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**CORE LIKE A ROCK:**  
LUTHER'S THEOLOGICAL CENTER

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## CORE LIKE A ROCK: LUTHER'S THEOLOGICAL CENTER

You have asked me in this essay to “review the central core of Luther’s confession of divine revelation.” That is interestingly put. Lots of things have cores, and they function in different ways. Apples have cores that you throw away. When I was growing up, Milwaukee had its “inner core,” defined in 1960 by a special mayoral commission as the area between Juneau Avenue on the south, 20<sup>th</sup> Street on the west, Holton Street on the east, and Keefe Avenue on the north—a blighted part of town, so they said, where people from my tribe didn’t go.<sup>1</sup> The earth’s “core” is a glob of molten nickel/iron wrapped around a solid iron ball, and those who claim to know these things say our core generated the heat that caused Florida to break off from Africa and remain stuck on Georgia and Alabama,<sup>2</sup> for which many persons are grateful.

The “core” of a nuclear reactor is like that; it’s where the fissionable material is found and where the reaction happens that is the whole point. So is the cylinder of “core” muscles around your abdomen, without which you can have biceps the size of Dwayne Johnson’s and when the bad guys show up you’re still basically George McFly, only in a tighter shirt. That is how I understand my assignment. You want to hear about Luther’s spiritual fulcrum, the point around which everything turned. It might also be a little like your “core” temperature, in that as long as it’s holding steady at 98.6° you’re probably going to be OK even if at the moment you feel lousy.

But first, a further word on what you don’t mean, or at any rate what I don’t mean. This will not be about reducing Luther to a single propositional statement *a la* homiletics class, or his theological system to one central truth. One difficulty there is that Luther was not a systematic theologian. That is to cast no aspersions on systematic theology as an enterprise, or to suggest that Luther was a sloppy logician or that his thought had no center. There is a center;<sup>3</sup> it is in the attempt to “reduce” Luther to it where the trouble arises. Behind attempts to reduce Luther or Lutheranism to a single proposition you generally sense a certain intellectual laziness: “To ‘get’ Luther, all you have to know is . . . .”

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1. “Final Report: Mayor’s Study Committee on Social Problems in the Inner Core Area of the City, Milwaukee, Wis., 1960,” cited in Charles T. O’Reilly, “The Inner Core—North: A Study of Milwaukee’s Negro Community,” School of Social Work, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (1963): 1.

2. Barbara Murck, *Geology: A Self-Teaching Guide* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2001), 89–90.

3. Cf. the point in the *WLS Dogmatics Notes*: “It [dogmatics] does not develop all doctrines from one central truth. There is a central truth . . . . But this is not offered for speculative development” (I Prolegomena, p 29).

This will not be about “all you have to know is . . . .” Instead, it will be about the iron ball in the center of Luther that generated volcanic heat that shifts continents even today. I will allow Luther to speak for himself as much as possible. I will comply with my assignment by locating this core in Luther’s “theology” but not in the sense of system; rather, in the sense of that splendid expression *habitus practicus*, dear to me because I have come to apprehend the untranslatable *habitus* by means of another untranslatable, the Portuguese *jeito*. “Habit” won’t do it. “Aptitude” or “knack” get us closer but not quite there. You’re the kind of musician who slides on your guitar like a man slipping into a shirt;<sup>4</sup> you fire off a riff you’ve been fooling around with and somebody who’s listening asks your wife, “Where’d he learn to do that?” She rolls her eyes and says, “He has the *jeito*.” The *habitus*. The guitar is a mold you got melted down and poured into and this is how you came out. How and when it happened, you have no idea. You just play.

Luther’s theology = his *habitus*. His *jeito*. His core. What was it?

August Pieper had it right.

In what did Luther’s greatness consist? . . . Luther’s greatness lies in the greatness of his childlike faith. . . . Luther believed, believed, believed. That is the secret of his strength and his greatness. . . . All things are possible for him who believes. That has proven true in him. Luther believed the Lord like Abraham. That is his most striking characteristic. How simply, like a child, how hopefully and firmly, how confidently and unshakably the man believed! We simply recall the burning of the papal bull, Worms, the stay at the Wartburg, his letter to the elector while leaving the Wartburg, in which he wrote to him, “I come in the protection of one much higher than electors; indeed I maintain, I will protect your Electoral grace more, than it protect me; whoever believes the most will here protect the most.”<sup>5</sup> His letters testify to this childlike and yet heroic faith, right from the first, dangerous time. But even every writing, every work of Luther, all his great blows against Rome, against Münzer and the peasants, against the sacramental enthusiasts, his monumental writings on the Lord’s Supper and the proper interpretation of Scripture, his Commentary on Galatians, his book on the captive will, his arrangement of the German worship service, his Catechisms, his fight at Marburg, his stay at the Coburg, his attitude toward the Smalcald League, his Bible translation, his position on the council which was finally announced, his Smalcald Articles, his firmness against Bucer, his final renunciation of the Swiss, his confession about the Lord’s Supper, his last powerful

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4. Said by Garrison Keillor of the great Chet Atkins. “Country Golf,” in *We Are Still Married* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 174.

5. From Luther’s March 5, 1522, letter to Elector Frederick: “I have written this so Your Electoral Grace might know that I am going to Wittenberg under a far higher protection than the Elector’s. I have no intention of asking Your Electoral Grace for protection. Indeed I think I shall protect Your Electoral Grace more than you are able to protect me. And if I thought that Your Electoral Grace could and would protect me, I should not go. The sword ought not and cannot help a matter of this kind. God alone must do it—and without the solicitude and co-operation of men. Consequently he who believes the most can protect the most. And since I have the impression that Your Electoral Grace is still quite weak in faith, I can by no means regard Your Electoral Grace as the man to protect and save me.” *LW* 48:391.

writing against the Papacy, his hymns and prayers, in short, every writing and every deed of Luther up until his childlike, joyful death is a testament to his simple, joyful, often burdened, but firm, unshakable, heroic faith in Christ and his grace, in God and his promises, and in the written word.<sup>6</sup>

Luther's core was his personal faith. The subject before us in this essay is both that simple and that profound.

### **“Faith” in Luther—What?**

Fortunately for our purposes, what Luther understood by “faith” is not the least bit mysterious. There are few subjects he treats more extensively or to which he returns more often.

Faith is the firm and sure thought or trust that through Christ God is propitious and that through Christ His thoughts concerning us are thoughts of peace, not of affliction or wrath.<sup>7</sup>

Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God's grace makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and with all creatures.<sup>8</sup>

For I could not have faith in God if I did not think he wanted to be favorable and kind to me. This in turn makes me feel kindly disposed toward him, and I am moved to trust him with all my heart and to look to him for all good things.<sup>9</sup>

True faith draws the following conclusion: “God is God for me because he speaks to me. He forgives me my sins. He is not angry with me, just as He promises: ‘I am the Lord your God.’”<sup>10</sup>

Even a casual survey of Luther's remarks on faith strikes a reader with two things. First, in Luther, “faith” and a “good conscience” are a virtual hendiadys. Faith does not merely *lead to* or *create* or *result in* a good conscience; faith practically *is* a good conscience.<sup>11</sup> Faith is the unspeakably joyful realization that God's heart is a thousand times warmer toward me than was my mother's at that moment when she laid eyes on the red, squalling, infant me for the very first time. Faith is the certainty that God harbors toward me not a single ounce of ire or displeasure, not one thought that is the least bit disapproving or even ambivalent. When Satan objects that I

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6. August O. Pieper, *Quo proprior Luthero, eo melior theologus*, translated by Andrew Hussman, edited and excerpted by James L. Langebartels, *WLQ* 113.2 (2016): 116–117.

7. *LW* 3:22.

8. *LW* 35:370.

9. *LW* 44:30.

10. *LW* 4:149.

11. *LW* 31:66.

am a sinner (spot-on, as far as it goes), faith hears the Holy One of Israel answering: “*Nu*, so he’s a sinner. What’s your point?” The inseparable connection between faith and a clear and joyful conscience is why, in Luther, the antonym of “faith” is often not “doubt.” The antonym of “faith” is often more like “guilt.”

Second, you notice how affecting Luther’s faith-talk is. Recall from dogmatics that the Scriptures can use “to know” as a synonym for “to believe” (John 17:3, Eph 4:13, 2 Tim 1:12, etc.). When they speak this way, however, the object of “to know” is generally God or Christ; rarely if ever is it some proposition. In other words, faith is indeed a “knowing” but it’s the way you knew your mother, not the way you know the optative. August Pieper again, on 2 Tim 1:12:

Without weakening his declaration in the least, the apostle might have said, “I know *what* I believe.” Those words would have compelled us to understand that Paul was absolutely sure of his faith—of that which he believed, of the gospel which had been revealed to him. But instead, Paul gave the object of his faith a distinctly personal emphasis: “I know *whom* I have believed.” God had not revealed the gospel of Christ to Paul as an abstract truth, objective and general; Paul had entered into an intensely personal relationship with the Lord Jesus himself, the very founder of the Gospel.<sup>12</sup>

The description fits Luther’s faith equally well: a knowing of a Somebody, not merely a something.

### **Faith in Luther—Where?**

The anthropology of the scholastic theologians, following Greek philosophy, had divided man’s inner life (“psychology” in the old sense) into three parts—intellect, emotions, and will. Rather than re-invent the wheel, the Lutheran dogmaticians took over this tripartite division and defined faith as “knowledge,” “confidence,” and “assent” respectively.<sup>13</sup> The dogmaticians’ *jeito* was precision and thoroughness. Their intent was to leave absolutely nothing unsaid that Scripture says, although it has been argued that this tripartite “psychology” already contained the seeds of intellectualism and its concomitant legalism.<sup>14</sup>

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12. August O. Pieper, “Paul, A Model of the Certainty of Faith, Especially for All Servants of the Word,” John C. Jeske, transl., in Curtis Jahn, ed., *The Wauwatosa Theology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 3.214.

13. E.g., J. A. Quenstedt, *TDP*, pars IV, cap. VIII, sect. 1, thes. V, 282. Cited in *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Dogmatics Notes*, II D. 1., p 13.

14. Leigh D. Jordahl, introduction to *History of the Wisconsin Synod*, by J. P. Koehler (St. Cloud, MN: Sentinel Publishing Company, 1970), xxiv. Jordahl attributes this critique of the dogmaticians’ “psychology” to Koehler, though the citation he adduces from “*Gesetzliche Wesen Unter Uns*” does not in fact mention it. In the context Koehler is highly critical of “intellectualism,” however. Cf. J. P. Koehler, “Legalism Among Us,” translated by Philemon Hensel, in Curtis Jahn, ed., *The Wauwatosa Theology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992), 2.241ff.

In any event, John Schaller sounds much more like Luther than did the dogmatists when he defines faith as “essentially and basically an *emotional* [emphasis original] state of the soul (*Gefuehlssache*).” What’s more, Schaller says,

It stands out as a serious defect in the older psychology as it appears in the writings of our teachers in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, that it fails to recognize this distinctive nature of the emotions. Hence they ascribe faith either to the sphere of the intellect or that of volition (cf. quotations given below), and find considerable difficulty in rescuing its non-intellectual and non-volitional character as they needed it in their opposition to synergism of all kinds.<sup>15</sup>

Schaller’s point makes a person wonder whether, if our faith-talk were as affecting as Luther’s, we too might have an easier time “rescuing faith’s non-intellectual and non-volitional character” when we need to—when, for instance, we are discussing the faith of infants or the failing elderly. Luther too had his “trinity” of synonyms for faith, just like the scholastics, but it was not “knowledge, assent, and confidence.” It was three emotions: “fear, love, and trust.”

A bit more on the contrast between Luther’s faith-talk and the faith-talk of the scholastics. Thomas said that “the act of faith is to believe, as stated above, which is an act of the *intellect* determinate to one object of the *will’s* command”<sup>16</sup> (emphasis mine. Kindly notice, at least so far, what’s missing). Not content to divide faith like Caesar’s Gaul into three parts, the scholastics then assigned to each part its own distinct role in human salvation, as if solving a problem in mechanical engineering.

Thomas’s mini-narrative about faith proceeds something like this. God makes a beginning by revealing some proposition about himself not otherwise accessible to the human mind (nobody has “faith” that water boils at 212°). The intellect looks favorably on the proposition because of the authority of the one proposing it; but it is the will, moved by grace and attracted by the prospect of a reward, that persuades the intellect to take the proposition as true. Faith must be an act of the will and not the intellect alone, Thomas reasoned, or else it could not be meritorious; nobody deserves credit for accepting something if he has been compelled to by evidence or the weight of some authority. Faith, then, is an operation of those two faculties, the intellect and the will; but up to this point “faith” is nothing but a “lifeless” virtue of the mind. Intellectual assent does not become fruitful until love for God is added to it (*fides formata caritate*). But—and here is the important thing—for the scholastics, “lifeless” and “living” faith are the same “habit,”<sup>17</sup> and intellectual assent is already “faith.” To make such “faith” the means

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15. J. Schaller, “The Nature, Origin, and Effects of Saving Faith,” in *Biblical Christology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1981), 251–252.

16. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, “Of the Virtue Itself of Faith (Eight Articles),” trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1947, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/aquinas/summa/sum259.htm>.

17. *Ibid.*

by which a soul passes from eternal death to eternal life now sounds absurd, to say nothing of any talk about salvation “by faith *alone*.”

“Lifeless” or “intellectual” is the last thing Luther would ever have said about “faith,”<sup>18</sup> and his break from the scholastics’ faith-talk is not mere semantics. Faith on the dissection table; faith’s component parts, and which part does what—Luther shows little interest in any of this (nor do the Scriptures, for that matter). A typical Luther-an complaint about his opponents is that they are always wasting time on fine distinctions that nobody understands, least of all they themselves,<sup>19</sup> and that can interest only a person playing theological games. While his opponents were preoccupied with grasping “faith” correctly, Luther always wrote and taught as one whose faith had grasped *him*.

Writers in our own circles<sup>20</sup> have done much to raise our awareness of the disconnect between what “faith” means in Luther (and in Scripture) and what it has come to mean in popular parlance. I once watched aghast as a pundit on TV explained that faith works something like this. First, somebody tells you that the Bible is true and the death of Jesus has paid for your sins, making things right between you and God. Logically the whole business is absurd, of course, but in a supreme act of devotion you manage to talk yourself into believing that it’s true. This so impresses God that he rewards you by letting you into heaven. I don’t know whether the speaker had a background in Roman Catholicism, but he had essentially articulated the Thomist position, managing also to sprinkle in a little post-post-modern talk about the sheer mental derangement that religious “faith” entails.

What may have impressed you more was the ignorance the speaker displayed about how a person comes to have faith, a subject to which we now turn. In preparation, however, please pause to reflect on the likely reason for the speaker’s ignorance. It may be that nobody had ever explained faith to him correctly, although I doubt it. One of the main things we learn from Luther is that those who cannot talk about faith from personal experience<sup>21</sup>—to an extent, even we who can—are going to find *any* attempt to capture “faith” in words unintelligible. Good luck explaining falling in love to a turnip.

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18. LW 35:370.

19. SA III III 18. Quotations from the Confessions are from Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000).

20. E.g., Daniel Deutschlander. Cf. “What Do We Mean When We Say: ‘Faith Saves?’” <http://essays.wls.wels.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/1174/DeutschlanderFaith.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

21. Schaller, “Saving Faith,” 251.

## Faith in Luther—Whence?

### The search for peace

Luther was a man gifted by God with a sensitive conscience. A just God who reveals in no uncertain terms what he demands from his creatures was vividly real to Luther, as was Luther's utter inability to comply. From his youth, he keenly felt the pain of uncertainty about his standing with God. At times it could make his life intolerable—"Apart from the forgiveness of sins I can't stand a bad conscience at all; the devil hounds me about a single sin until the world becomes too small for me"<sup>22</sup>—and it could lead him to look upon God with the most violent revulsion imaginable. In Luther's own words: "I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners."<sup>23</sup>

Naturally this leads unsympathetic biographers to assume that Luther had done or was doing something really awful.<sup>24</sup> The truth is that after his search for peace led Luther into the monastery, his father-confessor Staupitz used to complain that the sins Luther kept running to him to confess were nothing but peccadilloes. Staupitz would send him away with orders not to come back until he had actually done something worth confessing.<sup>25</sup>

I understood the verse [Prov 27:23, "Be sure you know the condition of your flocks"] this way. I had to bare myself so completely to my pastor, prior, etc., that he might know what I did every day of my life. So I told everything I had done from my youth up, with the result that my preceptor in the monastery finally reprimanded me for doing so.<sup>26</sup>

That suggests that Luther's pangs of conscience tell us nothing about the kind of sinner he really was. If open, manifest sins are in view, probably he was no worse than anybody else in the Black Cloister, and he may have been a good deal better.

The story of Luther's *Turmerlebnis* has been recounted often enough (including multiple times, in mildly discrepant versions, by Luther himself<sup>27</sup>). Twentieth-century Luther scholarship loaded it with significance, this gripping tale of the West's own version of Siddhartha Gautama, after a long and torturous night of meditation, suddenly at a moment near dawn achieving

22. LW 54:34.

23. LW 34:336.

24. Perhaps above (or below) all, the Dominican Heinrich Denifle, *Luther und Luthertum in der ersten Entwicklung quellenmässig dargestellt* (Mainz: Kirchheim, 1904).

25. James M. Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 84. Staupitz appears to have been the kind of wise counselor who reserved this advice for cases like Luther's, where it would not blow up in his face. I once had an overly timid basketball teammate to whom our coach finally said in exasperation, "For Pete's sake, Derek, get in there and *foul* somebody," and the result was an official timeout so that Derek's victim could be helped off the floor. Not good.

26. LW 54:76.

27. E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950), 287.



*samsara* and becoming the Enlightened Lutheran One. The reality is that Luther's "core" was not forged in a single crisis-moment experience but through a process of development that in 1513 (or 1514, or 1515, or whenever it happened) had barely begun.<sup>28</sup> This past year, you may have observed that the story of the *Turmerlebnis* retains its power nonetheless.

Why is that? An analogy might be so-called "decision theology." The notion that a Christian must be able to trace his salvation back to a crisis moment in which he "got saved" by asking Jesus into his heart rests on a notion of "free will," another burning issue in Western philosophy in which the Scriptures show no interest; maybe it does also appeal to the natural human desire to contribute at least something toward our salvation. But there is a sense in which "decision theology" is not about "theology" at all. It is about a story, one many Christians regard as both *the* story and *their* story; a compelling narrative into which they insert themselves because it offers a way of thinking about what a Christian is.

The *Turmerlebnis* functions similarly for many Lutherans. Here is *our* story, if not *the* story. Here is theology as drama, law and gospel locked in mortal combat within the archetypal human soul; then, the climactic moment when the law loses and the gospel wins and the whole world is changed forever. The story is almost enough to make me wish I *could* remember a time in my life when —fast bound in Satan's chains I lay, death brooded darkly o'er me, sin was my torment night and day, and life had become a living hell<sup>29</sup>—because this is how "it" happens, or should.

The truth is: not necessarily. What matters for present purposes is this: though probably not born in a single, identifiable moment,<sup>30</sup> Luther's core was forged and hardened by intense experiences of spiritual torment and relief. He knew life without faith, life in a universe inhabited by no God but the maker of impossible demands who throws anyone into hell who cannot comply. He knew what it was to be unsure where you stand with this God, to writhe in pain as the *monstrum incertitudinis* clamps your soul in its jaws and gnaws away. Through faith he had come to know another God altogether, to watch God's demands fade into irrelevance and God's angry scowl dissolve into a smile; and he would allow nothing in heaven or on earth to put this in jeopardy for an instant. The resulting joy, confidence, and relief became part of Luther's marrow, which is why you sometimes sense his deep and intimate knowledge of these matters outstripping his ability to put them satisfactorily into words—something that sets him dramatically apart from his opponents, and some friends as well.<sup>31</sup>

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28. Gottfried Herrmann, "Reformation—What Happened 500 Years Ago," *WLQ* 114.4 (2017), forthcoming.

29. *CW* 377: 2.

30. One could mention the birth of faith in his baptism, of course.

31. "Substance and words—Philip. Words without substance—Erasmus. Substance without words—Luther. Neither words nor substance—Karlstadt." *LW* 54:245.

Luther's was a sensitive conscience, as has been said. Like all gifts of God, sensitive consciences are distributed where and to whom God wills. Your life may never have become "a living hell." Your faith may not be the fruit of a personal experience this intense and it may not involve one now; that detracts nothing from its saving quality—faith is faith, when it comes to that. Furthermore, if faith came to you or me differently or grips us differently now, that is not the only reason you and I are not Luther—but it is one reason, and an important one. God seems to have devised a particular journey to faith for Luther in order to qualify him uniquely for what God had planned for him.

### **The source of peace**

What brought Luther through his dark night of *Anfechtung* and out into the light of faith is also, fortunately, another subject about which there is nothing mysterious. Luther's faith was entirely the work of God through the gospel, or as Luther characteristically puts it, the "promise." Any "faith" resulting from our own efforts is a human delusion and worthless.

Faith is not the human notion and dream that some people call faith. When they see that no improvement of life and no good works follow—although they can hear and say much about faith—they fall into the error of saying, "Faith is not enough; one must do works in order to be righteous and be saved." This is due to the fact that when they hear the gospel, they get busy and by their own powers create an idea in their heart which says, "I believe"; they take this then to be a true faith. But, as it is a human figment and idea that never reaches the depths of the heart, nothing comes of it either, and no improvement follows.

Faith, however, is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God, John 1[:12–13].<sup>32</sup>

If man is to deal with God and receive anything from him, it must happen in this manner, not that man begins and lays the first stone, but that God alone—without any entreaty or desire of man—must first come and give him a promise. This word of God is the beginning, the foundation, the rock, upon which afterward all works, words, and thoughts of man must build. This word man must gratefully accept. He must faithfully believe the divine promise and by no means doubt that it is and comes to pass just as God promises. This trust and faith is the beginning, middle, and end of all works and righteousness. For because man does God the honor of regarding and confessing him as true, he becomes to man a gracious God, who in turn honors man and regards and confesses him as true. Thus it is not possible that a man, of his own reason and strength, should by works ascend to heaven, anticipating God and moving him to be gracious. On the contrary God must anticipate all [of man's] works and thoughts, and make a promise clearly expressed in

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32. LW 35:370.

words, which man then takes and keeps in a good, firm faith. Then there follows the Holy Spirit, who is given to man for the sake of this same faith.<sup>33</sup>

The chief and most important part of the doctrine is the promise; to it faith attaches itself, or, to speak more clearly, faith lays hold of it. Moreover, the confident laying hold of the promise is called faith; and it justifies, not as our own work but as the work of God. For the promise is a gift, a thought of God by which He offers us something. It is not some work of ours, when we do something for God or give Him something. No, we receive something from Him, and that solely through His mercy.

Therefore he who believes God when He promises, he who is convinced that God is truthful and will carry out whatever He has promised, is righteous or is reckoned as righteous.<sup>34</sup>

A word or two about the gospel as “promise” (Acts 2:39, Rom 4:21, Ga 3:22, etc.). First, English “promise” is generally future-oriented;<sup>35</sup> you don’t “promise” your wife that you loved her once, but that you always will. The same tends to be true of ἐπαγγελία in the Scriptures.<sup>36</sup> For that reason, to a cultural outsider not yet fluent in Lutherspeak it may sound odd when we talk about God’s “promise” concerning something that happened already, viz., our justification through the finished work of Christ—although we often do this. There is nevertheless an advantage to using the word “promise” for the object of faith, which is that “promise” casts faith as something that looks not only back, but around (right now) and forward (to the future). Gospel-as-promise is no doubt part of what gives Luther’s (and Scripture’s) faith-talk its peculiar vivacity and relevance. And it goes without saying that to trust a promise is to trust the Promiser, and vice versa.

Second, faith and promise always go hand-in-hand. According to Luther, “. . . the very fact that God promises something demands that we believe it, that is, that we conclude by faith that it is true and have no doubt that the outcome will be in agreement with the promise.”<sup>37</sup> From this common designation of the gospel in the Scriptures as “promise,” the *WLS Dogmatics Notes* deduce faith’s essential nature as *trust*.<sup>38</sup> When someone makes you a promise you either trust them to keep it or you don’t; *tertium non datur*. What is more, a promise that becomes such only if the recipient believes it is a logical absurdity. Imagine (if you can!) a groom who somehow

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33. LW 35:82–83. An editor’s footnote supplies the thought that Luther was well aware of the Spirit’s prior work of bringing us to faith, as seen in his explanation to the Third Article.

34. LW 3:23.

35. <https://framenet2.icsi.berkeley.edu/fnReports/data/lu/lu480.xml?mode=lexentry>. Contrary to what your father believed if he ever told you, “And that’s not a threat, it’s a promise!”, “promises” involve desirable things. Undesirable things involve “threats.”

36. See its entry in BDAG.

37. LW 3:20.

38. *WLS Dogmatics Notes*, II D. 1., p 23.

found out that, when he promised his bride lifelong faithfulness on their wedding day, she had her doubts, and the groom considered her doubt a license to stray when he felt like it. Then, compare 2 Tim 2:13: “If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself.”

Our faith is the appropriate response to the gospel; it is not itself part of the gospel. The gospel is a unilateral promise from God to forgive our sins, to count us righteous (which is the same thing), to regard us with love and favor, and to give us a blissful life with him in a joy-filled paradise that will never end—all for the sake of Christ, in whom we have these treasures and hundreds more. To doubt that the Holy One of Israel will actually do what he says is beyond lamentable; it is damnable (more on this later). But the fact that some believe the promise and some don’t does not make the promise in any way conditional, contingent, qualified, limited, tentative, provisory, probationary, codicillary, qualified, or anything of the kind.<sup>39</sup>

We are not talking here either about people’s belief or disbelief regarding the efficacy of the keys. We realize that few believe. We are speaking of what the keys accomplish and give. 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 this 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.

Well, you say, here you yourself teach that the key fails. For the keys do not accomplish their purpose when some do not believe nor accept. Well, friend, if you call this failing, then God fails in all his words and works. For few accept what he constantly speaks and does for all.<sup>40</sup>

Let me give an example. If I gave you one hundred florins and hid them from you under the table and you believed and said that they were merely lead or a lead alloy, what difference would that make to me, who offered you gold? It’s your fault that you don’t believe. The gold’s gold, even if you don’t think so. God doesn’t lie when he promises eternal life. Only let us be sure that we appropriate it for ourselves in faith. For our unbelief doesn’t make God’s promise empty. On the contrary, poverty is the companion of truth.<sup>41</sup>

Any condition attached to the promise, even faith as condition<sup>42</sup> (“the only thing you have to do is believe,” which sounds like a bargain but actually disqualifies me from salvation faster than

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39. Your essayist has learned from Luther the art of piling up adjectives like cold cuts on a sandwich.

40. *LW* 40:367.

41. *LW* 54:192–193.

42. A statement that is a syntactical “condition” does not *per se* constitute a denial of the unconditional nature of the gospel (John 6:51, John 8:51, John 10:9, 1 Cor 8:3, etc.). “If you believe, you will be saved” may be a perfectly innocent or heretically synergistic statement, depending on the context in which—above all, the purpose for which—it is said.

anything else<sup>43</sup>) opens the door for the *monstrum incertitudinis* once again. For Luther, who bore scars from the monster all his life, this is always the *summum malum*, the outcome to be avoided at any cost.

The gospel is a creative word from God that effects a certain reality,<sup>44</sup> but it is first and foremost a “revelation”—i.e., a disclosure of a reality existing prior to the moment of its being disclosed, like the hundred florins hidden under the table.<sup>45</sup> The gospel reveals the redeeming work of Christ and its result, a forgiving and approving disposition on the part of God (John 3:16, John 19:30, Rom 4:25, 2 Cor 5:19, etc.).

Faith must spring up and flow from the blood and wounds and death of Christ. If you see in these that God is so kindly disposed toward you that he even gives his own Son for you, then your heart in turn must grow sweet and disposed toward God. And in this way your confidence must grow out of pure good will and love—God’s toward you, and yours toward God.<sup>46</sup>

This promise from God is the “means” of his “grace,” making this the place for a word or two about that crucial phrase. First, because “means of grace” is a basic conceptual metaphor in Lutheran theology, we easily forget that it is an expression Scripture never uses. “Means” connotes an entity, or an action, used by an agent to achieve a purpose.<sup>47</sup> The metaphor “means of grace” evokes something (“grace”) being carried from point A to point B in a vehicle, like water in a pipe. In AC V Melancthon acknowledges the metaphorical nature of the expression when he tells us that in word and sacrament the Holy Spirit is given “*as through means*” (als *durch Mittel*; tamquam *per instrumenta*).<sup>48</sup> He hopes you catch his point: the Lutherans know very well that grace is not literally water and word and sacrament are not literally pipes (*als; tamquam*). It does no harm to talk about them as if they were; in fact, it can be extremely handy (for instance, when you are debating a Calvinist), provided that you do not lose sight of the fact that the “stuff” carried in your “pipes” is words, i.e., a tender promise of undying love and

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43. “So whoever proclaims faith as a condition for justification sets a demand before the person to be justified, that is, proclaims the law to him, and in fact proclaims the greatest law of all, the first commandment.” August Pieper, “The Proper Distinction of Law and Gospel and its Application for Pure Teaching and Spiritual Life,” transl. R. Dennis Rardin, in Curtis Jahn, ed., *The Wauwatosa Theology*, 2.66.

44. In pragmatics (a subdomain of linguistics) this is known as a “performative.” One test for whether a statement constitutes a “performative” is to try adding the word “hereby”: “I [hereby] declare that they are husband and wife”; “I [hereby] forgive you all your sins.”

45. A trait it shares with “the wrath of God.” Each is the subject of ἀποκαλύπτεται in Rom 1:17–18.

46. LW 44:38.

47. Framenet, “Means,” <https://framenet2.icsi.berkeley.edu/fnReports/data/frameIndex.xml?frame=Means>.

48. AC V 2.

forgiveness spoken to a hearer by God. The preached gospel is an event taking place in time,<sup>49</sup> not literal “stuff” you store up in a tank so that you can open the tap when you need to.

A second thing to notice about “means of grace” is that if faith is certainty, Luther characteristically locates the basis for our certainty here: “God is God for me because he speaks to me.”<sup>50</sup> Normally what Luther names as the reason I can be sure God loves me and forgives my sins in Christ is not the universal nature of God’s decree (major premise: “God so loved the world”; minor premise: I am in the world; conclusion: God must love me—which is most certainly true but has all the emotional *oomph* of a disjoint set algorithm). For Luther, I can be sure of God’s love because God has spoken to me and promised always to love me, to forgive my sins, and to give me eternal life. God makes no promises he doesn’t mean and to affirm the contrary is to call God a liar. Observe that in the quotation above in which a king bestows a castle, Luther’s point in the context is not God’s having decreed the whole world “not guilty” of sin on the basis of the finished work of Christ. His point is the keys—the preached absolution—and what they bring to those who hear. If the promise has reached me, I can be sure of my salvation, because the promise is most certainly true.

### **Justification and sanctification at their “core”**

Luther regarded the original *sedes doctrinae* of justification by grace through faith as Gen 15:6, since it is here that Paul finds it:

Read Paul, and read him most attentively. Then you will see that from this passage he constructs the foremost article of our faith—the article that is intolerable to the world and to Satan—namely, that faith alone justifies, but that faith consists in giving assent to the promises of God and concluding that they are true.<sup>51</sup>

Notice that Luther does not treat the passage as if it had said, “He [Abram] believed God, and he credited [the redemptive work of one particular offspring from those promised in 15:5] to him as righteousness.” The reason is simple: the passage doesn’t say that. The antecedent of the pronominal suffix on וַיִּשְׁׁבְּ (“and he reckoned it”) is Abram’s faith. In other words, God here points to Abram’s faith and says, “Now that’s what I call ‘righteousness’! Put that in the ledger in the ‘credits’ column (זָשָׁב).”

Here, Luther says, Moses teaches us that “righteousness is nothing else than believing God when He makes a promise.”<sup>52</sup> Faith is uniquely deserving of praise because it

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49. Kenneth A. Cherney, Jr., “Foreword to Volume 112: Doctrine is a Verb,” *WLQ* 112.1 (2015): 3–5.

50. *LW* 4:149.

51. *LW* 3:19.

52. *LW* 3:20.

alone lays hold of the promise, believes God when He gives the promise, stretches out its hand when God offers something, and accepts what He offers. This is the characteristic function of faith alone. Love, hope, and patience are concerned with other matters; they have other bounds, and they stay within these bounds. For they do not lay hold of the promise; they carry out the commands. They hear God commanding and giving orders, but they do not hear God giving a promise; this is what faith does.<sup>53</sup>

Faith is also the “mother of all other virtues,” Luther says,<sup>54</sup> which include “love, hope, and patience”; but it is not for this reason that it justifies. It justifies because it lays hold of a promise from a gracious God,<sup>55</sup> thereby coming to possess a gracious God.

Luther is lavish in his praise of faith, and not just because it justifies. Luther does not hesitate to call faith a good work; for Christians it is the “chief work” (*Hauptwerk*).<sup>56</sup> Faith does not justify as a work but as the opposite of a work, a receiving from God rather than a giving to God. And yet, in the kind of paradox of which Luther is fond,<sup>57</sup> this is the very thing that makes faith the noblest work to which man can aspire. Faith is a work of obedience to the First Commandment, and it gives God the highest honor he can receive. It is really the only honor God seeks, the one that in the Old Testament God’s chosen people had broken his heart again and again by refusing to give him: the honor of considering God trustworthy and of looking for help nowhere else, least of all in ourselves:

Look, here you have the true honor and worship that please God, which God also commands under penalty of eternal wrath, namely, that the heart should know no other consolation or confidence than in him, nor let itself be torn from him, but for his sake should risk everything and disregard everything else on earth.<sup>58</sup>

“Faith desires to be the only way of serving God, and will allow this name and honor to no other work, except in so far as faith imparts it, as it does when the work is done in and by faith.”<sup>59</sup>

Luther’s praise of faith as both the ultimate good work and the *sine qua non* of all good works is, in my opinion, the point that is missed by those who accuse Luther and Lutherans of denigrating good works, or failing to teach sanctification.<sup>60</sup> Faith and works are antithetical in

53. *LW* 3:24.

54. *LW* 3:20.

55. AC IV 56.

56. *LW* 44:23, *StL*.X:1363.

57. A fondness which Luther acquired from his mentor, the Apostle Paul (e.g., 2 Cor 12:10), and which Paul no doubt acquired from his mentor, Jesus of Nazareth (e.g., Matt 10:39).

58. LC I 16.

59. *LW* 44:33.

60. E.g., John Wesley, “Who has wrote more ably than Martin Luther on justification by faith alone? And who was more ignorant of the doctrine of sanctification, or more confused in his conception of it?” Sermon 107,

Luther's doctrine of justification; in sanctification, it is always faith *as* work, work *as* faith made visible in life. As just one example: God commands me to be generous to my neighbor in need, but my generosity is a good work only if it is founded on trust in God's promise always to see that I have more than I need for myself (2 Cor 9:8, Phil 4:12–13, Heb 13:5). If it is not, my "generosity" is nothing but sinful profligacy with my money and possessions<sup>61</sup>—when it is not something even worse, viz., a damnable attempt to obtain God's favor by paying him for it.

### **“Without ever mentioning ‘faith’!”**

In view of the high praise Luther gives to faith, let us turn to a point of Walther's that has a surprising amount of currency among us, viz., that it is possible to preach faith into the hearts of your hearers without ever using the words “faith” or “believe.”

Suppose you were picturing to a horde of Indians the Lord Jesus, telling them that He is the Son of God who came down from heaven to redeem men from their sins by taking the wrath of God upon Himself, overcoming death, devil, and hell in their stead and opening heaven to all men, and that every man can now be saved by merely accepting what our Lord Jesus Christ has brought to us. Suppose that you were suddenly struck down by the deadly bullet of a hostile Indian lying in ambush. It is possible that, dying, you would leave behind you a small congregation of Indians though you may not even once have pronounced the word *faith* to them.<sup>62</sup>

Walther's point in the general context is well taken: a preacher is spreading spiritual death instead of life if he yammers on about “faith” while giving his hearers nothing—or the wrong thing—to put their faith *in*, the right thing being the Lord Jesus and his redemptive work. And yet, observe that nowhere in the above does Walther recommend a practice of omitting any mention of faith or believing, as a way of steering clear of the false teachings that faith saves because of some inherent quality or that your hearers could make themselves believe if they only buckled down and tried. The illustration of a preacher cut down in mid-sermon by a bullet is artificial and Walther knew it; he's making a point. The point had to be made during the controversy with synergistic Lutherans in the Ohio and Iowa Synods (and most of the Norwegian Synod), who taught a justification that faith helps to create;<sup>63</sup> but the usefulness of the point outside that context should be demonstrated and not simply assumed. You might also have

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“On God's Vineyard,” The Wesley Center Online, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-107-on-gods-vineyard/>.

61. LW 44:108–109.

62. C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, W. H. T. Dau, transl. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1929), 261.

63. August O. Pieper, “The Proper Distinction of Law and Gospel and Its Application for Pure Teaching and Spiritual Life,” in Curtis Jahn, ed., *The Wauwatosa Theology*, 2.47–48. It is certainly also necessary to emphasize faith's object in a religious milieu where faith in one's personal conversion experience has replaced faith in Christ.



noticed that in the quotation above, Walther (probably because he was steeped in Luther) doesn't quite pull it off. Just before the preacher's sermon gets cut short by the bullet, it *does* mention faith. It simply calls it by another name ("accepting what our Lord Jesus Christ has brought to us").

Preaching faith into someone's heart without ever mentioning it is no doubt possible. So are a lot of things, but that does not necessarily commend them in practice. Paul and Silas's response to the jailer at Philippi's question, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:31), does not need any hyper-orthodox correcting from us *a la*, "~~Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved~~. Nothing. It has all been done for you by Christ. Away with this synergistic notion that you need to 'do' something!" Walther might have been the second-last person who would have recommended this, Martin Luther being the very last. As for the Apostle Paul, he saw the teaching that our justification is by faith as reinforcing our certainty (Rom 4:16), not undercutting it.

Likewise, I do not find precedent in Luther for attempts to crank up the volume on the objective side of our justification *coram Deo* by means of heroic statements that purposely ignore the role of faith—e.g., speaking of the "guilt-free" or "saintly" or "saved" status of unbelievers, up to and including Judas in hell. Many of these statements when read in context are capable of being understood correctly. Historically, some of them may have served a purpose by flushing out into the open some deniers of the truth taught in Rom 3:23–24, 2 Cor 5:19, 1 Tim 4:10, etc.<sup>64</sup>

And yet, if ignoring faith when teaching justification were such a helpful move, why is it that neither Luther nor the Confessions nor Scripture appear to have thought of it? In the two primary *sedes doctrinae* on our justification (Rom 3:21–28 and 2 Cor 5:11–21), faith, the means by which we make God's "not guilty" verdict our own, has at least as much discourse prominence<sup>65</sup> as the verdict itself, if not more. This, in texts written to believers. As a general rule, to talk this way in an evangelism setting—and leave prospects to fill in the blank about repentance and faith for themselves—strikes me as a very bad idea, though there may be special cases.

Ah, but what about your parishioner who can't stop morbidly obsessing over whether or not she really believes? By all means, brother, direct her attention away from herself and toward

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64. Raymond J. Bell, Jr., "A Brief History of the Kokomo Four," (Senior Church History paper, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 1987)  
<http://essays.wls.wels.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/391/BellKokomoJustification.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

65. On "discourse prominence" see Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1994), 302.

her Savior; but is it really necessary to ignore or even deride faith<sup>66</sup> in order to accomplish this? Luther's pastoral approach with such persons was different.

I recall that at Torgau a little woman came to me and complained with tears in her eyes that she could not believe. Then, when I recited the articles of the Creed in order and asked about each one whether she was convinced that these things were true and had happened in this manner or not, she answered: "I certainly think that they are true, but I cannot believe." This was a satanic illusion. Consequently, I kept saying: "If you think that all these things are true, there is no reason why you should complain about your unbelief; for if you do not doubt that the Son of God died for you, you surely believe, because to believe is nothing else than to regard these facts as the sure and unquestionable truth."<sup>67</sup>

More than once Luther used the nature of faith as that which honors God by regarding him as truthful in order to bring unbelief into sharp relief and rebuke it, sometimes sternly. To be unsure that your sins really are forgiven after God has told you so, to doubt God when he makes you a promise, is to call the Holy One of Israel a liar. It is to dishonor him who loves you and has given you more than you can now imagine, in whom you will find not even a shadow of a reason not to trust him.

Consider, therefore, what a gracious God and Father we have. He not only promises us forgiveness of sins, but also commands us, on pain of committing the most grievous sin of all, to believe that they are forgiven.<sup>68</sup>

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, and I do not know whether he approves his own words, when he says to Peter, 'Whatever you loose ... shall be loosed.'" O God, spare everybody from such diabolical disbelief.<sup>69</sup>

What's more, to walk around downcast because you don't "feel" forgiven is like the disciples moping around on Easter Sunday—tantamount to denying that Christ is risen, so knock it off.

Please do not misunderstand: it may be that your parishioner's real problem is that she is clinically depressed, in which case this approach of Luther's might also be a really bad idea. The point for present purposes is that Luther's tactic of choice with those who doubted their faith does not seem to have been, "You don't believe? Well, so what?" What does seem characteristically Luther-an is to say, "You say it every Sunday in the Creed. Jesus suffered,

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66. Anecdotally, I have heard of pastors—probably out of sheer exasperation—trying to jolt such persons out of their morbid introspection by speaking of faith in derogatory terms. I cannot imagine Luther approving of the practice, although the exasperation he certainly knew well.

67. *LW* 5:46.

68. *LW* 35:14.

69. *LW* 35:13–14.

died, and rose to save you. The Holy One of Israel has made you a promise. Don't call him a liar; trust him!"

### **From the core out: contra Rome**

A "solid declaration" that the Reformation owes its ultimate success to the personal faith at Luther's core requires more time than the agenda allows and more competence than your essayist, who is not a historian, possesses. A few examples will have to suffice. To return to the analogy of the "core" muscles around your abdomen: exercise physiologists sometimes call this "the powerhouse." Regardless of what kind of movement you're initiating, if these muscles fire first, the movement is likely to be coordinated, powerful, and efficient. If they don't, you stand to hurt yourself, possibly severely.<sup>70</sup>

In a similar way, I believe the faith at Luther's core accounts for the coordination, efficiency, and power of the blows he struck in controversy. Luther shows an uncanny ability to separate information from noise, to glide past the "peripheral piffle"<sup>71</sup> that is distracting everybody else and get to the nub of the issue. The nub almost always turns out to be faith and a clear conscience, and this only makes sense. Faith and the resulting good conscience is the reason God sent his Son to die,<sup>72</sup> the principle by which the Church exists and the believer lives, the *summum bonum* for human beings while on this earth. What promotes faith is the work of God. Whatever undermines it is of the devil.

The point surfaces throughout Luther's battles with Rome irrespective of the issue. The blasphemy at the heart of Rome's theology is the teaching that a Christian cannot, indeed, dare not be confident of his salvation. For Luther, this amounts to denying a Christian's right to be a Christian.

This certainty and full conviction must be retained; for otherwise Baptism would be useless, and absolution and the use of the Lord's Supper would be in vain. Thus under the papacy the same thing Paul mentions happened to us. He speaks of those who always learn and never arrive at a knowledge of the truth (cf. 2 Tim. 3:7). For it was a horrible blindness and an error which must be execrated by all means, even if there had been nothing else in the papal doctrine than the fact that they taught us to be unsure and to waver in indecision and doubt about our salvation. For this uncertainty removes from me my Baptism and grace. I am a Christian in vain; I labor and live in vain.<sup>73</sup>

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70. "Introduction to Core Strengthening," <http://www.sportsinjuryclinic.net/rehabilitation-exercises/core-strengthening-stability/introduction-to-core-stability>.

71. Students of the late John C. Jeske here present will recognize the phrase.

72. LW 54:64.

73. LW 7:155.

The God of the Turks helps only to the extent that one is godly. This is also true of the pope's God, but when a papist begins to doubt, as he must, that he has made enough satisfaction, he becomes alarmed. Such is the faith of the pope and the Turks.<sup>74</sup>

Introducing works into our justification is not only unscriptural (Rom 3:27–28, Eph 2:8–9, etc.); what is worse is that it dashes any hope of arriving at certainty and peace. The entire sacramental system is founded on the premise that our salvation is unfinished (and therefore uncertain) and needs helping along; furthermore, the system mixes human traditions, about which there can be nothing certain, together with institutions of Christ. The Mass undermines faith by replacing Christ as that which heals and delivers from sin,<sup>75</sup> and because the sacrament was clearly meant to be used “with certainty” and received “with faith,” the Mass is not to be tolerated.<sup>76</sup> The invocation of the saints fails a similar test. Absent any word of institution from God or precedent in Scripture, there can be no certainty that the cult of the saints pleases God, and to imagine that we need any help from the saints undermines confidence that we have all we need through faith in Christ. It may be that the saints in heaven pray for us, but who knows? Even if they do, from this it does not follow that we ought to try to cajole them into helping us further by means of prayers, vigils, festivals, pilgrimages, etc.<sup>77</sup>

Indulgences, penance, monasticism—no matter what the subject, Luther views it through the lens of faith in God's promise and assays it on that basis. In the church one can put up with an awful lot and sometimes must, for the sake of the weak. But if anything casts doubt on whether God really meant his promise of eternal love and forgiveness in Christ, if it clouds a Christian's clear conscience with uncertainty, it simply has to go.

It is this about Luther that Rome would not tolerate, and for good reason. As the *WLS Dogmatics Notes* put it, “The secret of his [Antichrist's] power is the sin-troubled conscience.”<sup>78</sup> A person bothered by doubts about his standing with God becomes very easy to manipulate. All it takes is for someone to come along who claims to be able to affect that standing in a positive way, and to offer to do so in exchange for certain considerations (acquiescence to his authority, the jumping-through of certain hoops, respect, territory, cash, etc.). Rome had developed a sheer genius for exploiting the doubts of simple people in this way, and Rome might have gone on

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74. *LW* 54:70.

75. *SA* II II 1.

76. *SA* II II 29.

77. *SA* II II 25. Luther also opines that once everyone realizes that we can expect no help from the saints, they will be “left in peace, both in the grave and in heaven. For no one will long remember, esteem, or honor them simply out of love with no hope of return.”

78. *WLS Dogmatics Notes*, II D. 6., p 604.

forever had their agent Johann Tetzel not badly overplayed his hand by selling indulgences along the border of Electoral Saxony in 1517.<sup>79</sup>

But when we consider Luther's identifying of Antichrist we do ourselves a disservice if we leave the matter there. The subject cries out for a broader consideration of the phenomenon of church as mechanism of domination, "ministry" as path to power—in which case "ministry" is no longer *service* (and thus requires quotation marks). To think of the phenomenon as coterminous with the Roman Catholic Church or as having ended with the Reformation is naïve. The point must be left for another day.

### **From the core out: contra the "False Brethren"**

The case is the same *mutatis mutandis* with the so-called "False Brethren": Karlstadt, the Sacramentarians, the Anabaptists, the peasants, Erasmus, etc. To lump them together this way may be to demonstrate the intellectual laziness that was lamented in the introduction to this essay.<sup>80</sup> On the other hand, do the False Brethren really present us with a kaleidoscope of different issues, or only one?

In dealing with all of them, too, sooner or later Luther accuses them of undermining faith. In his liturgical "reforms" Karlstadt had badly misinterpreted Luther and run roughshod over tender consciences. Even change that is clearly positive becomes wrong when it is imposed by force, since simple Christians will "consent to it and yet not know where they stand, whether it is right or wrong."<sup>81</sup> Not even restoring both kinds in the sacrament was worth murdering consciences over.<sup>82</sup>

Both the Sacramentarians and Erasmus practiced an irresponsible hermeneutic that manhandled the Scriptures and that would ultimately leave everybody unable ever to be sure of anything. What Luther said to Erasmus applies to the False Brethren as a group:

For you who do not give a tinker's curse for the certainty of Holy Scripture, I can well believe such license of interpretation to be convenient; but for us who labor to establish consciences, there can be nothing more inappropriate, nothing more injurious, nothing more pestilential than such convenience.<sup>83</sup>

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79. James F. Korthals, "The *Ninety-Five Theses*: The Little Spark that Grew into a Reforming Fire," *WLQ* 114.3 (2017): 174–175.

80. "Do I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself. (I am large; I contain multitudes.)" (Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself, Part 51," <https://iwp.uiowa.edu/whitmanweb/en/writings/song-of-myself/section-51>).

81. *LW* 51:76.

82. *LW* 48:280.

83. *LW* 33:235–236.

When the *Schwärmer* (by etymology “those who swarm,” like a cloud of biting insects) claimed direct access to the Holy Spirit, Luther did not oppose them by teaching as an article of faith that extra-canonical revelation is *a priori* impossible. Scripture declares no such thing, and reading such a statement into Scripture requires a great deal of ingenuity. When in the Smalcald Articles Luther says that God does not want to deal with us apart from his external word and sacrament,<sup>84</sup> “word” is not a synonym for “the biblical text” (although it certainly includes this), as the addition of “sacrament” and Luther’s scriptural illustrations make clear. Luther means the word of the gospel that conveys God’s promise to forgive our sins in Christ. What Luther says here in the Smalcald Articles is perfectly consistent with what he says elsewhere: God only wants to deal with us in Christ,<sup>85</sup> and it is death for finite and sinful man to seek God anywhere else.<sup>86</sup> This is the problem with claims to special revelation apart from the preached word of the gospel: they destroy certainty, undermine faith, and cloud consciences. The Lutheran response to the claim “God spoke to me” is not “I can prove from Scripture that he didn’t.” It is: “There’s no way for me to know for sure whether he did or didn’t. Here there be dragons. Take your ‘revelations’ someplace else.”

### **The heroic Luther: faith and the canon; faith and *pecca fortiter***

In my opinion, faith as Luther’s ultimate concern helpfully explains pronouncements of his that trouble some readers, on two subjects. One is the canon of Holy Scripture. I refer not only to the mixed review he gives the Epistle to the Hebrews,<sup>87</sup> his view of the Epistle of St. James as inferior,<sup>88</sup> his regarding the Epistle of St. Jude as late and non-apostolic,<sup>89</sup> or his statement about Revelation: “I can in no way detect that the Holy Spirit produced it.”<sup>90</sup> What sometimes seems almost as odd is this: we often say the biblical books are edifying by virtue of their being inspired; in his Translator’s Prefaces, Luther often seems to turn this around. For instance, he will commend a book (e.g. Malachi) because it “contains beautiful sayings about Christ and the gospel,”<sup>91</sup> leading you to wonder: as opposed to what? Are there prophetic books that don’t?

What is going on here is that for Luther, although biblical inspiration and authority are not in doubt, Holy Scripture is not the core issue. Faith is. Faith in Christ is the reason God has given us any Scripture at all; therefore, how can a book claim a place within the “chief books

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84. SA III VIII 10.

85. E.g., *LW* 33:139.

86. E.g., *LW* 5:44.

87. *LW* 35:394.

88. *LW* 35:395.

89. *LW* 35:397.

90. *LW* 35:398.

91. *LW* 35:322.

which are supposed to lay the foundations of faith”<sup>92</sup> if the book bears an uncertain relationship to Scripture’s great purpose (what has been termed Luther’s “canon within the canon”<sup>93</sup>)? This “great purpose” Luther saw for all Scripture also explains his working concept of the biblical canon as a solid core of “chief books,” second-tier works like Proverbs or Hebrews, and at the outer orbit, works like Judith—a book of dubious historicity but nonetheless “a fine, good, holy, useful book, well worth reading by us Christians,” and in which the Spirit’s voice can sometimes be heard.<sup>94</sup> In the period of Orthodoxy the nuance in Luther’s concept of canon was blurred and finally lost altogether,<sup>95</sup> simplifying the systematic theologian’s task considerably (since proof passages may now be sought everywhere, indiscriminately).

The faith at Luther’s core is also what renders intelligible his famous *Pecca fortiter!* Sadly, *Pecca fortiter* is not only the favorite Luther quotation of his opponents; you wonder sometimes whether it is the only thing he said that some people know (perhaps alongside “Here I stand”). We do ourselves and Luther no credit, however, if we deny that he said it, or (what amounts to the same thing) propose that he meant it ironically, along the lines of Amos’s admonition “Go to Bethel and sin” (Amos 4:4). Luther did indeed say it, and if the question is whether the statement was an aberration, some chance remark that just slipped out and that Luther later came to regret, bear in mind that (to my knowledge) he issued no retraction and the remark is consistent with a point he makes elsewhere (see below).<sup>96</sup> Here more than perhaps anywhere else is the place to remember an old adage in hermeneutics: “The meaning of what is said must be derived from the reason for saying it.” *Pecca fortiter!* may also be the best possible illustration of the truth of another old saying, “A text without context is a pretext.”<sup>97</sup>

The context is an August 1, 1521, letter to Philip Melanchthon dealing with the vows of priests and monks. It is the devil himself who prohibits marriage, Luther says; therefore, the vows of priests to remain celibate “should be boldly broken.” The vows of monks might be

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92. *LW* 35:398.

93. I.e., the “canon” (in the sense of “ruling principle” or “criterion”) within the “canon” (in the sense of “collection of books”). See, e.g., Michael Rogness, “A Canon Within the Canon? Yes: Proclaim Christ,” [http://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/26-4\\_biblical\\_authority/26-4\\_face\\_to\\_face.pdf](http://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/26-4_biblical_authority/26-4_face_to_face.pdf).

94. “For the words spoken by the persons in it should be understood as though they were uttered in the Holy Spirit by a spiritual, holy poet or prophet who, in presenting such persons in his play, preaches to us through them.” *LW* 35:338–339.

95. J. A. O. Preus II, “The New Testament Canon in the Lutheran Dogmaticians,” *Concordia Journal* 36.2 (2010): 134–151.

96. See, e.g., *LW* 54:34 (cited below).

97. Attributed to both D. A. Carson and Jesse Jackson. In actuality the saying goes back to at least 1912. “Conference of Epworth League Well Attended,” *The Spartanburg (SC) Herald*, June 13, 1912, <https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=9ncsAAAAIBAJ&sjid=1skEAAAAIBAJ&pg=7333,4027328&dq=context-is-a-pretext&hl=en>.

another matter and Luther is still thinking about it.<sup>98</sup> Communion in both kinds also comes up. Luther is pleased that Melanchthon is working to restore it, although those who receive it in only one kind have not sinned.<sup>99</sup> In short, the entire letter deals with matters on which many were troubled by scruples of conscience, probably Melanchthon more than most.

Here is the last paragraph of the letter in its entirety.

If you are a preacher of grace, then preach a true and not a fictitious grace; if grace is true, you must bear a true and not a fictitious sin. God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners. Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death, and the world. As long as we are here [in this world] we have to sin. This life is not the dwelling place of righteousness, but, as Peter says, we look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. It is enough that by the riches of God's glory we have come to know the Lamb that takes away the sin of the world. No sin will separate us from the Lamb, even though we commit fornication and murder a thousand times a day. Do you think that the purchase price that was paid for the redemption of our sins by so great a Lamb is too small? Pray boldly—you too are a mighty sinner.<sup>100</sup>

Luther's advice recalls what Staupitz had told him in the monastery, and to interpret either as really advocating sinning is a perverse distortion of their point. Not only is life in this world messy, but so are we. We must be transparent about the good and bad both in our circumstances and in ourselves. To imagine that it is possible to live sin-free in this world and in this body is an act of hubris (Eccl 7:16).<sup>101</sup> Fastidiously and obsessively trying to live sin-free dishonors Christ by devaluing his redemptive work, attributing superior gravity to whatever sin I might happen to commit. The truth is, "sin doesn't harm us as much as our own righteousness."<sup>102</sup> Besides, in real life (and real pastoral practice), attempting to avoid all sin can be paralyzing. If you can't make a mistake, you can't make anything. The implication of *Pecca fortiter!* in context seems to be that the needed reforms Luther is discussing with Melanchthon should proceed, despite whatever messiness they might entail.

Even more surprising is Luther's occasional observation that, although sin remains an affront to God's will and a stench in God's nostrils, sometimes a particular sin has a salubrious effect on a Christian over the long haul:

God frequently permits a man to fall into or remain in grievous sin so that he may be put to shame in his own eyes and in the eyes of all men. Otherwise he could not have kept

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98. LW 48:277.

99. LW 48:280.

100. LW 48:281–282.

101. Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 260.

102. LW 54:34.



himself free of this great vice of vain honor and a famous name if he had remained constant in his great gifts and virtues. Thus God must ward off this sin by means of other grievous sins that his holy name alone may be honored. And so one sin becomes a medicine for the other because of our perverse wickedness, which not only does that which is evil, but also misuses all that is good.<sup>103</sup>

A friend once pointed out to me<sup>104</sup> that the three greatest men of God in Scripture after Jesus of Nazareth—Moses, David, and Saul of Tarsus—were all men with blood on their hands. Small consolation to their victims, perhaps; but in their life of faith, how might this sin of theirs have served them as “medicine” that prevented something worse? Sin is an awful thing, but it is not the worst thing, and avoiding sin is not the *Hauptwerk*. Faith in Christ is.

### **Conclusion: core stability**

What are the implications of Luther’s theological core for the life of the church today? And what about the next five hundred years, should the Lord grant them? That I leave to you; for now, simply recall a rule mentioned above. Movements that originate with trust in the promises of God are likely to be authentic, graceful, and efficient. Other movements will probably result in our hurting ourselves. In addition, consider this rule: whatever “establishes consciences” through faith in God’s promise belongs in the church. Whatever doesn’t build up consciences in freedom, joy, and peace will be a distraction at best. Consider the implications for worship, preaching, evangelism, counseling, stewardship, our institutions, one’s devotional life, etc. Clearly, a task for a lifetime. The implications are myriad, and staggering.

Most of all, consider what core stability will do for us in a world where the only constant is change. “Repristinators!” is an epithet sometimes hurled at conservatives by progressives repelled by the notion of absolute truth.<sup>105</sup> For this reason, the title is owned proudly by some good people—like those at “Repristination Press,” who like you simply believe that the sun rose before the day we first saw it rise; that truth is never invented, it is discovered, and it can be discovered again.

But repristination is a mirage. It does not matter which age you decide to repristinate: the first century, the fourth century, the sixteenth, etc. The longing for the return of a Golden Age requires historical astigmatism, since on closer examination whatever Golden Age you have in mind always turns out not to have been so “golden” after all. Life may be remembered backward but it is lived forward. While there still was a real Eden, an angel with a flaming sword barred

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103. *LW* 44:45.

104. John C. Lawrenz.

105. Leigh D. Jordahl, introduction to J. P. Koehler, *History*, xiv. Jordahl disputes the charge that Walther was a “repristination theologian.”

our way back in, and Eden is long gone. Until the Lord returns, *ecclesia semper reformans*, and “he not busy being born is busy dying.”<sup>106</sup>

In the meantime:

In Luther’s life we may behold what a great thing in life faith is. It is brought home to us again that only the Scriptures are conversant with all life, that it is not a partial but a comprehensive view of life when the sacred writers from Moses to St. Paul and John, and Christ the Savior at their head, embrace everything great and good that may be told of the life of men in the term ‘faith’, and thereby indicate the deepest and most potent source of healing for all human ills. By the same token we realize that we will grasp this truth, and analyze correctly all life whatsoever, only inasmuch as we have the experience of faith ourselves.<sup>107</sup>

Eden may be gone, but God’s promise remains. “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). This is most certainly true.

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106. Bob Dylan, “It’s All Right, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding),” <https://www.bobdylan.com/songs/its-alright-ma-im-only-bleeding/>.

107. J. P. Koehler, *History of the Wisconsin Synod* (St. Cloud, MN: Sentinel Publishing Company, 1970), 6.

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