

Richard Rex, *The Making of Martin Luther*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

Chapter 4: The Quest for Certainty

Preaching on a favorite story from Genesis, that of Abraham ... Luther interpreted the Christian life in general, and his own life in particular, in terms of Abraham's two sons, Ishmael, son of Hagar, and Isaac, born of Sara in her old age. Isaac, as the son of grace, promised by God, was the reward for Abraham's faith, which had never wavered, not even when Sara was long past all apparent hope of motherhood. Abraham's trust in God's promise was, for Luther as for Saint Paul (and indeed for all Christian theologians), the supreme exemplar and pattern of faith. In this particular sermon, Luther wished to draw out another moral or theological lesson from the narrative, namely the contrast between the children of God and the children of this world (and thus of the flesh and ultimately of the devil). In medieval allegory, these two groups, the elect and the reprobate, the sheep and the goats, were respectively symbolized in the persons of Isaac and Ishmael. Such was the interpretative context within which Luther offered the following fragment of autobiography:

For thirty five years I was a son of Hagar. I desired to be saved by works through the monastic life. There was no promise there, where I confessed, fasted, and celebrated mass. I was not certain that I was saved. . . . But when Sarah became my mother, I grasped the promise, that we are saved without works, by the promise. ...

The distinctively new note in Luther's theology was certainty, certainty that he was "saved." Never before in the history of Christianity was such personal certainty, which medieval theologians called "certainty of grace" or "certainty of salvation," deemed normative, rather than exceptional, in Christian life. For centuries, scholastic theologians, in their inquisitive way, had from time to time addressed the question of whether a Christian could be certain, at any given moment, of being definitely in a "state of grace"—that is, certain that their sins had definitely been forgiven and that they therefore definitely enjoyed, at that moment, the grace and favor of God. By certainty they meant, as Luther meant, certainty—not near certainty, moral certainty, or any other more or less distant approximation to certainty, but absolute and infallible certainty. Their answer, one and all, was "no," at least in relation to the ordinary course of a Christian's life. The one exception they allowed for was what they called a "special revelation," a direct and unmistakable irruption by God into an individual's life, such as Paul's experience on the road to Damascus. ...

Luther himself knew how unusual his position was, observing in 1518 that certainty of grace was something which his opponents "all deny." Instead of certainty, scholastic theologians and preachers offered hope, trust, and sometimes "moral certainty," a reasonable confidence, a sort of working hypothesis of forgiveness and salvation based on divine mercifulness. It was with this hitherto complete consensus that Luther broke in 1518. ...

Expounding the text which declares how Christ “appears in the presence of God for us” (Heb 9:24), he urged upon Christians an absolute certainty regarding the efficacy of Christ’s intercession with the Father not merely in general but also in their own particular case: For this reason the Christian must be certain, absolutely certain, that Christ appears before God as a priest for him. He buttressed this demand with a clutch of New Testament texts that demanded unhesitating faith (Mark 11:23, Matt 8:12, James 1:6)...

To make people uncertain about the mercy of God and trust of salvation ... is to overthrow Christ and his faith completely. ...

You could ... know for sure, in the here and now, that you were in receipt and in possession, by faith, of God’s saving grace. This immediate certainty was itself the essence of faith, its defining characteristic.

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this move in Luther’s theological development. Certainty of grace, based on faith alone, indeed commutable with faith alone, became the acid test by which he judged all Christian doctrine and practice. Certainty of grace conferred upon believers, ... that “peace of conscience” ... which was the practical fruit and objective of belief and worship, of prayer and preaching. Certainty of grace was the revolutionary concept which would lead Cardinal Cajetan later that year to see in Luther’s teaching a new doctrine for a new church. ... “Certainty” ... and “assurance” would become catchwords of the new “evangelical” or, as it was later known, “Protestant” movement. The offer of certainty dispelled the sort of anxiety over sin and grace that motivated what often seems like the frenetic and almost industrial “ritual performance” of late medieval Catholicism.

As late as the compilation of the *Ninety-Five Theses* in October 1517, there is no hint of this idea in his writings. One of his greatest objections to the practice and soon also to the theory of indulgences was that they imbued their devotees (or, as he came to see it, their dupes) with a false sense of security, leading them to believe that the acquisition of indulgences entailed in itself the complete forgiveness of sins. ... Luther opposed to this false sense of security the *a fortiori argument* that “not even the infused grace of God” could confer the kind of assurance people falsely derived from indulgences. The “infused grace of God” was scholastic jargon for the operation of the seven sacraments, especially those of confession and communion. The sacraments conferred grace upon those suitably predisposed to receive and benefit from them. But indulgences were not among the seven sacraments, and did not confer grace. So if even the sacraments could not give their recipients certainty of grace, there was no way that indulgences could. This is the diametrical opposite of what he was to say in 1518....

Luther’s new ideas about certainty of grace [appeared] in a couple of his earliest publications, his *Instructions for Confession* and his *Sermon on the Proper Preparation of the Heart for the Reception of Communion*. ...

Both the *Instructions* and the sermon emphasize that those who come forward to communion should do so relying not on the fact that they had previously made a good confession, but on the certain confidence that they would indeed receive in

communion the grace available therefrom by faith alone...an argument that seeks to wean hearers or readers from their traditional reliance on confession per se as preparation for communion.... Luther informed them that reliance on confession as such was a preparation not for communion but for damnation. Those who took communion relying on having made a good confession “eat and drink judgment upon themselves” (invoking Saint Paul’s sentence upon those who receive the sacrament unworthily). In his sermon, he developed his counterintuitive proposition into a striking paradox:

The best preparation is none other than that by which you are least prepared. And, contrariwise, you are worst prepared when you are most prepared.

It was essential, he added, that someone who approaches the sacrament should do so in absolute certainty of being without mortal sin:

Make sure that you come forward with full faith (or at least as full as possible) trusting with complete certainty that you will acquire grace. ...

We should therefore see early 1518 as the time when Luther first took a firm grip on the fundamental axiom of his theology—which came to be described as “justification by faith alone.” ...

What Luther does tell us in later years about this formative period in his life is that he had indeed suffered, not so much physically as spiritually. His ... trials or temptations or tribulations, might have been characterized in the modern world as mental illness: depression or some other disorder. For a medieval friar these afflictions were seen as being of a spiritual nature. Luther’s troubles seem to have consisted primarily of anxiety over his own spiritual status and condition. He had a profound and abiding sense of sin and unworthiness which found little relief in the usual treatment for such a condition, the sacrament of confession and the sophisticated spiritual direction which, at least in a learned environment such as a religious order, could accompany it. Temptations to despair arising from these feelings had troubled him since his childhood. He would look back ruefully on the way that he had repeatedly pestered his confessors with trivial sins. His career as a friar only fed his anxieties, as his conscience could be troubled by his inevitable failure to live up to the ritual demands of the rule of his order. Neither frequent confession nor fasting to the point of self harm brought him relief. It was only with the transformation of his theological perspective in 1518 that he realized that true peace was not to be found through such strenuous exertion: Works never make someone’s soul secure, nor do they render the conscience joyous and at peace with God....

[Luther] set an extremely low value on the “good works” that people strive to perform in accordance with [the] law, and conclude in effect that even their best efforts remain, in themselves, sins. This paves the way for his second bombshell: Free will, after sin, exists in name only, and, when it does what it can, commits mortal sin. The denial of free will was in itself a direct affront to medieval theology, which ... insisted that the human will was in some sense irreducibly free.

[On] the human will, with respect to sin, he observed that “it is not that it is nothing, but that it is not free except to sin.” Without grace, he continued, citing Augustine, free will

was capable only of sinning. Thomas Aquinas would not have disagreed, but Luther's hyperbolic and provocative formulation of his ideas raised hackles.

The connection between the question of free will and the issue of certainty at the core of Luther's theology becomes apparent in his discussion of ... free will "when it does the best it can." The Latin of this, *dum facit quod in se est* ... alludes to a familiar tag in the theology of late medieval Catholicism: ... God does not deny his grace to someone doing their best. This was an idea that confessors deployed to comfort and reassure those who became anxious about their spiritual condition, a kind of anxiety to which Luther himself was prey, and which he seems to have believed was normal among Christians. ... Notwithstanding Luther's opinion, such anxiety does not seem to have been widespread. ... Luther himself complained that indulgences left people unhealthily blasé about their spiritual state. But equally there was enough anxiety around to have elicited *facienti quod in se est* as a strategy for pastoral care. Luther's objection ... was precisely that it failed as a pastoral strategy, when measured against his novel demand that Christians should experience a "peace of conscience" which only certainty of grace could confer. In a somewhat incoherent but nonetheless revealing statement ... we begin to see both the limitations of Luther's logical capacity and the crucial importance to him, in his new world of justification by faith, of the sense of certainty about receiving the grace of God. For, he argues,

If grace is given to people who do their best, then they can know that they are in a state of grace. This is proved as follows. People either know, or do not know, that they are doing their best. If they know, then they also know that they have grace, since it is generally acknowledged that grace is given to those who do their best. But if they don't know, then the doctrine is handed down in vain and its consolation evaporates, because if, whatever works they have done, people still do not know whether they have done their best, then they will remain in doubt forever.

By the time he reached the end of his chain of reasoning, Luther had lost sight of its start.... His starting point was his intention to demonstrate that, even on the basis of traditional theology, his principle about certainty of grace was demonstrable. However, his argument led not to that conclusion, but to the conclusion that either one knows one is in a state of grace or one is doubtful about it, a conclusion that hardly requires elaborate demonstration. What matters about this argument is its unstated assumption that doubt on this subject is unacceptable. What Luther showed was simply how much importance he now attached to attaining a sense of certainty about being in a state of grace. For him, any doctrine that did not produce such certainty was pastorally worse than useless....

[Anti-Aristotelian Rhetoric]

His anti Pelagian insistence that, contrary to Aristotle's ethical principle, "the justice of God is not acquired by the frequent repetition of actions" was complemented by the affirmation that "it is infused through faith," an affirmation buttressed by his favorite text from Romans, "The just person lives by faith." It was all summed up in his proposition, "The just person is not the one who works hard, but the one who, without works, believes firmly in Christ." ...

[Divine Justice/Justification by Faith]

Luther had always been deeply concerned, one might even say obsessed, with divine justice. Even in the early lectures on the Psalms ... he had drawn a strong distinction between human justice (or self justification), the human aspiration to be just or to become just by one's own unaided efforts, on the one hand; and on the other, divine justice, the mysterious and mystical quality by which alone the salvation of the sinner was made possible.

Such was the subsequent success of Luther's portrayal of Roman Catholicism as a religion preaching "justification by works," as a religion of "works righteousness"—in stark contrast to his own religion of "righteousness by faith"—that it has been all too easy for scholars, especially those in the specifically Lutheran and generally Protestant traditions, to assume that his early emphasis on divine justice, on grace, on the gratuitous character of salvation, already constituted some kind of radical departure from medieval Catholic theology. This was not the case. Roman Catholicism, especially medieval Roman Catholicism, believed just as firmly as any Protestant tradition in "justification by faith," and insisted just as unequivocally that salvation came by grace....He then describes in rather general terms his intellectual struggle with the concept of divine justice, which he presents as intimately bound up with his profound personal anxieties over sin, guilt, and confession. This struggle culminated in the insight that this justice was primarily "that by which the just person lives, thanks to God's gift, namely by faith." Putting it another way, he accounts for it as the realization that the justice of God was for human beings something that God gave, and not something that they could win by their own efforts (from about 1525 he would therefore call this justice *passive*). It was not something they did, but something that was done to them. He does not spell out in 1545, as he had so often done before, the contrast between passive and active justice, but his readers would by that time have grasped this intuitively. This distinction, endlessly reiterated in Luther's mature writings, is crucial, for the concept of "passive justice" excluded not only the "Pelagian" theory of an active justice by which human beings might work out their own salvation, but also the Augustinian and Catholic conception of "cooperative" grace, by which sinners were enabled, through grace, to collaborate with that grace in the process of justification and salvation. ...

The key to Luther's breakthrough about justice therefore resides less in the idea of justice itself than in the coda "through faith" (*nempe ex fide*). It is the appropriation of the justice of God by faith, entirely passively, that is what matters, and here faith means—as Luther and his disciples stated on countless occasions—no merely general faith in God nor even a merely "historical" faith (*fides historica*) in the theological facts of the incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but the specific, personal faith that the saving work of Christ had been made actual and effective in one's own case (*pro nobis, pro me*). To focus too exclusively on Luther's anti Pelagian understanding of divine justice therefore risks missing the point. Luther believed right from the start that it was the justice of God that effected the justification of sinners, not some justice that they developed or manufactured by their own efforts and on their own account. But such an understanding was mainstream

Catholic theology and entailed no breach whatsoever with medieval Catholic doctrine or practice. ...

It was his new conception of faith, faith now modulated to the key of personal certainty of grace, that constituted Luther's most important and most original contribution in the field of Christian theology. On this faith, on this certainty, everything else hinges. There is not a trace of this in his writings until 1518. From 1518 it is all over them. This fundamental shift in focus was even reflected in his attitude towards Augustine. At first, Luther remarked, he did not so much read Augustine as devour him. But once he had learned from Paul what justification by faith was, "it was all over with me and Augustine." Augustine, he remarked on another occasion, got closer to Paul than all the scholastics, but he still did not get Paul, and did not adequately explain or understand justification....

The Resolutions ... give clear indications of Luther's new thinking about faith and personal certainty of the forgiveness of sins, and inculcated his theory that forgiveness depended not on an individual's contrition (as in medieval Catholic pastoral theology) but on their faith and trust in the truth of the words of absolution pronounced in the name of Christ by the priest in confession.... Certainty of grace, founded on an absolute trust in the promise of Christ, is clearly set out, and this is the substance of "faith alone."... The doctrine is presented under the seventh thesis, which concerned sacramental confession, the context within which Luther had first formulated his doctrine of certainty. ...

"Faith in Christ, the gratuitous donor of forgiveness, is to be taught first of all." Already some of the implications of this new principle were becoming clear. The power of the priest to forgive sins was traditionally rooted in a clutch of New Testament texts such as John 20:23, "Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven." Luther's new conception of faith shifted the focus from the action or power of the priest to the faith of the penitent:

Why did Christ say, "Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven," if not because they are not forgiven to anyone unless he believes himself to be forgiven by the absolving priest?

The person seeking absolution must therefore take every care that they should not doubt that their sins are forgiven before God, so that they may be at peace in their hearts.

The traditional understanding of the sacraments was therefore called into question. For Luther, they could no longer be seen as supplying grace to those who put no obstacle in their way. That was a view he now stigmatized as heretical. ... Instead, for Luther, grace functioned only for those who believed in the faith of the sacrament. This certainty of deriving grace from participation in the sacraments was so essential that anyone lacking it was better advised to abstain from the sacraments completely, for fear of the harm they would do their own soul and the offence they would give to God and his Word. The customary invocation of Ecclesiastes 9:1 against the possibility of certainty of grace now horrified him. If that argument were valid, then it would follow that "I doubt whether the merits of Christ granted and applied to me are adequate to

the remission of sins. And what could be more loathsome than such a doubt?" The faith that he taught was, in his view, the essence of the Gospel message, and in the light of his new understanding he faced the awful prospect of the near total corruption of the contemporary Church, for "the Gospel of God is pretty much unknown in the greater part of the Church."...

Even as the ramifications of his theology were reaching far beyond the narrow issue of indulgences which had brought him into the public eye, the *Ninety-Five Theses* themselves began to come under hostile scrutiny as far away as Rome. ...

For Luther, doubt as to one's standing before God was tantamount to doubting the very power of God to save sinners. This has often been called a "subjective" doctrine of justification, and there is some merit in this old fashioned Catholic analysis of Luther's teaching. However, it is fairer to say that Luther collapsed the distinction between the objective and the subjective. For the sense of certainty as to one's own salvation, a sense which it is not altogether unjust to label "subjective," was not to be achieved by the traditionally subjective means of introspection and examination of conscience. He had already stipulated in the *Resolutions on Indulgences* that peace of conscience was not to be attained "by inward experience" (by which he seems to mean the kind of mystical experience that might be sought through the cultivation of meditative prayer). This sense of certainty was attained by an entirely objective and external engagement with the saving promise of Christ. Experience was the fruit of faith rather than its cause. For Luther, the focus of this mental operation was emphatically outside rather than inside the self. The focus was Christ, not self. Through that focus on Christ one attained inner peace by means of the realization that Christ's saving work applied to oneself—and that this work, because it was God's work, was utterly certain and beyond all doubt.

The crucial discovery of 1518 was the decisive turning point in Luther's theological development. That discovery was of a complete spiritual certainty that he was in what Catholics would call "a state of grace," complete spiritual certainty that, in the words of the modern evangelicals, "he was saved." This is not to claim that spiritual certainty rather than "justification by faith alone" was the theological heart of Luther's theology. The point is that "justification by faith alone" is itself spiritual certainty. The received wisdom about Luther, that his doctrine is all about "justification by faith alone," is correct as far as it goes. The problem is that it is rarely understood. It is a complex and counterintuitive doctrine, deeply paradoxical, as Luther delighted in emphasizing. ... For Luther and his followers it was a paradox that brought the troubled soul to the haven of a conscience at peace with God and itself.'

Questions

1. What did Luther mean by the following terms: Faith, Justification by Faith, Peace of Conscience?
2. What did they mean for Luther's teaching on the sacraments?