



Cleansed and Fed: The Sacraments Promote Good Theology

GOSPEL CERTAINTY

One friend to another...
"If you were to die tonight, would you go to heaven?"

The reply...
"I hope so!"

What reasons might the second friend give for their uncertainty?



"I'm a believer, but is my faith strong enough?" Answers will vary.

Certainty or sinful pride?

Luke 18:9-12

⁹To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

What was the basis for the Pharisee's confidence?

Better than others

Dedication to God (offerings)

Name some other false foundations for confidence before God.

"At least I'm trying." / "I'm not perfect, but God made me this way."

Changing God in some way (lower standards / God wouldn't judge)

But: "On Christ, the solid rock I stand, all other ground is *sinking sand*."

Even the name "Lutheran" can become a false foundation for confidence before God. It happened in history. About one hundred years after Martin Luther died, the Lutheran church in Germany had become plagued by spiritual laziness.¹ Two Lutheran theologians, Philip Jacob Spener (1635-1705) and August Hermann Francke (1663-1727), fought for a higher level of Christian piety.

¹ Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) left churches in ruins, and pastors without a paying job. Afterward, princes appointed pastors for their area, but pastors weren't well-trained. Princes declared that everyone in their realm was a member of the church. Church membership was thus just automatic. Among people, there was general distrust of authority after the war, including church authority. In addition to all these things, it is always true that even when the gospel is proclaimed clearly, the sinful flesh can reject it. Many Lutherans became Lutheran in name only: "Because I have the right doctrine, God loves me."

Spener, Francke, and others like them encouraged things like:

- Small group Bible studies
- Personal prayers
- Lay ministry
- Christian living

Still today we enjoy some benefits that have come to us from this era of Lutheran Pietism. Can you think of examples?

Sunday School, Confirmation instruction, emphasis on personal Bible study, hymns expressing personal devotion to God, Bible study groups, etc.

In spite of the Pietists' good goals, it wasn't long before their emphasis on improving Christian behavior began to lead them away from the Bible teachings they sought to defend (NOTE: on paper, they continued to proclaim allegiance to the Lutheran Confessions, Word and Sacrament, and they claimed that the gospel alone creates and strengthens faith – but the approaches laid out below showed up in their practice).

- They began measuring people's Christianity based on their level of Christian living. **Instead of letting Means of Grace serve as the marks of the church, they made piety a mark of the church. They created their own standard of righteousness and used it as a measuring stick (LEGALISM)**
- They suggested that Christians aren't fully Christian until they experience their conversion in some way. **If someone was uncertain, they were told to pray for a conversion experience – EMOTIONALISM (i.e., you need to feel it)**
- Baptism wasn't considered complete until a baptized person took their confirmation vow. **They assumed that people baptized as infants had, since then, fallen from baptismal grace. Confirmation vow supposedly made Baptism complete.**
- The gospel was considered useful only insofar as it led people to live holier lives. **"Holier life" as defined by the pastor. And if gospel wasn't producing notably holier lives, they would assume impenitence and withhold gospel.**

Explain: In trying to address the false confidence of their fellow Christians, Pietists introduced a new source of confidence that was equally false.

New source of confidence became PIETY. (devotion to God as measured by personal experience/feeling)

Still today the Christian church at large continues to be influenced negatively by some aspects of Pietism. Can you think of examples?

"How to" sermons without gospel.

Law preached not to lead people to Christ, but as an end in itself.

Emotion-driven worship (emotions are good, but shouldn't be driving force)

No secular entertainment allowed (have to flee world) – Pietists forbade reading of fiction – since it wasn't helpful for pious living. They said entertainment must be Christian at all times.

Lord Jesus Christ, with us abide,
For round us falls the eventide,
Nor let your Word, that heavenly light,
For us be ever veiled in night.

O God, how sin's dread works abound!
Throughout the earth no rest is found,
And falsehood's spirit wide has spread,
And error boldly rears its head.

*Nikolaus Selnecker
Christian Worship Hymn 541, s.1,2*

Damage Report

Luke 11:46

⁴⁶ Jesus replied, "And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.

Matthew 23:27-28

²⁷ "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. ²⁸ In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness."

Of what is Jesus accusing the Pharisees and teachers of the law?

Loading people down with burdens they can't carry.

Hypocrisy

Why do you suppose the Pharisees and teachers of the law were teaching these things?

Looking for certainty of salvation apart from Christ. It wasn't to be found.

When we rest our confidence on our own ability to serve God...

- What kind of damage do we do to ourselves?
Either we fall into despair, or we fill ourselves with arrogant, sinful pride. CWS 738, "now prodigal, now Pharisee, O God, be merciful to me." FEAR. We separate ourselves from God
- What kind of collateral damage do we do to others?
We burden them with the illusion of our Pharisaical attitude. In despair, we shift blame from ourselves to them.

Sing or say the following hymn stanzas together.

In these last days of sore distress
Grant us, dear Lord, true steadfastness
That pure we keep, till life is spent,
Your holy Word and sacrament.

Lord Jesus, help, your Church uphold,
For we are sluggish, thoughtless, cold.
Oh, prosper well your Word of grace,
And spread its truth in every place.

*Nikolaus Selnecker
Christian Worship Hymn 541, s.3,4*

The Sacraments and Gospel Certainty

Matthew 11:28

[Jesus said,] "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

1 Peter 3:21

Baptism... saves you.

Matthew 26:27-28

"Drink from it, all of you. ²⁸ This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Evaluate: We should be wary of letting people become too confident of their salvation.

True, if you're talking about false confidence. But when it comes to confidence in Christ, you can't have too much of a good thing. Does God seem "wary" in the passages above? There are no "if's," no strings attached, no demands for piety. We can trust the gospel to do what God says it will do (i.e., strengthen our faith in God and our devotion to him).

Your friend says, "I went to Communion today, but I still don't feel forgiven." How might you respond?

Feelings are important, but even though you don't *feel* forgiven, you are. Jesus paid for all. He gave you his own body and blood for your forgiveness. ILLUS. Standing on an ice covered pond. Ice is 6 feet thick. Your friend: "I don't feel like I'm standing on thick ice." What would you say? Feelings have nothing to do with it. You're standing firm!

Explain: In providing us the sacraments of Baptism and Communion, God gives us a source of certainty that comes from outside of ourselves.

When confidence rests in self, there can be only two possible conclusions: "I'm amazing!" or "I stink!" This is the path away from God. Our confidence needs to come from something outside of ourselves. Water, word, bread, wine = all come to us from outside ourselves. All are connected to Christ. They are given to us by God, and that makes them certain things, because God doesn't lie.

Sing or say the following hymn stanzas together.

Oh, keep us in your Word, we pray;
The guile and rage of Satan stay!
Oh, may your mercy never cease!
Give concord, patience, courage, peace.

The cause is yours, the glory, too,
So hear us, Lord, and keep us true.
Your Word alone is our defense,
The Church's glorious confidence.

Oh, grant that in your holy Word
We here may live and die, dear Lord,
And when our journey's ending here,
Receive us into glory there.

*Nikolaus Selnecker
Christian Worship Hymn 541, s.5-7*