

Monergism

THE CERTAINTY OF FAITH

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by Herman Bavinck

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The Loss of Certainty

The centuries preceding the French Revolution (1789) are in many ways different from the epoch that followed. The radical change of direction introduced into the life and thought of the nations by this tremendous event shattered the continuity of history. We can project ourselves into the thought and life of those preceding ages only with great difficulty. They were the ages of authority and objectivity,

whereas in our era the subject proclaims its freedom and asserts its rights in every area of human existence.

Admittedly, by taking its starting point in faith, the Reformation dealt a stunning blow to the authority that had previously encompassed all of life. In the Reformation the believing subject arose against the oppressive authority of the infallible church and boldly shook off the painful yoke of an old tradition. Nevertheless, in the principles of the Reformation, Christians remained bound to God's Word as it came to them in the Old and New Testaments. And in the protestant church the

authority of that Word was initially so unshakable that people rarely doubted it—not even in their heart. There was faith and there was certainty. No one felt the need for an inquiry into the final ground of faith, into the deepest foundations of certainty. People were convinced they possessed the truth, and no one questioned the writings on which the faith was grounded. In times of vital religious life you don't doubtfully examine the foundations of your hope. You speak as one having authority and not like the Pharisees.

After the middle of the eighteenth century this situation gradually changed. The subject came into its own. It became aware of its true or presumed rights and slowly broke all the ties binding it to the past. In an unlimited sense of freedom it emancipated itself from everything the past held sacred. All authority that demanded recognition and obedience had to answer first the foundational question: By what right do you demand my obedience? Critical reason had been awakened, launching an inquiry into the ground of all authority. Naive, simple, childlike faith all but vanished.

Doubt has now become the sickness of our century, bringing with it a string of moral problems and plagues. Nowadays, many people take into account only what they can see; they deify matter, worship Mammon, or glorify power. The number of those who still utter an undaunted testimony of their faith with joyful enthusiasm and

complete certainty is comparatively small. Families, generations, groups, and classes have turned away from all authority and broken with their faith. Even among those who still call themselves believers, how many must screw up their courage into a forced, unnatural belief? How many believe as a result of habit, laziness or lack of spirit? How many act out of an unhealthy attempt to recover the past or out of a misleading conservatism? There is much noise and movement, but little genuine spirit, little genuine enthusiasm issuing from an upright, fervent, sincere faith.

Nowhere is this more true than among theologians. They are the most doubting, vacillating group of all. They have plenty of questions, doubts and criticism to offer. But what we expect from them more than from anyone else—unity of outlook, consistency of method, certainty of faith, eagerness to give an account of the hope within them—for these traits we often look in vain.

This phenomenon is not confined to a few theological schools; it touches all parties who don't bury their heads in the sand but participate in the great battle of the spirits. The question regarding the rights of faith and the ground of certainty is the dominating question, not just in practical life but also in universities. The more the Christian faith retreats from dealing with every possible question, restricting its (material) content, and the more it applies itself to building a rigorous foundation, deducing all else logically, from these fundamental principles, the more it will become inwardly weak and divided. Those seeking direction in this area are met by a motley array of options and opinions.

Nevertheless, it is vital to faith and to the life of faith to study the area of basic principles very closely, because the questions raised here are of fundamental importance to everyone. There is no more important question than the one concerning the ground of our faith, the certainty of our salvation, the rootedness of our hope in eternal life. What good is knowledge, power, fame and honor if we cannot answer the question about our only comfort?

Thus, our area of inquiry is circumscribed as holy ground, for it must be entered with reverence and fear. Here we touch the most intimate depths of the human heart. Here more than anywhere else we need a childlike and humble spirit, but at the same time a frank, unbiased attitude, in order to understand the life of religion in its inner essence and to purge it of all untruth and error. Wisdom and care dictate that in pointing out the way to obtain the certainty of faith, we first consider what this certainty of faith is and the different ways men have sought it.

What Is Certainty?

The question regarding certainty of faith is not only of scientific, theological but also of practical, religious importance. It is of concern not only to the theologian but also to the layman. It belongs not only in the study but also in the living room. It is not just a theoretical, academic issue but preeminently one of life and practice.

No matter how wicked and fallen anyone may be, at sometime in his life he will encounter moments of passionate seriousness. Everyone is at some time seized by the mystery of life, the power of death, the dread of judgment or the fear of the Lord. As one observer put it: "Happiness leads us into paganism, but suffering leads us to Christ." When the drunken stupor in which we often live wears off, when the happy glow dulls and the conscience awakens, when we are overcome by the mystery of life or the pain of suffering, then we all become conscious of death and the grave, of judgment and eternity. Then no one can maintain indifference or hide behind the shield of neutrality. In this respect, people are better than we are sometimes inclined to think. There are no atheists, no people without a heart or conscience. Or more precisely, God never leaves Himself without a

witness. Whether it be through blessings or through trials, He speaks to the conscience of each and every person.

True, many seek to stifle this voice and sear their consciences with a cauterizing iron. And many have doubtlessly become very adept, persisting in their false assurance or disdainful indifference unto their deathbeds. But history also gives us incontestable evidence that the human has not been extinguished even in the most hardened sinner; the voice of the almighty and omnipresent God sets up a responsive chord somewhere deep in the heart. "There is no peace," says the LORD, "for the wicked" (Isa. 48:22).

By nature, each of us spoils this peace. No one stands blameless before the accusation of his conscience. No one is in himself assured that things will go well in life and later in death. The assurance of salvation is not something you can inherit; no one is born with it. Neither is it the fruit of human effort nor a reward for duties conscientiously performed. We seek it in vain in the treasures of this earth, in life's joys, in the praise of the masses, in the fame of scholarship, in the acclaim of the arts, or in anything here below.

In order to live comforted and die happily, we need certainty about the invisible and eternal things above. We must know what we are and where we are going. We must know that our personhood is more than a ripple in the ocean, that the moral battle stands far above the natural order, and that the highest and purest ideals of the soul are not illusions but reality. We must know how we can be liberated from the accusations of our conscience and from the weight of sin. We must know that God is and that He is our God. We must be sure we are reconciled to Him and can therefore approach death and judgment without terror. In all this, our greatest need is for certainty. It is the deepest, although often unconscious, need of the human soul.

Mankind has sought for certainty all through the ages, although along the wrong roads and with the wrong methods. Every religion,

no matter how distorted, seeks for the highest and holiest known to man. Every religion is born out of and sustained by the desire for eternal survival. Believers value their religion above all other blessings. Every genuine follower holds his religion as the central and only unconditional necessity. To him religion is life in its deepest essence. Religion is the only way for persons to attain what they desire for this life and the next. Whatever is considered the most real, the highest, the truest kind of life is the content and subject of religion. In religion we assure ourselves of our unconditional and enduring existence.

Science and Religious Truth

When confronted by life's deepest problems, science has often taken a stance that conflicts with the seriousness of these problems. This is unworthy of science itself. Science is often content to characterize these questions as important for lesser men and for the unsophisticated but of no significance to the scientific community. This belief, however, is nothing but a proud and vain illusion. In no way do we wish to belittle the great accomplishments of modern science; it has made astounding discoveries and achievements. It has enriched and eased human existence immeasurably. We all gratefully enjoy the knowledge and power it has given us over nature. But although it may have a lot to offer our senses and our understanding, it leaves the heart unsatisfied. In the hour of suffering and in the face of death, what good comes from the conquest of nature, the blessings of civilization, the triumphs of science and the enjoyment of the arts? What good does it do a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?

Science is mistaken if it passes by these serious problems of human life with an indifferent shrug. The consciousness of good and evil, the awareness of sin, righteousness and judgment, the accusations of

conscience, the fear of death and the need for reconciliation are just as real as matter and energy, as size and number. In fact, they are realities of tremendous import, for they rule the world and mankind, life and history. To act as if they don't exist betrays a lack of love for the truth. To look down on them with disdain betrays a lack of self-knowledge. And to dismiss them as outdated images and foolish delusions demonstrates an extensive superficiality. If science relegates all these awesome realities to the realm of dreams, we at least have the right to ask on what grounds it does so. We don't simply take science at its word.

If science asserts that there is no God, no good and no evil, no judgment and no punishment, no heaven or hell, then let it give us sufficient, incontrovertible proof. We should be absolutely sure of the truth of this denial—so sure that we can confidently live and die by it. At stake is our irrevocable eternity, so we need firm, unshakable, divine certainty on this point. Therefore, in this connection a sharp, unsparing, unrelenting critique of science is appropriate. Science may say what it wills about guilt and punishment, death and the afterlife, but it cannot ask us to hang eternity on a flimsy spider web. When our highest interests, our eternal weal or woe is at stake, we must be satisfied with nothing less than infallible, divine certainty. There must be no room for doubt.

But it is not hard to see that science can never offer us such certainty. Science may be right in rejecting a scepticism that elevates doubt into a new dogma, but no part of its vast area of research can yield us anything more than human and therefore fallible certainty. This is especially true when it ventures into the area of religious and ethical, philosophical and supersensible truth. For then it immediately finds itself at odds with the powerful testimony of the whole of humanity at all times and all places. Every human soul is beset by a restlessness that no scientific reasoning can remove. These ultimate questions arise in the hearts of both the learned and the unlearned. The world's greatest geniuses have wrestled with them; philosophy

had its start with them, and these questions gave birth to all religions.

Moreover, science in the popular sense of the word exceeds its competence and powers when it tries to study and solve these deepest of human problems. Science may honor the mystery of being but it can never explain it. Precisely at the point where it would serve us most, it has to admit its impotence and leaves us mute. It knows nothing of our origins, of our essence, of our destination, and cannot, therefore, provide us with the bread that will still our hunger or with the water that will quench our thirst. Nor can it speak the word that will give life to our souls. Before and behind, to the left and to the right, above and below, science discovers mystery upon mystery. After only a little inquiry it keeps bumping into the unknown, the knowledge of which is indispensable for us. It finds itself surrounded by an invisible world which it cannot enter. No wonder that those who once looked to science to save us are turning away in disappointment to seek in art and idealism, in the deification of man and hero worship, in the occult and Eastern religions what science cannot provide but their souls need. This only confirms the truth that our hearts were created for God and cannot rest until they have found rest in Him.

The Task of Theology

Of the sciences, it is theology more than any other that consciously deals with these mysteries of human life. It has the glorious task not only of showing us the waythrough but also out of this life so that in life's vicissitudes and in the hour of our death we may have certainty about those things that are fixed. It must lead us to rest in the arms of God. A theology must demonstrate its right and truth, not only in the area of science, but also and more powerfully amidst the awful realities of life— at the sickbed and deathbed, in suffering and want,

in distress and death, to the guilt-laden conscience and to the heart thirsting for reconciliation and peace. If theology stands powerless in the face of these situations and is unable to provide any consolation, then it is unworthy of its place among the sciences.

Generally speaking, we surely cannot expect the sciences in the first place to provide us with comforting truths. We cannot ask the natural scientist or historian to spare those images and concepts with which we have grown up and which have become dear to us. Aside from any practical use, truth always has enduring value. Truth is always life, always sets us free, always crowns us as kings to rule over whatever it touches with its light.

As a science, theology also is subject to these rules. It may not proclaim as truth what cannot survive the test of truth, no matter how rich it may be in comfort—false comfort—for the pious heart nourished on such "truth." Nevertheless, there is also a practical side to theology that makes it akin to medicine. The theoretical knowledge of the doctor is doubtlessly very important, but his worth and the worth of his science only comes into its own when he heals people. Similarly, theology must prescribe medicine for the ailments of the soul. It must be able to say how and in what way we can be freed from our guilt, reconciled with God, attain to patience and hope amidst life's tribulations, and find reason to sing praises in the face of death. A theology that does not concern itself with these things and only dedicates itself to critical and historical studies is not worthy of the name theology. And a theologian who is acquainted with all the latest issues of his science but who stands speechless at a sickbed and knows no answer to the questions of the lost sinner's heart isn't worthy of his title and office.

A theology professor once told me that in his student days he was introduced to all sorts of scientific issues, but was never given the answer to one question: How do I get to heaven? Yet, the answer

to this question provides the church and theology with their reason for existence. This is what preaching and family visiting are about. Modern theology, whose achievements we must not underestimate, did not flounder because of the scientific acumen of its enemies. Its impotence became evident in practice. It lost in the pulpit and in family visiting because it had no comfort to offer for either life or death. Not the school but the church, not the seminary but the pulpit, not apologetics but the sickbed and deathbed showed up its poverty. History and experience show us every day what is most expected from theology: it must nurture our certainty of faith. Otherwise, rather than seek help from an established science that can wax eloquent about illness but which cannot heal, the sick will turn to the first quack who comes along.

The Certainty of Faith

But what must we understand by this certainty of faith which is so important to theology? Certainty is not the same as truth, although the two are closely related. Truth is agreement between thought and reality and thus expresses a relation between the contents of our consciousness and the object of our knowledge. Certainty, however, is not a relationship but a capacity, a quality, a state of the knowing subject. One's spirit may assume different states in reaction to different statements or propositions. If it knows nothing whatsoever about the matter, it may be completely indifferent. If in weighing the pros and cons it can come to no decision regarding the truth or falsity of the matter, it may be cast in a state of doubt. If for whatever reason it leans more one way than another, it may find itself in various states of opinion, surmise, or trust. But it can also achieve a state of complete certainty with regard to some statement. Certainty exists when the spirit finds complete rest in its object of knowledge.

Each of our faculties finds rest in what it by nature strives toward. The will finds complete rest only in the good; our sensibility in the beautiful. So the mind or spirit rests only in the true—that is, more profoundly conceived, only in God, who Himself is the truth. Error and lies, therefore, directly conflict with the original nature of the spirit. Even in a fallen state the spirit honors the lie only under the semblance of truth. Only the truth satisfies and answers to the need of the spirit. There it finds rest. Certainty is rest, peace, blessedness, while doubt, surmise and opinion always involve a certain degree of discomfort and uneasiness. Certainty is the normal and natural condition of the spirit as health is of the body.

Therefore, even the search for truth is beautiful and a precious gift. But even more beautiful and precious is finding it, enjoying it and walking in its light. Doubt, on the other hand, is never the true condition of man, but is abnormal, like disease. Sometimes, due to the error and lies that beset our lives, doubt is necessary, just as a fever may be good for the body and a thunderstorm good for the atmosphere. But in itself it is always a painful evil. He who doubts is like a wave on the sea, but he who believes is like a rock.

There are, however, different kinds of certainty. The Greek philosophers already distinguished between the certainty provided by the senses and that provided by reason. Within the latter realm Aristotle further distinguished between the immediate certainty derived from the first principles of science and the mediated certainty derived from demonstration and proof. These three kinds of certainty are recognized by all but the most hardened sceptic. We all feel certain about the things we can perceive with the senses. Nor do we doubt the most basic, self-evident, undemonstrable principles of the various sciences, such as the axioms on which mathematics is based. Similarly, we are also completely certain about the truths that in science are inferred through logical deduction from an established premise and which are therefore based on sufficient proof.

But beside these types of scientific certainty there exists another kind—the certainty of faith. People may differ widely regarding its value, but that it exists is beyond doubt. Even philosophy has had to take faith into account. It was Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) who, beside empirical and logical certainties, also made room for moral certainty (Gewissheit). The way in which Kant accomplished this is not our way, but we may be thankful to philosophy that through one of its most perceptive thinkers it has recognized the existence and rights of another form of certainty than the strictly scientific.

One would, indeed, have to deliberately blind oneself to doubt the reality of such certainty, for in the area of religion and morals no one bases his certainty on scientific proof. No one maintains the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, the mediatorship of Christ, the authority of Scripture and many other beliefs on the basis of rational argument. People seem to carry within them the knowledge that science may not and cannot have a say in such matters. All higher religions, therefore, claim to be based on revelation, and none of them is the product solely of rational understanding. Proofs come after the fact in every religion; they don't lead the way but trail behind. They are conceived for those who don't believe.

When speaking with an unbeliever, a believer cannot be content to assert: I believe and therefore it is true. He must seek grounds, not for his own faith, but to make it more acceptable to the outsider, to silence criticism, and remove all excuses for unbelief. Apologetics is the fruit, never the root, of faith. The arguments by which the apologist seeks to promulgate and confirm his faith are often rather flimsy. If it had to rest on these arguments, it would be built on a very weak foundation. But it is rooted much deeper than in these after-the-fact reasonings.

We do not obtain and maintain our deepest convictions, our world and life view, by way of scientific demonstration. These are not a product of understanding or of the will. These beliefs are located

deeper, in the depths of the soul, in the heart. They are part of man himself; they are, as it were, part of his essence; they are him, as he was born, raised and molded in a particular environment. J. G. Fichte (1762-1814) said that the philosophy a man chooses determines what kind of man he will be. The shape of one's thought is often nothing more than the history of his heart.

Testimony as the Basis of Certainty

This certainty, already moral in the wider sense of the word, can better be called the certainty of faith. But how does it originate? Does a man sit down and, reflecting on his moral nature, postulate some abstract dogmas? Of course not. Normally certainty of faith is born in childhood, when one's consciousness through faith adopts the moral and religious concepts recognized as authoritative by a specific community. A child then identifies its ultimate well-being with these concepts.

This certainty of faith differs in two respects from that derived from observation and thought. Viewed objectively, the latter appears stronger. Scientific certainty rests on grounds valid for all rational beings; its dependability can be demonstrated to any creature endowed with reason. The genuine results of science have a power to compel our reason. Anyone who isn't convinced by scientific proof casts doubts on his sanity.

This is not the case, however, with certainty in religion or ethics. Just as faith cannot be undermined by scientific argument, it cannot be convincingly established by it. It always rests on revelation, authority, a divine word, whether true or presumed, and is therefore always only a fruit of faith, a faith that—for whatever reason—recognizes this authority and bows before it in obedience. In this

respect scientific certainty is actually more universal and stronger than the certainty acquired through faith.

Nevertheless, the kind of certainty that is valid and appropriate in science is wholly inadequate in religion. Scientific certainty, no matter how strong and fixed, always remains based on human argument and can, therefore, always be overturned by further and better investigation. Such a doubtful, fallible certainty is insufficient in the area of religion. Here we need an infallible, divine certainty, one that transcends all human doubt and can never let us down. We can count on it for time and eternity. Besides, scientific certainty transferred to the domain of religion would make religion a matter of reason. This would demand a level of intellectual development possessed by only a few. It would make us subject to a scientific hierarchy in our most personal concerns—a hierarchy that would exceed pre-Reformation Rome in intolerance and tyranny. Freedom of conscience would cease to exist.

Such scientific certainty imported into spiritual life would ultimately produce the opposite of what religion by nature and by everyone's conviction ought [to be. Religion is in the first place faith: that is, humility, trust, dependence, obedience, simplicity and childlikeness. But in religion, scientific certainty would engender pride instead of humility, intellectualism instead of simplicity of heart, and self-elevation instead of childlikeness. Knowledge puffs up but love edifies. Therefore we should not complain but be grateful that besides the scientific, there is another form of certainty, namely, the certainty of faith, which does not depend on fallible human insight but on unshakable divine authority.

If everyone accepted such divine authority in religion and there could be no doubt about where and how it was to be found, then no one could reject as unreliable and uncertain the knowledge acquired by faith from such an infallible testimony. Certainly no one objects that a large part of our knowledge rests upon the testimony of others and can, therefore, only be obtained by way of faith. Faith can

be conceived of in an even broader sense so that it includes our trust in the testimony of our own consciousness. Then the assumptions and principles of science as a whole and of the particular sciences can have certainty for us only on the basis of faith. That our sense perception is reliable, that the outside world has an objective existence, that the laws of thought correspond with those of being and that the so-called axioms are the firm foundation for all knowledge—these and many other postulates cannot be proven but are established by the immediate testimony of our consciousness prior to all proof. Anyone who refuses to proceed on this basis blocks his own way to the truth and falls victim to doubt.

But also in the narrower and truer sense of the word, faith as trust in another's testimony assumes an important role in science. Every man, even the most learned, is limited in his gifts and energies, in time and place. What he can investigate freely and independently for himself makes up only a tiny part of the boundless domain of science. He owes by far the largest part of his knowledge to the investigation of others, and he accepts their testimony on trust as being true. Even more significantly, beside the natural sciences, which are built on observation, there is the science of history, which has no choice but to build on testimonies regarding the past. Although they remain subject to criticism, these testimonies always require a large degree of trust on the historian's part. Anyone who demands mathematical or experimental proof in history is forced to challenge its scientific nature and will never achieve any degree of certainty.

There is no science without personal trust and faith in the testimony of others. Therefore, just because religion and theology don't rest on personal observation but on divine testimony and can only

be established for us by faith, this does not in itself prove anything about their truth. Why should the knowledge we gain from the testimony of others be of less value than that gained from our own investigation? The same limitations that plague others also expose us

to all kinds of mistakes and errors. Everything depends on whether the persons on whose testimony we rely are trustworthy and dependable. If so, then the knowledge we gain on their authority may possess more truth than what we gain from our own fallible observation.

Since in religion not a fallible human being but God Himself steps forward as a witness, then from this point of view there is no science more certain of its subject matter than theology. Its basis and strength consists in the *Deus dixit*, so says the Lord. What human authority can be compared to that of the Almighty? And on whose word can man rely more fully with mind and heart, in suffering and death, for time and eternity, than the testimony of Him who is Himself the truth?

Given the existence of a divine authority, the problem in religion is not that it deserves our faith and trust. Everyone would concede this in the abstract. The problem comes as soon as we ask where this divine authority is to be found and how it may be recognized, for then mankind becomes endlessly divided. In the history of mankind numerous religions have appeared alongside and after one another, each one claiming to be the truth. Even within the same religion, adherents are divided about the nature and authority, the content and scope of revelation. This may not, however, lead us to doubt whether truth can be found. For to so doubt would do violence to our rational and moral nature, which can never escape the impact of God's majesty. But it should instill in us a deep humility and an honest desire to seek the truth only where it may be found by a blinded, erring humanity.

The question regarding the certainty of faith, therefore, becomes two-fold. It can be addressed to the truth of the religion we ought to confess, or to our personal share in the salvation promised by that religion. There is a certainty that pertains to objective religious truth and a certainty that pertains to the subject's share in the benefits promised by that truth. The two kinds of certainty are doubtlessly

very closely interconnected, but they should, nevertheless, be distinguished and not confused. The act of faith by which I recognize the truth differs from the one by which I am assured of my own salvation.

The Power of Certainty

While scientific certainty rests on rational and therefore more universal ground than the certainty of faith, the latter far outstrips the first in subjective power—that is, in the strength of the tie by which the soul embraces its object in faith. Once a testimony has been recognized and accepted as divine, obviously it binds and rules man more powerfully than any other word. The convictions of faith are the deepest, the most intimate, the dearest and at the same time the most tenacious of all. No wars are more terrible than those fought for religion. No greater hate exists than that aroused by religion. But also no devotion, no commitment, no self-denial, no love, no faithfulness, no patience, no virtues in general are as marvelously rich and sublime as those that blossom forth from a life of fellowship with God.

Faith, to name only one of these virtues, counts its martyrs in the thousands, even in the millions. Science has but a few. The famous Johann Kepler (1571-1630) practiced astrology contrary to his convictions in order to make a living. He excused his conduct with the remark that the needy mother (astronomy) would have to live off the foolish daughter (astrology). Three times Galileo (1564-1642) recanted his scientific convictions about the Copernican system before the Inquisition. His fear of execution was greater than his love of science. Who wants to die for the proposition that the earth turns? Ultimately it makes very little difference and can always be corrected later. Who will put his possessions, his name, and his life on the line

for a purely theoretical truth? Scientific certainty can't stand up to the torch and stake.

But the certainty of faith is much different. It possesses far greater intensity; it is ineradicable, because it is rooted in the human heart and involves every fibre of our existence. If a person is opposed to you on the basis of principle, he is almost impossible to convince otherwise; in fact, it is impossible to reason with him. A man's religion always rules him, even in the most nonpartisan study. It is at the basis of all differences that divide mankind.

Therefore, the true believer considers nothing too costly for the preservation of faith, whether it be the rack, the branding iron, the cross or the stake. It is more precious than home and country, than spouse and children, than one's own life, than the whole world. For he who loses his faith, loses himself, his soul, his eternal salvation. But he who keeps his faith also keeps himself even if he should lose his life.

The certainty of faith is therefore the most perfect rest, the highest freedom of the spirit. It doubts not. It is heroic and fearless, though there be as many devils as shingles on the roof. Faith fears God alone and no one else. It is even more certain of itself than of the sun shining in the sky. It can doubt everything except itself. And with at least as much right as Descartes posited his *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am), the believer posits *credo, ergo sum, ergo Deus est* (I believe, therefore I am, therefore God is).

The Search for Certainty

Because certainty of faith is of such great value and significance, it is not surprising that mankind has always sought it. Without this heart's rest, man lacked peace of soul. He tried to achieve certainty in

many ways. No sacrifice was too great, no punishment too severe, no life too valuable. He tried to obtain it by observing laws and rituals, with bloody and unbloody sacrifices, through scourging and killing the flesh, and in wild orgies as well as rigorous asceticism.

The history of religion reveals such profound, awesome struggles and sufferings that natural disasters, social revolutions, and wars pale in comparison. Every page of this inner history tells us of tears, sighs, prayers, pleas, struggles and temptations. Uncertainty, doubt, fear, terror and anxiety eat at the heart and life of every person. The hymns of all nations are filled with moving lamentations. The futility of the world and life has been expressed in the most eloquent tones. The greatest and noblest of the human race have been subject to the most fearful inner struggles.

Some of the most beautiful poetry also drew its subject matter from this suffering. Philosophy was born from pondering the riddle of death. The origin and goal of the arts and sciences is to make life easier to bear. And religion taken as a whole is one gigantic attempt to support man, with the help of the Deity, in the fearsome struggle against harsh, unrelenting nature. The devotees of pleasure and sensuality as well as artists and scientists often hide their nagging anxiety behind a mask of indifference. Through pleasure and work they seek diversion from the unrest in their souls. These are means to escape the emptiness of their existence and the accusing voice of conscience—in a word, themselves. Blaise Pascal (1623-62) spoke the truth when he said that the sum total of all activity and business, the diversions and pleasures we observe in mankind "arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber" (139).

Certainty in Non-Christian Religions

Although it is a temptation, we cannot possibly examine and judge the various religions from this point of view, however briefly. But one phenomenon does deserve our attention, if only in passing. Certainty regarding one's own state and future is not unique to Christianity; it also occurs in other religions. The basic mood of heathen religion was doubtlessly timid, anxious fear (religio, deisidaimonia). Outside of redemption in Jesus Christ, all men live in fear of death, in servitude, without God and without hope. Nevertheless, the heathen world produces not only voices of fear, but also of trust and repose.

All religious faiths have inspired martyrs, those who testified with their blood. One famous example is Socrates (c. 469-399 B.C.). In 399 B.C. he was charged in Athens for deviating from the state religion, for importing new gods and for perverting the youth with his teachings. In the speech he made in his defense he held that he had seen his whole life as a service to the deity. If the judges wished to pardon him on the condition that he give up his vocation—the teaching of philosophy—he would have to refuse, choosing to obey God rather than man. He was not afraid of death but of doing something unholy and unrighteous. So he went into death confidently, knowing that he was going to the gods -and was being set free from life's troubles. With imperturbable composure he then drank the cup of hemlock and died as a martyr to his faith.

This example would be easy to support with many others. They all teach that certainty is not the same as truth. Truth always brings certainty, but certainty is no proof of truth. The human spirit can find false rest in an error presumed to be the truth. We like to believe in what we wish were true. Certainty in itself, however, does not set one free. Only the truth can free man from the servitude of sin and death. If the Son has made you free, you shall be free indeed.

Nevertheless, these examples of steadfast trust should shame us Christians who have received a much greater grace and may walk in a much brighter light. Christendom does not always present a more attractive picture in this respect. We are not thinking here of nominal

Christians who live on without a care, forcefully repressing any thoughts about death and eternity. Nor are we thinking of those modernistic movements that have sprung up within historical Christianity which reject all special revelation and thereby rob faith of its original meaning and its central place in the life of the believer. In these movements one can no longer speak of the certainty of truth and, thus, not of the certainty of salvation either. These people may surmise, guess, think, even hope that all will go well with them in this life and the next, and they may dare to die in that hope. They may even be able to muster an equanimity that does not fail them even in the hour of death. But the clear consciousness that they are the Lord's both in life and in death; the unshakable conviction that, because they love God and have been called according to His will, all things will work together for their good; the steadfast assurance of the hope of eternal life; rejoicing in persecution and in the face of death— these you will not find among them. Their songs are filled with doubt, melancholy and hope, but are devoid of bold, enthusiastic faith.

We must admit, however, that even those who genuinely accept God's special revelation do not always possess certainty of faith. Often we find doubt instead of faith, care instead of steadfast trust, complaints instead of enthusiasm and praise. Those who are assured of their share in Christ and who rejoice in the hope of the glory of the children of God are few indeed.

Certainty in Roman Catholicism

The Roman Catholic Church, following St. Augustine (354-430), even denies the possibility that a Christian can be sure of his eternal salvation apart from a few exceptions and then only by a special revelation from God. The certainty attainable by keeping the decrees of the church is, and remains, nothing more than an opinion, a

surmise, an opinioconjecturalis. No matter how much it may seem so, this certainty can never become an unshakable conviction, a complete, ineradicable certainty. There is no room for such in Rome's system, for it does not see salvation as assured in Christ and sealed in the heart of the believer by the testimony of the Holy Spirit. Salvation depends on good works and as such is always only conditional. The Roman Catholic Church never allows the Christian to become independent and to stand on his own feet. It never sets him loose but always retains a hold on him, even years after his death in purgatory. The church alone can open and close the gates to heaven.

In Catholicism, therefore, the Christian faith does not turn on the question: How do I know that I truly believe and how can I be sure of my salvation? It concentrates on a much different question, namely: How do I keep the decrees of the church and how, according to its judgment and pronouncement, do I earn eternal life? As long as the layman does what the church says, he need not worry; the church takes care of the rest. But in his attempt to win eternal life by good works the Catholic Christian can take one of two directions. He can make it very easy on himself and, if not in theory yet in practice, he can ask himself: How little can I get by with? He can also take eternal life seriously and demand from himself a strict observance of all the church demands, and even further, compel himself to do more than is required.

As a result, in Catholicism there are always two kinds of Christians: those who occasionally go to confession and mass, observe the required fasts and for the rest live quite a superficial, carefree life, trusting in the church for their salvation; and those who are dissatisfied with such externalities and attempt to live a purely religious life through mysticism and asceticism, in separation from the world and denial of the flesh, thus to come before the face of God.

Far be it from us to immediately denounce the latter with the protestant judgment that since such piety issues from a false

principle—righteousness by works—it is therefore worthless to God. For no matter how much truth that judgment may contain, before we utter it we must remind ourselves that the Catholic righteousness by good works is vastly preferable to a protestant righteousness by good doctrine. At least righteousness by good works benefits one's neighbor, whereas righteousness by good doctrine only produces lovelessness and pride. Furthermore, we must not blind ourselves to the tremendous faith, genuine repentance, complete surrender and the fervent love for God and neighbor evident in the lives and work of many Catholic Christians. The Christian life is so rich that it develops to its full glory not just in a single form or within the walls of one church.

Nevertheless, Catholic piety, even in its best form, is different in character from that of protestantism. It always remains unfree, uneman-cipated, formal, legalistic. Complete inner certainty of faith is lacking. It always leaves room for the question: Have I done enough, and what else should I do? Rome deliberately keeps the souls of believers in a restless, so-called healthy tension. Spiritual life fluctuates between false assurance and painful uncertainty. Catholicism does not understand the word of Holy Scripture that the Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are children of God and that all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

Certainty in the Reformation

The Reformation, however, brought about many changes. This powerful movement was born out of a deeply felt need for the assurance of salvation. In vain, Martin Luther (1483-1546) sought it in good works. He found assurance in God's free grace, in the sinner's justification by faith alone. When he had discovered this treasure, Luther stood up against the entire Christendom of his time with heroic boldness. His faith was so firmly anchored and his hope

so sure that with them he dared stand alone before all his opponents. God was for him; who could be against him? Certainty was a characteristic not only of Luther's faith but also of the faith of all the Reformers.

This is not to say they never experienced temptations and struggles; it is wrong to suppose they always rose above all doubt. They all passed through periods of fearful anxiety and deep discouragement. Notwithstanding his great faith, Luther often had terrible struggles with the devil and with reason. Frequently he had doubts about the Tightness and blessedness of his reforming labors. Philipp Melanchthon (1497-1560), too, was often oppressed in spirit. John Calvin (1509-1564) testifies, no doubt from his own experience, that a believer can harbor many doubts and cares. But the difference between the Reformers and their later disciples was that they did not foster or feed such a condition. They saw no good in it and were not content to remain in doubt. They struggled to come out of doubt and they begged to be freed from it. The Reformers rose above it by the power of faith. Not doubt and fear, but steadfastness and certainty was the normal condition of their spiritual lives.

Their courage was rooted in humility, their self-assurance in trust in God, their freedom and independence in childlike dependence on His grace alone. Their emotions did not rule their reason, while reason and will did not deny the rights of their emotions. Their hands were never idle. Head, heart and hands worked together in exceptional harmony. They were not pietists with only an eye and heart for the religious life. They were not mystics who retreated into isolation and left the world to its fate. They were not intellectualists and moralists who failed to do justice to the richness of emotional life. Despite differences in inclination and character, the Reformers were all of a deeply religious nature. Nevertheless, or perhaps precisely for this reason, they kept their eyes open to the needs of family, societal, economic and political life. All unnatural, unhealthy pietism was foreign to them. Their religious lives were sound at heart—clear and plain, yet passionate and deep.

Their piety had a much different face than that of Rome. They understood the essence of Christianity in a wholly new and original way. Returning to the refreshing, living source of Scripture, they drew from it a spirit and power that changed the topography of Christian Europe. It was the piety of the psalmists, the prophets and the apostles that again lived in them and spoke through their words. They were imitators of Christ who, though God's Son, became the Son of Man, and counted nothing human strange to Him.

Their description of the faith also answers to this standard. With them faith is not hope and opinion, not guess and conjecture, not even knowledge and assent, but certain knowledge and firm trust, a consciousness and conviction so strong and final it excludes all doubt and fear. Just listen to the humble but at the same time bold language in the Heidelberg Catechism of the Christian who gives an account of the hope that is within him. He is firmly assured that he is a living member of Jesus' church and that he will eternally remain so. He lives in the childlike trust that not only others but he personally has been forgiven and granted eternal righteousness and salvation by God out of pure grace, and only on the merits of Christ.

In this confession the Christian has received a voice. He stands in the freedom of the children of God. God's Spirit testifies with his spirit that he is a child of God. He believes and therefore he can speak. Here the Christian life has gained its independence. It is dependent on no other creature; it is bound only to God and His Word. Here faith finds nothing and no one in the world, only God.

Certainty in Orthodoxy and Pietism

This joyful note echoed on into the time of the Canons of Dordt. But then gradually it weakened, and uncertainty and fear entered the language of faith. The faith of the sixteenth century became the

orthodoxy of the seventeenth. People no longer confessed their beliefs, but they only believed their confessions. Among most of the people this orthodoxy prepared the road for rationalism. Religion became a matter of reason, the truth regarding eternal things was now dependent on historical proofs and rational argument, and the certainty of faith became confused with rational insight. On the other hand, within the small circles of the faithful it evoked another reaction; they were not satisfied with merely rational knowledge but sought the essence of salvation in experience. This movement gradually devolved into pietism.

As more and more people with genuine faith saw the bastardized forms of historic and temporal faith developing, they began to lose their own certainty and belief. There had to be an essential difference between these different faiths, a difference like that between life and death, between genuine trust in God's grace in Christ and purely rational assent to truth. But there was a great risk of confusion, self-deception, and false security. To point out the difference between true and false grace, between the born-again at their worst and the others at their best was a difficult, exacting task. Accordingly, the believer was prompted to turn inward in order to assure himself about the reality of his own faith.

In this self-examination he was soon guided by the meditational works of devotional writers. They traced the life of the soul from its most intimate beginnings, analyzing its most hidden motions, and describing it in a long series of subtle but often confusing signs. Never before or since has the hidden life of fellowship with God been studied more deeply and earnestly.

Arguing against the cold orthodoxy of their time, they said that knowing is not enough; real faith is experience. It isn't enough to hear the domain of spiritual things described by others; one must have seen it with one's own eyes. To talk about the disease like a knowledgeable doctor doesn't mean much; one must have experienced the disease as well as the healing. The first is mere cold,

historical word-knowledge. Only through experience does one first understand the truth. Experience discovers in the words of Scripture an entirely new spiritual meaning; it shows us a truth behind the truth, not because it wants to say something else, but because we have then experienced and benefited from it in our hearts.

Gradually the list of requisite experiences on heaven's way was expanded. It began with a deep feeling of misery, a painful experience of guilt, and a fatal thunderbolt from the Sinaitic law. Anyone who has not heard the judgment of doom proclaimed by the law has no need for the gospel's declaration of

pardon. The sick, not the healthy, need the Great Healer. Jesus came to call the sinners, not the righteous, to repentance. Believing parents, baptism, Christian nurture, confession of faith, the Lord's Supper—these do not make such an experience superfluous. Instead of enshrining the notion that those so blessed are included in God's grace, they should serve as warnings so we do not deceive ourselves, as many do, about eternity. Everyone, including covenant children, must pass through the judgment of God's law to know himself in his lost state and to learn with the publican to cry for grace out of the depths of misery.

Such a feeling of lostness may last a long time or only a short while. Even if a ray of light penetrates to the soul, opening the eyes to redemption in Christ Jesus, one may not immediately believe and throw oneself on the promises of God, for this incurs the danger of a presumed, stolen faith, and stolen goods do not prosper. First the right and courage to believe has to be given by God. So all sorts of spiritual preparation had to precede the act of embracing God's promises in faith.

Faith was not immediately certain of itself right from the beginning. There was a difference between the essence and the well-being of faith, between a shelter-seeking trust and an assured trust. The first years of faith were full of sighing and lamentation, praying and

hoping. Certainty was attained only after a series of experiences spread over many years. It was not given with faith itself, nor did it issue from it. Certainty was often added from the outside, mechanically, by special revelations. Sometimes it occurred through the sudden intrusion of some Bible passage. Or the soul might suddenly be inundated by a glorious light, prompting the believer to say with Jacob: I have seen the Lord face-to-face and my soul is saved. Occasionally the Lord Jesus showed Himself directly to the seeking soul and filled it with heavenly joy. Or the believer might, like Paul, be drawn up into the third heaven and led into the inner chamber by the King. Only then had he attained the highest rung of faith, and a place among the established, assured believers.

But few ever made it this far. Most continued to stumble forward along life's way in sighing and lamentation. They were a poor, wretched people always preoccupied with their own misery, seldom if ever rejoicing in the redemption that was theirs in Christ Jesus and never coming to a life of joy and gratitude. They preferred to be addressed as Adam's polluted offspring, as sinners under God's judgment; they drew comfort from the promises God gave to the worm Jacob and the people of Israel.

Because there was no light and happiness in their souls, everything around them looked dark and gloomy too. They spoke of earthly life as a life of trouble and grief. The world was to them nothing but a vale of tears, a desert, a Meshech. They would have preferred to withdraw from it completely and restrict themselves to the narrow circle of like-

minded people. Family and society, science and art, state and church were given up to unbelief and revolution as wholly spoiled and unredeemable. The spiritual lives of these people were nurtured only through small group discussions and by reading old authors. For the rest they waited quietly, patiently discharging their duties until the time would come to put off this body of sin, or until the swift return of Christ.

Reactions to Pietism

During the seventeenth century the faith of the best and the most pious had devolved to this level in all Reformed churches in the Netherlands. But this situation couldn't be endured for long. Such a largely fearful and isolated life couldn't be the true, complete Christian religion. Those lamentations weren't worship, those sighings weren't faith, and that world-flight wasn't the victory over the world. As a result, a widespread longing sprang up for something different, something better.

Various movements tried to point to a better way to achieve certainty. They can be reduced to two main lines: the Moravian Brethren in Lutheran circles and the Methodists in Reformed circles.

The Moravians wanted to win souls and lead them to their greatest happiness not by the law, but by the gospel; not through thunder from Mt. Sinai but through the loving voice from Golgotha; not through the stern figure of Moses but through the friendly figure of Jesus. Nikolaus von Zinzendorf (1700-1760) wanted nothing to do with the so-called Busskampf and Durchbruch (penitential struggle and breakthrough) of the pietists. He called them miserable Christians; Zinzendorf didn't want a sighing, lamenting faith but a singing, rejoicing Christianity. To bring this about, all that was needed was the proclamation of the dear Savior. A lifelike description of His endless love for sinners revealed in His suffering and death, in His blood and wounds, would be enough to make an impression on the receptive heart. And this impression is the saving work of Christ, the renewal and impartation of life through His Holy Spirit. Those so affected by the gospel of the cross rest in Jesus' wounds, enter into a marriage covenant with Him and are freed from the guilt and domination of sin. From then on they would lead happy, thankful, unburdened lives, fed and strengthened by the

remembrance of Jesus' words, by a rich cultus (worship) and by a treasury of emotional hymns.

Methodism chose another route. Because they experienced the guilt of sin more deeply than did the Moravian Brethren, the Methodists felt it was necessary to shock the soul out of its false security. Faith ought to be preceded by a deep sense of guilt evoked by passionate speeches, by terrifying descriptions of death and hell, and by emotional, stirring songs. But immediately thereafter, grace was preached and there was an offer of salvation.

From the descent into hell of self-knowledge, the soul ascended into the heaven of knowing God. Methodism compressed all experience of salvation into one moment. The deepest misery and the highest blessedness lay side by side. He who sat down in the sinner's seat as a lost soul was in that same moment found by Christ. He sat down guilty and deserving hell, and he stood up pardoned and having inherited heaven.

Faith was therefore an immediate, full certainty, because it originated suddenly out of deep woe and derived its total certainty from the contrast with the state that preceded it. Faith was born in the bright light of awareness. The Methodist knows the day and the hour of his rebirth. John Wesley (1703-1791) was converted on May 24, 1738 at 9:15 P.M. Anyone who came into the certainty of faith by this route never need doubt his own condition. There was no longer any need for continual self-examination, looking inward to test the reality of one's faith. One knew that one had passed from death into life and now had more important things to do. Justification was for once and always, finished, but sanctification lay before him. And around him lay a world full of lost souls who needed to be saved in the same manner. Converted himself, he now had no higher calling than to convert others and to win as many souls for Jesus as possible.

Both movements have exerted a strong influence on Christianity. They awoke Christians from their self-reflection and called them out

of their isolation back to the battle with the world. Under their leadership, home and foreign missions received a powerful impetus. These congregations also took the initiative in organizing Sunday schools and many other kinds of associations. As a result of these movements the distribution of Bibles and tracts, evangelism, philanthropy, and many other Christian actions were made to serve the spread of the Kingdom of God. All of Christianity was shaken out of its slumber and stirred into new, vital life.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that both movements suffered from a narrowness of Christian vision. Neither paid sufficient attention to the first article of the Apostle's Creed, namely, that God is the Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. The earthly terrains of art and science, literature and politics, family and society were not recognized in their full meaning and significance and were therefore also not reformed and renewed on the basis of Christian principles. Resting in the wounds of Jesus or being converted and then going out to convert others seemed to be the entire content of the Christian life. Sentimentality and an unhealthy sensibility often characterized the first state and frenzied and thoughtless activity the other. Consciousness was often suppressed for the sake of emotion and will, and there was no harmony between man's capacities and powers. The freedom of the children of God—dominion over the world, the grateful enjoyment of every good gift given by the Father of all light, the faithful exercise of the earthly calling, the open eye, the broad view, the spacious heart—none of these came to fruition. The Christian life was often seen to be alongside, sometimes above, and occasionally even at enmity with human life. Here Christianity was not like a leaven that mixes with the dough and leavens the whole.

Greater Uncertainty

A great uncertainty resulted from the mixture of these different elements into the life of faith. It was continually being driven in different directions—orthodox and pietist, Moravian and Methodist, rationalist and mystical—preventing it from taking a consistent course and growing steadily in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. Even more damaging to the spiritual life than these differences in religious viewpoint, however, was the cutting judgment of philosophy on man's capacity to know, and the impact of historical research on the Holy Scriptures as the source of truth.

Since the time of Immanuel Kant, a philosophical notion has been gaining ever wider acceptance: man, bound as he is by a finite, limited, sense perception, can never gain a genuine knowledge of invisible, eternal things. Historical criticism has added its seal to this position by announcing the untrustworthiness and unreliability of not only the confessions but also of the Scriptures of the prophets and apostles. Thus, we can find no more certainty—not outside of us, not within us. All that is certain is what we see with our own eyes and touch with our own hands. As soon as we go beyond this, there is nothing that can step forward with authority to demand man's subservience. Every man is his own measure for those things he cannot see, and one man's opinions are as good as another's. Therefore let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die. Or, at least let everyone seek salvation in his own way, for religion is a private matter. In this domain no one has access to the truth.

This philosophy of unbelief is gaining ground—even among those who confess Christ—faster than one might think. And large masses live on in this frame of mind, inwardly swayed this way and that by doubt, tossed up and down like billows on the sea, finding no peace or joy. Often those who carry the name of believers hide the uncertainty in their hearts behind a noisy concern for all kinds of things. And the theologians spare no effort to blaze a path through the maze of claims to the knowledge of eternal things. How can we gain this certainty of faith which is essential for peace of heart?

The Way to Certainty

An important distinction between science and religion is that the first can be satisfied with human certainty but the latter demands nothing less than divine certainty. The object of faith must be the wholly reliable, infallible, eternal truth so that we can count on it in life and death, for time and eternity. In most earthly matters we can tolerate lesser or greater degrees of probability. But in religion, which in its deepest ground always concerns man's eternal salvation, total certainty is an indispensable requirement. The basis of our hope for eternity cannot be a human word, a result of scientific inquiry, an ideal shaped by our imagination, or a proposition built on human reasoning, for all these are shaky and fallible. They cannot support the building of our hope, for soon it would collapse into ruin. Faith-religious faith—can by its very nature rest only on a word, a promise from God, on something that proceeds from His mouth and is revealed to man either naturally or supernaturally.

It is therefore no coincidence that all religions appeal to revelation. They may trace their origin back to a special revelation or they may live on the basis of continual revelation, but they never claim to rest on human investigation, only on divine authority. This flows forth from the nature of religion. Revelation is the presupposition, the foundation, the flip-side, the necessary correlate of religion. A religion that no longer dares to come forward in God's name and authority loses its very essence. It has become mythology or philosophy of religion. Moreover, it has thereby lost its influence on people, who always expect more from religion than human opinion. A theology that no longer dares to trace its dogma to a *Deus dixit* (so says the Lord) has undermined its foundation, lost its stability, and will soon tumble into ruin. Revelation, divine authority, is the only pillar on which religion can rest.

This is not to deny, of course, that religion has always horribly abused this authority. Nowhere has so much deception been practiced, on a large or small scale, subtly or crudely, than in the area of religion. Demagogues have exploited this divine authority to further their own selfish ends. Priests have set themselves up as mouthpieces of God's will to hold people in bondage and make them serve the priests' advantage and power. Superstition, witchcraft, fortune-telling and many other barbarities have entwined themselves around the stem of divine authority like parasitic plants. The injustices and atrocities committed throughout history in the name of religion are countless. Broad and deep is the river of blood and tears shed by all religions to the greater glory of God.

But all this detracts nothing from the fact that divine revelation and divine authority are the basis of religion. Rather, these acts tend to confirm this tenet, for men fought one another to the death because they were convinced they were serving the cause of God and promoting the interest of the highest good. This again points to the fact that, in distinction from science and art, religion demands a divine certainty. The human soul can find complete rest only in God; it is fully satisfied only by an infallible authority. The preacher is, therefore, powerful only when he brings the Word of God. Without it his proclamation has no influence and power. Who but God gives him the right to climb into the pulpit above the people, to hold up to them the rule of faith and life, and to bind their eternal weal or woe to their acceptance or rejection?

Scientific Demonstration

If this is so, it raises a more important and more difficult question: Where and how can that divine authority be found which properly demands our recognition and obedience?

In answering this question we begin with the unadorned admission that it is impossible to completely solve this dilemma in the abstract. In science one cannot begin to isolate the proof introduced for a given proposition so that all other conflicting presuppositions held by the subject remain out of play. All proof presupposes a starting point common to those for and against, a foundation recognized by both.. It is impossible to reason with someone who denies all principles. Both the proofs as well as the presuppositions on which they rest vary from science to science. They are different in mathematics and in the natural sciences; different in the philosophical and in the historical sciences. They differ in composition, in number, in power and in the degree to which they depend on the subject and his attitude.

Mathematical proof presupposes the least; it therefore has the most universal validity, possessing a very compelling character. Logical proof proceeds from a great many more presuppositions and as a result often leaves the other party unconvinced. Historical proof makes an even stronger appeal to the subject; as a result, it is often weak, in many cases producing, no more than a degree of probability. But whatever proofs the sciences introduce, they always build on the unity and coherence of human nature. Hence, they also build on faith in the reliability of the senses, in the validity of the rules of logic, in the existence of a knowable truth and in the veracity of God. They are based on many metaphysical, logical, psychological and ethical presuppositions which are pre-established, self-contained, self-evident and unprovable, but which are the vehicles of all proof. Those who would delve beyond them in order to begin with doubt alone undermine the foundations of science and make all certainty impossible.

This is even more true in the area of religion. No one has been raised devoid of all religion and morality so that he can now stand neutral and unprejudiced to all religions. To attempt to prove the truth of any religion to such an abstract, bloodless being who exists only in the imagination would therefore be a futile waste of time. Everyone

learns to speak a certain language as a child, and in that language he receives all kinds of religious and moral concepts, which as a rule he retains to the end of his life and which rule all his thinking and willing.

The modern method, which seeks to study all religions without making any prior judgments so as to select one at the end, runs into all kinds of insuperable practical and theoretical objections. Everyone immediately sees the impossibility of such an attempt to rid oneself of all convictions and preconceptions planted in the heart by birth and breeding before and during scientific investigation. Even in a thoroughgoing unbeliever the religious impressions of childhood continue to exercise some influence. And even theological faculties, although they may have been converted into faculties of religion,* continue to feel the influence of their Roman Catholic, Lutheran, or Reformed origin and environment.

*A change from confessional theology to the comparative study of religions, (trans.)

Moreover, the method of arriving at the pure religion through a comparative study of religions also deserves to be theoretically condemned in the name of science. Whoever studies the various religions under the auspices of any scientific discipline proceeds from the belief that they are something other, something more than a pathology of the human spirit. He proceeds from the truth of religion as such, and thus from the existence of God, from the value and right of metaphysics, from the idea of unity and development, plan and purpose in the history of religions. In order to study the religions, compare them, judge them according to their true, distinct values, we require a standard, an idea of religion, no matter how vague and general, which precedes such study and evaluation, and which guides and rules it. A purely positivistic conception of science is untenable not only in theology but also in the science of comparative religion.

The study of religions has, furthermore, achieved one important benefit: it has shed clear light on the superiority of the Christian religion over all other religions. There are, it is true, a few scattered groups in Europe and America who give precedence to Buddhism or Islam and have formally switched to these religions. And much greater are the ranks of those who feel they don't need Christianity, can lead rich lives without it, and hate it all their lives. In fact, untold numbers are turning their backs on Christianity in humanistic pride or in practical indifference and are seeking satisfaction in paganism.

Yet, none of this detracts from the fact that the religious and ethical makeup of Christianity is far superior to that of all other religions. Nowhere else are nature and history, man and world, heart and conscience conceived with such intimate truth and so true to reality as in the Christian religion. Our self-knowledge and our knowledge of the world continually verify the knowledge of God revealed in Holy Scripture. This is the light on the path that leads through creation, and which is itself clarified and confirmed by all of nature and the whole history of mankind. We have no idea what we would be missing, into what dire spiritual poverty we would sink if the Christian religion and all its influence and impact were suddenly excised from our society and culture. If the Christian religion is not the true religion, there is every reason to despair of truth in the area of religion. Practically and concretely the question regarding certainty of faith comes down to this: In what way can the truth of Christianity be demonstrated and impressed on our souls so we are convinced?

There are primarily two ways that are recommended. One is the way that first demonstrates the truth of natural theology through the proofs of God's existence and of the independence and immortality of the soul; this approach then derives proof for the truth of Christianity from the reliability of the apostles, the prophecies and miracles of Holy Scripture, the teachings and life of Jesus, the continuance and spread of the church, etc. This method seeks to convince us by reasonable, scientific methods.

This way is not forbidden, impossible or unprofitable. Even the prophets, apostles and Jesus Himself used it to move their listeners to faith. Jesus' miracles are signs of His Sonship and He demands belief in His person, that the Father is in Him and He in the Father, on the basis of the works He did (John 10:38). Christian theologians have always made use of these proofs in order to silence opponents and clear a way for faith. They give the defenders of Christianity the weapons with which to repel all kinds of scientific attacks. These proofs enable them to skilfully defend themselves against criticism that subjects the object of their faith to science. And Christians are able to show that as much, and usually more, can be said in support of faith than of unbelief.

It is therefore wrong to deprive oneself of these proofs because of doubt and distrust, retreating behind the bulwark of mysticism and agnosticism. Anyone who despairs beforehand of his cause renders himself unfit for the battle and prepares for defeat. In the scientific arena, too, believers are called to give a reason for the hope that is in them and, trusting steadfastly in the Tightness of their own cause, to stop the mouths of their opponents and repulse their attacks.

Christianity does, after all, have a historical side. It encompasses God's eternal thoughts as they have entered into temporal forms. Its focal point is the incarnation of the Word and it rests on a revelation with a long, rich history that comprises part of the world as a whole, and as such is accessible to historical study. Although the proofs may be insufficient to move someone to believe in the truth of Christianity, on the other hand belief in that truth would certainly have no right to exist if this revelation could be proved to be unhistorical. For faith is not only trust, it is also knowledge and assent and cannot live by cunningly devised fables.

The proofs for the divine testimony of the Holy Scriptures at least possess the power to make it clear that to believe is not unreasonable or nonsensical. We certainly don't have recourse to mathematical proofs, but these are not available in any area of history. History is

not a mathematical problem. Nevertheless, the inward and outward characteristics of revelation do without a doubt add up in number and force against its opponents.

Numerous arguments have been introduced over the years to challenge the genuineness and reliability of the Holy Scriptures, but many soon appeared to be unconvincing and had to be taken back. Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) declared that the time was past in which we could see in the oldest Christian writings a tissue of deceptions and distortions, for the reports we have about the origin of Christianity are correct in broad outline. Egyptian and Assyrian archeological discoveries have established beyond doubt that all claims about the lack of culture in Moses' day and the impossibility

that the decalogue had been delivered at that time are completely untenable. If in the Scriptures we were dealing with ordinary history, and sinful self-interest and human hardness of heart played no role, the proofs for their truth would generally be regarded as sufficient. The blame for man's unbelief lies not in God and His revelation but in man himself.

Insufficiency of Proofs

Nevertheless, because of the subjective inclination of the human heart, all proofs are insufficient to move man to believe. The word of the Gospel itself lacks the power. How then could this be strengthened by human proofs for the truth of that word? These proofs are usually of a more or less scientific nature and are the result of a great deal of study and reflection. Before they were discovered, they could, of course, do no service. Now that they do exist, they are usually known and understood only by the highly educated. Moreover, closer investigation and more serious reflection may rob them of all or part of their strength. They are therefore of

importance in any scientific struggle, but for religion they have only a limited value, for no person's religious life is based on or nurtured by such proofs. For this we can be thankful. The revelation given us in God's Word is for everyone, for the learned as well as the common man. Its truth may not hinge on scientific investigations which are accessible only to the wise and learned.

This is why revelation possesses a wholly unique character. It is history; it consists of words and facts that have obtained a place in the life and history of mankind. But its entire development is ruled by one special, divine idea. Revelation is an organism with a life of its own. At work in it are powers that are not earthly but heavenly, not temporal but eternal, not human but divine. It is flesh in its whole manifestation, but that flesh is inhabited by the Word, which is with God and which is God Himself. It is not just a witness about events in the past which no longer concern us; as a witness of the miraculous deeds of God in days gone by, it is a word that even now still goes out from God to man, calling him back to His fellowship.

Just as history in general is no mere sum of incidents but an organic unity of interrelated events tied together by a single idea, so the words and facts that belong to the sphere of special revelation comprise a system ruled by one thought, one plan, one goal. Anyone who doesn't understand this thought doesn't understand revelation. That person cuts the heart, the soul, the life out of the organism and is left with nothing but a dry skeleton which falls apart and is destined for the charnel house. Then the words and facts, which derive their value from revelation, lose their meaning and significance, because they then must be explained on a natural level and judged by human standards. The inevitable result is that the unity of Scripture, the unity of faith, the unity of the church, and the unity of theology disappears.

If the history of revelation is not grasped and described from the viewpoint of its own idea, it also stops being history in the ordinary, natural sense of the word. The Holy Scriptures constantly disappoint

us if we subject them to the same demands we put on other historical sources. Certainly the books of the Old Testament do not enable us to write an ordinary history of Israel. The Gospels are just as unsatisfactory for a continuous narrative of the life of Jesus. And the Epistles constantly let us down if we use them to acquaint ourselves with the lives of the apostles or the history of the church during the first century. All these writings are composed from the viewpoint of faith. None of them is the product of a so-called presuppositionless, scientific, historical investigation. All are the testimonies of believers. Anyone who tries to write a regular history of Israel, of Jesus, or of the apostles apart from the idea of revelation will find himself constantly forced to resort to hypotheses, to fill the gaps with conjecture, to emend, criticize and register the sources in order to achieve a continuous whole.

From this special character of revelation it directly follows that reasonable scientific proofs are insufficient to establish the truth of the Christian religion beyond a reasonable doubt in the same way as that of ordinary historical events. All those proofs only touch the facts externally and do not penetrate to their heart and essence. In the words of Nathasius, they lead us to the empty tomb but not to the living Savior. At most they lead to a historical faith. In the Roman Catholic scheme this is enough to receive supernatural grace through baptism, and even within Protestantism it is not devoid of all significance; nevertheless, it is not the genuine, true faith.

Historical faith reduces revelation to ordinary history that took place in the past but no longer concerns us. It removes from the Word of God that which is the core and what today still makes it an evangel, the good news of salvation. It is nothing more than a rational assent to some past events, without any involvement of heart and without a change of direction in one's life. The Roman Catholic Church also claims such faith is insufficient for salvation. According to the Roman Catholic confession, this faith must be supplemented by love and receive its form and features from love in order to justify and sanctify man. This supplement, however, introduces no real

change into the essence of faith. It leaves the ordinary historical character of faith unchallenged; in a questionable manner it shifts the onus from faith to love, from the gospel to the law, from religion to morality.

Over against this the Reformation took the position that revelation was not merely a narrative of past events but a word of God to us. Therefore, faith wasn't just assent to the truth of historical reports but a heartfelt trust in the good news of salvation. The Reformation thereby restored the revelatory character to revelation, and the personal relation between God and man to faith. It again made them religion.

The Liberal Solution

For all these reasons we have cited against historical proofs, many theologians following Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), began to champion another method to demonstrate the truth of the Christian religion and to lead people to the certainty of faith—the method of experience. This method held that the revelation given us in Scripture, particularly in the person of Christ, carries a unique character. It is not a product of scientific propositions that can be made acceptable to reason by proofs. Nor is it a mere doctrine requiring only intellectual agreement. No, Scriptural revelation is life; it has a religious-ethical content, which serves to make a man wise unto salvation, to make him independent from the world so he can stand in the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

The truth of that revelation can therefore be recognized only by the conscience, by the heart, by the will. It must be practically experienced, ex-perientially known; one must feel it in the soul. Don't the Scriptures say only the pure of heart will see God? Only those who are born again will enter the Kingdom of Heaven? Only

those who do the will of the heavenly Father will confess that Jesus doesn't speak from Himself but that His teachings are from God.

The gospel of Christ does not address itself first of all to man as a moral being. It confronts him with the ethical choice of either remaining subject to the world and sin or sharing in the new life of freedom issuing from the influence of Christ's image in the Scriptures and in the church. Those who join in the faith of the church and allow themselves to be influenced by the image of Christ will have a saving experience. The gospel comforts the conscience, brings peace to the heart, strengthens the will, and endows the whole person with the power to live a new life. This experience assures one of the truth of the Christian religion, of the revelation of God's grace in Christ, and of one's own citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Among those who base the truth of Christianity and the certainty of salvation on such an experience, there is a marked difference in the character as well as the content of their experience. Some have in mind an experience that is the fruit of a special operation of the Holy Spirit. Others regard it as a product of the image of Christ as it speaks to us in the Scriptures and lives on in the church. Still others see it as not much more than a further development of the religious, moral experiences that everyone undergoes in his heart and conscience from time to time.

Similarly there are also great differences about the content of such experiences. There are those who seek to construct an entire confessional dogmatics on it, for example, a Lutheran one. Others infer from it the religious-ethical truth of Scripture or the doctrine of the person and work of Christ. Still others believe this experience only establishes the inner life of Christ, that is, the ethical greatness of Jesus, apart from His miracles, His supernatural birth, His resurrection and ascension. Harnack even asserted that the person of Christ does not belong in the original gospel.

Experience as the Ground of Certainty

These diverging viewpoints on the nature and content of religious experience make it clear that we must carefully distinguish here between truth and error, and be on guard for misunderstanding. Upon deeper reflection, we become increasingly convinced of this, for if we take experience to mean sense perception—as we do when we speak of the experimental sciences—then there is no place for experience in religious knowledge. The real content of the Christian faith, whether it be taken in a broader or narrower sense to include only moral truths or also the person of Christ, the trinity, the incarnation and Christ's propitiation, is entirely beyond experience. It cannot be seen or heard, measured or weighed. And it is completely impossible to establish the truth of that faith by experiment.

If experience is taken in the sense of inner experience, it is true beyond doubt that the Christian faith brings with it a wealth of experiences. Guilt feelings, concerns about sin, accusations of conscience, fears about death and eternity, the need for redemption, hope in Christ, peace in His blood, reconciliation with God, fellowship with Him through the Holy Spirit, consolation of the heart, joy of the soul- foretastes of eternal life and many other humbling and comforting experiences—to a greater or lesser degree these are all part of the life of those who follow the Christian way of salvation. The Christian faith awakens a whole world of emotions in the human heart, ranging on the scale from groans of utter brokenness to the jubilant song of blessed exultation.

But all these experiences presuppose, accompany and follow faith. They are not its ground and do not precede it. Anyone who does not believe the Scriptures' teachings on sin and does not acknowledge them as a revelation from God, also will not be overcome by a sense of guilt. Anyone who does not confess Christ to be the Savior of the world will not seek propitiation for sin in His blood. Similarly,

anyone who does not believe in the Holy Spirit will never taste His fellowship. And anyone who doubts the existence of God cannot rejoice in being His child and heir. Those who come to God must, in short, believe that He exists, and that He rewards those who seek Him.

All these truths, which constitute the content of the Christian faith, are also by their very nature impossible to experience personally. They are, after all, not innate ideas; we cannot dredge them up from the hidden treasure of our hearts simply by thinking hard. We can only learn about them if we are told by someone else. No one knows by nature that God is the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, that Jesus Christ is His only begotten Son, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, that He suffered under Pontius Pilate, died, was buried, descended into hell, arose, ascended into heaven until He shall come again to judge the living and the dead, that the Holy Spirit regenerates man and leads him into the truth, that there is one holy, catholic church to which in grace God has given the gifts of the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

It was a common practice to derive the resurrection from the experience of God's children. And the power of the resurrection is indeed revealed in believers. The new, spiritual life flows to them from this source. They are born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Christ. Faith, the forgiveness of sins, the hope of glory, dying in Christ are built on the resurrection, and without it these experiences would be no more than vain illusions.

Nevertheless, it is self-deception to think that the reality of the resurrection of Christ can be deduced from the new life of the children of God apart from the Scriptures. The Christian knows that he owes this new life to Christ's resurrection only from the apostolic witness. This is the only way he can come to know it here on earth. The inner experience of the power of Christ's resurrection

presupposes faith in that resurrection. Without it, the believer could not recognize this experience for what it is.

The Failure of Experience

The method that seeks to derive the objective facts of Christendom from the religious experience of the church by reasoning from effect to cause ought to be rejected. The Holy Scriptures never point us in that direction. In I Corinthians 15, Paul does point out to the church of Corinth the indissoluble unity between the blessings believers share in and the resurrection of Christ. But he does so only after establishing and confirming it with the witness of Scripture and the appearance of the risen Savior. The Holy Scriptures never make a believer dependent only on himself. They always bind him to the objective word—to the law and the witness. If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. If they have rejected the word of the LORD, what kind of wisdom do they have? The church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Paul threatens with God's curse anyone who preaches another gospel.

One cannot counter by recalling the words of the Samaritans, who said they no longer believed simply on the basis of what the woman at the well had told them, but because they had heard Christ Himself and knew that He truly was the Savior of the world. We may, to be sure, conclude from this that in the gospel it all comes down to personal faith, individual conviction. But in no way does this suggest that faith is independent or should gradually make itself independent of the witness of the apostles. The apostles have a much different task relative to the church than the woman at the well had in relation to her fellow townsmen. They soon met Jesus themselves; they heard His words and saw His deeds. But we do not meet Jesus; we cannot

hear or see Him except in the witness of the apostles. Our fellowship with Christ is bound to our fellowship with their words.

John does testify that believers have for Christ's sake received the anointing of the Holy Spirit and therefore know all things and don't need anyone to teach them. But this also does not mean that believers can bring forth the truth out of themselves through reasoning. The believers to whom John was writing had already heard the proclamation of the gospel. They knew its content and perhaps they had no need of anyone to teach them more than what accorded with the contents of the gospel. They had only to stick with what they had heard from the beginning, and they would remain in the Son and the Father. What the apostles saw and heard, they proclaimed; so that those who believed might have fellowship with them and with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ.

In essence, all the truths of the Christian faith come to man from the outside. They are known to him only through revelation, and they become his possession only when he accepts them like a child in faith. Faith, including genuine, saving faith, therefore always involves knowledge. Not an immediate, direct knowledge, not a knowing from face to face, not seeing. Not a knowledge gained through personal investigation, argument and proof, through observation and experiment. But a knowledge gained from a reliable witness. Not until we know and acknowledge truth in this way can it evoke trust and stir up different kinds of experiences in the heart. As long as the Christian faith retains its uniqueness, this knowing and assenting element cannot be denied. Only when faith is completely robbed of its Christian character and content can it lose this element, but then it also stops being a religious concept. In rationalism, which still clings to the trilogy of God, virtue, and immortality, the focal point is no longer faith but works, not religion but morality.

The inadequacy of the method of experience is abundantly clear because at various times everything or nothing can be deduced from it, and not without justification. All religions awaken religious

emotions and experiences. If they give us the right to conclude to the truth of that faith and of its content, in philosophical language, if judgments of value are the ground and proof of judgments of being, then the Buddhist can conclude to the truth of nirvana from his experience, the Muslim mystic similarly to the reality of his sensible heaven and the Roman Catholic to the right of the cult of the virgin Mary. And all of them could agree with Zinzendorf, giving this ultimate ground for their faith: *Es ist mir so, mein Herz sagt mir das* (It is so to me; my heart tells me).

When we get down to essentials, this experiential method resembles that of pietism, which reversed the order and made experience the foundation of faith. There is a difference, however. Pietism used its method against dead orthodoxy and did not intend to throw doubt on the objective truth of the Christian religion. In recent times, however, this method became attractive because the certainty of faith had been lost and this was seen as the only way to restore it.

This method arose after Kant restricted man's knowing capacities to the sensible world and after historical criticism had thrown doubt on the truth of Scripture. It is a child of unbelief but harbors the secret hope of nevertheless being able to salvage some faith. It is a secret hope that science will respect the inner sanctity of the soul and leave the plant of religion to subsist there undisturbed. It concedes everything—the whole world, nature, history, and almost the whole man with his senses and perceptions, memory and imagination, understanding and reason—to positivistic science, as long as it is permitted to retain a small, modest place somewhere deep in man's heart for faith. To this end it surrenders bulwark after bulwark, allowing man to apply his self-emancipation and secularization even to the largest part of theology and dogmatics. In the thought of its most consistent interpreters it is left with nothing more than a few universal religious concepts.

The Appeal of the Gospel

This experiential method, thus, does not lead to its intended goal. It attempts to uphold the religious character of revelation but makes its content dependent on the believer's experience, thereby risking the danger of losing all objective truth. Nevertheless, we must be grateful for the reminder that Christianity is not science or philosophy but religion. There are indeed no scientific proofs or philosophical arguments that can move man to accept the gospel. Generally speaking, the rule applies, as we have said, that you can't argue with someone who is principally opposed to you.

This is especially true in the area of religion, because the gospel presents itself as standing above and in opposition to the natural man. It is meant for him, but it does not accord with his thoughts and inclinations. It claims to be of divine origin and therefore demands a different inclination than is man's by birth. If man could be compelled to accept God's Word through scientific reasoning, the gospel would not gain but lose force. It would thereby be robbed of its special character, of its divine origin, of its religious content, and of its saving purpose, and it would be reduced to an ordinary, fallible, rational and human level.

If neither rational argument nor moral experience can explain how the Christian faith comes into being, the question arises whether there isn't a better way in which man may be led to trustingly embrace the truth revealed in Christ. And then we ought first of all to remind ourselves that the gospel, however it may be viewed and misinterpreted, despite all opposition, still continues to be preached from century to century, and regardless of all differences in interpretation has as its principal content that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. This is how the gospel encounters everyone who has come into contact with it, be it early or late, be they young or old. Whether he accepts or rejects it, it comes to him calling for faith and repentance. This is an unalterable fact. That the gospel is made

known to us, confronting us with the call to believe and repent, does not depend on our will but on a decree of God. It is He who ordains us to be born to Christian parents, raised in a Christian environment, and without any merit on our part makes us acquainted with the way of salvation in Christ.

To sum up, there exists one holy, catholic church which, as the pillar and bulwark of the truth, maintains the mystery of godliness: God is revealed in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by the angels, preached among the heathens, believed in the world, lifted up into glory. The church's witness would doubtlessly be stronger and its impact more powerful, if all Jesus' disciples were one, as the Father is in Him and He in the Father. Then the world would almost be forced to confess in spite of itself that Christ was sent by the Father. But even now, despite all its inner divisions, the church is a pillar and bulwark of the truth amidst the world. What divides it, no matter how serious, is always less than what binds it together and unifies it. The more self-conscious and bolder that unbelief becomes, the more the Christian church closes ranks against the common foe. What it has to save and defend is one spiritual, holy possession. And to the world its confession sounds like the voice of many waters saying that there is no other name under heaven given to men by which they must be saved than the name of Jesus.

The Spirit of the Lord is operative in that confession, convicting the world of sin, righteousness and judgment. God does not leave Himself without a witness to anyone in nature. He does not prove His existence and does not make it dependent upon our investigation, but He witnesses to Himself in our hearts and consciences, through nature and history, life and destiny, and this witness is so powerful that no man can avoid it, no one can continue to resist it.

There may be all kinds of objections to be raised against the existence of a personal God. According to our limited insight there may be numerous phenomena and events that don't agree with it.

Nevertheless, it is an established fact for every human being. This is also true of the gospel of Christ. It exists; it is brought to us in many ways and in widely differing circumstances; it reaches out to us at every moment during our life's journey.

And this brings us to the second thing that we should remind ourselves of: the gospel never stops making an impression on our hearts. The only influence proper to the Word of God, considered in itself as word, is, by the nature of the case, a moral influence. It can make an impression without molding the will and changing the heart. Nevertheless, it is not an empty sound or a clanging cymbal. It never returns void but does everything the Lord has sent it to do. It is in itself a light upon the path and a lamp unto the feet, even though because of the blindness of his eyes man may not be able to see it. Although it does not make his truth dependent on reasoning and proof, the Word of God does not sidestep them either. Precisely at the moment when we in our wisdom think we have shown it to be foolishness, it is revealed as the wisdom and power of God. It does not direct itself, like all human science, to our reason to be studied and only then accepted as truth or rejected as error. Neither does it wish to be judged by our standards and justified before our tribunals. But it lifts itself high above our insight, asserts itself as a judge of our thoughts and desires, and summons us with all that we are and have before His tribunal. It directs itself to the whole man, to his understanding and reason, to his heart and conscience, to man in his hidden depths, to the core of his being, to man in his relationship to God. It assumes nothing on his part other than that he is a sinner who needs reconciliation and peace and salvation. And it promises and gives these to him by way of faith and repentance.

In both respects the gospel answers to the most perfect and beautiful idea of religion we can form for ourselves. For on the one hand it is nothing but the good news of grace and salvation. It doesn't pose a single demand—not of age or generation, of race or language, of class or wealth. It poses no conditions, it asks nothing, it demands nothing, it is no law but the opposite of all law. It is broadly human

and completely universal, because it presupposes nothing but what is common to all men, namely, the need to be freed from the misery of sin. In accordance with this, on the other hand, the gospel confronts man with nothing but a moral choice, the choice to accept the gift of God's grace in faith or to spurn it in hardness of heart.

Faith as Ethical Choice

That the difference between belief and unbelief is not merely one of insight but of ethical choice is testified to by the conscience of everyone who lives out of the gospel. Everyone is from time to time plagued by a sense of guilt and misery. In the best and most sacred moments of life the question involuntarily arises whether the gospel might not be divine truth. An unbeliever is never sure. How can someone who puts his trust in man believe with unshakable certainty that Jesus Christ did not come into the world to save sinners? Who would risk his name and reputation, his possessions and life for such a negative faith? Who would dare, who would be able to go forward joyfully to martyrdom with such a denial on his lips? A negation inspires no martyrs, which shows that its deepest ground and origin is not in rational reflection, in philosophical reasoning, or in critical doubt, but in hardness of heart. And this moral guilt of unbelief again supports the truth of the gospel. For no religion can be the true religion if, when I scorn it, it does not in my conscience make me guilty before God.

The choice for or against the gospel involves a moral decision because the promises embraced in the gospel exclude all compulsion. No one is made to believe against his will. Faith is a function of understanding that has been moved to acknowledge the truth of the gospel by the will. The whole man is therefore involved in believing—with his reason, with his will, with his heart, in the core of his being, in the deepest part of his existence. Knowing himself to be guilty and

lost, man, in faith, surrenders himself wholly to God's grace in Christ. He ceases fighting the war he has long been waging in his conscience against the witness of the Holy Spirit. He leads all his thoughts captive to the obedience of Christ. As we said earlier, what is at issue in religion is always the highest interest, the highest good man recognizes for himself, for his own life, for the preservation of his soul. The Christian religion teaches us that the highest good for man is found in God alone, in fellowship with Him, in heavenly salvation. Faith is a thoroughly personal matter, a retying of the bonds that tie the soul to God, a renunciation of all creaturely things to place all one's trust in God, whether in life or death. Faith is an inattention to the things one sees in order to take into account those that are invisible but yet eternal and imperishable.

The nature of faith also makes it clear that another power is necessary to move man to faith than the moral influence proceeding from the gospel. In order to believe, freely, willingly and with one's whole mind, one needs a new heart and a changed will. Who can initiate these changes? The word can serve as medium, and the rational and moral proofs may serve to recommend faith to man's conscience. But ultimately, even taken together, they are not able to effect in man's heart the faith that turns him away from all created reality and allows him to put his trust in God alone. The Scriptures place this witness in the forefront, prior to all experience. Flesh and blood do not reveal the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, but only the Father of Jesus, who is in heaven. It is his good pleasure to hide these things from the wise and learned, and to reveal them to children.

At first glance this might seem illogical, yet it is very reasonable. Just as knowledge only occurs when the known object and the knowing subject agree, so true knowledge of God is possible only through faith, which He Himself quickens in our hearts. No one knows the Father but the Son and to whom the Son wishes to reveal Him. This should not discourage us and prompt us to ask: Then who can be

saved? All men, even the most lost and fallen, are offered the great consolation that in God all things are possible.

The experience of all believers confirms this testimony of Scripture. No matter how they may differ and how their beliefs may diverge, in their prayers and praises all believers confess before the face of God that they owe their faith and hope to His grace alone. They cannot explain how they obtained it in any other way. All origins are hidden in the veil of mystery; all birth is from darkness into light. The wind blows where it wills, and you hear it, but you don't know where it's going. Thus it is with everyone born of the Spirit of God. The man blind from birth could only testify, One thing I know: once I was blind, but now I see. So the man who has come to Christ in faith sees and judges and evaluates everything differently. What once was foolishness to him, he now honors as divine wisdom. What he rejected as an offense, he now considers his

highest joy. Although everything may oppose it, although everything may seem to contradict it, although the whole world and his conscience should accuse him that he has grievously sinned against all God's commandments and still is inclined to all evil, the believer can only testify that out of pure grace God gives him the righteousness of Christ and reckons it to him, as if he had never sinned, as if he had himself accomplished the absolute obedience that Christ has attained for him. Thus, faith is an act of moral energy, an act of the highest spiritual power; it is God's work par excellence because it is His most precious and most glorious gift. Faith clings to God as though seeing the Invisible, knowing His love, depending on His grace and hoping in His faithfulness.

Faith and the Word of God

From this center the believer feels himself to be in communion with the saints; he is ever more intimately bound to the whole truth, to the full, rich witness of the apostles and the prophets, to the entire Holy Scriptures as the Word of God. This bond of the soul to the Scriptures undoubtedly possesses a mystical character, as does all love and all inclinations of the heart, but it is not therefore irrational and ungrounded. It is true that faith by no means accepts as divine truth only what it has itself experienced or can infer from its own inner experience, because the emotions generally, and even more so in believers, trail far behind faith. God's revelation in the Scriptures has been given not to a single member of the church but to the church of all ages, all times and in all circumstances to be a source of the truth and a means of grace.

But faith does not blindly accept everything that a philosopher or artist, church or priest presents as truth. Nowadays many seek to tread a middle way, drawing on the subjective certainty and comfort of religion while surrendering its objective truth and knowability. This makes religion a private matter, a psychological need: whatever someone considers useful and necessary to believe at a given time and place is deemed to be true.

But if religion in the objective sense doesn't exist or is unknowable, its subjective certainty is an illusion. If Christ did not rise from the dead, all preaching is futile and so is all faith. To be acceptable to faith, a word must present, confirm and seal itself as a word from God. From its very inception and as the Reformation returning to Scripture again clarified it, faith has a religious character. It is not first a historical knowledge which later is supplemented and completed by trust or love. From the very beginning it is a religious state, a practical knowing, a knowledge that applies to myself, an appropriation of the promises God made to me.

But such appropriation is possible only if a word presents and confirms itself to me as a word from God. If Scripture were nothing more than a narrative of past events it could be accepted only on

historical grounds by an historical faith. But although it is also history, in that history it is more than a narrative, it is a word from God that comes to man calling him to faith and repentance. As such, it can be known through genuine faith. Whoever accepts its testimony confirms that God is truthful. Promise and faith are correlates; they address themselves to one another. The more the Christian develops, the more he roots himself in that Word, learning to know it better and to value it more. In the same act of faith he also embraces Christ, whose likeness comes to him unadulterated in the Scripture's witness of Him.

Therefore, faith is not the ground that carries the truth, nor is it the source from which knowledge flows to him, but it is the soul's organ; it recognizes the objective, self-subsistent truth. Faith is the pail with which the believer draws the water of life from the wellspring of God's Word. In all perception and thought, agreement between subject and object is required. It isn't enough for the sun to shine in the heavens. Man also needs eyes in order to see the sun by its own light. It isn't enough that the visible world is the embodiment of thought. Man also needs a mind to follow those thoughts and receive them into his consciousness. Similarly, the believer is nothing more than a normal human being whose eyes have been opened to the eternal and heavenly things, whose heart has again learned to understand the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven. The Christian does not construct his knowledge of the truth from faith, but through faith he penetrates ever deeper into the mysteries of salvation. The Word of God is always the solid ground on which he stands, the rock to which he clings, the starting point of his thought, the source of his knowledge, the rule of his life, the light on his path and the lamp for his feet.

The Dimensions of Certainty

But the certainty of truth is not enough for a Christian. He also needs the certainty of salvation. He will only be able to rest and glory in the freedom of the children of God when his faith is certain not only of the object on which he depends but also of himself. These two kinds of certainty, easily distinguished, cannot be separated. They are closely interrelated; the one does not exist without the other.

In this way faith is like knowledge. A characteristic of knowledge is certainty not only of its object but at the same time also of itself. If we really know something for certain, at the same time we spontaneously and immediately know that we know. Genuine, true knowledge excludes all doubt regarding itself. It reaches this certainty not by rational argument, and not by self-reflection or by logical inference; the light that knowledge sheds on the known object immediately reflects back on itself and expels all darkness. This is also true of faith. Faith that really deserves the name brings its own certainty.

Within faith we can again distinguish between what our fathers called the outgoing and the returning acts of faith, between the shelter-seeking and the assured trust of faith, between the being and the well-being of faith. But as fine as these distinctions may be, they must not be made into divisions. Faith is not an assemblage, which like a machine is put together from different parts and gradually molded into a unit. Nor is it a gift that is imposed from the top upon our own nature, always remaining inwardly alien to it. But it is a restoration of the right relationship between God and man, the return of the trust a normal child places in his father. In the state and attitude of the soul which the Holy Scriptures call faith, certainty is included by its very nature—certainty first of all regarding God's promises given us in the gospel, but also certainty that by grace we too share in these promises.

The latter form of certainty does not come to faith from the outside; it is not mechanically added on; it is not joined to it by a special revelation. This certainty is contained in faith from the outset and in

time organically issues from it. Faith is certainty and as such excludes all doubt. Whoever is stricken by guilt and crushed and honestly seeks refuge in Christ is already a believer. To the degree that he exercises a shelter-seeking trust he also possesses an assured trust. How else would a sinner convicted of his own guilt ever dare to approach God and evoke His grace unless in the depth of his heart, without being consciously aware of it himself, he shared in the certainty of faith and the hope that the Father of Jesus Christ is merciful and great in loving kindness?

Sometimes this is pictured as though the sinner, convinced like Esther of his sinfulness, turns to God with the words on his lips, "And if I perish, I perish." The trust that flees to God for shelter is not an uncertain experiment nor a doubting calculation of chances; it means standing on the promises of God that He will not cast out anyone who cries to Him in Christ for grace and forgiveness. The assured trust is thereby included in this shelter-seeking trust. And both develop together. The stronger the shelter-seeking trust becomes, the stronger becomes the assured trust. And if the latter is small and weak, we may confidently conclude that the first too is needy and incomplete. Faith, therefore, does not attain certainty regarding itself through logical reasoning nor through constantly examining itself and reflecting on its own nature. Kant's Critique of Pure Reason hardly helps to establish our certainty. But certainty flows to us immediately and directly out of faith itself. Certainty is an essential characteristic of faith; it is inseparable from it and belongs to its nature.

Nevertheless, even in the most sanctified Christian, faith is often mixed with doubt; this doubt, however, does not originate in the new man but in the old. When, in the light of the Spirit, the object of faith places itself before the eye of the soul, that same light illuminates faith and raises it beyond all doubt. Just as the Israelites in the desert were healed not when they looked into themselves but when they looked up at the raised snake, so the believer becomes sure of his salvation when he expects it not from his faith but through faith from

God's grace. This certainty is and will always be a certainty of faith, very distinct in source and nature from scientific certainty, but no less fixed and unshakable for that. It doesn't rest on human reasoning, but on the Word, the promises of God, the gospel, which poses no conditions but only proclaims that everything has been accomplished. All we have to do is enter into that accomplished work and rest in it for eternity.

Certainty a Danger?

Often the Christian church has not dared to proclaim this rich, free gospel and has tailored it to man's opinions. Already in Paul's day many were afraid grace would be abused and made an occasion for the flesh, that people would begin to sin more so grace might abound. In numerous ways the gospel has often been transformed into a law, God's gift turned into a demand, and His promises made into conditions. In the Roman Catholic Church good works had to come first, and in the protestant churches many kinds of experiences were necessary before one could truly believe and appropriate this rich gospel of God's grace. The priests or the guardians of the spiritual life only granted believers the right and the freedom of spirit to believe as the end product, the fruit of a series of good works or genuine inner experiences. Faith was separated from its object—the grace of God in Christ—by a long list of activities, and it was duty-bound to constant examination of and reflection on its own development. Seeking in vain within itself and in the tossing waves of experience that which it could only find outside of itself in Christ, faith lost its certainty.

By its very nature and essence faith can find rest in nothing but a word from God, a promise from the Lord. Any other ground makes it shaky, because it is human and therefore shifting and unreliable. Only a word from God can give life to our souls and provide an

immovable foundation for the building of our hope. When all human things obtruding between God's grace and our faith are eliminated, and when our faith fastens on God's promises directly and immediately, then faith will be certain and unshakable. Then faith no longer rests on a subjective, changeable foundation but on an objective, abiding foundation. The unshakableness of the foundation is conveyed directly to the person who, rescued from life's shipwreck, plants both feet firmly on it in faith. When the plant of faith is allowed to take root in the ground of God's promises, it will naturally bear the fruit of certainty. The deeper and firmer the roots anchor themselves in this ground, the stronger and taller it will grow, and the richer will be its fruit.

The Confirmation of the Sacraments

These promises are offered to us in two forms: audible and visible, as preaching and as sacrament. The sacraments are signs and seals of the word and are therefore subject to the word. Apart from the word they have no value whatsoever and stop being sacraments. They cannot, therefore, signify or convey grace that isn't already included in the word and presented through the word by way of faith. They also presuppose faith in that word. Anyone who doesn't accept that word in faith derives nothing from the sacraments, and by using them he only leaves himself all the more without excuse. Sacraments have been ordained only for believers, for they don't effect what isn't there, but only strengthen what is already there. They do so by their very essence, for they are bound to the word and signs and seals to confirm it.

The sacraments exercise this confirming and strengthening power in two ways. First, they seal for the believer the promises of God that He will be a God unto them and unto their seed. He remembers His

covenant, and He gives them all the blessings of salvation—the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

He will not abandon good work begun in them but will carry it to completion. Second, through the sacramental confirmation of God's promises believers are strengthened in their faith. Along with the certainty of God's promises and their fulfillment, the strength of faith also grows. Consciousness follows being. To the extent that the child grows up into a man, he puts away childish things and ripens into clear self-consciousness and walks in the full light of knowledge. The emotions retreat into the background and all of life becomes illuminated by the steadfast certainty of faith. This once prompted Paul to say that God's Spirit testified with his spirit that he was a child of God. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

The Fruits of Certainty

The nature of this faith, therefore, makes it impossible that those whom it engrafts into Christ will not produce fruits of thankfulness. Those who believe in righteousness by works always seem to be afraid that a faith that rests solely on God's promises will be morally harmful. But such fear is entirely groundless and idle, for in a certain sense there is no such thing as a dead faith without works. All faith, even normal, everyday faith, and similarly in religion the so-called historical, temporal and miraculous kinds of faith, bear fruit, but fruit after its own kind. If we are away from home and receive a message that our house or family has been struck by disaster and we believe it, that does not leave us unaffected. It immediately sets us in motion and sends us speeding home. The demons, say the Scriptures, believe there is one God, and because they believe and cannot deny it, they shudder.

Historical faith, too, which used to bind all Christendom generally to the truths of the gospel, was not without fruit, for the broad cross-section of the people were captivated by it and preserved from many horrible sins. Although it is true that hypocrisy was widespread in those days and many evils were committed in secret, that hypocrisy was, nevertheless, a homage paid by error to truth, and by sin to virtue. It certainly was no worse than the horrible frankness with which the most awful abominations are shamelessly committed in contemporary society.

Consequently, every faith bears fruit according to its object and its nature. Depending on whether the object of our faith is good or bad news, a promise or threat, a story or prognostication, gospel or law, it will differ in character and so will the fruit that it bears in our lives. If this is true of all faith, how much more true it must be of the faith rooted in a spiritual renewal of the heart, which truly receives the gospel as good news, depending only on God's grace in Christ. It cannot produce careless and impious people; it bears fruit according to its own nature, fruit that glorifies the Father.

In that fruit the reality, the soundness, the power of that faith is once again revealed. Experiences and good works can never prove the truth of faith beforehand. All genuine experience and all virtuous works are not the roots, but the fruits of faith. Not until the promises of the gospel have been appropriated in faith do they exert an influence on our hearts and lives through our consciousness. The emotions follow understanding, and the will is led by both. Faith is the source of emotional life and the power animating the works of our hands. If faith, however, does not come first, no genuine experience and no true good works can follow.

As long as we aren't certain and firm in our faith and we still doubt, we will continue to experience anxiety and fear and will not have the boldness and trust of children of God. We will still be far too much concerned with ourselves to be able to devote our attention to works of love toward God and our neighbor. The eye of the soul remains

turned inward and does not have a broad, liberated vision of the world. We are still more or less subject to the spirit of fear. We still feel far from God and do not live out of fellowship with Him. Secretly we still harbor the thoughts that we must please Him with our stature and virtues, and we still act out of legalistic principles; we remain servants, not children.

But if in faith we fasten immediately onto the promises of God and take our stand in His rich grace, then we are His children and receive the Spirit of adoption. This Spirit is appropriate to our sonship; it testifies with our spirit that we are children of God. Then we feel like children; we have the stature and experience of children and as a matter of course also do good works, not for wages like servants, but out of thankfulness.

If we are children, we are also heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. The reversal of the order of salvation—that is, the separation of faith from its only proper object—also had the result in the past that the faithful concentrated more and more on themselves, meeting together in conventicles to discuss spiritual matters, leaving the world to its fate. Pietistic Christians preferred to withdraw from the turbulence of life into their own intimate circles. The religious, spiritual life was the only true life. It shunted all other activity into the background by deeming it of lesser worth. One was indeed bound to a spouse, a family, a job in society and had to devote some attention to them, but one did so reluctantly. One's life in the world formed a sharp contrast to one's spiritual life; the former always seemed more or less to involve serving the world. In any case, it was life of a lower order. To sit in quiet contemplation or to relate to the circle of the faithful what God had wrought in one's soul—this was really living, this was the ideal, this was the Christian's real destiny.

Such a conception of the Christian's earthly task issued from the reversal of the order of salvation that we mentioned earlier. A Christian was a sighing, burdened person who could come to certainty and rest only at the end of his life after a series of inner

experiences. Certainty became the goal rather than the starting point of all his striving. To be saved was the object of all his desires. Unsure about his own state, he had enough work looking after himself and lacked the courage and strength to turn his eyes outward and assume the work of reforming the world. It was sufficient if at the end of his troublesome life he might be taken up into heaven. He preferred to leave the earth to the servants of the world.

This tradition overestimated and overemphasized the one thing needful, which, on the other hand, is often lacking in the busyness of contemporary life. While these nineteenth century Christians forgot the world for themselves, we run the danger of losing ourselves in the world. Nowadays we are out to convert the whole world, to conquer all areas of life for Christ. But we often neglect to ask whether we ourselves are truly converted and whether we belong to Christ in life and in death. For this is indeed what life boils down to. We may not banish this question from our personal or church life under the label of pietism or methodism. What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world, even for Christian principles, if he loses his own soul?

But this does not suggest that the meaning of the Christian religion may be limited to the saving of individual souls. The situation appears much different to those who in agreement with the Scriptures and with the confession of the Reformation do not place faith at the end, but at the beginning of the way of salvation. This way doesn't strive for faith, but lives out of faith. It is the way that does not work in order to believe, but believes in order to work. Such a Christian has found his standpoint in the promises of God's grace in Christ. The foundations of his hope are fixed, for they lie outside him in God's word, which will never be moved. He doesn't need to constantly examine the genuineness and strength of the foundation on which the building of his salvation has been built. He is a child of God not on the basis of all kinds of inner experiences but on the basis of the promises of the Lord. Assured of this, he can now freely look around and enjoy all the good gifts and the perfect gift that descends

from the Father of lights. Everything is his because he is Christ's and Christ is God's. The whole world becomes material for his duty.

Religious life does have its own content and independent value. It remains the center, the heart from which all the Christian's thoughts and acts proceed, by which they are animated and given the warmth of life. There, in fellowship with God, he is strengthened for his labors and girds himself for the battle. But that mysterious life of fellowship with God is not the whole of life. The prayer chamber is the inner room, although it is not the whole house in which he lives and functions. Spiritual life does not exclude family and social life, business and politics, art and science. It is distinct from these; it is also of much greater value, but it does not stand irreconcilably opposed to it. Rather it is the power that enables us to faithfully fulfill our earthly calling, stamping all of life as service to God. The Kingdom of God is, to be sure, like a pearl more precious than the whole world, but it is also like a leaven that leavens the entire dough. Faith isn't only the way of salvation, it also involves overcoming the world.

The Christian, as he is drawn in Scripture and as he speaks in the Heidelberg Catechism, stands and works in this conviction. Reconciled with God, he is also reconciled with all things. Because in the Father of Christ he confesses the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, he cannot be small-hearted and constricted in his affections. For God Himself so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son so that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life. And this Son came to earth not to condemn the world but to save it. In His cross heaven and earth are reconciled. Under Him all things shall be gathered together with Him as head.

The history of all things proceeds according to His counsel toward the redemption of the church as the new humanity, toward the liberation of the world in an organic sense, toward the new heaven and the new earth. Even now, by rights, everything in principle belongs to the church, because it is Christ's and Christ is God's. As a

priest in the temple of the Lord, he who believes this is king over the whole earth. Because he is a Christian, he is human

in the full, true sense. He loves the flowers that grow at his feet and admires the stars that sparkle overhead. He does not disdain the arts, which are to him a precious gift from God. Nor does he belittle the sciences, for these, too, are a gift from the Father of lights. He believes that everything God has created is good and that, taken in thanksgiving, nothing is condemned. He labors not for success and doesn't work for wages, but he does what comes to hand, seeing, by means of God's commandments, though ignorant of what the future may bring. He does good works without thinking twice and bears fruit before he realizes it. He is like a flower that spreads its fragrance unawares. He is, in a word, a man of God, perfectly equipped to all good works. And while for him to live is Christ, in the end to die is gain.
