

Paul, a Model of the Certainty of Faith, Especially for all Servants of the Word

By August Pieper

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We often complain today about the sad condition of the Christian church, and rightly so. We servants of the Word also complain about this, but unjustly. "Why should any living mortal, or any man, offer complaint in view of his (own) sins?" (Lm 3:39, NASB). The only thing that the church of our day, and especially we ministers of the Word, lack is faith: living, robust, confident faith—the certainty of faith. Where certainty of faith governs the church, it will prosper. The certainty of faith is the source of all spiritual life, as well as the power for it. "Everything is possible for him who believes" (Mk 9:23)¹.

From her very beginning down to the present day, the church has always had individual great heroes of faith—Adam, Enoch, Noah, Shem, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, the prophets, John the Baptist, our Lord's disciples—and they accomplished great things. One of the greatest was Paul. He established the Christian church among the Gentiles—through faith. Through faith the Lord toppled the papacy. Through faith Walther and his coworkers established the church of the pure Word in our land.

Of the Scripture passages which describe Paul's certainty of faith, 2 Timothy 1:12 is surely one of the most beautiful. The two epistles to Timothy, for all of their brevity, abound in expressions of Paul's confident faith. The second epistle is Paul's valedictory, his last will and testament to the New Testament church. You might say it was written with his heart's blood; its tone is one of uncommon earnestness. Paul wrote this epistle aware of his impending death. He was confident of having fought a good fight, of having finished his course, of having kept the faith. "Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day... The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory for ever and ever. Amen."

Humanly speaking, there was only one of Paul's pupils and associates who could assume the leadership of the Gentile congregations Paul had founded. That was the truest and dearest of Paul's spiritual children, Timothy, a young man of genuine faith, who had been loyal to the Lord and His apostle down to the present hour. Only one thing seemed to be lacking in this future leader. He had been brought up in the Christian faith by two women, his mother and his grandmother; he had a gentle disposition; he was still a comparatively young man; and occasionally he seems to have yielded to his inborn timidity. He seems to have lacked the ability to take hold of himself with a virility given by the Spirit. Yet those were the very gifts the church's leaders were going to need to lead the church securely in the face of the subtle heresies of false teachers, and in the face of increasing persecution from Roman authorities and heathen mobs.

The entire second epistle to Timothy can pretty well be summarized in the single admonition: "My son, take strength from the grace of God which is ours in Christ" (2:1, NEB). Paul provided ample foundation for this admonition. As servants of the Word, we have also received the proper spirit for our ministry—not a spirit of fearfulness, but of strength, of love, and of self-control. Without any merit on our part God in pure grace rescued us from eternal death and converted us, in accordance with his eternal purpose in Christ. Our Lord Jesus has abolished death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. If we died with Christ, we shall live with Him; if we endure, we shall reign with Him. The Lord has risen from the dead; He provides for our bodily needs; He will give us everything we need to face the difficulties that confront us in our ministry; He knows His own. Of course, if we deny Him, He will deny us, but our unfaithfulness to Him does not annul His

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Bible quotations are taken from the *New International Version*.

faithfulness to us, for He cannot deny Himself. Perilous times will come; hypocrites and deceivers will enter the church under the guise of true religion and will seek to win followers for themselves. But their successes will be short-lived, for God will expose them for the fools they are. The time will come when those who call themselves Christian will not endure wholesome teaching but will gather a crowd of teachers to tickle their ears. But all of this cannot and dare not rob you of your courage and strength, and make you fearful or weary in your work of love! Take hold of yourself, and keep a clear head by holding to the kind of sturdy, salutary words you have heard from me and by guarding that good deposit that was entrusted to you through the Holy Spirit. Entrust this to reliable men, who will also be qualified to teach others. Do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, but in His strength endure hardship with me like a good soldier of Jesus Christ, competing according to the rules, doing your work faultlessly, keeping yourself clean from the contamination of evil. Rebuke all ungodliness, yet with kindness; shut the mouths of those who oppose you, and in view of Christ's imminent return be unswerving in preaching and teaching the Word with great patience and careful instruction. What is at stake here is the salvation of God's elect. This is how I have conducted my ministry, and I have not been put to shame. The Lord stood beside me, delivered me from all persecution, and strengthened me, so that through me the gospel might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. Now the Lord will deliver me from the last great evil and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom. *For I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him for that day* (1:12).

Although the apostle does not say it in just so many words, it is clear from this summary of the thought of 2 Timothy that he wants to strengthen Timothy for the task ahead of him. Paul saw in Timothy the outstanding future leader of the Gentile church, which he himself had founded. In this strengthening process Paul's own example played a prominent role. As Timothy had observed from day to day, and as Paul himself emphasized a number of times (cf. 1:12), Paul's ministry was based on his certainty of faith.

The closer one looks at the apostle's words quoted above, the more brightly they shine, like a sparkling diamond. "I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day." These words apply to all Christians, but especially to all messengers of the gospel and to all leaders in the church. Confident faith is not the special prerogative of public servants of the Word. Every believer is to be confident in his faith, for according to Hebrews 11 faith is nothing else than being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. Essentially faith is firm trust, created by God himself, in the unbreakable promises He has given us—promises for this life and for the next one. In one person faith may be little and weak, in another large and robust. A Christian's strength of faith may indeed vary from time to time. At one time it may be shaken and may waver; at other times it may rejoice in triumph, depending on how we view God's promises or conditions in our life. The Lord often rebuked His disciples for littleness of faith. More than others, they should have been strong in faith, and confident of God's promises, regardless of unfavorable conditions in their life at the moment. Regardless of which view one holds regarding the divine institution of the public ministry, this will remain true: there is no form of the ministry in which the possessor does not need a strong faith if he is to carry out his ministry properly. For the public ministry of the Word—as apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers and officials of the church, whether we call them pastors, ministers, preachers, missionaries, professors, teachers, chaplains, visiting elders, synod presidents, bishops, or elders—God can use only those who possess a knowledge of the gospel and a strength of faith in surpassing measure.

This is not to say that public servants of the Word do not have to undergo trials of faith common to other mortals. The pastor's doubts about the inspiration of the Bible, about the truth of the gospel, about Lutheranism's claim to be the only true religion, will not cease when he graduates from the seminary. On the contrary, he will continue to be plagued by littleness of faith, by depression, stubbornness, discouragements and doubts of various kinds—indeed, we need to be plagued, if our faith is to grow and mature. The reason why God lets these trials enter our lives is that we by His grace and Spirit may overcome them, be preserved in the hour of trial, and be more firmly established in faith. And all the while He remains faithful to His promise, not to test us beyond what we can bear (1 Cor 10:13). Paul's admonition to Timothy "My son, be strong" will always apply in a very special way to called servants of the Word. Just as Paul admonishes Timothy and us to

fan into flame God's gift for our ministry, the spirit of power and love and of self-control, so he also adds the special promise that this gift of strength will be given to us in abundance.

In the ministry it simply will not do, and we will accomplish nothing worthwhile, if we are not divinely certain that what we preach and teach is God's everlasting truth and the only way to eternal blessedness. The gospel of Christ is no earthborn, earthbound creation. It was not given to flowers or trees, field or forest, mountain or valley; it was not written on the forehead or in the heart of man or beast. The ocean doesn't thunder the message of the gospel, nor do the trees whisper its truth to you. You will not read it in the stars, nor will the clouds and wind and weather sing you its glories. It comes from God's heaven; the Spirit of holiness reveals it to the occupants of this planet, who otherwise would not know it, in order to rescue them from their own wisdom and their own righteousness and their own vices, and to make them wise and justified and upright for all eternity. This is the reason why the unbelieving world cannot tolerate the gospel. Wise men call it folly, the self-righteous an offense, the slaves of sin tyranny. Together they hate it and persecute it with ridicule and mockery and blasphemy, with violence, prison, torture, and death. Understandably, all hatred of the gospel focuses primarily on those who preach and represent it. They must be ready, for the gospel's sake, to take what the unbelieving world is going to hand out. Rather than being ashamed of the testimony of Christ, they will, when opposed by men of science and philosophy and culture, continue to confess the gospel as truth, the truth which judges and condemns this world's wisdom. They must have the necessary courage and energy to separate themselves from every Hymenaeus and Philetus, to put out of the church every one who professes the name of the Lord but does not turn away from wickedness.

The unbelieving pastor and the doubter will never manage to accomplish this; they see the wolf coming and run. The weak pastor will not accomplish this either, because he lacks the strength to risk enmity and to bear the abuse and recriminations that will be forthcoming from those members whom the congregation has disciplined. Such a pastor is ashamed to testify to his Lord; the moment his own well-being, his honor and position are endangered, he no longer stands solidly on the Word. Melancthon was a good and pious man, but he was forever fearful that Luther's unbending insistence on the Word would harm his and the church's cause. And the result? When "the old lion" was dead, Melancthon betrayed the church's cause every time danger threatened or apparent advantage beckoned. This man of peace and of "love" lacked the assurance of faith which made Luther the man who rescued the gospel. Melancthon, on the other hand, stood in constant danger of surrendering to compromise. He simply was not able to endure hardship like a good soldier of Jesus Christ; he could not bring himself to put aside his concern for daily bread and to fight as a soldier should.

The work of the public ministry invariably demands the whole man. Although these demands may vary in individual cases, God asks pastors to exert themselves to the utmost when preparing sermons and class presentations, when ministering to the sick and the troubled and the tempted, when instructing and nurturing the youth and adults who lack knowledge. And when these matters have been taken care of, there is always the matter of Scripture study, of thinking through the gospel again—in general and in its particulars. This is a work which no man in the ministry ever finishes. And if, in addition, a man has accepted a special responsibility—director of an institution, visiting elder (cf. Ac 15:36), synod president, or whatever—let him remember that he has not only a position of honor, but a noble task. He has accepted a precious but difficult assignment, one that demands physical and mental and spiritual exertion. Remember Paul's statement: "I labored more than they all." The church cannot tolerate frivolous, easy-going, pleasure-loving people in any of her ministries without being harmed. What a man accomplishes does not depend so much on how much work he has to do as on the inner energy with which he approaches his work. We who have been given a special call to work in our Lord's vineyard may be growing older in years, but we dare never grow old and tired-out mentally. We are renewed day by day with the strength God has promised (Is 40:29–31; 2 Cor 12:9).

The Apostle Paul offered his pupil Timothy his own example as a model. In the Old Testament, the man who carried the heaviest load of trouble was Moses; in the New Testament, that man was Paul (cf. Nu 12:3 and 2 Cor 11). Paul outdid all the Lord's apostles in effort expended, work accomplished, battles fought, and sufferings undergone for the gospel's sake. We will never match his record. Our assignment is not as great as his, and as a result his measure of spiritual power has neither been given nor promised us. But God has

promised and given us the same spirit of inner power and energy; not the spirit of comfortable unconcern, but the spirit of selfless, self-denying, all-consuming love for souls headed for perdition; not a self-indulgent spirit that seeks to gratify one's own earthly inclinations, but the spirit of self-discipline, which keeps watch over one's body and spirit, lest they become fat (*geil*), Romans 13:14. It is of utmost importance that we never stop fanning into flame the spirit God has given us.

A mistake many people make is to imagine that our spiritual strength will be in direct proportion to the amount of spiritual knowledge we possess. Not so. The uncounted martyrs of the first three centuries—fathers and mothers, young men and young women—were not theologically trained. A humble homemaker, whose spiritual knowledge does not extend far beyond her catechism, may very well be capable of sturdier faith and larger sacrificial love for her Lord than her son, who through her self-sacrifice has been trained as a pastor or theological professor. It goes without saying that to be spiritually strong the Christian must have a clear and complete understanding of God's plan of salvation, which is after all the very essence of the gospel. A martyr must know the truth for which he will lay down his life; if he does not know that, he is an enthusiast, a fanatic. It often happens that people present doctrines and principles which they themselves have invented and vehemently proclaim these as God's own truth; they may even be willing to fight and to suffer and even to die for what they call truth. This is no indication of a strong faith, but only the curse on a faith which rests on self-made idols. It is that sort of false faith which led the Hindu to throw himself under the wheels of the juggernaut. Fanaticism may have the form but not the essence of Christian strength. What the fanatic believes is only a figment of his imagination.

The Christian's strength, on the other hand, rests on his personal assurance of faith. "I know whom I have believed, and am convinced." Christian strength is built on what it believes, namely on the objective truth of the gospel. This is the means the Holy Ghost uses to build the confidence of faith, the essence of which is one's personal assurance of his own salvation. The believer knows he has been delivered from sin, from death, and from Satan's power; he knows he has become the personal possession of Jesus Christ and of God the Father for time and eternity. Whoever does not have this assurance of his personal state of grace lacks the power to preach the gospel properly, to contend for it, to suffer for it, to expend himself for it. He who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind, James 1:6.

How different it is with the person who knows that he has been snatched out of the present evil world into God's gracious arms! He will not find it unduly painful to renounce the friendship of the unbelieving world and the pleasures of this life, and gladly to shoulder the trouble and shame, the misery and suffering which will be the lot of the man who remains loyal to the gospel. We can see this in the apostles, Acts 5:41f, and especially in the Apostle Paul. How much this man accomplished single-handedly, how much he suffered, how much he gladly endured! The strength for all of this flowed from a single source: the certainty of his faith. It was this certainty that sustained Paul through his entire apostolic ministry; it was this that filled his entire consciousness, even when he faced death; it was this that strengthened his readiness to lay his neck on the executioner's block for the gospel's sake.

How did Paul ever come to gain such assurance? It will be worth our while to examine the confession of his life more closely, especially as this is illustrated by his unique conversion.

Without weakening his declaration in the least, the apostle might have said: "I know *what* I believe." Those words would have compelled us to understand that Paul was absolutely sure of his faith—of that which he believed, of the gospel which had been revealed to him. But instead, Paul gave the object of his faith a distinctly personal emphasis: "I know *whom* I have believed." God had not revealed the gospel of Christ to Paul as an abstract truth, objective and general; Paul had entered into an intensely personal relationship with the Lord Jesus himself, the very founder of the gospel. The Lord appeared to him personally, and had let him, Saul of Tarsus, recognize the Lord in all His glory as divine Judge and Savior. Saul had seen the Lord personally in this twofold glow, which the Holy Ghost had led him to recognize. By letting him see a reflection of His own divine majesty God blinded Saul and threw him to the ground. In a voice which penetrated to the very marrow of Saul's bones God called him by name; He laid his sin on his conscience; He threatened him with the awful consequences of his personal rebellion against the Holy Ghost.

Saul asked: “Who are you, Lord?” He still did not know who it was who was revealing himself. With the address “Lord” Saul was not referring to Jesus. Every pious Jew called Israel’s God “Lord.” Saul understood clearly that the Lord Jehovah, the true God, had appeared to him here on the Damascus road. He had appeared to Saul just as he had once appeared to Abraham, to Moses, and to the prophets in that familiar appearance of the **יְהוָה יְכָבוֹד** (the “Glory of the Lord”). But then the Lord responded to Saul’s question: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” When it dawned on Saul that this was Jesus, then his conscience accused him of sin; it crushed him, and he lay trembling in terror at the Lord’s feet.²

It is worth noting that none of the three accounts of Paul’s conversion mentions that here Paul came to know the Lord, repented of his sin, and asked for forgiveness. Everything that we are told about Paul’s repentance is contained in the words which Paul spoke. “Lord”—with that word he acknowledged Jesus’ divine majesty and the divine truth of his teaching, the very teaching for which he had formerly persecuted the followers of “this way” (Ac 9:2; 22:4). Then, by asking Jesus: “What shall I do, Lord?” he was completely submitting his will to the will of this Jesus, whom he had up to now opposed in every way possible, (26:9). Paul admitted as much to Agrippa (26:19): “I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven.” In the Scripture repentance means an about-face, a turning from evil to good, “from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God” (26:18). Essentially Paul’s repentance was complete, even though outwardly it did not show itself in the usual form. The unusual form it did take resulted from the unusual and majestic form in which the Lord came to meet this unusual sinner.

Mention should also be made of the unusual form of the forgiveness granted to this penitent sinner and of how God received him into grace. In none of the three accounts (cf. also Ga 1) are we told that the Lord personally spoke the absolution to Paul. According to the first two accounts (Ac 9 and 22), the Lord simply referred him to Ananias in Damascus. The third account (Ac 26) omits all reference to Ananias, and says nothing of any formally pronounced absolution; we are told immediately of Paul’s call³ “as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen...” (26:16).

² The Greek text in Acts 9:5–6 is not well attested. Luther made his translation from the second Gerson-Erasmus edition, a reading which the Elzevirs later accepted into their so-called *recepta*. The later editions of Tischendorf, Gebhard, Tregelles, and Westcott-Hort omit all the words after “whom thou persecutest” (Ac 9:5, KJV) up to the words “Arise, and go into the city...,” because they are not found in the oldest Greek codices and seem to have been inserted here because they are found in Paul’s subsequent accounts of his conversion (Ac 22 and 26). The words “And he trembling and astonished said” (Ac 9:6, KJV) are also missing in both of the later accounts. Apparently they were inserted in the Vulgate from the oldest Syriac translations. Even if they are not original, they are biblical and Christian; cf. Genesis 3:10–15; Acts 2:36–38; 16:27–30.

³ One ought not draw the wrong conclusion from the fact that in his presentation before Agrippa Paul said nothing about being sent to Ananias, but instead put his call to apostleship into the mouth of the Lord who had appeared to him. This does not prove that the Lord Jesus in fact spoke all these words already at the time he appeared to him. Remember Paul was speaking before godless Agrippa, before heathen Festus, and before a hostile crowd of onlookers. For him in company like that to have reported on his being sent to Ananias and on his formal absolution and call to apostleship through Ananias would have been not only unnecessary, but completely out of place. What the apostle was concerned about here was to justify his message and his ministry with the divine authority of Jesus, and to make an impression on this assembly. Retelling the Ananias story would only have weakened his case. Omitting this detail, therefore, does not make Paul’s presentation any less factual; the other accounts vouch for its historicity. Paul is not being untruthful when he ascribes to the Lord his call to become an apostle. The Lord himself indicated that when, according to Acts 9 and 22, he sent Paul to Damascus with the words: “Go into the city, and you will be told what you must do,” “all that you have been *assigned* to do.” The Lord’s words preclude the possibility that he had already told Paul this when he appeared to him. But even though Paul was sent to Damascus to receive absolution and further instruction from Ananias, nevertheless it was the Lord Jesus who pardoned Paul, and who called him. It will be worth the reader’s while to read what Luther says about this (St. L. XIII, 1098 and 2654f). The words with which the Lord directs Paul to Ananias sound regal and majestic. If we did not know from 9:12 that the Lord in the vision had shown him Ananias as the man who would restore his sight and announce God’s grace to him, we might think Jesus’ majestic words were cold, almost a rebuff. Luther makes the excellent comment that the Lord had something else in mind in directing Paul to Ananias. His conversion had occurred with the help of supernatural revelation. But God does not perform miracles needlessly. It is His business why He chose to perform one to bring about Paul’s conversion. Suffice it to say that this strong man needed that miracle if he was to accomplish the unusually difficult assignment God had cut out for him. But beyond that the Lord bound His Holy Spirit and His converting power to the Word proclaimed by human beings, to the word of prophets and apostles, and from now on also to the word of Paul (26:18; Eph 2:20). While he was still Saul, Paul had despised the disciples’ message concerning Jesus; now he was going to

The inner relationship of trust which Jesus brought about in Paul and which Paul showed toward his Lord en route to Damascus reached full fruition only after Ananias had spoken to Paul (9:17ff; 22:12ff). Then for the first time Paul could say in full confidence: “I know whom I have believed, and am convinced.”

Paul’s relationship to the Lord Jesus became deeper and more intense as time went on. Paul learned to know Him as the Judge of all flesh, exalted to the right hand of the Father, as the One God had anointed to be the Savior of sinners, and as his own personal Savior. God’s plan of salvation was now clear to him. And yet he was to get to know his Savior even better.

It is difficult to say what must have happened in the heart of Paul during his three-day blindness in Damascus. We are told only that he prayed. The picture of Jesus, as he had appeared to Paul in the “Glow of the Lord,” stood vividly before his mind’s eye. Imagine: Jesus of Nazareth, the one crucified, is God’s Christ, the Savior promised in the Scripture! All those tumultuous scenes Paul had experienced before and during the crucifixion came back to him; the testimony of Peter and John to the resurrection of Christ, repeated by other Christian witnesses, occupied his thoughts. So Jesus *had* showed himself to them alive, and called them to be his witnesses! What Peter had said in his Pentecost sermon must have kept running through Paul’s mind; by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge this Jesus whom the wicked hands of the Jewish Council and people had crucified had been shown to be Lord and Christ, so that all who believe in Him will receive forgiveness of sins. Salvation is to be found in no one else. Paul must also have thought about his own part in this recent history—how intensely he had hated this Jesus, how viciously and violently he had persecuted Christians, how gleefully he had arrested them, turned them over to the Council, and helped stone them to death!

All his former zeal for the Law of Moses, all his blameless conduct, had been in vain! It had been wrong; it had actually made of him a persecutor of the Savior sent by God and a murderer of the congregation of God. Since the veil of Moses had covered his heart, his diligent study of the Scripture had trained him to be an enemy of God and a destroyer of the church.

With such thoughts tormenting his heart, he shuddered as he now recalled the details of the previous day’s experiences, and he prayed and prayed. What do you suppose he prayed? His prayer must surely have been disorganized bits and pieces of sighing and crying for grace and spiritual illumination, for peace and assurance. Paul’s prayer was answered through the word of Ananias. He comforted Paul, absolved him, baptized him, and called him to be the apostle of Him whom he had seen.

Paul now had peace of heart and assurance of grace; he had been enlightened by the truth about Christ, and assured of his call as a gospel witness. After only a few days he already began in Damascus to proclaim Jesus as God’s Son. We are told (9:22) that he became more and more resolute in preaching Jesus, and baffled the Jews by showing them—out of the Scripture, of course—that this is the very Christ, the promised Messiah. With the same resoluteness and zeal he had previously showed in persecuting Christ he now stood up for Christ and His gospel, without worrying about what the consequences might be for him. Unless he recanted, his conversion to Jesus meant expulsion from the synagogue and fanatic, unrelenting persecution to the death. For Paul to stand up as he did meant a complete break with everything in his past.

Yet Paul made this break, as we can see if we take his words “I know whom I have believed...” at full face value. Luther’s translation of the Greek perfect with a present tense “...whom I believe” is correct. The apostle is referring to what is in his heart now, as he faces death. But the perfect tense which he uses looks back into the past: “I know whom I have believed,” beginning at the very moment of his conversion, through all of his apostolic activity, right on down to the present hour, in which he is still conscious of that very same faith. At his conversion he was first led to see clearly and confidently what kind of Man it was who had revealed Himself to him: a Man to whom divine glory and all power in heaven and earth had been given, whom God had appointed to be the Judge of the living and the dead, and the Savior of the whole world through faith in Him.

experience in his own heart that that Word, in addition to Baptism, was the means by which one receives forgiveness of sin and the gift of the Holy Ghost. Far from despising that Word, Paul would learn to treasure it, and to preach it. The Lord’s appearance had crushed him and converted him; but the Lord’s hand of chastisement still lay heavy on him in his blindness. He prayed, but not yet with enlightened mind and joyful heart. The full measure of the Spirit, the triumphant certainty of his state of grace, the joy and power to testify for Jesus came to Paul only through the absolution, baptism, and the call of Ananias (9:20; 22).

This is the Man who had called Paul to be a servant of the gospel, to work toward the conversion especially of the Gentile world. This was equally sure to Paul—divinely, infallibly sure—and as a result Paul had entrusted himself completely—this lies in the perfect ξ *πεπίστευκα*—to the Lord Jesus as his sovereign Lord. He had put matters of life and death in that master’s hand; he had placed all his abilities into the Savior’s service, without reservation or condition. And the Lord gave him the strength to keep his vow and to complete his assignment victoriously.

To begin with, he sent Paul to school. Perhaps because of his doctrinal struggles with the Damascus rabbis, perhaps through a direct indication from the Lord, Paul interrupted his preaching activity in Damascus and went to Arabia for more than two years, Galatians 1:17ff. We are not told what he did there, but it is unthinkable that he did nothing, or that he sat alone with his thoughts. Undoubtedly this student of Gamaliel, who had learned the Old Testament so incorrectly, studied the Scripture all over again, this time under the illumination of the Spirit. What miracles of revelation his eyes now saw! Full of new insights, Paul returned to Damascus to resume his preaching. When the Jews resolved to kill him, he escaped to Jerusalem, where he again preached Christ. Here the same fate threatened this apostate Jew, especially at the hands of Greek-speaking Jews with whom he had come into almost immediate conflict. After Paul had spent fifteen days with Peter and James, the apostles sent him by way of Caesarea, Syria, and Cilicia to his hometown of Tarsus, where he had a special opportunity not only to study the Scripture, but to become better acquainted with Greek wisdom and literature. Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. In Tarsus Paul received a call from Barnabas, who had introduced him to the elders at Jerusalem, to serve a congregation which had recently been organized among the Gentiles in Antioch. For a whole year Paul worked in Antioch with Barnabas and other prophets and teachers, instructing the congregation. It was from Antioch that the Holy Ghost commissioned Paul and Barnabas as apostles to the Gentiles, after they had arranged for the offering for the Jerusalem brethren.

Now Paul’s loyalty had to be tested; his faith had to prove itself. He was confident of his Lord’s grace and of his call as apostle. Although the thought of his sinfulness and unworthiness never left him (1 Cor 15:9; Eph 3:9; 1 Tm 1:13ff), yet for Paul that was always incentive to deeper humility, more intense joy, more earnest gratitude for the rich grace he had experienced, and more dedicated performance of the ministry entrusted to him, a ministry of which God had considered him worthy. Paul was aware of the fact that he possessed no special skills as an orator, but he knew that God had equipped him with full apostolic knowledge of the way of salvation (2 Cor. 11:5f; 1 Cor 2:10ff; 11:23ff). God had laid a severe physical burden on Paul (Ga 4:13f; 2 Cor 12:7f), and despite Paul’s repeated prayers had seen fit not to remove it. He had, however, reminded Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” For 30 years the word came true which the Lord had spoken to Ananias: “I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” But just for that reason God gave Paul a glimpse into Paradise and let him hear inexpressible things that man is not permitted to tell (2 Cor 12:4). The Lord permitted toil and anguish, trouble and sorrow in abundance to come upon Paul, but through it all He stood by him. He comforted His suffering son as a mother comforts her child. He strengthened his heart and his shoulders so that Paul was able to write to Timothy: “The Lord rescued me from all of them” (2 Tm 3:11). “I was delivered from the lion’s mouth” (2 Tm 4:17). In the strength of his Lord’s faithfulness he had now finished his course, he had kept the faith. In the face of impending death he was confident that the same Lord who is seated at the right hand of the Father as Lord over all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come, the God who had shown great mercy to him and who had remained faithful to Him, would also be able to keep safe—even beyond the grave—what Paul had entrusted to Him, and would place on his head the crown He had promised him (2 Tm 4:8,18).

The source for the power⁴ Paul displayed in all of his apostolic activity, in his prodigious output, in his

⁴ The reference here is *not to the active power of the Word preached by Paul* or to the success of his preaching “to open their eyes and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God...” (Ac 26:18). No preacher has the power to do that, no prophet or apostle, regardless of how pious and faithful he may be. Historically this error has surfaced in the church whenever the life of faith is in a state of decline. It arises invariably among people who profess themselves to be pious and other pastors to be spiritually dead (at least moribund), or downright ungodly. Their argument runs: no spiritual life can come from a spiritually dead pastor, from a spiritual corpse; God has seen to that. But this is an error fraught with far-reaching consequences. It will surely promote disunity in the church. It leads to the unfair judging of the majority of pastors and of the church, and to a separatistic uniting (*Zusammenballung*) of those who consider themselves to be spiritually alive, especially knowledgeable, and faithful. (Enthusiasm always proceeds from spiritual or natural pride.) This error also, to quote Luther, puts the faith of Christians on a monkey’s tail, since nobody can then know for sure whether a preacher is a true believer or a pious hypocrite. No one can then tell where the communion of saints can be found and where Word, sacrament, and Keys are efficacious.

The correct teaching in this matter is this: God does not want any spiritually dead person, whether clergy of laity, to preach His Word. Furthermore, God wants no sin, no error, no unbelief—either in the world or in the church. The church is not to tolerate any manifest unbeliever. God not only wants no spiritual corpses in the church, He wants no lukewarm, inactive, indifferent, sleeping, fearful, imperfect Christians in the church, least of all in the ministry—not a single person who has lost the first love. God’s will is that the church tolerate no person as pastor or teacher who is obviously incompetent, or whose life is an offense, or who holds on to false teaching. God’s will is that every man of God be perfect, thoroughly equipped for every good work, a master Christian, an example to Christians in word and deed, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity. Because this is His will, God has given us His gospel, with grace and His Spirit. Because of our old Adam, He has also given us His law.

But there is one thing God did not do. *He did not arrange it* that His Word would have the power to convert and sanctify and save only when preached by a believing pastor. Instead God arranged it that wherever the gospel is preached it converts and sanctifies and saves people when it is preached properly and purely, with correct application of law and gospel. It may be preached within the framework of history, or using dogmatical categories and conclusions; it may be preached out of love or out of hatred, from pure or impure motives, with or without mental reservations, from a believing or an unbelieving heart. God has placed saving power in His Word alone, Romans 1:16; Jeremiah 23; Hebrews 4; 1 Corinthians 1 and 2; and a hundred other places. The compelling logic and rhetorical artistry of the believing preacher, his thundering and his whispering, his perfectly executed gestures, his classic language and poetic ability cannot contribute in the least toward the spiritual effect of his sermon. A frivolous pastor may love to have his hearers tell him: “Pastor, that was a beautiful and powerful sermon!” But that opinion is a very misleading criterion for measuring its true spiritual effectiveness. This is why Luther warned against this so earnestly. We humans, indeed, can with our own ability win people over to our way of thinking and perhaps even persuade them to do great things, but that is simply human activity. To have an influence on a man spiritually, to crush him, to bring him to faith and a new birth and a holy life is something only the almighty and all-knowing God can do. He is the One who searches the heart, the One who can call what is not into existence. For that reason He has said: “My glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images” (and that includes pastors or professors who consider themselves quite capable, 2 Cor 3).

We preachers and teachers can indeed impair, perhaps even hinder, the God-intended working of the Word through our preaching and offensive conduct and unfaithfulness. But if we wanted to make orthodox preaching effective, we would always be too late, for that power is already present in orthodox preaching. A pastor effectively destroys the power of God’s Word if he refuses to say what the Word says, or if he adds to what it says, twisting it, applying it falsely, or rearranging its message improperly. He destroys the power of the Word if he treats weak Christians as if they were unregenerate, or the unregenerate as if they were Christians; if he strengthens a sinner in his sin or his error; if he withholds gospel comfort from sinners who have been crushed by the law until they have demonstrated true faith, deep-down repentance, and fruits in keeping with repentance; if he fails to direct terrified sinners who ask “What must I do to escape sin’s punishment and to receive God’s grace?” to trust God’s promise, but instead sets all sorts of conditions for them to meet. Such a pastor is preaching law where he should be preaching gospel. That man is falsifying God’s Word worse than a person who denies the real presence of Christ’s body and blood in the sacrament. That man is doing what he can to confuse souls, to lead them either into the pit of despair or into pharisaic pride. That man is destroying the power of God’s Word. If the Word is to bring its divine power to bear on a human soul, one thing is absolutely indispensable: it must be taught purely and applied properly.

This is what we must be most concerned about, for this is the one great difficulty in our pastor and teacher training programs. Training servants of the Word will not happen automatically, and it will not happen without effort, because our heart’s natural inclination is always to choose the wrong path. All our instruction, all our educational work must focus on the student’s heart. We dare attach no more importance to training his brain than is necessary for a complete and correct understanding of the Scripture. Actually, it all boils down to this, that the servant of the Word be found faithful. This faithfulness is not something which we can produce with our educational expertise, or with our own faith. The faithfulness God looks for will result only when we preach the pure, clear Word of God into the hearts of our students. But again this will happen only when the preacher is faithful. If only we would consider this, and act accordingly! *Our personal faith is indispensable for faithfulness in the ministry, but not for making the Word we preach powerful.* Faith is required for the faithful and profitable study of the Scripture, for the man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God. Faith is required if we are daily to arouse the spirit of power, of love, and of self-control which God has

untiring patience under suffering, his indestructible courage in danger, in his single-minded, self-denying surrender to his Lord, in his quiet confidence in Him even when facing death—lay not in the keen intellect and strong will which the Holy Ghost had given Paul and had placed into the service of Christ, but rather in his certainty of the grace, the power, and the faithfulness of his Lord and Master which he had experienced so richly. “I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Php 4:13). “I know what kind of a person I have entrusted myself to.”

What is there that we can learn from this discussion? We are to strive to become confident in our faith, firm and strong in the certainty of faith, so that we can overcome all our doubts about Christ and about His gospel. God wants us to dismiss doubts about whether or not God has called us to our present post, our doubts about God’s promises, His faithfulness, and His power even over death—and to stand firm in faith amid all storms that threaten the world and the church.

We need not concern ourselves here with the unbelieving preacher, the hireling, whose only interest in the ministry is his daily bread, his reputation, his comfort. He has his reward. The preacher who doubts can read his verdict in James 1:6–8. But littleness of faith, with its fearfulness and anxiety, can do great damage in the church of God (Mt 6:30; 8:26). It will cripple all real joy in one’s ministry; it will shy away from every battle, every difficulty; it will make a man unwilling to suffer; and it will tremble in the face of death. Vigorous, sturdy faith is needed to do the work the ministry requires, to endure patiently the sufferings of the ministry, the thanklessness one meets in the church, the enmities of brother and of the world. It takes strong faith to deny oneself, to give oneself over completely to obedience and service of Christ. This takes a faith which “is sure of what it hopes for and is certain of what it does not see” (He 11; Jn 12:29).

We have no business wanting to attain the measure of faith which was granted to Paul; our assignment is not as large as his. Nonetheless he will remain the ideal toward which we will strive. We should indeed learn to say with him: “I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him for that day.”

And we will have to learn to say it in essentially the same way Paul learned to say it—in essentially the same way, that is, not in exactly the same way. We dare not count on seeing a miraculous vision of the Lord as he did. God has not promised this to everyone. What converted Paul was not just the miracle of that heavenly vision. No miracle has *in itself* the power to convert; no sign from heaven compels one to believe; otherwise many Jews would have come to faith when they observed Jesus’ miracles. They demanded signs, saw them, and remained in unbelief. The old Adam can explain away every miracle. Saul could have explained away the miracle by pleading that his overworked nerves were playing tricks on him. By claiming deception Paul could have explained away the heavenly vision, just as contemporary leaders in theology and science discount the possibility of any miracle on that Damascus road. They argue that already before his conversion Paul had a tendency toward the “weakness” about which he later complained in his Galatian epistle, and furthermore that all his epistles show him to be a very nervous man. As a fanatic Jew and legalist Paul was firmly convinced that Jesus of Nazareth was a false prophet. Furthermore he was well acquainted with God’s command in Deuteronomy 13 forbidding his people to believe a false prophet even if he performs miracles. But Paul knew that a higher power was at work here; the vision itself would not have converted him.

given us; if we are to be faithful and diligent in doing the work God has given us to do—in preparing every single sermon, in ministering privately to every soul entrusted to our care. Faith is required if we are not to be ashamed of the gospel, if we are going to stand up for it fearlessly in season and out of season, under all circumstances, even in danger of being deposed or killed. Faith is required if we are not to lose patience when our conscientious labor seems to produce no results. In short, faith is required, confident faith, so that we may be personally faithful, diligent, and strong in carrying out our ministerial office. But in his sovereign majesty God has reserved for himself the work of granting spiritual efficacy to our preaching, teaching, laboring, suffering, and battling, Mark 4:26f. Besides, there is a big difference between outward success and true success; often what appears to be success is actually failure, as e.g. with sensationalist preachers.

Even the measure of our faith and the certainty of our confidence (Rm 12:3ff; 1 Cor 12), as also the measure of our power and love and selfcontrol, our spiritual capability, is God’s to give, and His alone. No other apostle was Paul’s equal. Finally it all comes down to this, that we work diligently with the talent God has entrusted to us (Mt 25; Lk 19); this will determine our judgment and our reward.

It was the stern law-word the Lord Jesus hurled at Saul that broke him down. “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” Under the crushing weight of this word the strong man collapsed. This was not the first time Jesus had confronted this proud Pharisee. Saul was well acquainted with “this way” and had persecuted it with all his might. The Word preached by the apostles had testified to Saul that it was the truth of God and the power of God. But Saul had up to now managed to suppress the divine witness—with a bad conscience. There was a goad in his conscience, put there by God, and he had struggled against it down to this very moment. The Lord therefore announced to him: “Saul, that’s going to be hard for you;” in other words: “It’s going to be impossible for you; it will destroy you.” This word, which drove the familiar curse of the law into his already wounded conscience, broke down the self-righteous Pharisee. And the gospel brought him to faith. If we take the account in Acts 9 to be historically more accurate, and the account in Acts 26 as a summary (*Querschnitt*), the subsequent details seem singularly symbolic. The preaching of the law with its curse does not execute the curse but is God’s demand and threat, which are to crush the sinner so that grace can do its saving work. Saul realizes that God has not immediately consigned him to the flames of hell; his life has been spared—that was grace! The Lord tells Saul to get up out of the dust into which the heavenly vision had cast him—that was grace again! The Lord promises to explain fully what His plans were for Saul—still more grace! A ray of hope, trust in God’s grace began to steal into his heart, although all around him it was still black as night. God’s revelation that a man named Ananias would restore his sight strengthened his faith. But it was only when Ananias proclaimed the Word to him and baptized him that Paul came to a clear and precise understanding of his call and to the glad certainty of the forgiveness of his sin. *Paul was converted through the preaching of law and gospel.* The vision from heaven accentuated the working of the Word, especially the message of the law, but was not responsible for it. Paul perceived the heavenly vision with his physical senses, as some of his companions did, but they were not converted by it. Paul saw the Lord not physically but spiritually in that vision, although to a casual observer Paul appeared to be no more than a man lying on the ground blinded. It was only through the Holy Ghost that he understood the words of Jesus; his companions heard only sounds that didn’t make sense. The Holy Ghost used the Word to bring Paul to faith.

That is essentially the way God has chosen to bring every sinner on this earth to conversion. “They have Moses and the prophets; let them listen to them...If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead,” Luke 16. “We have a more sure Word of prophecy” (more sure than any vision). That is the only light which in this dark world can bring the light of day into hearts that heed its call. God has not left himself without witness in this lost, sinful world. And why? Only to rescue it from the curse and the death it has called down upon itself. God has revealed himself in Jesus of Nazareth, the true Word made flesh, and in no one and in nothing else in heaven or on earth. He himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, 1 Peter 2:24. Through Him and only through Him God has spoken to us ever since the world began. And down to the end of the world God will speak to us only through Him. Of Him God has said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well-pleased. Listen to Him!” “And whoever will not listen to my words which He shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him” (Mt 17; Dt 18). Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and obey it; but he who despises the Word destroys himself.

God has put his own converting power into this Word, whether it is preached by Him personally or by human beings. “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you; he who listens to you listens to me, and he who listens to me listens to Him who sent me.” The gospel of our salvation is the Word of almighty God; this is what makes it powerful to save.

This Word has the power to convert a sinner because it is God’s law and His gospel, because it announces the glory of His justice and the glow of His grace. Like a judge, that Word first of all confronts us with the evidence—the thoughts and attitudes of our heart, Hebrews 4:12. It convicts us of our sinfulness and forces us to hear its verdict of eternal damnation. No one can come to faith in God’s mercy who has not, to quote Luther, “tasted terror and trembling” and learned to despair of making himself right before God. It is only the broken heart that God can and will comfort, heal, assure of His grace. Wherever God finds such a conscience, He promises to comfort as a mother comforts her child, Isaiah 66:13. This is the psychological law

of conversion and of sanctification. God will not make any adjustment here for any sinner. Only in this way can anyone be sure of God's mercy.

The more certain and the more joyful we are in our faith, the holier our Christian life will be, the more zealous we will be in our ministry, the more courageous in danger, the more patient in suffering, the more fervent our love for fellow Christians, the less afraid we will be of death. The more we experience the amazing riches of our good and faithful God, the more faithful we will be as Christians and as servants of the Word.

After his conversion Paul went into seclusion, to Arabia and then to Tarsus, to study the Scripture. What miracles of divine prophecy penned by human writers met his eyes! He saw Jesus, Jesus, Jesus only—Jesus of Nazareth, who had revealed himself to him personally. From God's Word Paul gathered treasures of understanding—a rich measure of comfort, of grace, of certainty, of spirit, of courage and power and surrender to that Person who had not rejected the chief of sinners, this archenemy, this blasphemer. "I thank our Lord that He considered me faithful, appointing me to His service" (1 Tm 1:12) to make known to Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ. It was in this way that Paul became strong in faith. In his work of ministry he drew closer to Him who had called him as servant, and each new day brought a new experience of the faithfulness and might of the Caller. As Paul's earthly course drew to its close, his word to Timothy "I know whom I have believed" was only putting into words what he had experienced a thousand times over.

This is how we, too, can receive a sturdy and confident faith, which will make us competent servants of Christ. It is not enough for us to consider the Bible God's Word and the gospel a true teaching, which we as honest men can preach with a good conscience. If our study of the Word has not brought us to a personal fellowship with Jesus Christ, our ministry will remain without purpose and power. We will have to learn to say with Paul: "I know *whom* I have believed." Jesus must reveal himself to us personally; we must learn to know Jesus intimately. Jesus must become our personal Friend, who accompanies us every day, who illumines our mind, speaks comfort to our heart, and stiffens our resolve. This is how He gives himself to us. "Surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age." That promise is as true for us as it was for Paul. But let us not wait for a special miraculous vision of Jesus; He has not promised us that. He has put himself into His Word; here and here alone we can find Him. Here He has recorded His name; here He comes to us to take up His dwelling in us; here He wants to be found; here He fills us with grace and comfort, with spirit and power.

A preacher or teacher or professor may be able to speak and teach fluently and skilfully, but if he studies the Word infrequently or not at all, he is a sorry specimen. On the other hand, what an able servant of the Word that man is who lives constantly in that Word, cultivating his friendship with Christ Jesus! He is like a tree planted by the rivers of water, which yields fruit in season; its leaf never withers, and whatever he does prospers.