**A Sure and Certain Conscience**

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1. **The Gift of Spiritual Certainty**
2. **Introduction**

* Hebrews 10:35-36 as the text for my ordination: ***Do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you will need endurance, so that by doing God’s will you may receive what is promised.***
* Henry Hamann’s remark about critical biblical scholars: ***Their certainty escapes me.***
* Time of shaken foundations for life on earth
* God’s foundation of the earth and its order in creation (Ps 24:2; 89:11; 93:1; 96:10; Pr 3:19; 8:29; Jer 10:12): institution of natural, political, domestic and ecclesiastical orders
* God’s creation and maintenance of the world and its pillars by his word (1 Sam 2:8; Heb 1:3)
* God’s assurance of ecological order by his covenant with Noah (Gen 8:2-9:17)
* The shaking of its foundations by the wicked (Ps 11:2-3; 82:5)
* Millennial existential uncertainty: natural, intellectual, moral, domestic, economic and political order
* Prevailing climate of spiritual uncertainty in the church
* Personal diffidence of pastors and people
* Assertiveness that masks inner uncertainty
* Misplaced certainty
* The result of an uncertain conscience

1. **The nature of spiritual certainty**

* Lutheran distinction between security and certainty
* Security: presumptuous self-confidence
* Relative certainty: humble reliance of what is true
* Spiritual certainty: our dependence on Jesus and his word
* See Paul’s warning in 1 Cor 10:12: ***let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.***
* Note the use of this image in the NT for certainty
* The basis for a certain standing
* The gospel (1 Cor 15:1)
* God’s grace (Rom 5:2; 1 Pet 5:12)
* Faith (Rom 11:20; 2 Cor 1:24)
* Jesus as God’s firm foundation for faith and service (2 Tim 2:19)
* The gift of certainty by Jesus as Judge in Rom 14:4: ***Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.***
* Certainty of our standing with him
* Certainty based on Jesus rather than ourselves or our knowledge or achievements
* Certainty through faith in him and his judgment of us
* Certainty that comes from a good conscience, ***a true heart*** (Heb 10:22)

1. **The provision of certainty by the words of Jesus**

* His use of performative utterances: words that do what they say
* His speaking with divine authority and power by saying: ***I say to you***.
* His speaking the Father’s word (Jn 8:29; 12:49-50)
* His good confession under oath of himself as God’s Son, the Messiah (Matt 26:63-64)
* His emphatic asseverative assertions with his Amen sayings
* 51 Amen saying in the synoptic gospels
* 25 Amen, Amen sayings in John’ gospel (1:51; 3:3, 5, 11; 5:19, 24, 25; 6:26, 32, 47, 53; 8:34, 51, 58; 10:1, 7; 12:24; 13:16, 20, 21, 38; 14:12; 16:20, 23; 21:18)
* The nature and function of these Amen sayings
* Unique use of Amen by Jesus to introduce a saying rather than affirm a prayer or an oath
* See the introduction to the words of Jesus in Rev 3:14: ***The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation.***
* Words spoken with divine authority by God’s eternal Son
* Oath-like speech by which he himself vouches personally for the truth of what he says
* Foundational sayings for the faith of his disciples that provide certainty for them: words of revelation, words of assurance and encouragement, as well as words of warning and judgment
* Declaration by Jesus in Luke 21:33: ***Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.***

1. **The gift of certainty by apostles and Paul as a faithful witnesses**

* See the faithful sayings that are worthy of full acceptance.
* 1 Tim 1:15: ***Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.***
* 1 Tim 3:1: ***If anyone aspires to the office of bishop/oversight, he desires a noble task.***
* 1 Tim 4:7b-8: ***Train yourself for piety, for while bodily training is of some value, piety is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and the life to come.***
* 2 Tim 2:11: ***If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful.***
* Tit 3:8: ***When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by grace we might become hairs according to the hope of eternal life.***
* Sayings that Paul addresses to pastors

1. **Goal of God’s word: certainty of conscience rather than intellect**

* Modern equation of self-esteem with a good conscience
* Feeling good about ourselves and what we do
* Goal of therapy and new goal of education and worship
* Confusion of emotional mood with spiritual state
* Guilt and shame as bad feelings that must be eliminated from the conscience
* Bad feelings as “the hell” of the post-modern world and loss of self-esteem as its “damnation”
* Axiom: “God wants me to be happy.”
* Greek term: συνείδησις
* Literal sense: seeing the same as others
* Seeing ourselves as others and God see us
* Awareness of how others see us, or how we would like to be seen by them differs from the way we see ourselves
  + Modern psychological understanding of the sovereign conscience: own lawmaker, ruler, jury and judge
  + Biblical view of the conscience as inner umpire rather than law maker
* It does not make the rules but it applies them.
* It is governed by God’s word as law and gospel.
* It does not instruct me but receives instruction.
* It does not pass judgment by itself but receives judgment from others and God.
* Classical Christian definition by Luther (EA 44:298): ***For the conscience is not the power of acting but the power of judging. Its proper work (as Paul says in Romans 2) is to accuse or to excuse, to cause one to stand accused or absolved, terrified or secure. Its purpose is not to do, but to speak about what has been done and should be done, and this judgment makes us stand accused or saved before God.***
* Our need for a good, clear conscience as a window that lets the light into our minds and enables us to see ourselves with God’s eyes
* Good conscience that is certain of its justification and its possession of God’s approval
* Standing in God’s grace in Rom 5:2: access by faith the grace in which we now stand
* Dependence of conscience on the truth of God’s word as law and gospel
* Exposure of sin and guilt by God’s law
* Assurance of salvation by the gospel
* Guidance in good works by God’s law
* Result: assurance that God is well-pleased with us from the gospel and what we do from the law
* The counter-catechetical instruction of the Christian conscience by the devil’s use of God’s word
* Devil as liar (Jn 8:44), spirit of error (1 Jn 4:6) who makes us uncertain about certainties and certain about uncertainties
* Use of gospel to excuse sin
* Use of law to condemn penitent sinners or promote proud self-justification
* Result: fear that God is not pleased with us or our works
* Conviction of the conscience by the Holy Spirit as the precondition and consequence of certainty: see John 16:8-11: ***And when he (the Spirit of truth comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.***
* The three senses of ἐλέγΧω: expose what is hidden, convict, convince
* Picture: God’s court with three plaintifs – unbelievers, Jesus, the devil
* Exposure of unbelief in Jesus as sin: conviction of the conscience about guilt
* Exposure and vindication of Jesus by God the Father: conviction of the conscience about Jesus and justification by him
* Exposure and condemnation of the devil: conviction of the conscience about his defeat
* Faith as the conviction of unseen spiritual realities (Heb 11:1)

1. **Conclusion**

* Reception of a certain conscience through faith in Jesus and his word
* Basis for Paul’s assertion in Rom 8:38-38: ***I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor demons, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.***

1. **The Gift of Spiritual Assurance**
2. **Full Assurance**

* Two sides to spiritual certainty: objective word that provides certainty and the subjective certainty that is received from it
* Use of the unusual Greek noun πληροφορία in the NT for the delivery and reception of complete certainty
* Full assurance of four things by the gospel of Jesus
* Our understanding of Christ as the mystery of God (Col 2:2)
* Our empowerment by the Holy Spirit through the gospel (1 Thess 1:5)
* Our hope of receiving all that God has promised (Heb 6:11)
* Our faith that we may approach God with a true heart through Jesus as our high priest (Heb 10:22)
* Connection with the divine authorization of three things
* Worship
* Prayer
* Ministry

1. **God-pleasing service**

* First question about assurance of salvation: How can I be sure that God is pleased with us?
* Second question about vocational certainty: How can I be sure that God is pleased with our service of him?
* Biblical teaching on pleasing God: well-pleasing, acceptable service
* Paul in 2 Cor 5:9: ***we make it our aim to please the Lord***.
* Our task
* Col 1:10: **walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him**
* Eph 5:9-10: ***Walk as children of the light … and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.***
* Our God-pleasing priestly vocation
* Offering of our bodies as living sacrifices with our prayers and praises to the Father though Jesus by the Holy Spirit (Rom 12:1-2; 15:16; 1 Pet 2:5)
* Presentation of gifts of mercy in the divine service and deeds of mercy in our lives (2 Cor 8:12; Phil 4:18; Heb 13:16
* Reception of God’s gifts to us so through Jesus that we can do his will and he can work in us what is pleasing in his sight (Heb 13:21)
* Offering of well-pleasing worship: ***Therefore, receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us have grace and thereby offer to God well-pleasing service, with reverence and awe*** (Heb 12:28).
* God’s assurance of our conscience about our works by his commandments: see 1 John 3:21-22: ***Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence (freedom of speech) before God, and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.***
* Pleasing God in the divine service by doing what He has commanded us to do: Lutheran teaching on divine institution
* Divinely instituted service in my station and vocation: guidance by the Ten Commandments to do God-pleasing work together with God (see LC 1. 16, 77, 92, 102, 113, 115-118, 125, 143, 151-152, 252, 290, 311, 328)

1. **Divinely Instituted Worship**

* Problem: worship wars and challenge from Pentecostal reduction of worship to praise singing
* God’s institution of the main parts of the divine service with his word for its

enactment: divine ordinances and mandates

* Distinction between what human beings do without a divine mandate and what God has instituted for the divine service of the church (Matt 15:1-9)
* Observance by the church of what Christ has commanded it to do in its worship and piety (Matt 28:20
* Luther in LC 92: ***all our life and work must be guided by God's word if they are to be God-pleasing and holy***
* Luther in LC 94: ***Places, times, persons, and the entire outward order of worship (divine service) are therefore instituted and appointed in order that God’s word may exert its power publicly***.
* Luther in *Concerning the Ministry* (EA 40:21): ***But the first and foremost of all on which everything else depends, is the teaching of the Word of God. For we teach with the Word, we consecrate with the Word, we bind and absolve sin by the Word, we baptize with the Word, we sacrifice with the Word, we judge all things by the Word.***
* Apol 27.70: ***God is pleased only with the services (cultus) instituted by his word and done in faith***.
* Apol 15:17: **what certainty do we have that the services (cultus) instituted by men without God’s mandate justify inasmuch as we can affirm nothing about the will of God without the word of God? What if God does not approves of these services?...since these services have no testimony from the word of God, the conscience cannot but doubt whether they please God.**
* Application of the same principle for the service of God in the three orders that he has instituted (AC 27:13) and in the practice of piety (FCSD 6.20-25)
* Use by Reformers of Col 2: 20-23 to reject self-devised, self-chosen worship and piety (*’ethelothrēskia*) based on human commands

1. **Christ’s institution the foundations for the maintenance of a certain conscience**

* Purpose of divinely instituted worship: the delivery of a good conscience through God’s word as law and gospel
* Gift of certainty for uncertain consciences and correction of misplaced certainty
* Certain authorization by Jesus for our enactment of the divine service
* Certain foundation for faith in God and the assurance of salvation
* Certain enactment of the gospel for our reception of its blessings
* Certain reception of the Holy Spirit and empowerment by the Holy Spirit
* Certain sanctification of the congregation and the service of its members
* Certain cooperation with the triune God
* Certain participation in the heavenly service with Jesus, the angels and the whole communion of saints
* Avoidance of burdening consciences with human demands
* Focus on what is essential to the life of faith, divine mandates
* Pastoral distinction between *mandata* and *adiaphora*
* Balance between order and flexibility
* Avoidance of legalism and gospel reductionism, ritualism and minimalism

1. **What has Christ instituted for the divine service?**

* No exhaustive list in the confessions of what Jesus has instituted but mention only of the two most essential elements
* The preaching of the word and the ministry of word and the administration of the sacraments with the ministry of word and sacrament (AC 5, 7)
* Faith in Christ and its fruits which are produced through the proclamation of the gospel (Apol 24. 34, 35)
* Three important distinctions
* Foundational commands of Jesus v teaching about what he has instituted: note Luther’s emphasis on the foundational passages for baptism and the sacrament of the altar in the Small Catechism
* The teaching of Jesus v the teaching of the apostles
* The teaching of the apostles v precedents in the apostolic church
* The parts of the divine service that have been instituted and explained by Jesus
* Baptism: Matt 28:17; Mk 16:16 → Jn 3:3-8
* The Lord’s Supper: Matt 26:26-27; Mk 14:22-23: Lk 22:17; 1 Cor 11:24-25 → Jn 6:32-58
* Teaching and preaching God’s word: Matt 10:7; 28:19; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47 → Matt 13:1-23
* Hearing, keeping and doing God’s word: Matt 17:5; Lk 9:35 + Matt 13:9; Mark 4:9, 23, 24; Luke 8:8, 16, 18 → Matt 7:24-27; 13:16-17; 17:5; Lk 8:21; 10:16;11:28; Jn 8:31-32
* The Lord’s Prayer: Matt 6:9-13; Lk 11:2-4 → Lk 11:5-13
* Petitionary prayer: Matt 7:7-8; 18:19; Jn 15:7; 16:24 → Matt 18:19; Mk 11:24; Lk 18:1-7; Jn 15:7; 16:23
* Prayer to the Father in the name of Jesus: John 16:24 → John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23
* The office of the keys: Matt 16:19; Jn 20:22-23
* Repentance: Matt 4:17; Mk 1:15 → Mk 6:12; Lk 24:46-47
* The ministry of the word and sacraments: Matt 28:19-20; Mk 16:15; Lk 22:19-20 → Matt 10:40; Lk 10:16; Jn 13:20
* Male ministry: 1 Cor 14:37
* Offering of gifts of mercy and tithes: Matt 6:2-4; 22:23 → Matt 5:23-24

1. **Application in the following cases**

* Participation in a communion service led by a woman
* Celebration of Holy Communion without the words of institution
* Baptism in the name of the Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier

1. **The Gift of a Spiritual Boldness**
2. **A Crisis in Confidence**

* Pervasive spiritual uncertainty: diffidence and discouragement
* Uncertainty in three areas
* Worship
* Prayer
* Ministry
* Two results
* Sense of shame: Jesus and his words (Mk 8:38)
* Timidity rather boldness
* True certainty produces outspoken boldness: proper boasting
* See Heb 3:6: ***we are God’s house/temple if indeed we hold fast our confidence/boldness and our boasting in our hope.***
* See 2 Cor 3:12; 4:13: ***Since we have much hope, we are very bold…Since we have same spirit of faith according to what has been written (Ps 116:10), “I believed, and so I spoke,” we also believe and so we speak.***

1. **The Teaching on Boldness in the NT**

* See the use of *παρρησία* in Acts 4:13, 29, 31; 28:31; 2 Cor 3:12; Eph 3:12; 6:19; 1 Tim 3:13; Heb 3:6; 4:16; 10:19, 35; I John 2:28; 3:21; 4:17; 5:14 and its verb for bold proclamation in Acts 9:27, 28: 14:3; 18:26; 19:8; Eph 6:20; 1 Thess 2:2.
* Two sides: unrestricted freedom of speech and bold speech in public
* Secular sense
* Public speech
* Right of citizen to speak in the public assembly of a Greek city state: freedom of speech
* Right of Roman citizen to approach an official to petition for help: access
* Religious sense
* Privilege of access to God the Father as his sons in the divine service
* Boldness and confidence in approaching God and speaking to him in prayer: freedom of speech
* Boldness in speaking God’s word as his authorized representatives

1. **Boldness in Worship**

* See Hebrews 4:14, 16: ***Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession… Let us then with confidence/boldness draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.***
* Availability of kings for audience with their citizens in the ancient world to receive petitions and complaints
* Sitting on a throne in his palace or a public place
* Approach of people to petition them there for justice and help
* Unrestricted access of sons as members of the royal family
* Enthronement of God in the OT on the mercy seat above the ark in the temple on earth
* Access of high priest to him in the daily service
* Intercession by him for God’s people there
* Closure of the gap between the Father and us by Christ’s descent to earth and ascension into heaven
* Our approach God the Heavenly King with boldness together with Jesus in the divine service
* Our assured reception of his grace through him: pardon for sin and acceptance as royal 'sons'
* Our assured reception of help from our royal Father for our needs and for the needs of others.
* See Heb 10:19-22: ***Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence/boldness for entry into the holy places the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, (the way) of his flesh, and since we have a great high priest over the house/temple of God, let us draw near (to God) with a true heart in the full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled (clean and holy) from a bad conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.***
* The restricted access of the high priest to God in OT
  + Access to Holy of Holies on Day of Atonement
  + Way on entry through the double-layered curtain
  + Entry with the blood from the sin offerings
  + Sprinkling on mercy seat, altar for incense and altar for burnt offering
  + Purpose: purification and sanctification of the tabernacle, the priesthood and the people
  + Result: safe access to God and his blessings.
* Our unrestricted access to the Father's presence through Jesus
* Place: heavenly sanctuary in the divine service
* Our high priest: Jesus as bridge between us on earth and God in heaven
* We: co-priests with Jesus with high priestly status
* House of God: church (see 3:6)
* Way: flesh and blood Jesus in Holy Communion (cf. Heb 2:13-18).
* Our qualification for entry with boldness
  + Good conscience that has been sprinkled with Christ's blood in HC (cf. consecration of priests in Lev 8:23-24, 30)
  + Bodies that have been washed clean with the waters of baptism (cf. washing of priests at ordination in Lev 8:6 and before service in Ex 40:30-32).
  + Result: the full assurance of faith that is certain of God’s acceptance
* Our status: holy co-priests with Jesus (Heb 2:12)
  + Our heavenly vocation on earth (Heb 3:1)
  + Double representation: people to God and God to people
  + Architecture of our churches: open way from nave to altar
* See Eph 3:11: ***In Christ Jesus we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.***

1. **Boldness in Prayer**

See 1 Jn 3:21-22 and 5:14: ***Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us… And this is the boldness that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.***

* Foundations for boldness in prayer
* Good conscience before God the Father
* Assurance of justification and our sonship
* As his children we pray to him with all boldness and confidence as dear children to their dear father.
* God’s commandments
* Command to exercise our faith and love with prayer
* Guidance in what to pray for from the Ten Commandments
* Exercise of faith in Jesus and love for each other
* God’s will = God’s promises: praying the word
* Luther in the Small Catechism: ***We say Amen because we are certain that such petitions are pleasing to our Father in heaven and are heard by him. For he himself has commanded us to pray and has promised to hear us.***
* Prayer in the name of Jesus and with his words as prayer together with Jesus and by the Holy Spirit
* See Luther’s explanation of praying in the name of Jesus in EA: ***Christ prayed for me, and for this reason my prayers are acceptable through his. Accordingly, we must weave our praying into his. He is forever the mediator for all people. Through him we come to God. In him we must incorporate and envelop all our prayers and all that we do. But all this is said to Christians for the purpose of giving them the boldness and the confidence to rely on this Man and to pray with complete assurance; for we hear that in this way he unites us with himself, really puts us on a par with him, and merges our praying into his and his into ours. What greater honor could be paid us than this, that our faith in Christ entitles us to be called his brothers and coheirs, that our prayer is to be like his, that there is really no difference except that our prayers must originate in him and be spoken in his name. Apart from this, he makes us equal to himself in all things; his and our prayer must be one, just as his body is ours and his members are ours.***

1. **Boldness in Proclamation**

* Authorization and commission as ministers of the word by Jesus: Matt 10:1, 7; 28:16-20; Mk 3:14; 6:7; 16:15-16; Lk 9:1-2; 10:16; 22:29-30; Jn 20:21-22
* Authority over demons
* Proclamation of the gospel
* Baptizing and teaching
* Exercise of the keys
* Bold proclamation in the name of Jesus (Acts 9:27-28)
* Speaking on his behalf and in God’s presence (Acts 14:3): see 2 Cor 2:17; 12:19
* Boldness from being with him (Acts 4:13): see the call to be with Jesus in Mk 3:14 and the promise of his presence in Matt 29:20
* Boldness in proclamation of the authorized message
* God’s word (Acts 14:29, 31): “Thus says the Lord!” rather than what I think
* The mystery of the gospel (Eph 6:19-20; 1 Thess 2:2)
* Prayer for bold proclamation as a gift of the Holy Spirit: see Acts 4:29-31: ***“And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak you word with boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through your holy servant Jesus.” And when they had prayed, the place in which they had gathered was shaken, and they all were filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.***
* See Paul’s summary in 1 Thess 2:2-6: ***But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict. For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, but as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with pretext for greed…Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ.***
* Quest for certainty from human approval: flattery, wealth and popularity
* Pleasing people by resorting to error, sexual permissiveness and deceit
* Result: vocational uncertainty from an uncertain conscience
* Remedy: seeking to please God with faithful service
* Result: boldness in proclamation of the gospel

1. **Conclusion**

* Provisional spiritual certainty rather than absolute intellectual certainty
* 1 John 2:28: ***And now, little children, abide in him (Jesus), so that when he appears we may have boldness and not shrink from him in shame at his presence.***
* Christ’s provision of eternal certainty
* By abiding in him we can be sure of God’s approval of us and our ministry.
* We will not shrink from God in shame but have boldness before him at the last judgment.