

Can and Ought a Christian be Certain of his Salvation?

by *Ulrik V. Koren*

Introduction: “Can I be sure I am going to heaven?” This basic question has lurked in the heart of every believer. In the midst of the great election controversy in the Norwegian Synod, Rev. U.V. Koren penned the following essay, “Can and Ought a Christian Be Certain of His Salvation?” This paper was delivered in 1881, the same year in which Dr. C.F.W. Walther published his work on the controversy concerning predestination. We see how Koren vividly understands the purpose of all theology: the comfort of sinners with the grace of God in Christ. He heavily leans upon Luther and Article XI of the Formula of Concord, in addition to quoting many comforting verses from the great treasury of Lutheran hymn writers. It is clear that for Koren the Lutheran Symbols were not merely historical writings of what Lutherans once believed, but the very breath of the living church today.

It might seem strange to ask this question and it might seem unnecessary to use many words in answering it. It might seem enough to refer to our Confession of Faith where, in the Third Article, we say that we believe in “the life everlasting”; and to the explanation of this Article in our *Small Catechism*, where we say: “I believe . . . that the Holy Ghost shall give to me and all believers everlasting life”; or to one of the many passages in Holy Writ, where God promises to save those who believe in Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, when I undertake to treat the question more fully, I have several reasons for it, both general and more specific. Partly, there are many who think they are certain of their salvation, but who deceive themselves, and therefore need to be admonished; partly, there are many who would very much like to be certain of their salvation, but dare not be, and therefore need to be encouraged; finally, the question has recently become the object of controversy among us—a controversy very closely allied to, or rather a part of, the controversy concerning the doctrine of election. If one wishes to avoid misunderstanding in treating this matter and be kept from error both on the right hand and on the left, then

there are certain truths which must be noted in advance, be strictly adhered to, and never lost sight of.

1. First of all, we must maintain that when this question of our final salvation is being considered, there can be no talk of any so-called absolute certainty, provided the word “absolute” is used in its proper sense. But here, alas! In common usage the word “absolute” is wrongly construed to mean “altogether and wholly,” “completely,” and so forth. We do not use the word in this sense here; for, as we shall see, a believer can and ought to be altogether and wholly certain of his salvation. In itself, certainty is a superlative concept, denoting the highest degree. If the certainty is not a perfect certainty, it is not certainty, but only a more or less well-formed supposition. “Absolute” here means independent, free, not determined by anything else. Thus a person can be absolutely certain that he exists, of what he perceives with his senses, sees with his eyes, and so forth; or, of what he can demonstrate, such as the mathematical truth that one and one are two, and so forth.

Thus an absolute certainty is a certainty which we have in itself, and which is not dependent upon or attached to anything else. The expression “I know” generally designates this. A believer cannot have such an unbounded or disengaged certainty, or absolute certainty, regarding his salvation in this sense. Only God can have it. The certainty of which we speak is, first of all, a certainty of faith, which can only be where faith is. We arrive at such a certainty through another means, another power, than the one through which we arrive at certainty concerning those things which we are accustomed to say that we know. Further, the certainty of faith is not absolute, because it is bound to the Word of God and to the order and way which God has ordained unto salvation. But, as we have already said, it does not follow from all this that the certainty of faith is weaker than absolute certainty. Faith is certainty, and the Holy Scriptures often use the expression. We know about that which we believe or hope, for example, 1 John 3:3; 5:13; 2 Corinthians 4:14; 5:1, etc.

2. Furthermore, we must maintain that as certainty of salvation is a certainty of faith, only he who is truly a believer can have it. No unconverted person, no hypocrite, no nominal Christian, no one who has merely an “historic” faith, can possess it. True, many

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imagine that they are certain of salvation (Matthew 7:21-22); it often seems as though they believe that to be saved nothing else is needed than to belong to a congregation, live somewhat decently, and then die. But like their faith, their certainty is only imagination, for their faith does not have the marks which the New Testament places upon faith. Those who do not seek salvation have no promise of finding it; nor do those who seek it in other ways than the one God has shown us; for where there is no promise, neither can there be any true faith, and where faith is dead, certainty of faith can only be sinful security. For the same reason, neither can those who have another foundation for their faith than Christ and the promises of God because of Him have any certainty of faith regarding salvation. As their faith has no foundation, neither can their certainty have any, except in their own imagination.

3. Thirdly, we must maintain that a certainty is not here spoken of which all believers necessarily must have in the same degree, or which all believers necessarily must feel within themselves, with the result that if they do not do so, they must conclude that they do not have the right faith. When it is asked whether we can and ought to have certainty of faith regarding a matter, we do not really ask about the degree or strength of faith. The strength of faith, we know, can be different, without the essence of faith being changed thereby. Accordingly, the question is really whether we can and ought to have faith in this particular. If we acknowledge this, it follows of itself that we can and ought to have certainty, for faith, in its nature and essence, is a firm conviction. It can be this even if it is so weak that it is not felt as certainty—if it be true and sincere. If faith is not a firm conviction, it is not faith, but only a vague notion. Thus the expression “to believe” is often used in everyday conversation about things concerning which one has only an opinion or a presumption. Thus we, in fact, occasionally hear someone say, “I believe so, but it may be that I am mistaken.” This is not faith in the Biblical sense of the word. “I would wish,” Luther says, “that the word *faith* either were not so common, or that it were allowed to retain its right meaning and use, so that it were called faith when one is altogether certain and without doubt in the matter. . . . Therefore, the Scriptures, also designate faith with the Hebrew word *emuna*, and St. Paul calls it

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pleroforia, that is, that the heart is altogether certain and has no doubt as to the word. But for this the Holy Spirit is essential, who prepares the hearts, as the Psalmist confesses (Psalm 51:10): ‘Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.’ Oh! he says, I would gladly have a spirit which does not doubt or waver, but freely says: I know nothing of which I am certain except Thy Word alone. Here he plainly confesses that faith is not a notion or a something that grows of itself within our hearts, for he says: ‘Create in me,’ etc My beloved, it is not a matter such as one masters after a single attempt. I am now an old doctor, have preached, written and learned much thereabout, but nevertheless do not as yet know it. I can get nowhere with it. If I have today mastered a considerable part of it, it will only be, no doubt, that I have forgotten it again tomorrow. Our flesh and blood bring this about—which cannot enter so deeply into the Word, and hide itself, that it will perish because of it, as should indeed be the case, however, and verily must be.” (Luther’s *Sämmtliche Schriften*, St. Louis-Walch edition, volume XII, 1614) Hence, if certainty belongs to the essence of faith, it is so far from being audacity to possess or to seek it, that it is much more a sin not to possess it; for it is a sin to be infirm and weak in faith.

4. Furthermore, we must bear in mind that faith and hope, in the Biblical meaning, are not different in such a way that faith is stronger and hope weaker. The word “hope” is often used in such a way as intentionally to express thereby that something is inferior to, or weaker than faith. Many a person thus, for instance, when he is asked, “Do you believe that you will be saved?” will not readily venture to say, “Yes, I believe it,” but will perhaps not hesitate to say, “I hope so.” as if something less were said thereby. This usage of language has no foundation in the Holy Scriptures. Christian faith and Christian hope are altogether coordinate there. The difference is, partly, that hope especially has future blessings as its objective, while the objective of faith is things past as well as things present and to come. There is also this difference that while faith is the assent of the heart to the Word, and appropriation of the promise it contains, hope is the firm expectation of the blessings which are promised in the Word. Faith and hope are therefore inseparable. While faith believes the Word, hope expects the good which the Word promises. They go

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hand in hand; and how intimately they are conjoined is seen among other things from the explanation given of faith in Hebrews 11:1, that it “is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen,” just as the Christians “are called in one hope of their calling” (Ephesians 4:4), and as we confess that we are “in hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began.” (Titus 1:2) He, therefore, who through Christ has access by faith into grace, also rejoices in hope of the glory of God; and hope maketh not ashamed. (See Romans 5:1-5)

5. Further, we must maintain that there is no difference between being certain of one’s salvation and being certain of one’s election. It may well be that a believer has not heard anything about election, or has not understood any of this doctrine; but this does not alter the case, however, for these two concepts, to be saved and to have been elected, nevertheless amount to the same thing in effect. Every single soul of the elect will be saved, and none except the elect. (Matthew 24:24; Romans 8:30-33) To be one of the elect and to be saved are, accordingly, the same, and if one believes that he will be saved, it is the same as to believe that he is one of the elect.

6. Finally, we must be convinced that certainty of salvation cannot be attained by brooding over or wanting to “investigate the secret, concealed abyss of divine predestination.” Whoever makes this his beginning will fall into either arrogance or despair and will not attain to any certainty of salvation. Whoever, on the other hand, in conformity with the advice of Luther and the guidance of *The Book of Concord*, follows Paul in his explanation of God’s eternal counsel, as this is presented to us in the Epistle to the Romans, will, by the grace of God through the Gospel, learn to form the same conclusion as Paul does, when in Romans 8:31 he exclaims: “What shall we say then to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?” And in the immediate presence of the inscrutable mystery of God’s counsel, he will also repeat the words of the apostle: “O the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counselor? or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again?” (Romans 11:33-35)

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For “we must carefully distinguish between what God has expressly revealed in His Word and what He has not revealed.” (*The Book of Concord*, Tappert edition, page 625, 52) God has in Christ revealed to us all that we need in order to be certain of our salvation, but much of His secret counsel He has kept hidden. We are not to brood over this—and this admonition is needful in the highest degree. “In our presumption we take much greater delight in concerning ourselves with matters which we cannot harmonize—in fact, we have no command to do so—than with those aspects of the question which God has revealed to us in His Word.” (*ibid*, page 625, 53)

I.

With these introductory remarks, we will now account for whether a believing Christian can and ought to be certain of his salvation. As stated before, we find the first clear confession regarding it in our Third Article of Faith, where we say: “I believe . . . the life everlasting.”

In each of these parts in all the Articles of Faith it is true that our faith is a true Christian faith only when we truly add the words “for me,” and thus in a living way, make our own that in which we confess our belief. This is true also of this part; yes, concerning this part which states the final objective of our faith, we must say that it is obviously much more important that we make whatever lies therein our own, inasmuch as all the other parts are of no use if this one is not added; for all the others indeed aim at and are given precisely on account of this part. “Therefore, those who believe in Christ are to be certain of eternal glory and together with all creatures sigh and pray that God will hasten to come with a blessed day when our hope shall be fulfilled; and for this very reason God has commanded us to pray in our Lord’s Prayer: ‘Thy Kingdom come’; for we are not baptized for the present life, nor do we hear the Gospel just for it, but everything has eternal life in view.” (Luther’s *Sämmtliche Schriften*, St. Louis-Walch edition, volume XII, 735)

“If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.” (1 Corinthians 15:19) But how can a Christian have

certainty regarding his salvation, or, in other words, that he shall be kept in the true and living faith unto the end? He is to believe it. "The entire life which a truly believing Christian leads after Baptism is nothing else than an expectation of the revelation of the bliss which he already has. He certainly has it entire, but nevertheless hid in faith." (Luther, *ibid*, 137)

He is to believe, that is, humbly and in a child-like manner rely upon the promises which God has given him precisely concerning this. These promises are more firm than heaven and earth and are given just for this purpose, that we are to believe them, have a firm conviction that He will fulfill them in spite of the devil, the world and our flesh.

Of ourselves we are powerless, impotent. We can neither believe God nor do anything else well-pleasing in His sight. "It is God who works in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13), and "makes us perfect in every good work to do his will, working in us that which is well-pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever." (Hebrews 13:21)

What then has our heavenly Father promised to do for us and work in us? He has promised us who "wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ," that He will "confirm us unto the end, that we may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ;" and to assure us further He reminds us that He "is faithful, by whom we were called unto the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." (1 Corinthians 1:7-9)

He has assured us that He, because He "is faithful, will not suffer us to be tempted above that we are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that we may be able to bear it." (1 Corinthians 10:13) He has said that because He "is faithful, he will establish us and keep us from evil." (2 Thessalonians 3:3) He wants us to "be confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in us will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." (Philippians 1:6) "For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance" (Romans 11:29), and He has "called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that we have suffered a while." (1 Peter 5:10)

Our Lord Jesus does not desire that our hearts be troubled,

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but that we believe in God and believe also in Him. He has therefore said: “In my Father’s house are many mansions. . . . I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.” (John 14:1-3) He has promised us another Comforter, the Holy Spirit “that he may abide with us forever” (John 14:16), and has said: “because I live, ye shall live also.” (verse 19) In His High-Priestly Prayer, He prays that God will “keep us from the evil,” and says: “Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me.” (John 17:24) He has promised to be with us always, even unto the end of the world, and has at the same time reminded us that “all power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.” (Matthew 28:18-20) He can therefore also promise us, and has promised us, that His sheep, that is, those who hear His voice, “shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of his hand.” (John 10:28)

It is therefore God’s will that we “hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering, for he is faithful that promised.” (Hebrews 10:23) If we are troubled with the thought of how easily we can fall, and with what difficulty “our whole spirit and soul and body are preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ,” we are to pray and with Paul believe and say: “Faithful is he that called us, who also will do it.” (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24) He must do it; otherwise, it will not be done: “for we are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” (1 Peter 1:5) But we are also to rely firmly upon this power of God, for He has promised and said: “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee” (Hebrews 13:5), and therefore He wants us to “cast all our care upon him.” (1 Peter 5:7) We do this when we think and believe as follows: “What is to become of my soul? Well, He must see and give heed to that, who has so truly cared for my soul as to give His own life to redeem it. Let Him be praised eternally, the only right and true Shepherd and bishop of all souls that believe on Him! And, surely—He will not first because of me begin to teach me how He preserves and defends the saved, who hear and keep His Word, against the power of the devil and the evil and the tyranny of the

world. He says: ‘They shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck

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them out of my hand.’ (John 10:28) I will let the matter rest here. I therefore no longer wish to care for my soul myself, or have power and authority over it; for then it would truly be ill cared for because the devil could soon, yea, any moment snatch it away from me and devour it. There, in Jesus’ hand, it shall continue to be safe and well preserved, according to His Word.” (Luther’s *Sämmtliche Schriften*, St. Louis-Walch edition, volume IX, 1830)

For what do we need in order to be kept in the faith to the end?

Is there anything of all that we need which God should not be willing to give us? “He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?” (Romans 8:32) Therefore, St. Paul, with much frankness, can promise believers: “When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory.” (Colossians 3:4) Therefore he can teach us that “denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ.” (Titus 2:12-13; cf. Philippians 3:20-21) Therefore he himself can comfort us, saying: “For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (2 Corinthians 5:1), and we “rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:2), a “hope that maketh not ashamed” (verse 5), because we have not given it to ourselves nor invented it, but it is “the hope set before us,” which we should therefore “lay hold upon” and “have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast.” (Hebrews 6:17-19) Therefore St. John can testify so directly and surely: “We know that when he shall appear, we shall be like him.” (1 John 3:2) Yes, and Paul in his glorious song of victory in Romans 8 can challenge all principalities and powers, all enemies and dangers, both those present and those to come, and be certain that nothing shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Yes, indeed, God would have us believe that it is unalterably certain that we shall sometime be saved. For He has given us all these glorious words and promises that we should believe them. Surely, He

has not given them to us that we should doubt them. “For the Son of God . . . was not yea and nay, but in him was yea. For all the promises

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of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us.”

(2 Corinthians 1:19-20) He, therefore, who believes these promises believes that it is unfailingly certain that he shall once be saved. “He that believeth not God hath made him a liar.” (1 John 5:10)

Now, we are not to forget, and, if we are believers, neither will we forget, that left to ourselves we could easily fall from faith, and certainly would fall at once. But as a help against this, the Lord Jesus has taught us to pray to our heavenly Father: “Lead us not into temptation.” And when we then in this prayer pray “that God would guard and keep us, that the devil, the world and our flesh may not deceive us, nor lead us into misbelief, despair and other shameful sin and vice; and, though we be thus tempted, that we may still in the end overcome, and retain the victory,” are we not to believe and regard it as altogether certain that God will do this? And when we pray in the Third Petition “that God would break and hinder every evil counsel and will which would not let us hallow God’s name nor let His Kingdom come, such as the will of the devil, the world and our own flesh”; and when we further pray “that God, in place of our will, lets His good and gracious will be done, and strengthens and keeps us steadfast in His Word and in faith unto the end”—are we then not to believe and regard as altogether certain that He will do it? Or when we pray in the Seventh Petition that God “would deliver us from all manner of evil. . . and at last, when the hour of death shall come, grant us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this vale of tears to Himself in heaven,” are we then to regard it as uncertain whether we shall receive what we pray for? Are we not, as Luther says, to make the “Amen” which our Lord has taught us, right strong, and thus believe that it is unswervingly certain that we shall receive it? “Amen, Amen, that is, yes, yes, it shall be so.”

Thus, because God has promised it, we are to believe it, and consider it to be unfailingly true that we shall be saved. Because “from such words and promises of God, which of pure grace and mercy, without our deserving, are spoken to us, springs the hope that I certainly expect that which is promised to me, . . . and do not allow anything to frighten me away from them, be it sin, death, the devil,

or hell, the world or our own flesh. Just as now faith looks only to the promises of God, so does hope look only to the pure and undeserved

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mercy of God, that is, to that which is spoken in His Word and profuse of grace, as the psalmist says: 'For thy loving-kindness is before mine eyes: and I have walked in thy truth.' (Psalm 26:3)

“The work and fruit of faith is a good conscience, a tranquil heart, and a cheerful trust in God. Hope is tranquil and expects what God has promised, let fall what may: and it is especially established in tribulation. St. Paul sums this up so beautifully in Romans 5:1-5, where he says: ‘Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. By whom also we have access by faith into the grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope; and hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.’” (Luther’s *Sämmtliche Schriften*, St. Louis-Walch edition, volume XI, 1940)

We were baptized to share in the death and resurrection of Christ, and have promise upon promise from the mouth of God, and should we not want to believe it! Do we not have enough with which to struggle and contend, the miserable and shameful unbelief because of our old Adam without in addition thinking that we did right and that it was piety on our part to doubt what God has promised?

II.

Is there a doctrine in the Word of God to which men have not objected? I know of none. This doctrine has also been objected to, that a believer can and ought to be certain of his salvation. And, alas! These objections are now in our own midst, and from trusted teachers among us. I cannot but cherish the hope, however, that by the Word of God they can be set aright, so there can once more be the unity among us, which by the grace of God there has been for so many years.

The objections which are raised appear in a double form.

Partly it is alleged that we cannot have such a certainty, partly that we are not to have it. It is really but one objection, however. For it is true, that if we could not have this certainty, neither should we have

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it; and again, if it is God's will that we are to have it, we are also able to, by the grace of God.

In the Scripture passages previously cited I have shown from the Word of God both that we can and should be certain of our salvation, and I will now look more closely at the objections made to it.

In the first place, the objectors say: from the Scripture passages which have been cited, it is clear that God is able to do all that is necessary for our salvation; but I cannot know whether I shall receive His grace in the future, whether I shall permit Him to keep me in faith. I do not know whether I, like so many others, shall fail to keep from falling away. And how can I be certain that I shall once be saved? Where is it written that perchance I shall not fall and be lost?

First, let me reply to this: If this objection were valid, a Christian would have to spend his days on earth in uncertainty as to his eternal salvation. It would then be Christian and correct to say: "Now I am a Christian; but whether I remain one is more than I can know. I can have no firm belief regarding it. I am to watch and pray and use the means of grace; and I am to work out my salvation with fear and trembling—I know this, but what the end will be, I do not know: whether I come to Jesus or to the devil, to heaven or to hell—I can have no certain or dependable belief concerning this."

Is this Christian faith? Is this the faith the apostles had?

Paul—who testified: "Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day" (2 Timothy 4:8)—and John, who says, that "when he shall appear, we shall be like him?" (1 John 3:2) Is this the faith which called forth in the apostles' disciples the joy of which Peter speaks (1 Peter 1:8). . . ." ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory"? The reason for this joy, indeed, lay in the words of Peter, in which he "blessed God for his manifold spiritual graces," for instance, "Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection

of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time, wherein ye greatly rejoice,” etc. (1 Peter

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1:3-6) Do you suppose that in the midst of their unspeakable joy, and as they joined the apostle in blessing the “God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” that nevertheless they did and should have thought within themselves: “But whether we shall ever enter heaven and receive any inheritance, is more than we can tell; we dare have no firm assurance about it”?

Is this the burden of the faith we confessed in Holy Baptism regarding life everlasting? Does this agree with what we say in our *Catechism*: I believe that the Holy Spirit shall grant me, together with all those who believe, eternal life?

If the objection were true, it would be presumptuous to believe God’s promises. It would be audacious to sing at the grave of a dear one:

*Then shall I see Thy count’nance clear,
Lord, Throne of my salvation,
When Thou in glory dost appear,
With trump and angel-vision;*

or when we sing with Brorson:1

*O, I am a sinful man,
That is all my titled glory;
Better it can never be,
If God’s Law scroll I but scan.
But—Thou becamest Jesus,
And my mis’ry ‘pon Thee took;
Therefore is my name most precious,
And Thou wrot’st it in Thy Book.
At Judgment I shall rise
To enter heaven with joy,
To reign there with my Lord,
And wear the beauteous crown.*

*Branches of palm, and raiment white,
Angelic drink, abundant life—
These I enjoy,*

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For Jesus' sake, and by His blood.

or when we confess with the same hymn writer:

*My walk is heavenward all the way,
Await my soul, the morrow,
When thou shalt find release for aye
From all thy sin and sorrow;
All worldly pomp, begone.
To heaven I now press on;
For all the world I would not stay,
My walk is heavenward all the way.*

We would not then dare to sing with Kingo:2

*From first day of my life,
Whatever I have met
Of grievous pain and strife,
I shall indeed forget,
When in triumphant Church
Mid all the heavenly host,
With angel tongue and voice,
God's honor I will boast.
Then shall I in my hand
The palm of triumph wave,
For great the victory
By which Christ came to save,
Who by His blood and death
Has won the victory—
Thus it shall be my joy
To bear the emblem high.*

Neither ought we sing with Paul Gerhard night after night:

Behold, the day is vanished.

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*And hosts of stars have risen
In heaven's deepest blue:
Thus I shall be attired,
When life and cares are ended,
And I depart to be with You.*

We have then no right to pray with Palladius and Landstad:3

*Grant us a steadfast faith,
So we may never doubt
That peace and rest in heaven
We shall by Thee obtain!*

or to confess:

*His Spirit is to me a pledge,
My faith shall finally obtain
A sweet and blessed end.*

But no, God be praised! Let the papal church keep its old lie that a Christian is to be uncertain of his salvation. We will continue in our churches and in our homes humbly and joyfully to pray, praise and give thanks, saying:

*Until we join the hosts that cry,
'Holy are Thou, O Lord most high!'
And 'mid the light of that blessed place
Shall gaze upon Thee face to face.*

Now let us examine more closely what lies in that objection that "God can and will do His part, but I do not know, surely, whether I shall let Him do so, and thus I cannot be certain of my salvation." In it lies the assertion that the promises of God cannot be sufficient for a troubled heart. For, it is said, even though our Savior has promised: "I will come again and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:3), I surely cannot know whether I will always let Him receive me unto Himself, whether it won't happen

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that I leave Him, and so I cannot depend on it with full certainty that

I shall once arrive there where He is. Thus the promises of God are not sufficient for one to build an unfailing certainty of salvation on them.

Well now, if God's promises are not enough, what more then do we want? Something more from God? No, God indeed has already promised us everything. It must therefore be something of our own. Good deeds? No, for we surely know that they do not avail; for we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ, not by the works of the Law. (Galatians 2:16) Is it faith then which is meant? "Yes," they answer, "if I knew that I would continue in faith unto the end, I could be certain of my final salvation." If we meet this objection by reminding them that we indeed have the unfailing promise of God that He will keep us in faith unto the end, and that according to the Scriptures we "are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation, ready to be revealed in the last time," and that according to Scripture it is by God's power that we are preserved in faith to eternal salvation, they again answer with the same objection: "Yes, but I don't know whether I will be willing to receive this help from God unto the end. I can, of course, fall."

Thus the Word and promise of God are considered insufficient. God has promised to do everything; but that, however, is not enough. In addition, one must have something of his own, otherwise he cannot be certain of his salvation. Men want to build on their own acceptance of the Word in addition to God's Word. They want to make their own faith, or willingness to believe, or their own non-resistance, a basis for their confidence; and if they cannot do this, they do not want to have any confidence. But surely, thereby, faith has been mortally wounded. For whoever wants to build on something of his own in addition to the promise of God, does not have the true Christian faith which the Holy Ghost works. Because "it is the essence and nature of faith to tolerate nothing alongside it in which man might trust except the Word of God alone, or the divine promise. To him who uses faith as a weapon in the strife, the things which are contrary to God's Word will suggest themselves immediately. But faith lets go of all creatures and visible things in the world, also itself, and holds fast to the Word of God. Faith does not seek a footing somewhere, or

reach for something, to obtain certainty, and thus be preserved. This is what Christ means when He also says (John 8:51): ‘Verily, verily, I say unto you, If a man keep my saying, he shall never see death.’ If you cling to the Word of God and close your eyes, you will be preserved. From whence does it come? Indeed, from here: the Word of God is a living Word; death cannot devour it. If the Word remains, you also remain.” (Luther’s *Sämmtliche Schriften*, St. Louis-Walch edition, volume XI, 2191)

At this point the opposition will no doubt seek another expedient, saying: We subscribe to all this with all our heart, that a man is not to believe in his faith, and that faith has only the Word of God to rely upon; you could just as well have spared yourself the trouble of telling us, because we already knew it. When we say we want nothing to do with this faith that is unfailingly certain that we will once be saved, it is precisely because we neither can nor ought to have such a faith: “It is not commanded by God to know beforehand with divine certainty of faith that we shall indeed be constant, but rather with daily fear and trembling see that we become so by a true and diligent use of the means of grace.”

I reply to this: Fear and trembling form no contrast to faith and do not hinder it, but further it. I shall make this plain later. But the subterfuge that we are not to have certainty of faith regarding our salvation, and that God has not commanded it, is really nothing else than a new way of stating the previous objection, or, that God will do His part, but I cannot be sure that I shall do mine; and thus, neither can I be certain of my salvation. Indeed, men may say that they subscribe to those words about not believing in one’s faith, or in one’s acceptance of grace, but only in the Word and promise of God; however, they cannot dismiss this matter with such utterances. There is the best opportunity right here to show whether they really mean this and acknowledge the significance of it. I have cited a long list of promises of God to the effect that He will make us finally blessed. Why will the opposition not believe them, that is, be assured of their fulfillment? Christ says to us: “I will come again and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.” (John 14:3) If a person really accepts this truth, that the Word of God is sufficient for faith and that faith does not want anything else to rely upon, he

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must admit that we are to believe this promise of God, that is, be unswervingly certain that it will be fulfilled. Or is it not given to be believed? Is it not the will of God (that is to say, commanded us), that with divine certainty of faith we are to know beforehand that what God has promised will take place?

The answer is, yes, God wills it, to be sure, but we cannot know if we shall will it. This is but a repetition of the previous objection and shows where the damaging thing lodges.

The mistake is that they do not fully and completely surrender every thought of contributing anything whatsoever in any particular or in any manner to their salvation. If we do not do this, neither do we believe God's promise before we are assured that we ourselves will do our part, be it little or much.

The objection is raised: Indeed, you forget that we can resist the grace of God. Manifestly, this is our power, and who can vouch for it that we do not resist?

I reply: God must vouch for it; and—praised be His unfathomable grace! —He will vouch for it. And this is, indeed, the very thing we are to believe, and if we do not believe it we do not give God all the glory for our salvation. For who can overcome our resistance? Can we do it ourselves? No, no power in the world can overcome the opposition of our evil and vain hearts—save God alone. And hasn't God promised to do this? Hasn't He promised that He will not leave us? Hasn't He promised us eternal bliss? Did He, then, perhaps not take into consideration that this also required that He deliver us from our most dangerous enemies, our own flesh and blood? Has He forgotten this? Is He not, according to Scripture, "the finisher of our faith," just as He is its "author"?—No, the case is this: one does not want to give himself up wholly and entirely and cling to the Word alone.⁴

"A person must despair of himself, let go with both hands and feet, confess before God that he is incompetent, and implore His divine grace, in which he may firmly trust. Anyone who teaches or seeks another way to begin than this errs and deceives both himself and others as, then, those do who say: 'Look here, you have a free

will: do what is in your power; God will do His part,' and who are of the opinion that a person should not teach people to despair. It is true enough one is not to teach people to despair; but we must first

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explain this despair rightly. No one is to despair of the grace of God, but, despite the entire world and all sin, firmly rely on God's help; of himself, however, one is altogether to despair and in no way rely on his free will to perform even the smallest little deed. . . . It is not possible that God can deny a person His grace who thus with his whole heart acknowledges his inability and plainly despairs of himself. . . . This despair and searching after grace is not to last for an hour or for a time and then cease, but all our deeds, words, thoughts, as long as we live, are to have as their aim that we always despair of ourselves and continue in the grace of God with an eager desire and longing for him." (Luther's *Sämmtliche Schriften*, St. Louis-Walch edition, volume XI, 2310)

Despite all these glorious promises, men still make the pitiable assertion that God does not want us to have certainty of faith concerning our constancy unto the end. On what do they base this assertion? Among other things, on a rational deduction which unbelief makes along these lines: As it is possible for me to fall away, and since I, according to God's will, am always to acknowledge and bear in mind that it is possible for me to fall away—it follows that I neither can nor ought to be certain that I will not fall away.

But this rational deduction does not hold good, because there is no contradiction in one's recognizing as possibilities two opposite things: salvation and damnation—while at the same time, according to a divine promise, one has the certainty of faith that the first of these possibilities (salvation) will become reality. If anyone cannot understand this,⁵ he can, however, learn it from St. Paul, who says that by faith he is immovably sure that he shall be saved, but that the possibility that he may be condemned is not thereby annulled. By faith he is certain that this possibility, by the grace of God, shall not become a reality, and still he admits the possibility, as shall be pointed out later. (Romans 8:38; 2 Timothy 4:8; 1 Corinthians 9:27)

Or, it is said: I cannot be certain of my salvation because I know that I may fall away, and nowhere in the Bible does it say

that I will remain constant. The meaning is: If it were stated in the Scriptures, with the mention of my name, that I am to endure unto the end; or, if I could look into the Book of Life and find my name there, then I could be certain of my salvation. In other words, this

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is precisely what Christ so often and severely chastises: that people will not believe, but want to see. “Blessed are they,” He says, “that have not seen, and yet have believed.” (John 20:29)

“But as long as we are on earth, we must live in hope. For although we are sure that we have all the blessings of God through faith—for faith is surely accompanied for you by the new birth, the filial relationship, and the inheritance—we do not yet see this. It is still something to be hoped for and still somewhat remote. We cannot see it with our eyes. St. Peter calls this the hope of life. . . . We speak of a living hope, that is, a hope in which we may hope with certainty and be sure of eternal life. But this is still concealed. It is still covered with a cloth. One does not see it. At present it can be grasped only with the heart and through faith, as St. John says in 1 John 3:2.” (*Luther’s Works*, American Edition, volume 30, page 11)

Another objection by which men would save themselves from difficulty is that they say all of God’s promises of salvation are conditioned (as many of our church fathers have expressed it); for God has not promised us salvation unconditionally, but, as St. Paul says (Romans 11:22), “if thou continue in his goodness”; nor has Christ unconditionally promised that we shall be where He is, for we must infer a condition from other passages, as “if ye abide in me” (John 15:7); “if a man keep my saying.” (John 8:51)

I reply to this: Yes, if it were true that God’s promises are conditioned on something in us, which we must therefore first bring about in order to obtain the promises, our opponents would then, indeed, be correct, and we could never be sure of our salvation; but—God be praised!—it is not so. This objection is, then, nothing else than the old confusion and lack of understanding which we know from the Absolution Controversy, and of which every pastor with a little experience has had enough instances in his own care of souls. It comes from a confusion of the nature of the divine promises with

the effect of the divine promises. The promises of God in themselves are not conditioned upon anything except the mercy of God and the ground on which they are given, Jesus Christ. They are and must be unconditional, otherwise they would not be promises of grace, and this is then the essence of the promises. It is a different matter with the effect. This is conditioned upon our faith; for if we do not believe,

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the promises profit us nothing. And it is for this reason, indeed, that I write these lines—to exhort us that we do by all means believe these glorious promises. The effect of the promises is, accordingly, conditioned on our belief in them. But we are to note, in connection with this, that God Himself has promised to fulfill this condition, for we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Christ. And the means by which God effects this condition is precisely the free and unconditioned promise itself.

Wherever in the Gospel it seems as though God demands something of us, so that our salvation is made to depend upon it, Scripture shows that God Himself will fulfill the condition for us; for otherwise it would not be fulfilled, our salvation would not be of God, and the Gospel would not be Gospel. Here the Augustinian saying applies: “*Da quod jubes, et jube quod vis*”—that is, “Give me what Thou commandest me, and command what Thou wilt.” According to their nature, the promises of God are unconditional, and precisely for that reason they create within us the condition which is demanded for their blessed use—namely, faith. All that we can do by our own strength is to despise the promises of God or doubt them. Alas, it is quite easy for us to do this!

Another objection of long standing is that such a frank assurance of salvation does not agree with the many admonitions of God to us to “watch and pray”; that “he that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall”; that we are to “work out our salvation with fear and trembling,” and the like.

This has always been the claim of the Roman Catholic Church and later of a part of the Reformed Church.

This objection is also closely related to the lack of trust in

God's Word and promises already mentioned—as though these were not sufficient unto salvation—and is founded on a misconception of the nature of faith. So far from it being the case that the fear and trembling to which God exhorts us militate against the certainty of faith, much rather do these further that certainty. In fact, if we do not work out our salvation with fear and trembling; if we do not bear in mind that we may fall; if we do not watch and pray, and if we do not “strive to enter in at the strait gate” (Luke 13:24); in short, if our life is not a daily conversion, we cannot be kept in faith. Therefore St. Paul

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says, Romans 11:20: “Thou standest by faith. Be not high-minded, but fear!” An interchange of effect is to be noted here: the only way to be kept in faith is to fight the good fight of faith, and that which is to give us strength to fight the good fight is again, faith, the certain hope of eternal life.

God has not promised to save His elect, as it were, without any further ado, without their knowing it. He does not force us, but He reproveth, rebukes, exhorts, guides and comforts us. He bears us up; He draws us, and likewise gives the strength to follow His guiding hand. He has shown us the way by which He will save us—not the sinful way of security, but the narrow way. Jesus is the way for us and there is none other. The promise is joined to this way. If we would go any other, we have no promise; and if we have no promise, we can have no divine certainty of faith, but merely a vain illusion. Therefore the certainty of faith can and is always to be controlled and proved. Even though it is, as to its essence, a frank, unshaken, divine and unfailing certainty, it is indeed at the same time no absolute certainty, but a certainty of faith; and precisely because it is a certainty of faith, it is bound to the Word of God on which it rests. Therefore, many of our old teachers called it a *certitudo ordinata*, that is, one joined to and determined by a certain order (the order of salvation), so that if the order of salvation is abandoned, the certainty of faith ceases.

As God has promised that He will save us, we are to believe this with all our heart; but if we are God's children, we not only believe this one utterance, that it is certain that we shall be saved, but we also believe all the utterances in which God shows us how He saves us. Every word from the mouth of God is precious to us, and each day we have use for the admonitions and warnings of God, as

well as for His comfortings. For we are not merely spirit; our faith is, for the greater part, very weak and frail, while flesh and blood in us are strong; but if we “live after the flesh, we shall surely die.” If we relapse into sensual security, we lose our faith, and where is our certainty then? We, therefore, also need the Word of God which reminds us that there is the possibility that we may fall away and be condemned, in order that this truth may drive us to faith in God’s promises, in which our salvation lies. Faith in God’s promises cannot be preserved unless we shun all sin and live in daily repentance, so

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we must also precisely hold to faith and preserve a good conscience; for he who puts away from himself a good conscience will suffer shipwreck to his faith. (1 Timothy 1:19) “Because faith in God, and prayer, are delicate matters, and there may easily be a slight wound in the conscience which drives faith and prayer away, as every Christian often experiences. Therefore, St. Paul places these words together, as in 1 Timothy 1:5, 9; 3:9.” (Luther’s *Sämmtliche Schriften*, St. Louis-Walch edition, volume X, 1706-1707)

Paul shows this in his own case. He had unfailing certainty of faith regarding his election and salvation, but he also knew that God would save him through combat with the flesh, and that he could be preserved in faith only through such combat and thus obtain the incorruptible crown; therefore he says: “I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.” (1 Corinthians 9:27) He had the proper weapon for this combat in faith, which he calls the shield, with which we shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. (Ephesians 6:16) Therefore, Peter admonishes that we show diligence in good works, that by their testimony that we are on the right road of faith, we may be established in our calling and election, and that through this firm faith we again may receive strength, so that we do not become inactive or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, but that the virtues which issue from faith may be found to abound in us. (2 Peter 1:8-10) Therefore John says in the same breath, as he has said that he is certain that he shall be saved: “And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure.” (1 John 3:3)

If we consider what we are and what we have deserved, that we have never been and never could be worthy of even the least of the gifts of God; if we consider what we are in the sight of God, who thoroughly knows our miserable hearts; and if we then have become convinced from the Word of God that He loves us and would have us be among His own, that the Father loves us as that father in the Gospel loved the prodigal son, that the dear Lord Jesus has had mercy on us as on Peter, that the Holy Ghost has not become weary of us and will still be our Instructor and Guide—is it then possible that we can do otherwise than love Him in return, and that with filial fear we

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will live in daily conversion and take heed lest we do anything against God? Will it not be our daily shame and sorrow that we do not do better? Should we want to add this sin also to all other sins, that we will not believe what God promises us? No, we will believe it, and we will be certain of it, not in sinful security, but in filial fear. We will “serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling.” (Psalm 2:11) We will acknowledge our weakness of faith with shame; we will not imagine that we have “already attained, either were already perfect”; we will pray God that He will not leave us nor forsake us, but that He will strengthen our faith and help us to humility and to watchfulness against our most cherished sins we will strive to give up all hope of helping ourselves, and will seek our hope and our strength and our encouragement for all this in the glorious promises of God. We will believe them, even though we must cry out and say with tears: “Lord, I believe, help Thou mine unbelief!” Thus shall faith keep us in filial fear and filial fear drive us to faith.

Alas, we have also another fear in us—namely, the slavish fear of the old Adam. It is the fear belonging to doubt, servitude and an evil conscience. This fear does not give God the glory. It is damnable, and we are to strive against it; for it is not of God, but of the evil, natural, unbelieving heart, which will not believe God, nor can it (Romans 8:7), but wants to believe in itself, or else will not believe, but wants to see. It is this fear, which belongs to doubt and unbelief, of which St. John speaks when he says that “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear.” But St. Paul speaks of filial fear when he admonishes us to “work out our salvation with fear and trembling.”⁶

We need to be reminded of this in order to be kept from sinful security. Hence we sing:

*I walk in danger all the way,
The thought shall never leave me,
That Satan, who has marked his prey,
Is plotting to deceive me.
This foe with hidden snares
May seize me unawares,
If e'er I fail to watch and pray,*

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I walk in danger all the way.

And we sing, "I pass through trials all the way," and, "Death doth pursue me all the way." But why remind ourselves of this? Is it, perhaps, so that we will become terrified and begin to doubt and say: "I know I walk in danger, and what the end will be, and where I shall go, that I do not know?" No! So that the remembrance of danger may drive us to God, so that we may strengthen ourselves with His promise and by faith be given the power to be on our guard and overcome our foes, so that we may therefore continue, let us say instead:

*I walk with angels all the way,
They shield me and defend me;*

and:

*I walk with Jesus all the way,
His guidance never fails me.
Within His wounds I find a stay,
When Satan's power assails me;*

and therefore:

*My walk is heavenward all the way,
Await, my soul, the morrow,
When thou shalt find release for aye,
From all thy sins and sorrow.*

“For,” as Luther says, “having been bought with the precious blood of Christ, been born again in Holy Baptism because of His glorious resurrection from the dead, called by the Gospel unto a lively hope, ‘to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for us,’ as St. Peter says—we are also, with rejoicing and in full trust, to be looking for ‘that blessed hope,’ our soul’s final salvation.”

“This truly Christian attitude, with its heavenly lines of demarcation, the Apostle Paul designates to us in Titus 2:13, and admonishes us to note well the difference between this present

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perishable life and the future imperishable life, and to turn our backs to this present life as the life that perishes and which we finally must leave, and constantly have the future life in view and firmly and assuredly hope for it as the life that continues forever and in which we belong. We should do good deeds, in chastity, righteousness and godly fear look for that blessed hope, he says, that is, we should prepare for a better life than this life on earth. On that we should build more firmly, and with greater certainty hope for it, though we do not yet see it and feel it, than we build on and hope in this present life which we see and feel. This is a right doctrine, but it is not soon learned; a right sermon, but it is not soon believed; a beautiful exhortation, but it is not easily followed; it is well said, but not well done. For there are exceedingly few persons on earth who look for the blessed hope, the future imperishable inheritance and kingdom, and await it so assuredly, as it really ought to be, so that they do not possess the present life more assuredly. . . .Nor are we baptized to remain here on earth and make a paradise and a heavenly home here, . . .but that heaven may be opened for us, and that we may be saved unto eternal life For this eternal life we are baptized; for it Christ has redeemed us with His death and blood, and for it we have received the Gospel. . . .Here one must believe, hope, await, but in the beyond it shall be revealed. He who does not await the blessed hope will not come to the revelation; but he who firmly and without doubt awaits it, need not worry about the revelation. Such distinction (between hope and revelation) St. Paul also makes in Colossians 3:3: ‘Your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life shall appear,

then shall ye also appear with him in glory.’ St. John also makes this distinction (1 John 3:2): ‘Now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him. . . .’

“A Christian speaks as follows: God through His Son has granted me eternal life; unto this life I am baptized, and unto it I am called by the Gospel. I will therefore also confidently await it. Besides, however, He has created me and placed me in office, so that I am to be lord, mistress, servant, teacher, pastor, etc., and serve Him in my calling; I will therefore also be zealous in good works, be a pious servant, a diligent teacher, a faithful minister of the Word, and

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do what is pleasing to God.

“To him who knows this and conforms to it, life will not seem burdensome or hard, and he will not murmur against God though he at times fare ill. For being certain of eternal life, and waiting this blessed hope, and the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, he readily does and suffers what he needs must do and suffer But to him who does not know this and does not conform to it, life necessarily must be hard and cumbersome. For, not being certain of eternal life, and not awaiting the blessed hope, he can neither be contented nor have patience.” (Luther’s *Sämmtliche Schriften*, St. Louis-Walch edition, volume IX, 932ff.)

The Gospel according to St. Matthew (14:24-31) contains a narrative which, with a few touches, exemplifies and confirms the proofs I have adduced in the foregoing of how groundless are the objections that are raised against this doctrine.

One night the disciples were on the Sea of Gennesaret. It was nearing daybreak. The weather was rough, the wind contrary, and they were hard pressed by the waves. They saw someone walking on the sea. It was Jesus; but they did not recognize Him. It was, in fact, not yet light; they were tossed up and down by the waves, and—how would a person be able to walk on the sea? “They were troubled, saying. It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear. But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I, be not afraid. And Peter

answered Him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water. And he said, Come. And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus. But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me. And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?"

We have here a person who has set a goal for himself which he cannot attain by his own strength. Peter cannot by his natural strength take a single step forward on the water, much less, fully come to Jesus. Just as little can a sinful being by his own strength and effort take a single step toward God and salvation, to say nothing of keeping himself in the way of salvation to the end.

But the Savior said to Peter, "Come." Therein lies the promise.

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This word shows that Jesus both can and will help Peter come to Him; for He well knew that Peter could not come of himself, and that if he were to come, it must be by the power and will of Jesus. If Jesus had not been able as well as willing to help him go forward, He would not have said, "Come." Therefore, Peter should have held to this Word. By faith in this Word he should have been certain that he could and would come to Jesus. He should not have consulted his reason and considered that as the human body is heavier than water, there was the likelihood that he would sink, for surely this was not unknown to Jesus. Nor should he have allowed himself to be troubled by the rough weather and the high waves. Jesus, who had said that he should come, surely also knew what kind of weather it was. Nor should he have consulted his own fleshly thoughts, which would seduce him to rely on his faith instead of on the Word of Jesus. In other words, he should not have thought: Do I now have such a strong faith, that, on the strength of it, I can walk on the sea? For then he either would have doubted immediately or placed his trust in himself, as he once did later, and in either instance he would have sunk. It was indeed only that word of Jesus, "Come," that gave him the right to hope that he would reach his destination on the waves. Faith relies on the power of the Word of Jesus, to hold fast, and not on its own strength. If faith relies on itself, it has already forsaken the solid rock, which

is the promise of God.

Nor should he have thought thus: “It is true. Jesus has said, “Come,” but I cannot know whether I will ever be able to get there, because it is possible that I may sink; this possibility is not annulled. I know, surely, that a human being is heavier than water. I know, too, that only by faith can I stay on the water’s surface: but I cannot know whether I shall retain my faith, and whether I may not be frightened for a moment by this boisterous weather.”

This again would have been secret mistrust in the promise, as though it were not enough that Jesus had said, “Come,” With this word in his ear and in his heart, Peter should have said, as he did on another occasion, “At Thy Word, Lord—yea, at Thy Word I will come, in spite of myself and all the billows and storms in the world!” But did Peter not have to observe anything in order to have this certainty of faith about coming fully to Jesus? Is there in this incident

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no correlative to what we have said previously about the “fear and trembling” that are to accompany faith? Yes, there is that too. For when Jesus says “Come!” both the way and the goal are designated. Had Peter wanted to walk about and go elsewhere, he would have had no promise. His prayer had been: “Bid me come unto thee on the water,” and Jesus had said. “Come!” He had not said: “Go wherever thou wilt,” just as God has not promised us salvation without at the same time designating the way we are to go, namely, “the narrow way, which leads to life.”

But Peter let go of the promise; he conferred with reason; he made calculations according to the weather, which was rough, and therefore, he began to sink. Jesus said to him. “O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?” There we have the testimony of Jesus Himself as to what Peter should have done and what we are to do when we have a promise from the mouth of the Lord.

But what would be our estimate of Peter, if, after this reproof, he had, in addition, by means of all sorts of objections and seemingly sensible and rational arguments—perhaps even thinking this to be right, humble and spiritual procedure—wanted to adorn his unbelief and doubt of his being able to cross the angry waves and come to

Jesus?

II.

I have previously shown that it is in conformity with our covenant of Baptism to have certainty of faith regarding our final salvation, and that our *Catechism* points out that the prayer our Savior taught us strengthens us in this certainty. I have also called attention to this fact that our Church confesses it in its hymns. I will now show the relationship of this doctrine to the true Lutheran doctrine of the gracious election of God unto salvation.

As already shown, we cannot arrive at certainty regarding our salvation by pondering or wanting to search out the secret, hidden depths of divine predestination. Those who would begin here will

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not arrive at any certainty of faith as to their salvation, but will either become arrogant or else despair. We cannot believe in something that is hidden and of which we have not heard. (Romans 10:14) To believe, it is essential to have something which has been revealed. If the gracious election to salvation were altogether and solely a hidden counsel of God, it is clear that our faith and hope concerning salvation could have nothing to do with it. This, however, is not the case.

Therefore the Lutheran Church confesses that: "We are not to view this eternal election or divine ordering to eternal life only in the secret and inscrutable counsel of God, as though it comprised no more and that nothing more is involved in it, or that nothing more is to be considered in connection with it, than that God has foreseen who and how many are to be saved, who and how many are to be damned, or that he merely held a sort of military muster: This one shall be saved, that one shall be damned." (The *Book of Concord*, Tappert edition, page 617, 9)

"For from this many derive and adopt strange, dangerous and pernicious thoughts and speak thus: If I am foreordained to salvation, nothing can injure me with respect to it, regardless of what I do; and if I am not foreordained, then no matter what I do will not help, because I can neither hinder nor change the election of God." (*ibid.* page 618, 10)

“We must oppose such false imagining and thoughts,” our Confessions say, “with the following clear, certain, and unfailing foundation: All Scripture, inspired by God, should minister not to security and impenitence but to ‘reproof, correction and improvement.’ (2 Timothy 3:16) Furthermore, everything in the Word of God is written down for us, not for the purpose of thereby driving us to despair but in order that ‘by steadfastness, by encouragement of the Scripture we might have hope.’ (Romans 15:4) From this it is beyond all doubt that the true understanding or the right use of the teaching of God’s eternal foreknowledge will in no way cause or support either impenitence or despair. So, too, Scripture presents this doctrine in no other way than to direct us thereby to the Word (Ephesians 1:13, 14; 1 Corinthians 1:21, 30-31), to admonish us to repent (2 Timothy 3:16), to urge us to godliness (Ephesians 1:15ff.; John 15:16, 17:3,4, 10, 12), to strengthen our faith and to assure us of our salvation

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(Ephesians 1:9, 13, 14; John 10:27-30; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-15).”

(*ibid*, page 618, 12)

Therefore, as the Formula of Concord says, there is not one thing regarding the election of grace which God has revealed, and another thing which He has hidden from us, warning us not to ponder over the latter, but instead to remain with that which He reveals, and adding the words quoted earlier, that “this admonition is eminently necessary. In our presumption we take much greater delight in concerning ourselves with matters which we cannot harmonize—in fact we have no command to do so—than with those aspects of the question which God has revealed to us in His Word.” (*ibid*, page 625, 52-53)

What has been revealed to us concerning the gracious election of God to salvation is first of all: what prompted God to it, namely, His mercy and the most holy merit of Christ; and, secondly, in what way it has been revealed and by what means God will bring the elect to salvation, namely, through conversion and faith, which He will work in them by the means of grace.

These revealed truths, this grace of God in Christ, and this way of salvation are they in “which He has made known to us the mystery of His will and has brought it to light in Christ Jesus.” It is

these revealed truths alone which can give us the certainty of faith concerning our salvation, or in other words, concerning our election, and that, for this reason, these things concern not only some few, but they concern all men: for election must be learned from the holy Gospel concerning Christ, “which clearly testifies that ‘God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all’ (Romans 11:32), and that He does not want anyone to perish (Ezekiel 33:11; 18:23), but that everyone should repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:6; 1 John 2:2).” (*ibid*, page 495, 10) Furthermore, the Scriptures teach us that Christ has borne the sin of all the world (John 1:29), that His blood is the atonement for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:2) Christ says: “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28), and it is the Father’s will that whoever believes in Christ shall have eternal life. (John 6:40)

This truth that the promises of the Gospel concern all men,

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“we must therefore always hold to rigidly and firmly.” Furthermore, we must strongly hold fast the truth that God’s call is no delusion, as if He called only some with an effective call, while others are only apparently called. No, according to Scripture, God’s call is an earnest and holy call, and “in those whom He thus calls He will be efficaciously active through the Word so that they may be illuminated, converted, and saved. For the Word through which we are called is a ministry of the Spirit—‘which gives the Spirit’ (2 Corinthians 3:8) and a ‘power of God’ to save. (Romans 1:16) And because the Holy Spirit wills to be efficacious through the Word, to strengthen us, and to give us power and ability, it is God’s will that we should accept the Word, believe and obey it.” (*ibid*, page 621. 29)

If the promises were not universal; if we did not have the Word of God for it that God “will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4): if we did not know that the call of God is an earnest, effective and true call—then we would have no foundation whatever on which to stand, and we could not speak of any certainty of faith concerning our salvation. The thought that there is an election of grace, and that many are called, but few chosen, would then be a terrible doctrine which must lead either to

arrogance or despair; for what assurance would I then have that all those promises concerned me? None at all. Now, however, since we find it taught so plainly and incontestably in the Word of God that God does not desire the death of any sinner, but that He invites all to come unto Him, that Christ will gather all under His wings; yea, that God is angry when we do not come (Luke 14:21), while there is joy in heaven over every sinner who repents, we have a foundation which cannot be moved.

We could, of all men, least tolerate it that anyone deny the universality of grace—we, who have acknowledged that we ourselves can do nothing at all for our salvation, so that we can hope to be saved only because our salvation is from the very first to the very last an altogether free and unmerited gift of God's pure grace. Anyone who thinks he can himself assist in the matter, even though ever so little, by his acceptance of grace, or by his non-resistance and so forth—by being in one way or another not quite as great a sinner as others, may still suppose that he has some ground for hope, since he still has a little

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something of his own to hope in; but one who has acknowledged with Paul (not just said) that he is the chief of sinners, must despair if the radiant glory of the Gospel is not for everyone, does not drive away the darkness and draw and call him onward on the way to God. There is, therefore, no greater injustice than to maintain that we violate the universality of grace. That would be to close the door on ourselves; for there is no other reason than the universality of grace for our daring to count ourselves among the children of God. But God be praised, we now have a foundation which cannot be moved. What proof do we have that it cannot be moved? That we are completely helpless and that therefore we can only look to God for salvation, and that we have His unfailing Word and promise as to our salvation. This foundation cannot be moved; it is called Christ, for us and in us and with us and over us, our alpha and omega, the beginning and the end.

Again: if we ourselves could help a little, choose the good, accommodate ourselves to God, and so forth, and, accordingly, to that extent would have to see that we did our part, and therefore hope that we did what was ours to do (while God did His), our hope

would indeed be according to the foundation on which it was built, unstable, uncertain, wavering. No wonder, therefore, that anyone who has not fully surrendered himself vacillates between hope and fear as to his salvation, yea—and consequently maintains that it is right to waver like that.

On the other hand, anyone who sees that he has no prospect of helping himself (alas, a slow and difficult lesson for us to learn)—anyone who finds all avenues closed, with no way open for him, asks: What will God do with me? And then God gives him the answer in the Gospel.

But when the creative and regenerative power of the Gospel has overcome the resistance of our natural heart, and when the scales have fallen from our eyes, so that by the light of the Gospel we acknowledge God's glory in the countenance of Christ Jesus; when we then sigh amid the tribulations of this world and are worried about ourselves; when we think with anxiety about how many of the called have either despised the call or believed only for a time and then fallen away: and when we acknowledge our own inability to keep ourselves

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in the faith unto the end, and think of the danger to which we are therefore exposed—then it is that the comforting significance of a gracious election comes to our rescue and is acknowledged by us. As Luther says: “Be first of all concerned about Christ and His Gospel, in order that you may acknowledge your sin and His grace and thereafter strive against sin, as Paul teaches from the first to the eighth chapter in the Epistle to the Romans; thereafter, when in the 8th chapter you become vexed under the cross and suffering, the 9th, 10th and 11th chapters will teach you how comforting God's predestination is.” The Election of Grace does, indeed, teach us that when someone is saved, it is not because he himself was so pious that he wanted to come to God, but because God, of His grace, for Christ's sake, has determined to lead him through all the dangers unto eternal joy. All that God does in time, He has determined to do from eternity; for there is no change with God, nor shadow of turning, and there is no past or present for God, but everything is eternally present. Therefore, our Church confesses: “God's eternal election, however, not only foresees and foreknows the salvation of the elect,

but by God's gracious will and pleasure in Christ Jesus it is also a cause which creates, effects, helps, and furthers our salvation and whatever pertains to it. Our salvation is based on it in such a way that 'the gates of Hades' are not able to do anything against it." (Matthew 16:18) (*The Book of Concord*, Tappert edition, page 617, 8).

For when we—instead of wanting to brood over those things in the election of grace which are hidden—are willing, as shown above, to adhere to that which is revealed, namely, to the ground for election and grace, on which He carries it out here in time, then "it is indeed a useful, salutary, and comforting doctrine, for it mightily substantiates the article that we are justified and saved without our works and merit, purely by grace and solely for Christ's sake. Before the creation of time, 'before the foundation of the world was laid' (Ephesians 1:4), before we even existed, before we were able to have done any good, God elected us to salvation 'according to his purpose' by grace in Christ. (Romans 9:11; 2 Timothy 1:9) This also completely refutes all false opinions and erroneous doctrines about the powers of our natural will, for in His counsel God has determined and decreed before the world began that by the power of His Holy Spirit through

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the Word He would create and effect in us everything that belongs to our conversion." (*ibid*, page 623, 43, 44)

"This doctrine also affords the beautiful and glorious comfort that God was so deeply concerned about every individual Christian's conversion, righteousness, and salvation and so faithfully minded about it that 'even before the foundation of the world was laid' He held counsel and ordained 'according to His purpose' how He would bring me thereto and keep me therein. Furthermore, God wanted to insure my salvation so firmly and certainly—for due to the weakness and wickedness of our flesh it could easily slip from our fingers, and through the deceit and power of the devil and the world it could easily be snatched and taken from our hands—that He ordained my salvation in His eternal purpose, which cannot fail or be overthrown, and put it for safekeeping into the almighty hand of our Savior, Jesus Christ, out of which no one can pluck us. (John 10:28) For this reason, too, Paul asks, Since we are called according to the purpose of God, 'who will separate us from the love of God in Christ?'" (Romans 8:

35) (*ibid*, page 624, 45-47)

Here the objection will be raised: I can understand that this doctrine would be comforting if just one thing were added: whether I am really one of those who are chosen. But where is that written? How may I know whether I am one of the elect?

Answer: You are not to know or want to know in the ordinary sense of the word. You are to believe it, and do so on the basis of the promises God has given you. (It would be profitable to look more closely at these promises, of which I have gathered a considerable number in the first part of this article.) If a man will not believe these promises, nothing can help him. Isn't it enough that God promises a man everything that he needs? Whoever wants to have more must find it himself.

According to the Word of God, as our confessional writings also testify, the whole matter comes down to this: We ourselves can do nothing toward our salvation. God says that He will do everything for the elect. The Word of God also says that He wants to do everything for everyone. It follows that all should believe that they are chosen.⁷ But the greater number will not. For that reason they are rejected. God has not formed them vessels of wrath. They have done so themselves,

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because they put the Word of God away from themselves. If we are not willing to believe that God will do everything for us, we cannot be helped. But if we give God all the glory and believe that He will do everything for us, we also believe that He has determined this from eternity and has thus chosen us unto eternal life.⁸

In a very clear way, indeed, does the *Formula of Concord* conclude from the call the certainty of election. From that, or from the fact that we are called, it would have us conclude in faith that we are chosen.

God has called us with an holy calling to His eternal glory in Christ Jesus. He is truthful and does not lie. He knows what is required for us to follow this call, and He knows that we cannot follow it ourselves. Since He would have us follow it, however, it is clear that

He will also give us the ability to follow it, and to remain in it unto the end; for He “hath called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.” (2 Timothy 1:9)

Furthermore, in Holy Baptism, God has sealed His call to us and consecrated us unto participation in Christ and thereby to be “heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” If it seems to us that it is a long time since we were baptized, to God it is as though it had occurred today, and we are to comfort ourselves each day with this inviolable testimony of God’s will toward us.

And again: our Lord Jesus Christ has Himself come to us personally and has imparted Himself to us in the most Holy Supper. Is it possible that we could receive any greater and more glorious assurance that He would have us believe that we are His, members of His body, and are chosen unto eternal life?

And lastly, the promise of prayer;—is not heaven opened for us by it, as Paul says, citing the words of the prophet Joel: “Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved?” (Romans 10:13; Joel 3:5) Commenting on this passage in Joel, Luther says, (after he has shown how we obtain salvation through the free mercy of God, who loved us while we were yet enemies): “As we learn, we have our riches only in God’s Word. We do not have more from God until we die; then we shall see Him face to face. We are to note especially the unconditioned words: ‘Whosoever shall call upon the name of the

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Lord’; because He excludes no one from salvation, which He readily and freely promises those who call upon Him.

“It is well to know this, because of the dangerous thoughts concerning election, which the heart imagines without the Word of God, yes, contrary to the very Word; for, in the first place, the Word and mercy of God are offered to everyone in general, in this and similar passages. In the next place, the servants of the Word of God have received the command to remit the sins of the individual. We should be content with this divine ordinance and believe that since God sends us His Word we are those who are elected. Lastly,

we should also, wholly in keeping with this promise, call upon the Lord and be certain of our salvation, which He so plainly promises.” (Luther’s *Sämmtliche Schriften*, St. Louis-Walch edition, volume VI, 1436)

Because it is God who calls us; because we are called in one hope of our calling, namely, in hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, has promised from eternity, but now revealed in His Word (Ephesians 4:4; Titus 1:2); therefore, we can and ought to have the certainty of faith of our salvation and election. But it is also true, as Dr. Rudelbach says, only those who have acknowledged that they are called with an eternal, holy calling, only they can believe the Word of revelation, that they are chosen from eternity, before the foundation of the world was laid. (Ephesians 1:4) (*Church Postil*, 1,150)

God has promised that He will never leave us nor forsake us—Christ has promised that no one shall pluck us from His hand, and we should not want to believe! Christ wishes that we shall comfort ourselves with this, that all the hairs of our head are numbered; how much more does He desire that we shall comfort ourselves in the certainty of faith, that He has determined to preserve our soul. Praised be His Holy Name!

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Endnotes

¹ Hans Adolf Brorson (1694-1764). Danish hymnwriter.

² Thomas Kingo (1634-1703), Danish hymnwriter.

³ Peder Palladius (1503-1560), Danish hymnwriter; Magnus Bostrup Landstad (1802-1879), Norwegian hymnwriter.

⁴ Dr. Koren’s note: This objection (like the others raised against this doctrine), plainly militates against the First Commandment, which demands that we should trust in God alone.

⁵ Dr. Koren’s note: It is, as stated above, my conviction that the deduction is not even correct according to reason: first of all, because certainty of faith is not absolute; furthermore, because the Christian is seen in two different aspects, as the new man and as the old Adam; and, finally, because the realization of what faith anticipates takes place in the future and does not therefore annul present possibilities. However, it is of less importance whether or not one understands this. What is important is that we do not make our reason governess

of the Word of God, and do not reject a doctrine which is plainly taught in the Word of God because we cannot make rhyme nor

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reason out of it. We know that the Word of God does not contradict itself, even if we cannot see the agreement. It may be well here to call Luther's words to mind:

“Why does Christ refer us in various ways to the Scriptures? In order that we may keep our Christian faith. For all our articles of faith are very difficult and lofty, so that no man can understand them without the grace and gift of the Holy Spirit. I testify and speak thereabout as one who has experienced not a little thereof; and if you also want to experience a little of it, take an article of faith, whichever you want—Christ's incarnation, resurrection, and so forth, and you will not retain one of them if you try to comprehend them with your reason. I have fared thus: when I have let the Word of God go, I have lost Christ, God and everything. . . . Thus the heathen have made this bold deduction: What do you mean? God, who is immortal by nature, became man and died? There is no sense to it!—Of course there is no sense to it. Therefore men also lose it when they think of it without the Word, for it is too lofty. It will not permit being contained in my head, and still less in yours.” (Luther's *Sämmtliche Schriften*, St. Louis-Walch edition, volume XII, 1604-5)

⁶Dr. Koren's note: It is important to call attention to the fact that the opposite doctrine necessarily must work a lesser or a greater degree of slavish fear. But slavish fear is a revelation of sin in us. It belongs to the old Adam and is wrought in it by the Law. The fear which the Law demands is filial fear, which goes hand in hand with love and trust and is produced by the Gospel. This shows that the opposite doctrine confuses Law and Gospel.

⁷Dr. Koren's note: For those who may find these statements too brief, or who need a more detailed presentation, I will add the following: God has opened a way for us to eternal life and salvation through Christ Jesus. Those who make use of this way, or who follow the call of God and repent and believe in Christ, and thus become the children of God, know, both from the testimony of the Word of God and of their conscience, that they are not better than others, and have not merited the least good thing in preference to other sinners in the world. They

know that all the prerogatives they have are due solely and alone to the incomprehensible and unmerited grace of God. Therefore, they

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ascribe to God alone the glory for their entire salvation and for every part of it. They ascribe to God the glory for the beginning and for the end of their conversion and faith, yes, for every good thought that is in their heart. When they now see that God, because He was gracious to them, thus began the good work in them, and likewise understand that He promises them, in His inviolable Word, that He will perfect the good work until the day of Jesus Christ, they believe this Word of God in all humility and therefore believe that they shall be saved. And when they then ask, Whence comes this, and where is the source of this glory? They find no reason whatsoever in themselves or in their own conduct of any kind, and must also here, as the Word of God shows, conclude and say: It comes from the mercy of God and the most holy merit of Christ alone; it comes from the good and perfect will of God, from Him who does everything according to the counsel of His will. He is so gracious, that He predestinated me “unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will.” (Ephesians 1:5) Thus a Christian, therefore, believes that he is one of the elect, and that God has done and will still do everything for him. But now, God does indeed offer to all men this very same grace which has been described here, and that, not feignedly, but earnestly and truthfully. For God, in that He would have Christ preached unto all men, thereby also promises them everything that they need; as it is written: “He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him freely give us all things?” (Romans 8:32) Therefore, God wants to do everything for everybody. As those who are described above, everyone should therefore believe that they are chosen. Now it is true, that God knew from eternity that many will, alas, not accept His gifts, or will accept them for a time and at last cast them away. These are not chosen; but it is their own fault, for God called them with an earnest and powerful call, showed them that He really wanted to do everything for them, so that they would have full opportunity to become the children of God and continue to be so, and hence, to believe themselves saved and among the elect; but they would not, and thus “many are called, but few are chosen.” (Matthew 22:14)

8 Dr. Koren's note: Luther says, "From the Word of God, a Christian

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knows and acknowledges his own unworthiness and has a true fear of God, but he also comforts himself with the grace of God and believes that in Christ, the Son of God, he has the forgiveness of sins and redemption, and that he is pleasing to God and chosen unto eternal life; that in every need, where he finds weakness and temptations, he can find refuge in God, call upon Him, expect His help and be certain that he will be heard." (Luther's *Sämmtliche Schriften*, St. Louis-Walch edition, volume XI, 1860)

NOTE: LSQ stands for Lutheran Synod Quarterly, where this essay was published. Koren was a leading theologian of the old Norwegian Synod, which was in fellowship (for a while) with the Missouri Synod in the 19th century. Today, among many Evangelicals, the Calvinist doctrine of the perseverance of the saints (the P in TULIP), is popular. Lutherans reject the "once saved, always saved" teaching, while at the same time we teach that a Christian can and should be certain of his salvation. Koren's paper speaks to the issues of our day.