

HELP MY UNBELIEF: WHERE TO TURN
WHEN THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE DOES NOT MATCH THE DIVINE TRUTH

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ABSTRACT

At the heart of biblical and Lutheran doctrine, we see justification by faith. Through the work of his son, God has taken away the sins of the world (John 1:29 NIV). Through faith, the benefits of that work are received (John 3:16). But what happens when a Christian is tempted to think that those benefits are not for them? The purpose of this study is to answer the following question: What does a Christian need when faced with the temptation to not appropriate the promises of the gospel? The opening portion of the study will identify the existence of a particular affliction—often called *Anfechtung*—where one is led by Satan to doubt the sincerity of God’s promise of forgiveness. This section will lean heavily on the writings by and about Martin Luther, along with a variety of practical and pastoral sources. The second portion of the study will turn to those very promises of God, examining the scriptural truths that provide Christians with a deeper understanding of the objective truths which can combat this particular affliction. This section will primarily focus on the work of Lutheran dogmaticians, including Adolf Hoenecke, Johann Gerhard, and Francis Pieper. The third portion of the study will identify and recommend practices that can help Christians face this particular affliction. This section will make use of many of the same practical and pastoral writings as the first section.

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INTRODUCTION

“I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief” (Mark 9:24 NIV). These are the words of a man who had run out of options. If one was looking to replicate the terse nature of this man’s statement in Greek, it might be better to render his words in the following way: “I believe! Help my unbelief!” The man claims two seemingly exclusive realities: he has both belief and unbelief. Such a statement seems like an utter paradox, but when the rest of the account is examined—and when the rest of Scripture is examined—there is no reason to reject this man’s self-assessment.

In a way, this thesis is written for people who can see themselves standing in this man’s sandals. It addresses the seemingly paradoxical: the Christian who is tempted to not appropriate the promises of the gospel. Or to use the words of Mark 9, this thesis addresses the one who believes and struggles against unbelief.

While Mark 9 will not be the primary focus of this paper, the account will serve as its framework. The paper will explore the need, the source, and the application of the kind of help that can be given to those plagued by the temptation to doubt the promises of the gospel. In doing so, the paper will be divided into three parts. The first portion will demonstrate and define what it means to need this sort of help. The second portion will explore the objective truths of Scripture and how they provide this help. And finally, the third portion will propose a variety of methods for personalizing and applying this help. Overall, this paper suggests that the Christian who struggles to appropriate the promises of the gospel can be helped by the frequent and caring application of the means of grace, that is, the gospel in Word and sacrament.

PART I: “DO CHRISTIANS ACTUALLY NEED THIS KIND OF HELP?”

The man was facing the kind of situation that keeps young parents up at night; his son was suffering greatly under the possession of an evil spirit (Mark 9:17ff). At his wit's end, the man had gathered with a large crowd, hoping to get a glimpse of a notable teacher named Jesus, or at least one of his followers. “Maybe they can help,” he must have thought. However, before he even made it to Jesus, the man’s hope for his son suffered a setback; the disciples of Jesus could not drive out the evil spirit. But having made it this far, the man would not stop by only asking the disciples. He would ask the teacher himself, Jesus, to help. Following a dramatic back and forth which featured Jesus rebuking an “unbelieving generation” (Mark 9:19) and the boy shaking violently (Mark 9:20), the man made this heartfelt confession and stunning admission: “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24)

The quote from Mark 9:24 is a noteworthy one. It’s noteworthy because the man’s words are unique. There is no place in Scripture where a person so clearly identifies the presence of both belief and unbelief in their heart. And yet, there is so much behind his words that is *not* unique—not for the people of Scripture nor the people of the 21st century.

Whether it’s the rich young ruler in Luke 18, or the man born blind in John 9, or Job in just about the entire book which bears his name, the Bible is filled with people whose lives reveal an underlying false assumption—an assumption not taught in Scripture. If you have a good life, it’s because you have pleased God. But if you suffer or deal with hardship, it’s because you (or someone close to you) must have sinned and angered God. This false assumption leaves no room for the possibility that divine truth and personal experience could differ.

With that in mind, you can imagine how this man in Mark 9:24 could have struggled under the weight of that false assumption. His life was filled with the sort of hardships that could have intuitively led him to conclude that God was simply not on his side. This worldview is often referred to as a theology of glory. Dr. Richard Marris, a counselor-turned-seminary-professor at Concordia-St. Louis, defines such theology in this way: “[Martin Luther] asserts that we humans, including Christians, are constantly tempted to a theology of glory, which means to trust in the appearances of good in ourselves and the world. This leads us to see suffering as reprimand from God, as a removal of his blessings and love.”¹ This definition is an important one, as Christians in America remain susceptible to that sort of false teaching.² In a March 2020 survey called *The State of Theology*, only 49% of Americans who attended church at least once a month disagreed with the following statement: “God will always reward true faith with material blessings.”³ The implication is that people—even Christians—struggle against temptations to pursue and hold to a theology of glory.

1. Rick W. Marris, *Making Christian Counseling More Christ Centered*, (Bloomington: WestBow, 2019), 44.

2. Marris, *Making Christian Counseling More Christ Centered*, 52–53.

3. Ligonier Ministries, “The State of Theology,” *The State of Theology*, March 2020, <https://thestateoftheology.com>.

The Theology of Glory

An Inconsistent Theology of Glory

The Christian as a paradox was central to Martin Luther's theology. Luther called Christians *simul justus et peccator*, meaning they are both "righteous and a sinner at the same time."⁴ "The old creature [that is, the Old Adam] clings to them," and leaves them in constant struggle.⁵ Therefore, it would make all the more sense that Christians would struggle not only with sinful actions that don't line up with the New Man, but that Christians would also struggle with sinful theology that doesn't line up with the New Man. Even those who disagree with the statement posed by the survey mentioned above could struggle with that inconsistency. While they reject the theology of glory, they are tempted to live according to it. In moments of weakness—despite their confession that states otherwise—they might look to their circumstances, their experiences, or their emotions for evidence of God's acceptance or rejection—his blessing or curse. This inconsistency can seem harmless when all is going well. However, as Luther stated in his theses at Heidelberg, "A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil."⁶ So, when evil or hardships enter a Christian's life, then the theology of glory does its most significant damage.

4. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), 26:232. Hereafter AE.

5. FC SD VI:18 in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

6. AE 31:40.

The Theology of Glory as a Threat to View of Self and God

The theology of glory is an admittedly broad concept. It can touch a wide variety of aspects of a person's worldview, whether it be their perspective on possessions, physical health, career aspirations, and more. However, the greater danger of such a theology is not how it changes one's view of these things, but how it changes one's view of God, self, and how they relate to one another. When it comes to this theology of glory, this paper will not focus directly on the external scenarios of a theology of glory, such as possessions, physical health, and the like, but instead on the internal struggle that results when the theology of glory leads to a false view of both God and the self.

***Anfechtung*: The Result of Internalizing the Flaw of a Theology of Glory**

Defining *Anfechtung* in the Broad and Narrow Senses

Martin Luther had a pair of theological terms that he found particularly impactful in describing this internal struggle: the German word, *Anfechtung*, and its Latin counterpart, *Tentatio*.⁷ Luther would use Latin in his threefold method for studying theology: *Oratio* (prayer in response to reading God's Word), *Meditatio* (meditation on God's Word), and *Tentatio*.⁸ In his article, *Ein Kleines Theologisches Wörterbuch*, Professor Daniel Deutschlander provides a colorful and thorough definition of *Anfechtung*.

Objectively [*Anfechtung*] refers to tests which God sends to strengthen our faith, or to the temptations which come from Satan for the destruction of faith. Subjectively it is "Angst" in a profoundly religious sense; Luther uses it often this way; it is the torment of a guilty conscience which drives the soul to despair of God's grace and to imagine its own guilt

7. David P. Scaer, "The Concept of *Anfechtung* in Luther's Thought," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 47.1 (1983): 15.

8. AE 34:285.

as greater than God's desire to forgive. *Anfechtung* smells the smoke of hell's fire and feels its flame in the face of temptations from the devil which the soul has been unable to overcome. *Anfechtung* is the cry of Peter, "Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man!" and the anguish of Paul, "O wretched man that I am!" It is the dread of the New Man locked in mortal combat with the Old Man with the soul in dread that the Old Man has all but won. It is the dread of the one who wakes up in the middle of the night and hears the voice of accusing conscience say, "And you too, miserable man, must die!"⁹

Anfechtung and *Tentatio* have been translated as temptation, affliction, trial, tribulation, among many similar words.¹⁰ For that reason, these terms can be spoken of in both a broad *and* a narrow sense. In the broad sense, *Anfechtungen* are those things that God uses to refine faith.¹¹ It is "temptation in the sense of trial or tribulation."¹² In the broad sense, they can refer to a wide range of difficulties in a believer's life. Take David, for example. David faced several notable temptations recorded in Scripture, such as the temptation to kill King Saul (1 Sam 24:9) or the temptation to kill Uriah and take Bathsheba as his wife (2 Sam 11). David undoubtedly faced many temptations that are not recorded in the Bible. As temptations to outward sin, any of these would rightly bear the name *Anfechtung* in the broad sense of the term. However, David not only faced temptation. He also faced trials—challenges that are much more the product of a sinful world than the specific draw of David's sinful nature. Luther identified David's psalms regarding these trials to be real *Anfechtung*.¹³ Psalm 35 is typical of that struggle, as David prayed for the Lord to protect him in the trials of life. He prays for the Lord to "fight against those who fight

9. Daniel M. Deutschlander, "Ein Kleines Theologisches Wörterbuch" (WLS Essay File, 1994), 11.

10. Scaer, "The Concept of *Anfechtung* in Luther's Thought," 15.

11. While no two words are perfect synonyms, *Anfechtung* and *Tentatio* are similar enough to function interchangeably in most cases. For this paper, *Anfechtung* will be the primary term to refer to their shared concept. *Tentatio* will be used only when it would be inappropriate to use *Anfechtung* in the immediate context. Example: in Luther's Latin list of theological disciplines, *Oratio*, *Mediatio*, and *Tentatio*.

12. Steven A. Hein, "Tentatio," *Logia* 10.2 (2001): 33.

13. AE 34:287

against [him],” (Ps 35:1) and to “rescue [him] from their ravages,” (Ps 35:17) among other prayers for deliverance. Persecution—no matter from whom or where it comes—this, too, is *Anfechtung* in the broad sense.

Anfechtung in the narrow sense, however, is different. Professor John Kleinig defines Luther’s *Anfechtung* in the narrow or proper sense: “in this case, [Luther] does not refer to the enticement by the devil to sin, nor even to his condemnation of the sinner. The use of the German word ‘Anfechtung’ indicates that it involves some kind of attack upon the person.”¹⁴ Professor Kleinig’s point is that Luther uses the word primarily in the narrow sense—not as a reference to *any* temptation, but to a particular type of affliction. Within this narrow sense, Allister McGrath makes a further “inseparable” distinction: there is both “the *objective* assault of spiritual forces upon the believer, and the *subjective* anxiety and doubt which arise within him as a consequence of these assaults.”¹⁵

Returning to the life of David, the best illustration of this narrow sense of *Anfechtung* would be in connection with the words of Ps 22, where he famously prays, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps 22:1) These words of David are often viewed with focus on the fact that Jesus repeated them on the cross—and rightly so—but before the cross, they also applied to David. If one reads through Ps 22, David’s pain is plain to see. The feeling of being forsaken by God was genuine to him. Yet Scripture makes it clear that while David was afflicted, he was *not* forsaken. God promises his believers that “he will never leave [them] nor forsake [them]” (Josh 1:5; Heb 13:5) and the words “my God” spoken in prayer by King David are the

14. John W Kleinig, “Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio: What Makes a Theologian?” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 66.3 (2002): 264.

15. Alister E. McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther’s Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford; New York, NY: B. Blackwell, 1985), 170.

words of a believer.¹⁶ For this reason, the experience described by David in Ps 22 is the type of experience that can accompany *Anfechtung* in the narrow sense. It is an affliction that comes from Satan and results in spiritual anguish. Even though, in David's case, it was not "the torment of a guilty conscience," his experience matches what is described in Deutschlander's depiction of *Anfechtung*.¹⁷ For this reason, David is a particularly helpful example for demonstrating that this experience is not only practical, but scriptural.

When it comes to a more modern description of *Anfechtung*, Martin Luther himself serves as an archetype. While his experience lacks the benefit of being recorded via inspiration like David, the words he used were often pointedly focused on *Anfechtung*. It was a subject which was "quite familiar to him."¹⁸ Luther's life was filled with oppression at the hands of all sorts of enemies of the gospel. For that reason, his writing and life are useful to provide color to the discussion of *Anfechtung* in the life of the modern Christian.

The narrow definition of *Anfechtung* calls to mind the theology of glory. "*Anfechtungen* deal ... with the personal attitude of the Christian, who reflects upon the divine revelation and his own experiences in life, and is tempted to resolve the conflict on the basis of his experience."¹⁹ It is to see a lack of glory in one's experience and be tempted to see it as a sign of God's disfavor. It is the experience of David and Luther. It is, to differing extents, "the common lot of all believers."²⁰ Throughout this paper, unless otherwise stated, *Anfechtung* will be used in

16. John F. Brug, *A Commentary on Psalms* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2005), 275.

17. Deutschlander, "Ein Kleines Theologisches Wörterbuch," 11.

18. AE 42:179.

19. Scaer, "The Concept of *Anfechtung* in Luther's Thought," 27.

20. Hein, "Tentatio," 34.

the narrow sense and as a theological shorthand for the temptation to not appropriate God's gospel promises.

The Source of *Anfechtung*

“Every experience that leads a person to unbelief, denial, and doubt comes from Satan and not from God.”²¹ Because *Anfechtung* in the broad sense is synonymous with temptation, it would be blasphemous to label God as the source of it. “When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.” (Jas 1:13) This same reasoning applies to *Anfechtung* in the narrow sense. Because *Anfechtung* can lead a person to doubt God's promises, it must *not* originate in God. John Meyer, in his *Studies in the Augsburg Confession*, comments on the 19th article, “The devil invented sin. The lie is *his own*. He tempted man and still continues to tempt men. ... The will of the devil is the primary cause of sin.”²² Because *Anfechtung* can bring about doubt and sin, it is right to speak of Satan as the primary cause and source of *Anfechtung*. While the devil has “willing allies” in the world and the sinful flesh, they serve as secondary sources of sin in general and *Anfechtung* in particular.²³

Satan's approach in producing *Anfechtung* is revealed in the way that Scripture speaks about him. He is given two primary names: *the devil* and *Satan*. Devil, or διάβολος is used to

21. Scaer, “The Concept of *Anfechtung* in Luther's Thought,” 16.

22. John P. Meyer, *Studies in the Augsburg Confession* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1995), 252.

23. Lyle W. Lange, *God so Loved the World: A Study of Christian Doctrine* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2005), 184–186.

refer to a slanderer.²⁴ Satan, or שָׂטָן, refers to an adversary.²⁵ These names give a proper picture of Satan. He is the adversary of God; where God desires what is good, Satan desires only evil. He is the one who slanders God's people; he "accuses [Christians] before our God, day and night." (Rev 12:10) These roles as adversary and accuser—along with his status as the source of temptation—show how Satan sets the stage for *Anfechtung*.

Satan is mighty and does not lack options in doing his work. Scripture credits him both with authority in this world (John 12:31; Eph 2:2) and with wisdom to wield it (Gen 3:1). While Satan is not omnipresent, there are a great number of fallen angels.²⁶ Satan makes thorough use of his fellow fallen angels to aid in his assault on the world. "Satan has at his disposal everything within creation."²⁷ Satan makes great use of his ability to influence the sinful flesh—both in afflicting the one suffering *Anfechtung* and in tempting others to become a source of *Anfechtung*. Jesus speaks of the devil's primary weapon for this influence in John 8:44: "He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies." Satan's primary weapon is the lie, which he uses to convince the Christian that God is not loving. Such was his method in the Garden of Eden. There he convinced Eve that God's benevolent command to not eat of the tree was a conniving attempt to keep knowledge all to himself (Gen 3). In the words of Professor Deutschlander, Satan used the lie to "minimize sin" and to convince people that sin is "trivial

24. W. Arndt, F. W. Danker, and W. Bauer, *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 266.

25. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 966.1.

26. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, trans. Walter Albrecht, 4 vols. (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1950–1953), 1:503–504.

27. Scaer, "The Concept of *Anfechtung* in Luther's Thought," 20.

and nothing to be concerned about.”²⁸ This remains Satan’s primary tactic in leading human beings into sin.

Yet Satan does not leave the lies behind when dealing with a penitent Christian. Professor John Schuetze, in *Doctor of Souls*, notes how Satan switches from lying to tempt and moves to lying to accuse:

Once the person has repented of his or her sin, Satan changes his strategy. He moves from his tempter role to accuser role. If he can’t tempt a person to sin, he will try to make him or her feel guilty of his or her sin, long after the person has heard the comforting gospel message of forgiveness...Satan will tell the person, “Yes, you are forgiven – except for this sin.”²⁹

Satan does not give up when a Christian has been absolved of their sin. Where he had previously sought to lie and minimize sin, he now lies and “maximizes guilt.”³⁰ When a person has turned from their sin, Satan no longer desires bold defiance before God’s commands, but instead, he desires timid distraction from God’s grace. He wants the guilt to remain.

The Purpose of *Anfechtung*

Satan certainly makes frequent use of guilt in his efforts to make *Anfechtung* drive a Christian to not appropriate the gospel promises of God. This is supported by the frequency with which Christian authors and counselors address the issue. In his book on pastoral theology, *The Counseling Shepherd*, Professor Armin Schuetze makes a note of how common it is for

28. Daniel M. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds: The Splendor of Christian Doctrine* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2015), 211.

29. John D. Schuetze, *Doctor of Souls: The Art of Pastoral Theology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2017), 290.

30. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds*, 211.

Christians to struggle with feelings of guilt.³¹ Dr. Richard Marrs, speaks about how Christians can get trapped in an endless cycle of guilt.³² Famous Christian theologians, such as C.S. Lewis and Soren Kierkegaard, have written much about the topic and its theological cousin, despair. The regularity of the struggle is reason enough for both pastors, in particular, and Christians, in general, to be aware of the struggle that guilt can bring to a Christian's soul.

Satan often uses other things to compound the guilt with which a Christian struggles. "Like God, Satan is invisible, but works through visible means. ... In the *Anfechtungen* the contradictions become visible. Through the world, the flesh, and whatever afflicts the Christian, Satan becomes 'incarnate' and wreaks havoc."³³ The false theology of glory, then, plays right into Satan's hands. Satan can use false expectations to convince Christians that God has turned against them. Luther illustrated the devil's line of faulty logic when earthly glory and comfort is lacking: "You are poor, cast off, and thoroughly afflicted. God is hard and unmerciful, He has forgotten you, He is your enemy and adversary."³⁴

With that in mind, there is an important difference between Satan's goal in *Anfechtung* and God's goal. Satan and his "organized kingdom" of demons have a singular will: "to slander God's glory and to hinder his good will."³⁵ Because God's will is the salvation of humans (1 Tim 2:3-4), Satan's goal is to use everything at his disposal to prevent their salvation. Satan "prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." (1 Pet 5:7) *Anfechtung*, then, is a tool

31. Armin W. Schuetze and Frederick A. Matzke, *The Counseling Shepherd* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1988), 194.

32. Marrs, *Making Christian Counseling More Christ Centered*, 137.

33. Scaer, "The Concept of *Anfechtung* in Luther's Thought," 17.

34. AE 16: 214.

35. Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, trans. James Langebartels et al., 4 vols. (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1999-2009), 2:290.

that Satan uses to “lead us away from where our confidence lies (Christ and His gifts) and turn us toward ourselves or something or someone else for hope.”³⁶ At the end of all his lies, tempting, and accusing, Satan wishes to drive the Christian to despair and drive trust in God’s gospel promise of forgiveness right out of the Christian’s heart.

On the other hand, God’s purpose in *Anfechtung* is quite different. While it would be wrong to charge God with responsibility for the evils of *Anfechtung*, it would also be wrong to say that they happen outside of God’s control. In fact, not only would it be wrong, but it would strip away a great deal of comfort. Adolf Hoenecke explains how evil—which would include *Anfechtung*—is also used for his purpose: “if God permits evil action...then he does not desire the evil action as such but as a link in the chain of his providence, which ... above all, aims at the good and his eternal glory.”³⁷ Everything that happens in this world, evil included, happens with nothing but God’s good purposes in mind (cf. Rom 8:28ff). In general, that good purpose is the salvation of humankind (1 Tim 2:3-4). In particular, that good purpose is the salvation of the individual. Such is God’s purpose in *Anfechtung* as well. “[*Anfechtung*] is the touchstone which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God’s Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdom.”³⁸ Understanding the difference in how God and Satan use *Anfechtung* is vital for providing comfort amid the Christian’s struggle. Explaining this difference, especially concerning *Anfechtung* regarding God’s law, will be revisited as a method to comfort the struggling Christian.

36. Todd A. Peperkorn and LCMS World Relief and Human Care, *I Trust When Dark My Road: A Lutheran View of Depression* (St. Louis: LCMS World Relief and Human Care, 2009), 43.

37. Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, 2:144.

38. AE 34:287.

PART II: “WHAT CAN HELP?”

How many remedies had he tried before this? The man in Mark 9, whose belief struggled against unbelief, was a father. A father who had seen his son “from childhood” nearly burned alive and almost drowned to death (Mark 9:21–22). All along, the man could do nothing to help him. His heart broke for his son. For that reason, he had, without a doubt, sought a variety of cures. Had he reached out to the religious leaders of the area? Had he sought doctors? How his hopes must have risen and fallen, over and over, as each new attempt to relieve his son’s suffering failed! Finally, another seemingly improbable solution came along: Jesus and his disciples. Jesus had a proven track-record of providing healing and miracles. His disciples did, too (Mark 6:7–13). Would they succeed where so many others had failed? As the man spoke with Jesus, his nagging uncertainty pushed against his faith: “if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us” (Mark 9:22). Jesus rebuked the man’s conditional response: “if you can? ... Everything is possible for one who believes” (Mark 9:23). Would this be another instance where the man’s request and his son’s relief remained out of reach?

This account in Mark 9 had a happy ending. Jesus *was* able to provide the exact help that the situation demanded. The afflicted boy was in desperate need of someone who could rid him of that evil spirit. The afflicted man was in desperate need of someone who could rid him of his doubts. Jesus filled both needs with one powerful statement. He commanded the evil spirit to leave the boy, and it did (Mark 9:25–26). In doing so, the boy was freed from the physical torment. At the same time, the man, who struggled with doubts about whether Jesus *could* heal

his son, was given undeniable proof; Jesus *did* heal his son. Jesus gave both the man and his son *precisely* what they needed.

When he met that need, Jesus illustrated a truth that is not unique to spiritual problems—it finds its parallel in medical practice. When he has diagnosed a disorder, the work of the doctor is not finished. As C.F.W. Walther puts it, in his analogy between the Pastor and Doctor: “A physician may know all sorts of healing, but by ignorantly mixing them in the wrong way he may neutralize their virtue and, instead of curing the physical ailment of his patient, hasten on his death.”³⁹ A doctor must know both medical science and how to apply it at that moment. Such is the case for the Christian who struggles to appropriate God’s gospel promises. God’s Word has many different truths to apply to those who struggle through *Anfechtung*. But knowing the most appropriate truths—and knowing them well—is key, too. It is not enough for the Christian to hear sound Christian doctrine in *Anfechtung*. They must hear the *right* doctrines.

This author asserts that three scriptural doctrines are central in the struggle with *Anfechtung*: the nature of justification, of faith, and of the Christian. When a Christian knows these doctrines and applies them, it disarms Satan in *Anfechtung*. Out of the three doctrines, two of them—justification and faith—should be considered primary and one—the Christian—should be considered secondary. The reason for the Christian’s nature as secondary will be given attention under the appropriate section.

39. C.F.W Walther, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1986), 343.

The Nature of Justification

Justification is Universal and Objective

The first important doctrine that comforts a Christian through *Anfechtung* is the scriptural truth regarding justification. Johann Gerhard provides a thorough definition as follows:

Justification is the act of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit by which he forgives the sins of the sinner who truly believes in Christ, apart from any works or merits of his own, out of pure grace and mercy for the sake of the obedience and satisfaction of Christ the Mediator and Redeemer; imputes righteousness to him; receives him to eternal life—and all this for the glory of His name and the salvation of man.⁴⁰

Justification refers to the declaration pronounced by God that sins are forgiven. This declaration is based on the work of Christ, with the result being the glory of God and the salvation of people. However, this justification also rightly has a dual nature to it. Adolf Hoenecke notes that “justification is an action of God that occurs in time and especially to each sinner”, while also noting another justification, “which happened to all people in time, specifically in Christ’s suffering and resurrection...”⁴¹ The justification that Hoenecke notes first is often called *subjective* justification. It will be examined later in connection with the nature of faith. In this section, the focus will be placed on that justification which Hoenecke notes second—often called *objective* or *universal* justification. The two terms are often treated as interchangeable, despite different emphases.⁴² The term *objective* stands in contrast to the subjective justification which

40. Johann Gerhard, tr. Richard J Dinda, and Benjamin T. G Mayes, *Theological Commonplaces: On Justification Through Faith* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), 461.

41. Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, 4:337–38.

42. Lange, *God so Loved the World*, 343.

happens through faith, while the term *universal* pronounces the scope. For that reason, Professor Lyle Lange denotes the importance of distinguishing between the two adjectives.⁴³

Justification is *objective*, as opposed to subjective. Dr. John Brug, in his article *Christ is the Savior of the All People*, defines objective justification as a “declaration [that] happened before I ever heard about it or believed it. It happened in God’s courtroom when Jesus finished his work. It happened while I was ‘still God’s enemy.’”⁴⁴ This truth indicates the complete and utter dependency of justification on the work of Christ. It happened, whether a person knows it or not, entirely apart from their efforts or lack thereof. This means that the cause of justification must be outside of human beings. Johann Gerhard credits God’s grace as the “principal efficient cause” and Christ’s merit—his innocent death and perfect life on humanity’s behalf—as the “meritorious cause.”⁴⁵ This is further indicated by the way that Scripture speaks of justification: justification is a gift (Rom 3:24), apart from works (Rom 3:28), and a finished act (John 19:30). Closely connected to Brug’s definition is the *forensic* nature of justification. Dr. Edward Koehler begins his definition of justification with those very words: “justification is that forensic act of God.”⁴⁶ When speaking about justification, Hoenecke points out that the Greek and Hebrew behind the concept “does not mean *make righteous* but *declare righteous*.”⁴⁷ Therefore, justification is *not* an inward change in the essence or nature of a human being, but it is instead a foreign declaration of a change in how God views them.

43. Lange, *God so Loved the World*, 343.

44. John F. Brug, “Christ is the Savior of All People” (WLS Essay File, 2014), 3.

45. Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces: On Justification Through Faith*, 31, 52.

46. Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine: A Popular Presentation of the Teachings of the Bible*, 2nd rev. ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1952), 149.

47. Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, 3:318.

Justification is also *universal*, as opposed to limited. This objective declaration was made with not only some but *all* people in mind. This can be demonstrated by looking at Gerhard's principal and meritorious causes in light of Scripture. First, the grace of God can rightly be said to extend to all people. God not only loves the whole world (John 3:16), but he also wants "all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). God's grace is not in any way limited. It "extends to all men."⁴⁸ Christ's merits, too, are not limited. He is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29) and it was in him that "God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19). The merits of Christ are not in any sense too little. As Luther said: "We Christians should know that if God is not in the scale to give it weight, we, on our side, sink to the ground. I mean it this way: if it cannot be said that God died for us, but only a man, we are lost; but if God's death and a dead God lie in the balance, his side goes down and ours goes up like a light and empty scale."⁴⁹ Because Christ *is* God, the scales are not left wanting. Christ's merit is enough to cover the debt of every last sinner.

The Effect of the Nature of Justification

Francis Pieper states that "all soteriological teaching must be based upon the historical, accomplished fact of the objective reconciliation, or justification of all sinful mankind..."⁵⁰ With that in mind, this article is the chief source of comfort for the Christian who is wrestling with his salvation amid *Anfechtung*. The primary effect of this teaching, then, is certainty. Johann Gerhard notes that "free justification through and because of Christ must be assigned to the

48. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 80.

49. AE 41:103. Quoted in FC SD VIII:44.

50. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:398.

following...to the sure comfort of the conscience, because nothing at all can encourage and comfort the soul weighed down by the burden of sin and terrified by the sense of God's wrath except the free promise of the Gospel about the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake..."⁵¹

Justification is not something that is merited by works (Rom 3:28), nor does it depend on feelings or experiences in the human heart (1 Cor 4:3–4). It is achieved completely outside of the Christian, firmly tied up in God's grace and Christ's merits.

Because justification is *objective*, the Christian can be certain that when Jesus said, "it is finished" (John 19:30), he meant it. The work necessary for justification had been completed and it was God's work alone— "without man's help or merit or will or request or works."⁵² Because justification is *universal*, the Christian can be certain that God's love does not exclude him (John 3:16). His merit was enough to take away the sins of the world (John 1:29), so it was also enough to take away *this* sin and *that* sin. None are outside the scope of God's grace or Christ's merit. As Professor Lyle Lange said, "Since Jesus died for all, I know he died for me."⁵³ Finally, because justification is *forensic*, the Christian can have certainty despite the weakness of the sinful flesh. The Christian's status as one who has been justified is not caused nor based on a change within him, but rather based on God's unchanging declaration of "not guilty." This final truth will be further examined when discussing the nature of the Christian concerning the Old Adam. The nature of justification leaves the Christian with a security that is found outside of self. The Christian can cling to this doctrine when Satan assaults him with *Anfechtung*.

51. Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces: On Justification Through Faith*, 460.

52. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds*, 351.

53. Lange, *God so Loved the World*, 347.

The Nature of Faith

Faith is Defined by its Cause and Object

The second important subject for a Christian to consider in *Anfechtung* is that of the nature of faith. Faith is often called the ὄργανον ληπτικόν, or the receiving organ. This term raises the question: what, then, is it that faith receives? Johann Gerhard answers that question by repeating a frequent definition of faith as “the beggar’s hand which receives the gifts offered in the gospel.”⁵⁴ Faith is at the center of *subjective* justification—the Christian’s appropriation of the benefits of God declaring him not guilty. However, this depiction of faith would be shallow if there was no defined *cause* of faith and no defined *object* of faith. How could one be certain that their faith truly apprehends what the gospel offers? Therefore, the cause and object of faith must be explored. The object will be addressed first, as this is at the heart of faith.

It is worth noting that Scripture speaks of faith in multiple ways concerning its object. The term “faith” can be used to denote a faith in miracles (Matt 17:20), faith in the truth of a verifiable statement (1 Cor 11:18), or faith in the promise of salvation (Acts 16:31). For this reason, the object of faith is essential to whether faith is truly *saving* faith or not, and whether or not it is beneficial. Koehler illustrates the concept in this way: “to say that any kind of faith will help and save is as foolish as to say that anything a person eats will nourish him.”⁵⁵ Faith requires the proper object as much as proper nutrition requires that one eats good and healthy food rather than junk food or, worse, poison. The proper object of saving faith is none other than

54. Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces: On Justification Through Faith*, 111.

55. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 141.

“the gospel promises about Christ the mediator.”⁵⁶ That is, the promise regarding freely given forgiveness, life, and salvation is the object of saving faith. To place faith in anything else is not beneficial. This includes even faith placed in the historicity of Scripture or in God’s law.

Hoenecke affirms that all of God’s Word is the general object of faith. He also states that “since these [other] parts of Scripture are not dealing with faith but with doing ... they also cannot be the sufficient object of justifying faith.”⁵⁷ In other words, Scripture is a general object of saving faith because it is the very thing that reveals the promises and merits of Christ, not because faith is only able to save when it grasps the entirety of Scripture.

The *cause* of faith is of equal importance. Koehler once again proves helpful: “Faith is not a work of man in the sense that by his own powers he produces faith in his heart...[it is] the work of God in this sense that it is He, and He alone, who creates and sustains it in our hearts.”⁵⁸ This is not to say that the Holy Spirit believes for a Christian.⁵⁹ The person is still the one who does the believing, but within the person, the Holy Spirit not only produces faith, but even testifies to his presence in the believer’s heart. This means that faith is not something that a Christian draws out of himself, but rather it is a gift, granted by God (Eph 2:8–9). This gift is not given directly, but rather God works through means to grant faith. The specific means will be explored further in the final section of this paper. In brief, faith is granted through the gospel because the gospel is a preaching of good news (Mark 16:15) that also has the power to create faith that receives the benefits of that good news (Rom 10:17).

56. Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces: On Justification Through Faith*, 244.

57. Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, 3:306.

58. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 137.

59. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 137.

Finally, to comfort a Christian, it is important to address one thing that faith is *not*. Faith is *not* a meritorious cause of justification. Christians are justified “through faith” (Eph 2:8), not “on account of...for the sake of...[or] in view of” faith.⁶⁰ That would contradict the explicit truths of Scripture regarding the nature of justification. Faith does not give “any intrinsic value towards saving sinners.”⁶¹ *The Lutheran Confessions* maintain the opposite: “For faith does not justify or save because it is a worthy work in and of itself, but only because it receives the promised mercy”⁶² Faith is a gift which God bestows through his means of grace. Therefore, while it is proper to speak of faith in terms of strength and weakness—and strong faith is to be desired—this does not mean that one faith is somehow more justifying than another. That justification is received by the faith of both “the troubled father” in Mark 9:24, along with “Abraham, Paul, and others who have a resolute, strong faith.”⁶³

The Effect of the Nature of Faith

Professor Armin Schuetze makes the following observation about the effect that the object of saving faith has on a Christian:

The Lord’s forgiveness is effective because it is based on the purifying blood of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. People’s sins are no longer counted against them ... [This fact] effectively removes guilt and frees from an accusing conscience. This is God’s answer to the problem of guilt and is not only the best but also the only solution.⁶⁴

60. Walther, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, 268.

61. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:440.

62. Ap IV:56.

63. FC SD VII:71.

64. Schuetze and Matzke, *The Counseling Shepherd*, 195.

The effect of the nature of faith on a Christian is the same as that of justification: assurance. The Christian is comforted by the fact that not only is the justification of the world based on the work of God, but his personal justification is also based on God's work. The valuable object of Christ is what faith rests its hopes on; Jesus is "the pioneer and perfecter of faith" (Heb 12:2) The object of faith also gives assurance by what it is *not*; it is not a standard of knowledge that can be proved by a test of pure doctrine. Knowledge is an essential part of faith, for no one can believe in what they do not know (Rom 10:14).⁶⁵ But saving faith is not based on knowing Old Testament history well enough, nor being able to recite Luther's Small Catechism perfectly. It is not based on holding membership in the right church or not erring in any doctrine.⁶⁶ Pieper speaks of the lack of assurance from making "the entire scripture" the object of faith: "Again and again, doubt will rise in one's mind, and indeed in the mind of the most learned theologian, as to whether his understanding of all Scripture, including the historical portions of it, is a correct one."⁶⁷ Instead of this doubt, Christians have the assurance that their faith is placed solely in the promise of forgiveness for Jesus's sake.

Faith's cause is also a source of great comfort. A Christian in *Anfechtung* knows how often and easily he can make mistakes; how fragile and weak he is. If salvation, even faith, the hand that receives free salvation, is something that the Christian must bring about in himself, then certainty would be lost. But faith is not man's doing. "The work of man contributes nothing to righteousness, does not remove sin or produce a good work, knows and understands nothing

65. Lutheran Dogmaticians like Pieper accept a three-fold way of looking at faith: as knowledge, as assent, and as trust; However, the knowledge is explicitly noted as referring to "knowledge of the gospel", not of the Bible as a whole. Cf. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:428–430.

66. Walther, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, 334.

67. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:424.

of the truth and the real nature of salvation.”⁶⁸ The Christian does not contribute a single thing to his salvation. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph 2:8–9). The entirety of salvation, both the objective justification and the faith which receives it, is a gift.

Because this faith is not meritorious, it does not receive the benefits of the gospel because of its strength or weakness. It is not saving faith because it never wrestles with doubts or because it produces the correct works. Certainly, “good works follow from true faith.”⁶⁹ But there is not some standard of outward deeds that, once met, forms the basis of Christians faith.⁷⁰ Because saving faith is nothing but trust in the work of another, that is, Christ, it is not meritorious. Walther, in his *Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, used the illustration of a beggar who was incredulous at the idea of being asked to do the hard work of “accepting” free donations.⁷¹ To view faith as a virtue that *causes* salvation would be to adopt the logic of that beggar. Faith does not merit salvation—it simply receives it. This view of faith makes it nothing but pure comfort for the Christian who, in the midst of *Anfechtung*, is racked with uncertainty because he is tempted to believe that his perceived shortcomings nullify God’s work.

68. AE 14:82.

69. FC Ep IV:6.

70. FC SD IV:35.

71. Walther, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, 272.

The Nature of The Christian

The Christian is Both New Man and Old Adam

There is a third important doctrine that can help the Christian in *Anfechtung*: the nature of the Christian. God’s Word speaks of the Christian as both New Man and Old Adam. Dr. Richard Marrs says it’s the theological equivalent of “multiple personality disorder.”⁷² The Apostle Paul describes himself in that very experience in his letter to the Romans:

For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me (Rom 7:18–21).

Paul had a desire to do what is good—this came from his New Man. But at the same time, he struggled and often fell into what was evil—this came from his Old Adam. This is the reality for every Christian, and it results in two important corollaries: because of their New Man, Christians *will* produce good works, and because of their Old Adam, Christians *will* sin. In other words, “True faith always sanctifies...[but] sanctification is never perfect.”⁷³

Jesus illustrated the relationship between a person and their works using the picture of a tree: “every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit” (Matt 7:17–18). This picture is a perfect one also for the New Man. A Christian, like a good tree, will bear the good fruit of good works. Like a tree, these good works will be a natural consequence, a “fruit” of the fact that they are a Christian. Adolf Hoenecke refers to it in a similar way: “It is the necessity of natural connection

72. Marrs, *Making Christian Counseling More Christ Centered*, 82.

73. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 157–58.

that from justification and rebirth sanctification and good works follow, that the person who attains salvation also does good works.”⁷⁴ Lutherans have historically made it clear that good works can rightly be called “necessary” as a natural consequence, but not “necessary for salvation.”⁷⁵ In other words, good works are necessary, but not in order “to obtain nor to preserve” faith or salvation.⁷⁶

At the same time, Jesus’s illustration also serves as a picture of the Old Adam and what it produces. Professor Lyle Lange draws that conclusion when using the verse to illustrate the works of the sinful nature.⁷⁷ Those works—sin—are still present in a Christian's life because he still retains the Old Adam. However, this sin is not the same as the good works, nor is it the same as sin produced by an unbeliever who has no New Man.

Francis Pieper illustrates one reason that this sin is different for a Christian using the words of 1 John. There the apostle declares that no one can claim to be “without sin” (1 John 1:8) *and* that no believer will “continue to sin” (1 John 3:9). The difference is that Christians “do not permit sin to rule over them...but in the power of the New Man, the offspring of God, they control sin.”⁷⁸ In that way, the sins and shortcomings of a Christian are not the same as the sin of an unbeliever, nor are they the same as the good works which the New Man produces. The New Man rules over the Old Adam, even though the Old Adam is still present.

A second reason for that sin is different for a Christian is that the New Man is the identity of the Christian, not the Old Adam. Michael Middendorf notes how Paul speaks this way in Rom

74. Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, 3:417.

75. FC Ep IV:9, 16.

76. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:28.

77. Lange, *God so Loved the World*, 214.

78. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:32.

7, pointing out that while Paul doesn't deny the presence of his Old Adam, he speaks in a way that refers to "the 'essential self' of the 'I' [in Rom 7] which consistently agrees with and strives to accomplish the Law of God."⁷⁹ This self can only be referring to the New Man, since the Old Adam is, as Luther says, "what is born in us from Adam...it is beset with all vices and by nature has nothing good in it."⁸⁰ It's also worth noting that Christians will remain essentially themselves in heaven while no longer retaining the Old Adam.⁸¹ Therefore, the true self for a Christian is his New Man, even as his Old Adam remains with him and in him in this life.

The Effect of the Nature of The Christian

Walther spoke of the importance of properly portraying a Christian in his work, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*: "The Word of God is not rightly divided when a description is given of faith, both as regards its strength and the consciousness and productiveness of it, that does not fit all believers at all times."⁸² For a preacher, it is of the utmost importance to speak to Christians as *who they are*, not only as what they ought to be. That means recognizing them as heirs of eternal life even when they struggle against sin. When this truth is presented in connection with the nature of justification and faith, in theory, it reminds the Christian that the struggle with sin in general and *Anfechtung* in particular is not because they are not a Christian. Instead, the struggle with sin and *Anfechtung* is evidence of the fact that they *are* a Christian—New Man *and* Old Adam.

79. Michael P. Middendorf, *Romans 1-8*, ed. Dean O. Wenthe and Curtis P. Giese, Concordia Commentary (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2013), 570.

80. LC IV:66.

⁸¹ Cf. FC SD VI:24–25.

82. Walther, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, 308.

When a Christian is reminded of the presence of their Old Adam, one of the most oft-quoted lines from Luther comes into play— “sin boldly.”⁸³ This phrase, first addressed to Philip Melancthon, could easily be misconstrued as a license to not care about the sins that Christians commit. However, when it is read in context—both in the context of the Old Adam *and* its written context—its meaning is clear:

If grace is true, you must bear a true and not a fictitious sin. God does not save people who are fictitious sinners. Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death, and the world. As long as we are here [in this world] we have to sin. This life is not the dwelling place of righteousness, but, as Peter says, we look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. It is enough that by the riches of God’s glory, we have come to know the Lamb that takes away the sin of the world. No sin will separate us from the Lamb, even though we commit fornication and murder a thousand times a day. Do you think that the purchase price that was paid for the redemption of our sins by so great a Lamb is too small? Pray boldly – you too are a mighty sinner.⁸⁴

Luther’s intent is certainly not to encourage active sin. Instead, it is an encouragement not to be troubled by the fact that every last Christian, as long as they live in this world, remains a “mighty sinner”—Old Adam and all.⁸⁵ In light of the enormous comfort found in the external nature of both justification and faith, a Christian does not have to fear acknowledging their imperfections. “The *nature* of the sinner has not been changed...the *status* of the sinner was changed.”⁸⁶ Because justification is *forensic*, it is logical that a Christian may still in many respects struggle against sin. This is because the Christian’s essence is not the cause of his justification. Christians are not to expect that they “can keep and fulfill the law of God perfectly in this life.”⁸⁷ The

83. AE 48:281.

84. AE 48:281–282.

85. AE 48:282.

86. John P. Meyer, *Ministers of Christ: 2 Corinthians* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2011), 98.

87. FC Ep XII:25.

Christian, being both Old Adam and New Man, *won't* keep God's law perfectly and *will* struggle against sinful thoughts and desires that can spill into outward words and actions. For the Christian, sanctification is a "process of becoming rather than a state of being."⁸⁸ When the Christian remembers that the Old Adam is still present with them, Satan's temptation to despair whenever sin occurs is weakened.

When a Christian is reminded of the doctrine of the New Man and the fruit that New Man produces, there is another (albeit lesser) comfort for the Christian. Scripture often makes a connection between good works and justification. Jesus makes the connection himself in Matt 25:31–46, with his parable of the sheep and the goats. The connection in those cases, however, is not a meritorious one but consequential. "The effects of justification are good works."⁸⁹ *The Apology of the Augsburg Confession* explains the purpose of the connection between works and justification: "But just as Christ connects the promise of the forgiveness of sins to other sacraments, so he also connects it to good works. ... However, Christ normally connects law and Gospel in this way...so that we might also have many external signs of the Gospel and the forgiveness of sins, which remind and console us..."⁹⁰ The presence of good works can be a testimony to the presence of faith in the heart of a Christian. However, in practice, this is only of secondary value. Just as easily as any other doubt, Satan can present the individual with questions about the sincerity of one's struggle against sin or about the presence of any good works. To direct a doubting Christian to their works is a dangerous game. For that reason, this comfort for a Christian needs to be applied with care. God's Word proclaims both the supremacy

88. Lange, *God so Loved the World*, 370.

89. Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces: On Justification Through Faith*, 459.

90. Ap IV: 272A.

of the Scriptures regarding a Christian's status before God and the reality that good works give evidence of that faith: "Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth. This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything" (1 John 3:18–20). Because the Christian is both Old Adam and New Man, the testimony from their heart can be clouded by sin. The truths from God found outside of self—the truth in his Word regarding justification and faith—are to be held closer than the truth that comes from a Christian's heart. As Pieper stated: "Every Christian...must look for grace not in faraway places, by way of works, but near by, in the gospel."⁹¹

91. Francis Pieper, *Vorträge über die Lutherische Lehre Von Der Rechtfertigung* (Concordia, 1889), 97, <http://archive.org/details/DieLutherischeLehreVonDerRechtfertigung>. Pieper references this in a footnote in *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:510.

PART III: “HOW DO I HELP?”

What would have happened if that man in Mark 9 had come to Jesus with his demon-possessed son and left without that healing? It’s hard to imagine because Jesus *did* heal the man’s son. It’s hard to imagine because of the assumed effect that this would have had on the man’s faith. It is reasonable to think that this man had faith that Jesus could heal his son, but only someone who was both genuinely struggling *and* completely honest could say: “I do believe! Help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24) It’s hard to imagine that Jesus would send him away without help because the words of Isaiah’s prophecy seem to apply to situations just like this: “A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out” (Isa 42:3).

Yet, Jesus did not handle every questioning person the same way. When it came to the rich young ruler, Jesus did not send him away rejoicing, but in sadness (Matt 19:16–22). At various times, when the crowds desired to make Jesus their earthly king, he withdrew to avoid giving them something that was not in their best interest (John 6:15). One does not need to look long and hard to see how differently Jesus spoke and taught when dealing with Pharisees (Matt 23:29ff), as compared to how he spoke and taught when dealing with certain tax collectors, prostitutes, and other down-trodden people (Matt 9; Luke 18:15–17; John 4). Even amongst those down-trodden people, Jesus met their needs in a variety of ways.

Christians are called to seek the lost just like Jesus did. Yet it is difficult to know how to help one another in *Anfechtung*. In the case of Jesus, he was able to see into the hearts of men (Luke 9:47). He knows all things (John 21:17) —including exactly what they needed to have or to hear. Christians do not possess the perfect wisdom of Jesus. However, God has revealed in his

Word a variety of tools for Christians to use for the benefit of their fellow Christians. This section will explore God’s divinely-ordained tool for strengthening faith: the means of grace. This includes looking in detail at the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, along with private absolution. However, before those teachings are explored, it is wise to review the two primary teachings of God’s Word that guide Christians to encourage one another in *Anfechtung*.

Rewiring to God’s Framework

Dr. Richard Marrs, in his book, *Making Christian Counseling More Christ Centered*, spends an entire chapter outlining “Gospel Law Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.”⁹² Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is a type of talk-therapy that involves identifying and challenging “negative or inaccurate thinking.”⁹³ It’s effectively a method of rewiring the thought process in your brain when struggling with a variety of issues. Marrs makes the point that this sort of psychological strategy can also be used to identify and challenge faulty *spiritual* thoughts and replace them with accurate ones.⁹⁴ When it comes to rewiring one’s spiritual views, it’s not only important to determine *what* truths can help. It’s also important to have a framework for understanding these truths. To depart from a proper framework “robs troubled consciences of the comfort that [Christians] have in the holy gospel,” and leaves the Christian with no way to “sustain themselves in their greatest spiritual struggles.”⁹⁵

92. Marrs, *Making Christian Counseling More Christ Centered*, 165–73.

93. Mayo Clinic, “Cognitive Behavioral Therapy,” *Mayo Clinic Patient Care & Health Information*, 16 March 2019, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/cognitive-behavioral-therapy/about/pac-20384610>.

94. Marrs, *Making Christian Counseling More Christ Centered*, 168.

95. FC SD V:1.

Dos and Don'ts: The Proper Use of Law and Gospel

The framework that Scripture describes for understanding and applying God's Word is that of its two primary teachings: law and gospel (John 1:17; 2 Tim 2:15). C.F.W. Walther said that without understanding the distinction between these two, the Bible "remains a sealed book."⁹⁶ The terms law and gospel are used in a variety of ways in Scripture, but within this paper, the terms refer to their narrow senses as defined by *The Formula of Concord*. The law refers to "everything that condemns sin" while the gospel is that which "comforts consciences against the terror of the law, directs them solely to Christ's merits, and lifts [consciences] up again through the delightful proclamation of the grace and favor of God, won through Christ's merit."⁹⁷ In a way, *Anfechtung* is a personalized experience of law. It is an anguish that finds fault and weakness. For that reason, the law and gospel dynamics are certainly at play within *Anfechtung*. Understanding law and gospel, then, is important for working through *Anfechtung*.

As was noted in part one of this thesis, God's good purpose is the salvation of humankind (1 Tim 2:3–4). This purpose extends to the individual as well. Hoenecke describes the gospel's essence in connection with the very teachings of justification and faith described in part two: "the essence of the gospel is the *free* promise and pledge of grace...by means of which God also brings into being...the organ for receiving grace, namely, faith..."⁹⁸ The preaching of the gospel is therefore rightly called Christ's "proper function."⁹⁹ The gospel is the good news of justification that accomplishes God's purpose of creating the faith which appropriates that good

96. Walther, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, 60.

97. FC Ep V:4, 7.

98. Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, 4:39.

99. FC Ep V:10.

news. For that reason, the gospel must stand superior to the law, just as “the ministry Jesus has received” is superior (Heb 8:6).

This superiority of the gospel does not make the law obsolete. The law is still used in a variety of ways in the life of the Christian. Most often, there is a three-use distinction. Those three uses are that of mirror (to identify “both our sinfulness and our sins”), curb (to “[threaten] consequences to those who ignore it”), and guide (to show “which works are pleasing to God”).¹⁰⁰ Arguably, the primary of these uses is the mirror, which is appropriate, since “the law always accuses and terrifies consciences”—always serving as that mirror.¹⁰¹ Often included within the term “mirror” is “the pedagogic use” which would take the results of that sobering look in the mirror and lead one to desperately look for a savior.¹⁰² That, then, is where the gospel would begin its work. The sinner, stricken by his abundance of sin and feeling of guilt, finds himself in need of forgiveness and a declaration of “not guilty.” This gospel alone is the solution. “A conscience ceases to rationalize sin or be terrorized by the law only when it comes to rest in the forgiveness of sins.”¹⁰³ The law serves the gospel, bringing people to “a knowledge of their sins and to repentance” not to “despair.”¹⁰⁴ Because *Anfechtung* often results in an acute knowledge of sin, God uses it as law in the same way. “[God] uses [*Anfechtung*] to crucify our fleshly complacency and self-confidence. And then he uses it to send us running back the other

100. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds*, 233, 236, 238–239.

101. Ap IV:38.

102. Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, 4:35.

103. John T Pless, “Luther’s Oratio, Meditatio, and Tentatio as the Shape of Pastoral Care for Pastors,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 80.1–2 (2016): 44.

104. FC SD V:24.

way to the security and confidence of the word of promise that is given to faith.”¹⁰⁵ In other words, he uses *Anfechtung* as a mirror, to bring about the knowledge of personal weakness and even sinfulness, and to lead one to desperately seek the comfort found only in Christ.

Satan’s Improper Use of the Law

The Formula of Concord speaks of the two results of viewing the law improperly: “they either become presumptuous hypocrites, like the Pharisees, or they despair, like Judas.”¹⁰⁶ Satan himself seeks to use the law to achieve one or both of these improper results: confident works-righteousness or hopeless despair. In *Anfechtung*, Luther believed it was despair that was Satan’s primary goal: “In affliction and in the conflict of conscience it is the devil’s habit to frighten us with the law and to set against us the consciousness of sin, our wicked past, the wrath and judgment of God, hell and eternal death, so that thus he may drive us into despair, subject us to himself, and pluck us from Christ.”¹⁰⁷ Notice, too, that Luther says that Satan makes use of the law in *Anfechtung*. Luther even credited Satan with being more skilled in his handling of Scripture than Luther himself.¹⁰⁸

Yet, the way Satan uses Scripture is not the same as God’s framework outlined above. David Scaer describes Satan’s method as one that “takes a legitimate Word of God and preaches the Law there to lead to despair.”¹⁰⁹ Satan does not ever intend that the Christian be broken by the law to be healed by the gospel. He instead preaches law to those “already in terror on account

105. Hein, “Tentatio,” 35.

106. FC Ep V:8.

107. AE 26:10.

108. Hein, “Tentatio,” 39.

109. Scaer, “The Concept of *Anfechtung* in Luther’s Thought,” 17.

of their sins.”¹¹⁰ Satan does not let the gospel predominate.¹¹¹ Instead, he uses it with the end goal that Christians would no longer look to Christ and instead be “left alone before the searing wrath of God and [the Christian’s] own personal guilt.”¹¹²

It is of great importance that the Christian recognizes Satan’s improper use of the law in the *Anfechtung*. These are the very thoughts that a Christian needs to identify and then challenge with God’s proper use of both law and gospel. This can only be accomplished by returning to the truths regarding justification, faith, and self. These truths are both the basis for deconstructing Satan’s use of the law *and* the foundation for applying the gospel.

Means of Grace: God’s Distribution Method

Ephesians 2:8–9 clearly demonstrates that justification and faith are both gifts from God. As is the case with all gifts, they need to be distributed, or their benefit cannot be felt. The benefit of God’s universal declaration of “not guilty” is useless unless the individual *knows* that declaration has occurred. The individual who knows *about* faith and justification does not see the benefits unless that faith has been created. The fact that Jesus has won salvation for the world means little for the individual unless he believes that Jesus has won salvation *for him*. In Luther’s words, Jesus must “not only be Christ, but be Christ for you and me...”¹¹³ The means of grace are the very tools that take the objective fact (“he is Christ”) and makes it subjective (“for you and me”). These means of grace consist of the Word and sacraments.

110. Walther, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, 101.

111. Walther, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, 403.

112. Scaer, “The Concept of *Anfechtung* in Luther’s Thought,” 23.

113. AE 31:357.

In the Lutheran Confessions, sacraments are defined with both a broad and narrow definition. In the broad sense, they are “rites, which have the command of God and to which the promise of grace has been added...Therefore, the sacraments are actually Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and absolution...”¹¹⁴ In the narrow (and more common) sense, they must also include a visible element, limiting the scope to include only Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.¹¹⁵ While absolution is undoubtedly different from Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, all three are grouped-together by their purpose: they create and strengthen faith by taking the Word and applying it to the individual. Luther calls all three of them “sure seals and letters” that allow the individual to confidently say “[God] has blotted out my sin with his holy blood; I do not doubt that.”¹¹⁶

A vital part of the extra comfort found in the means of grace is their tangible nature. They are the Word made “visible.”¹¹⁷ While Satan makes every effort to “work from the inside,” afflicting the conscience with *Anfechtung*, God instead works “from the outside through the sacred things,” that is, Word and sacraments.¹¹⁸ This author’s assertion is the same as that of Professor Daniel Deutschlander: “it is help and rescue in the midst of [*Anfechtung*] that [God] promises in the Word and sacraments.”¹¹⁹

114. Ap XIII:3, 4.

115. Cf. LC IV, V.

116. AE 38: 158

117. Ap XIII:5.

118. Hein, “Tentatio,” 39.

119. Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross*, 7.

The Comfort of Absolution

“It is difficult to receive the gospel too often.”¹²⁰ How true those words are! In fact, by providing not only the written word of the Bible but the various methods of delivery, God essentially places his stamp of approval on these words. He wants his people to be filled to the top with the gospel—especially when they find themselves drained by Satan in *Anfechtung*. For that reason, it is a shame that private absolution is not utilized more often.¹²¹ The Lutheran Church’s primary confession of faith, *The Augsburg Confession*, even explicitly states that “private absolution should be retained in the churches.”¹²² More importantly, God’s Word talks about how it relieves guilt (Ps 32:3, 5) and how it brings healing (Jas 5:16). While absolution is a tool for any Christian to use for the benefit of another, it is also where a pastor can clearly do what God has called him to do, namely, “forgive your sins [and] bring you the healing balm of the Gospel.”¹²³ Absolution, despite not having physical elements like Baptism or the Lord’s Supper, is rightly called a “visible word.”¹²⁴ It takes the truths of the Word in the gospel and proclaims them, with the added benefit that comes from hearing them personally spoken by another human being.

When a Christian struggles against *Anfechtung*, and Satan “removes Christ from the gaze of the believer”—it is at that time more than any that the Christian needs the comfort of private

120. Samuel H. Nafzger et al., eds., *Confessing the Gospel: A Lutheran Approach to Systematic Theology* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2017), 2:886.

121. Both “confession” and “absolution” often serve as shorthand for the whole process of confession *and* absolution. In this paper, absolution is the preferred shorthand, as “The most important part in confession is absolution...it is only the word of absolution that brings healing...” Found in Armin W. Schuetze and Irwin J. Habeck, *The Shepherd under Christ: A Textbook for Pastoral Theology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1981), 194.

122. AC XI:1.

123. Peperkorn and LCMS World Relief and Human Care, *I Trust When Dark My Road*, 74–75.

124. Ap XIII:5.

absolution.¹²⁵ This is not to devalue the general absolution that is pronounced in many Sunday services. Indeed, the general absolution is “the same grace, and it is real grace...yet it is done in a general way.”¹²⁶ It is in the *private* absolution that this message is personalized. Luther said that in the face of the devil’s lies that “God is angry with you and wants to kill you or damn you,” and you must turn him back by simply “[listening] to what the gospel says to me.”¹²⁷ Private absolution is nothing else but doing that: taking your sins and the accusations of Satan in *Anfechtung*, confessing them to a pastor or fellow believer and then hearing what the gospel says to you. Absolution is rightly marked as “the effective means provided by God for dealing with a guilty conscience.”¹²⁸

In practice, Christians are not to be stingy with the gospel when helping a fellow believer in their *Anfechtung*. This is an important principle for sharing the gospel in absolution. Professor John Schuetze speaks about this non-stingy absolution as “baby steps to the cross.”¹²⁹ This refers to the sort of care and patience in absolving someone of their sins—to slowly and thoroughly speak the full beauty of what Christ accomplished at the cross for that individual. It is not best practice to merely pronounce a general word *about* God’s forgiveness. The goal is to assure the Christian that they are not only forgiven for all sins, but for the specific sin that troubles them.¹³⁰ This also means that there is no limit on the number of times that one might need words of absolution and comfort for the same *Anfechtung*. These *Anfechtungen* or “tribulations are not a

125. Scaer, “The Concept of *Anfechtung* in Luther’s Thought,” 23.

126. Meyer, *Studies in the Augsburg Confession*, 148–49.

127. AE 24:140.

128. Schuetze and Matzke, *The Counseling Shepherd*, 195.

129. Schuetze, *Doctor of Souls*, 289.

130. Schuetze, *Doctor of Souls*, 290.

disease, so there is no cure for them...only firm faith in God's unalterable promise enables spiritual crises to be withstood..."¹³¹ With that truth in mind, it means that a Christian may indeed need to be comforted "over and over again" with the fact that this, too, "was also covered by the cross."¹³² The reapplication of these truths is what builds that firm faith. It is not necessarily a sign of weakness when one needs to come back for relief from the same *Anfechtung*, the same guilty feeling, time and time again. Instead, seeking the help where it may be found—in God's Word and his sacraments—is quite possibly a sign of self-awareness and faith in God's promise to forgive. It is to recognize, as Luther did, that the Christian can "rejoice" and be "revived" when "the conscience hears the joy of absolution."¹³³

The Comfort of Baptism

It can be said that Baptism is both something that happens only once in the life of a believer *and* is an ongoing reality for the believer. There is no need to be baptized more than once because Baptism is the work done "not by human beings but by God himself."¹³⁴ Because God is faithful to his promises, even amid human weakness, a one-time Baptism can be trusted. Pastor Todd Peperkorn talks about how this explicitly means that God remains faithful when Satan tempts to despair in *Anfechtung*: "The promises given in your Baptism do not fade away and disappear because you are in despair and darkness."¹³⁵ God remains faithful to the promises which he has made (2 Tim 2:13).

131. Hein, "Tentatio," 33.

132. Schuetze, *Doctor of Souls*, 290.

133. AE 14:140.

134. LC IV:10.

135. Peperkorn and LCMS World Relief and Human Care, *I Trust When Dark My Road*, 89.

Yet Professor John Schuetze explains that this Baptism is *not* something to be done once and then forgotten: “Baptism is not a one-time event. Every day our baptism comforts us with the truth that we are children of God (Gal 3:26, 27). Baptism also gives us the power to live as children of God (Rom 6:1–4). Whenever we are struggling with doubt, we can look to our baptism and know that God has made a covenant with us. He betrothed us to him forever.”¹³⁶

Baptism is not *just* the moment where God marks you with his promises. It is a moment to which the Christian can return, again and again, for reassurance that the promises of God belong to him. God has attached specific promises to Baptism which tackle *Anfechtung* head-on. He promises that “He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5), that is, he makes the benefits of his objective justification the personal possession of the one who has been baptized. He promises that Baptism saves, as it gives the Christian “the pledge of a clear conscience towards God” (1 Pet 3:21). Professor Stephen Geiger explained the verse as follows: “Baptism itself is presented as that thing which is making a request to God—it lays claim to the promise of a good conscience. This action is inextricably tied to a consequence, a result—a bad conscience is no longer present. No longer is the conscience tormented by guilt. In other words, Baptism brings the forgiveness of sins.”¹³⁷ In Baptism, God gives people a clear conscience and “makes of sinful people sons and daughters of God.”¹³⁸

Because this is the case, Baptism is a powerful ongoing tool in the battle against Satan’s desire to lead the Christian to *Anfechtung*-induced despair. Luther spoke of using Baptism in that same way: “Nearly all people are tempted by despair, and the godlier they are, the more

136. Schuetze, *Doctor of Souls*, 81.

137. Stephen Geiger, “A Word about Baptism Ἐπερώτημα in 1 Peter 3:21,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 113, no.3 (Summer 2016): 209.

138. Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:806.

frequently they are attacked with this weapon of Satan. What else should you do in this situation than say: ‘I know that I am baptized and that God, for the sake of His Son, has promised me grace. This promise will not lie, even if I should be cast into utter darkness.’”¹³⁹ Baptism exposes Satan’s lies for what they are. Dr. Richard Marrs makes the point that “pointing to the objective markers that the LORD has given us”, i.e., Baptism, is more effective in counseling the struggling Christian than alternatives.¹⁴⁰ While there are other external testimonies, like the good works that a Christian produces, these can easily be hijacked by Satan, who wants to either shrink these works so that the Christian is utterly unaware of them or puff the works up so that the Christian takes pride in them. Pointing the Christian to their Baptism allows for neither of those strategies of Satan to get a foothold. Instead, the Christian can see that God’s promises are his, regardless of the current lie that Satan is seeking to sell.

The Comfort of The Lord’s Supper

“The more times and the more different ways God tells us, ‘I love you. You are my forgiven child,’ the stronger our trust in that truth will become.”¹⁴¹ Imagine a husband and wife. The husband indeed loves his wife, but there is a problem. As time goes on, his expressions of love for her begin to dwindle. Eventually, he only expresses it one way—by saying the *exact* same words at the *exact* same time in the *exact* same way. “I love you,” he says, every night, right before the couple heads off to sleep. How long would it take the wife to grow uncertain of her husband’s love for her? Not very long. How blessed Christians are that God does not in any way

139. AE 4:94–95.

140. Marrs, *Making Christian Counseling More Christ Centered*, 224.

141. Schuetze, *Doctor of Souls*, 100.

resemble that hypothetical husband! God expresses his love for his people in so many ways. The greatest of these is that he sent his son as the savior of the world (John 3:16). His Word proclaims this truth and grants faith which clings to it (Rom 10:17). Yet to proclaim this truth in one way was not enough. He also expressed his love in Baptism, which gives the Christian the “pledge of a clear conscience towards God” (1 Pet 3:21). Yet that, too, was not enough. Jesus also instituted a divine meal where the Christian could “taste the Gospel”, where they could, in yet another way, receive the forgiveness and love that God provides for the individual.¹⁴² In *Anfechtung*, Satan seeks to make every outward physical event into evidence for God’s *lack* of love for the individual. In the Lord’s Supper, Jesus takes physical elements and not only makes them evidence of God’s love, but in, with, and under them, he gives his body and blood to *grant* God’s love and forgiveness.

The Lord’s Supper, however, is not just Baptism with different elements. There is the concept of eating and drinking “in an unworthy manner” (1 Cor 11:27), which means that some are not admitted to the Lord’s table. In *Anfechtung*, Satan loves to latch onto the term “unworthy” and make the Christian question whether or not the supper is really for him. Luther’s words in the *Large Catechism* refute Satan’s lie: “All those who let these words be addressed to them [i.e. given and shed for you] and believe that they are true have what the words declare [i.e. forgiveness of sins]...if you are burdened and feel your weakness, go joyfully to the sacrament and let yourself be refreshed, comforted, and strengthened.”¹⁴³ The Christian who is heavy-laden by *Anfechtung* and whose weakness is evident in their terrified conscience is *exactly* the individual for whom the Lord’s Supper is meant.

142. Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:886.

143. LC V:35, 72–73.

The Lord's Supper, like Baptism, is an enduring weapon against Satan's attacks. However, unlike Baptism, it can be received not just once but frequently. Professor Armin Schuetze speaks of "fanning the flames of desire" for the Lord's Supper.¹⁴⁴ He suggests doing this by using the law to establish the need for what this supper offers, followed by using the gospel to bring to mind exactly what this supper offers.¹⁴⁵ The Christian who struggles with *Anfechtung* is often acutely aware of his sin. Therefore, rather than preach further law, it may be enough to make use of the existing conviction that comes from *Anfechtung*. In the Lord's Supper, God not only grants forgiveness, but he also "strengthens faith and enables growth in Christian living."¹⁴⁶ "Therefore, it is appropriately called a food of the soul, for it nourishes and strengthens the new creature."¹⁴⁷ The Lord's Supper, then, is exactly what a Christian needs in *Anfechtung*. It strengthens faith to stand against the assaults of Satan in *Anfechtungen*, not by ignoring the weakness that Satan uses against the Christian, but by instead recognizing that weakness, taking it to the cross, and receiving Christ's own body and blood to assure the Christian of forgiveness.

144. Schuetze and Habeck, *The Shepherd under Christ*, 85.

145. Schuetze and Habeck, *The Shepherd under Christ*, 85.

146. Schuetze and Matzke, *The Counseling Shepherd*, 30.

147. LC V:23.

CONCLUSION

“I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). The words of the man in Mark 9 can serve as a Christian’s prayer in the anguish of *Anfechtung*. While God certainly has the power to work directly by a miraculous relief of *Anfechtung*, God has promised to work indirectly, through his means of grace. “God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe” (1 Cor 1:21). Faith does not survive because we try harder, feel more, or think more about God. Faith and trust come solely by God’s gracious work through His Son, Jesus Christ. God uses His means of salvation to create and sustain faith. His Word, Baptism, absolution, and Holy Communion are His tools for keeping us in the one true faith.”¹⁴⁸ Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and the Word, along with the personal application of that Word in absolution, are God’s means for creating faith and destroying doubts. These things work because God has promised that they will. They also proclaim the foundational truth of justification and create, strengthen, and sustain the faith that receives the blessings of justification. They work not *because* of anything that the Christian brings about within himself, but instead, their power is wholly tied up in the gracious character and faithful promises of God. Using these means of grace in the most useful way involves a proper perspective on feelings and faith, on cross and glory, and on law and gospel.

First, there is a frequent confusion of how feelings and faith interact. In a recent survey, 42% of American Christians who attended church more than once a month said that “religious

148. Peperkorn and LCMS World Relief and Human Care, *I Trust When Dark My Road*, 76.

belief is a matter of personal opinion.”¹⁴⁹ This sort of popular worldview leaves Christians open to allowing subjective things, like personal feelings, to influence how they view their faith and how they view God. In *Anfechtung*, Satan will seek to make subjective feelings the last word on how the Christian relates to God. Professor Lyle Lange notes both the flaw in this view and a better alternative: “Human emotions are another false foundation for faith...emotions are fickle. Today they are high; tomorrow they may be low. Today we may feel close to God; tomorrow we may feel far from God...it is not how I feel about God that gives me assurance of salvation. It is how God feels about me that gives me assurance of salvation.”¹⁵⁰ Some Christians experience great emotional highs and lows, while others exhibit a relatively small range of emotional variance. In either case, the feelings of a Christian are much less constant than the God who is “the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb 13:8). That unchanging God has revealed how he relates to Christians in his Word, and it’s not based on subjective feelings. It’s based on the objective truths of God’s Word. Robert Preus presents the proper relationship between faith and feelings in *Anfechtung*:

The troubled sinner who perceives the objective and forensic nature of justification will not look inwardly to feelings, experiences or quality of faith to gain assurance that he or she is right with God. Rather, such a person looks to Christ crucified and risen "for our justification" (Romans 4:25) and to the Word which proclaims and confers this justification. Of course, justified sinners feel joy and at peace with God, but these emotions are the results, not the criteria, of their justification, God's acceptance of them for Christ's sake.¹⁵¹

Preus maintains that the objective is more powerful than the subjective. But more importantly, he counters the dangerous trend in American Christianity. Feelings do not influence faith; instead,

149. Ligonier Ministries, “The State of Theology.”

150. Lange, *God so Loved the World*, 309.

151. Robert D Preus, “Clergy Mental Health and the Doctrine of Justification,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 48.2–3 (1984): 119.

faith and its object are the only things that can produce appropriate and proper feelings about self and God. In the Word and sacraments, God nourishes a strong faith that can produce those proper feelings.

Second, there is a frequent misunderstanding of the theology of the cross and the theology of glory. It was previously noted that many Christians see a strong connection between experiences in life—the presence of material goods, career success, or general positive life events—and God’s favor. This view is born out of a theology of glory, which both trusts in and seeks after only the things that are good in appearance. This neglects the heart of Christianity: that God produced the greatest good (his glory and man’s salvation) through what was the least glorious thing imaginable (his son suffering and dying on the cross). The theology of the cross, then, is to realize that if God works through suffering to accomplish good for all people at Christ’s cross, he will also work through the suffering of individual Christians to accomplish good for the individual. Luther, in his commentary on the book of Isaiah, spoke about God’s chastisement of believers:

With supreme benefit [God] chastises His own with much greater love than earthly fathers. ... it is for the purpose of implementing the remission of sins, because it leads a man to call upon God. ... We groan and sigh to God always, and thus spirit, faith, and love grow. Thus the forgiveness of sins follows and is put into effect. Thus you see how noble and necessary God’s chastening is. For through the Word the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed, through faith it is received, and through the cross it is put into effect.¹⁵²

In the Christian’s *Anfechtung*, God is present, using it to chastise—to draw Christians to himself in prayer and to lead them to his forgiveness found in Scripture. *Anfechtung* in the life of a Christian is not how “[God accomplishes] His purposes of wrath” and “divine anger.”¹⁵³ Instead,

152. AE 16:215.

153. Scaer, “The Concept of *Anfechtung* in Luther’s Thought,” 24.

“To faith, the *Anfechtungen* as discipline proceed from His love,” that is, in faith, the Christian can see that God is strengthening the Christian’s reliance on him by using *Anfechtung* as a form of loving discipline.¹⁵⁴ The more that a Christian comes to know and appropriate these truths in *Anfechtung*, the more he realizes the truth that Gerhard Forde described in his comments on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation: “The cross story becomes our story. It presses itself upon us so that it becomes inescapable. It fights to displace the glory story. The cross thereby becomes the key to the biblical story and opens up new possibilities for appropriating—or better, being appropriated by—the entire story.”¹⁵⁵ In God’s plan for the world and the Christian, he makes use of the cross for accomplishing true and eternal glory. In the Word—both in Scripture and attached to simple elements like water, bread, and wine—God gives gifts that create and strengthen the faith that trusts God forgives and saves, even in *Anfechtung*.

Third, at the heart of applying the Word and sacraments in *Anfechtung* is a proper understanding of law and gospel. These two teachings speak two different and true realities to the Christian. The law condemns and the gospel comforts. This makes appropriately applying the two teachings a difficult task. Here Luther provides wisdom:

Therefore when the law terrifies you, sin accuses you, and your conscience is crushed, you must say: “There is a time to die and a time to live (Eccl. 3:2). There is a time to hear the law and a time to despise the law. There is a time to hear the Gospel and a time to know nothing about the Gospel. Let the law go away now, and let the Gospel come; for this is the time to hear the Gospel, not the law. But you have nothing good; in fact, you have sinned gravely. Granted. Nevertheless, I have the forgiveness of sins through Christ, on whose account all my sins are forgiven.”¹⁵⁶

154. Scaer, “The Concept of *Anfechtung* in Luther’s Thought,” 24.

155. Gerhard O. Forde and Martin Luther, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997), 8.

156. AE 26:117.

In *Anfechtung*, the Christian will see the full force of the law. He will see that despite the presence of the New Man, he has fallen short of God’s standard. He will see that despite God’s objective victory over the devil, Satan refuses to give up the fight and constantly accuses. He will see that despite his faith in God’s promises, he still needs help to overcome the pull of unbelief. When that law has been preached by *Anfechtung*, it is time for the gospel to be preached powerfully and personally by God’s divinely appointed means of grace. With this gospel, there is no place for stinginess.¹⁵⁷ Walther’s final thesis speaks rightly of a “general predominance” over the law.¹⁵⁸ In his commentary on that same thesis, Rick Marrs reasons that the primary place of the gospel is appropriate because “after Jesus’s return, the gospel will predominate for the rest of history”—even as law and wrath come more easily to mind in this world.¹⁵⁹ For that reason, it is certainly necessary that the Word and sacrament which bring such rich gospel would never be far from the Christian in *Anfechtung*. They indeed are God’s promised weapons for disarming Satan and placing *Anfechtung* in its proper place.

157. “God grant that some day people may say about you that you are preaching well, but too sweetly.” (Walther, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, 411–12.) For Walther, a faithful preacher is more likely to be accused of preaching *too much* gospel, not *too little*.

158. Walther, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, 403.

159. Marrs, *Making Christian Counseling More Christ Centered*, 220.

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