

## Certainty in an Age of Uncertainty

Why did the rediscovered Gospel cause such a stir in 16th Century Europe? Because it was a message of joyful certainty in an age of uncertainty. Recent scholarship has done much to show us that the late Middle Ages was a time in which traditional values and certainties had come under fire and new ones had not yet been found. Many events contributed to this great uncertainty. Wars, famines, plagues, a changing economy; but the greatest uncertainty of all was the uncertainty about eternal life.

When it came to the question of life after death, the church had heightened people's uncertainties and insecurities. They did this by promoting a kind of pastoral care that deliberately made people uncertain about their salvation, so that these same people would be made dependent on the intercessions of the church. The church offered the possibility of salvation to them, provided that they took full advantage of all the "services" the church offered. Among these "services" were the attending of masses, the sacrament of penance, the adoring of relics (saints' bones, and personal items), the buying of indulgences, the joining of holy orders such as monasteries, and the religious exercises of prayer, meditation, and self-denial. The goal of all these services was to increase in love for God, for only those who lived God sufficiently, the church taught, would enter life. .

Even when the theologians attempted to bring about more security they produced more insecurity. A Key example of this is the scholastic phrase, "to do what lies within you": do your very best. In other words, if you strive to love God to the best of your ability, God will reward such effort with the grace to do even better. Put another way, salvation was viewed as a process that took place within people as they perfected themselves by their good works. The church existed to aid a person's effort to do the best he could.

There are several problems with "to do what lies within you." One such problem is that it threw people back onto their own resources. Sensitive souls asked the logical question, "But how do I know when or if I have done my best, or enough?"

Popular religious instruction of the time answered, "You can't know, and it is presumptuous to think that you can! An example of this was Dietrich Kolde's *Mirror a/the Christian Man*, a popular catechism of the day. It was first printed in 1470, went through 19 editions before the Reformation, and was often printed after it. It was probably the most popular Catholic catechism before the time of the Reformation. It is a classic example of the mindset of the medieval person. Kolde summarised this mind set when he wrote, "There are three things I know to be true that frequently make my heart heavy. The first trouble my spirit, because I will have to die. The second trouble my heart more, because I do not know when. The third troubles me above all. I do not know where I will go."

"I do not know where I will go." This is the dilemma of uncertainty that confronted Martin Luther and everyone of his age. It is well known that in an effort to be certain about God's forgiveness, Luther threw himself into good works and piety of every kind. But no matter what he did, whether becoming a monk or priest, or whether prayer, meditation, and fasting, Luther became more uncertain. And the religious authorities of his day told him that such uncertainty was normal.

But when, by God's grace, Luther discovered the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, he also for the first time discovered certainty; and he turned the medieval piety of uncertainty on its head. How? Luther [discovered that our salvation, justification, and entrance into heaven depends not on what we do, but on what God has done in Jesus Christ. Our salvation does not depend on a process "within us", but on a declaration "outside of us." God has promised His love, His forgiveness, and His salvation on the basis of what Jesus Christ has already done. Our performance falls far short of what God demands: Jesus' performance did not. He kept God's Law for us and bore our punishment for us by dying on the cross. When we believe God's promise, that because Jesus lived and died for us, we are saved; we receive everything the promise offers, forgiveness of all sin and everlasting life. It is not what our works achieve, but what our faith receives that saves us. We are saved for Christ's sake by faith. If our salvation or entrance into heaven depended on our efforts or performance, we would never be certain, for how could we ever know that we had done enough?

By believing the Gospel, Martin Luther had broken through to certainty, something that the church of his day had said could not and should not be done. Years later, Luther came to see clearly that the "monster of uncertainty", as he called it, was the worst of all errors in the church of the Middle Ages. He wrote:

I am saying this in order to refute the dangerous doctrine of the sophists and the monks, who taught and believed that no one can know for certain whether he is in the state of grace, even if he does good works according to his ability and lives a blameless life. This statement, widely accepted and believed, was a principle and practically an article of faith throughout the papacy. With this wicked idea of theirs they

utterly ruined the doctrine of faith, over threw faith, disturbed consciences, abolished Christ from the church... If everything else were sound there (in the papacy) still this monster of uncertainty is worse than all the other monsters.

Luther realised that the teaching that no one can know for certain whether he is a Christian contradicted the heart of the Christian faith and greatly disturbed consciences.

This is not to suggest that Luther never had doubts or that certainty of his salvation was automatic. He often struggled with doubt because of an overwhelming sense of failure, unworthiness, and sin. Attaining certainty was often a struggle. Luther learned that the only way out was to look away from self and toward Christ, to be reminded that our certainty always and only depends on Him and His worthiness.

Let us thank God, therefore, that we have been delivered from this monster of uncertainty... And this is our foundation: The Gospel commands us to look, not at our good deeds or perfection but at God Himself as He promises, and at Christ Himself, the Mediator... AI1Q- this is the reason why our theology is certain: it snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that *we* do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works but depend on what is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive.

Let everyone accustom himself, therefore, to believe for a certainty that he is in a state of grace and that his person with its works is pleasing to God. For if he senses that he is in doubt, let him exercise his faith, struggle against the doubt, and strive for certainty, so that he may say, "I know that I have been accepted and that I have the Holy Spirit, not on account of my worthiness or virtue but on account of Christ, who subjected Himself to the Law on our account and took away the sins of the world. In Him I believe. If I am a sinner and if I err, He is righteous and cannot err.

The Christian can be certain when his certainty is founded on God's promise and Jesus Christ.

The rediscovered Gospel caused such a stir in 16th Century Europe because it brought the certainty of God's love, forgiveness, and eternal life to a people tormented by uncertainties, doubts and fears. From that day until this it causes a joyful stir wherever it is preached and believed. May it be so among us!

When the question is asked us, "Are you certain you are going to heaven when you die?" may we respond with joyful certainty, "Yes! I am certain because Jesus Christ has died for me and kept the Law on my behalf. He has done enough! And God has promised that whoever believes in Jesus has and will have eternal life. God's promise is certain. In this I trust."

[From *Proclaim*, with small alterations, from *Christian News*, Oct 26, 1998. page 13]