

SOTERIOLOGY

Present Tense

Why the Lutheran Confessions Reject "Once Saved, Always Saved"

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
Free for congregational use · larryherzogjr.com

A family gathers at a funeral. The man in the casket stopped going to church before he was twenty. For forty years he wanted nothing to do with Christ, and said so. But when he was eleven, at a summer camp, he walked forward during the last hymn, prayed a prayer with a counselor, and signed a card. Someone at the lunch afterward says what everyone at the table is hoping: “Well, once saved, always saved.”

It is meant as comfort, and it is offered by people who love him. But it is worth asking what the comfort rests on. It rests on something that happened in 1978. It rests on a moment, a prayer, a card. And the question every Christian eventually has to face is whether that is where God has told us to look.

The Lutheran Confessions answer that question directly, and the answer is no. They reject the teaching commonly called “once saved, always saved” (OSAS) by name and in more than one place. This essay lays out what OSAS teaches, what the Confessions say about it, why the difference matters, and what Lutherans offer in its place. The short version is this: OSAS puts the Christian’s assurance in the past tense. The Lutheran Confessions put it in the present tense.

What “Once Saved, Always Saved” Teaches

It helps to be precise, because the phrase covers two related but different teachings.

The first is the classic Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. The Westminster Confession (XVII.1) teaches that those whom God has effectually called and sanctified “can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace.” In this view, the elect will certainly persevere in faith to the end. If someone who once professed faith later abandons it and dies in unbelief, the conclusion is that he was never truly regenerate in the first place.

The second is the popular form that dominates much of American evangelicalism, especially in Baptist and nondenominational churches. Here the stress falls less on election and more on the moment of conversion. Once a person has sincerely accepted Christ, his salvation is permanently secured, whatever happens afterward. Some of its best-known teachers have pressed this to its logical end. Charles Stanley, in *Eternal Security: Can You Be Sure?* (1990), argued that even a believer who later stops believing altogether remains saved, because salvation, once received, cannot be taken back.

These two positions reach their conclusions by different roads, and a Reformed theologian would object to being lumped in with the popular version. But they share a common structure. Both hold that a person who has once truly been justified cannot finally lose that justification. The Reformed version protects the claim by redefining the fallen as never having believed. The popular version protects it by declaring that belief is not necessary to remain in grace. Either way, the one who truly came to faith cannot fall from it.

That shared claim is exactly what the Lutheran Confessions reject.

What the Confessions Say

The Augsburg Confession, Article XII

The Augsburg Confession of 1530 addresses the question in its article on repentance. After confessing that those who fall after Baptism can always be restored through repentance, Article XII adds a condemnation. It rejects those who teach that people who have once become righteous cannot lose the Holy Spirit. The Latin text names the Anabaptists as the target (AC XII.7).

Notice the setting. The Reformers did not raise this topic in a chapter on speculative questions. They put it in the article on repentance, because the question of whether a Christian can fall is a question about how a fallen Christian is brought back. The answer to “can a Christian lose the Spirit?” and the answer to “can a fallen Christian be restored?” come together in one article, and both answers are yes.

The Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article 3

Luther returns to the subject in the Smalcald Articles (1537), again in the article on repentance, and here he speaks more bluntly. He describes certain “new spirits” who taught that whoever has once received the Spirit or the forgiveness of sins, or has once become a believer, will remain in the faith even if he afterward sins, and that such sin does him no harm (SA III.3.42).

Luther’s reply is pointed. It is necessary, he says, to know and to teach that when holy people, who still have and feel original sin and daily repent and struggle against it, fall into open sins, the way David fell into adultery, murder, and blasphemy against God, then faith and the Holy Spirit have departed from them (SA III.3.43). The Holy Spirit does not permit sin to rule and gain the upper hand so that it is carried through to completion. Where sin does what it wants, the Spirit and faith are not present (SA III.3.44). Luther then quotes 1 John 3:9 and 1 John 1:8 together, holding both truths at once: the one born of God does not go on sinning, and yet the one who says he has no sin deceives himself (SA III.3.45).

David is Luther’s chosen example, and it is a pointed choice, because David is Scripture’s great example of a restored sinner. Luther does not say that David’s adultery and murder were covered in advance by an earlier act of faith. He says that David, while he walked in that sin impenitently, had lost faith and the Spirit. And yet David was brought back. Nathan came with the law (“You are the man!”) and then, when David confessed, with the gospel: “The Lord has forgiven your sin; you are not going to die” (2 Samuel 12:13). David’s own prayer in Psalm 51 asks God not to take his Holy Spirit from him (Psalm 51:11). That is not the prayer of a man who thinks the Spirit cannot be lost.

The Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration IV

By the time of the Formula of Concord (1577), the Lutheran churches were fighting on two fronts over good works. Against one side, they insisted that good works are not necessary for salvation, because we are justified by faith alone. Against the other side, they rejected what the Formula calls an “Epicurean” delusion: the idea that faith, and the righteousness and salvation received through it, cannot be lost through any sins or crimes, even deliberate and willful ones, so that a Christian may follow his wicked desires, resist the Holy Spirit, and set himself against conscience, and still keep faith, God’s grace, righteousness, and salvation (FC SD IV.31).

The Formula then cites the Smalcald Articles passage directly as the church’s settled teaching (FC SD IV.32–33), and it adds the warnings of Scripture: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:21; 1 Corinthians 6:9–10).

So the rejection runs through the Lutheran Confessions from 1530 to 1577. It is not a stray comment or a private opinion of one Reformer. It is confessed three times, in three documents, over nearly fifty years, and each time in the same context: repentance and the life of faith.

What Scripture Says

The Confessions did not invent this position. They were reading texts that OSAS has to explain away.

Paul, after listing Israel’s failures in the wilderness, tells the Corinthian church, “So let the one who thinks he is standing be careful that he does not fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12). He tells Gentile believers in Rome that the natural branches were broken off because of unbelief, and then warns them: “you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but fear! For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you” (Romans 11:20–21). He goes on: they will continue in his kindness “provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off” (Romans 11:22).

Jesus describes those in the parable of the sower who receive the word with joy, but “they believe for a while, but in a time of testing fall away” (Luke 8:13). Jesus does not say they only seemed to believe. He says they believed, for a while.

Paul names two men, Hymenaeus and Alexander, who rejected faith and a good conscience and “suffered shipwreck in regard to the faith” (1 Timothy 1:19–20). You cannot wreck a ship you were never aboard. He tells the Galatians, who were turning to the law for righteousness, that they “have been alienated from Christ” and “have fallen away from grace” (Galatians 5:4). The letter to the Hebrews, written to baptized believers, warns them not to have “an evil, unbelieving heart that forsakes the living God,” and says we have become partners with Christ “if in fact we hold our initial confidence firm until the end” (Hebrews 3:12, 14).

These are not warnings to unbelievers about what might happen if they never believe. They are warnings to believers, and they only make sense if believers are in real danger.

But What About the Promises?

The OSAS teacher will answer with texts of his own, and they are real texts. Jesus says of his sheep, “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish; no one will snatch them from my hand” (John 10:28). Paul is sure that “the one who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6). Nothing in all creation “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39).

A Lutheran does not need to soften a single one of these. They are true, they are for Christians, and they are meant to be believed without reservation. No devil, no persecutor, no power in heaven or on earth can tear a believer out of Christ’s hand. The good work God began, he intends to finish, and he is faithful.

The difference is in how the promises and the warnings are held together. OSAS resolves the tension by letting the promises cancel the warnings. The Reformed version says the warnings are real but can only be fulfilled in people who were never truly saved. The popular version says the warnings are about losing rewards, not salvation. In both cases, one set of texts is made to swallow the other.

The Lutheran approach is to recognize that these texts are doing two different jobs. The warnings are law. They are spoken to the secure, to the one who thinks he is standing, to the arrogant branch, to the Christian who has begun to treat grace as permission. Their purpose is to knock down false security. The promises are gospel. They are spoken to the terrified, the weak, the one who fears he has fallen or will fall. Their purpose is to lift up the one the law has knocked down. Scripture does not average the two into a single doctrine of “how secure a Christian is.” It applies each to the person who needs it.

Notice too who is being described in John 10: “My sheep listen to my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). The promise is spoken to sheep who are hearing the Shepherd’s voice. It is not a guarantee attached to a moment in the past regardless of whether the voice is now being heard. The Shepherd holds his sheep precisely by speaking to them, and the sheep are held as they hear.

Why the Difference Matters

Some will ask whether this is a quarrel over technicalities. Lutherans and OSAS teachers both believe God keeps his people, and both deny that we earn salvation by works. Why does it matter?

It matters because OSAS relocates the Christian’s assurance, and it relocates it to the wrong place.

It turns assurance into a memory

In the popular form, assurance looks backward to a decision. “Do you remember when you asked Jesus into your heart?” The question the troubled Christian is taught to ask is whether that moment was real. Did I mean it? Was I sincere enough? Was I old enough to understand? Did I pray the right words? Many people raised in this system have walked forward or prayed the prayer again and again, precisely because the security it promised depended on a past event they could not verify.

This is the heart of decision theology, and it is why OSAS and the altar call belong together. Once salvation is anchored to the moment a person decided, the Christian life becomes a matter of guarding the authenticity of that moment. The “once” in “once saved” is the sinner’s act, not God’s.

The Reformed version does not escape the problem. It moves the question from “was my decision sincere?” to “am I truly among the elect?” And since the fallen are explained as those who were never regenerate, the only way to know you are truly regenerate is to persevere, which you cannot know until the end. The result, as generations of Puritan diaries show, is often an anxious turning inward to examine one’s own fruits for evidence of election.

In both cases, the eye is turned toward the self. Either toward what I did at the altar, or toward what I see in my life. Neither of those places is where God has put his promise.

It gives the gospel to the wrong person

The man at the funeral illustrates the second problem. OSAS gives unconditional comfort to the person who is living in open, impenitent unbelief. It tells the one who has forsaken the living God, and does not care, that he is safe. That is the gospel spoken to someone who needs the law.

Luther’s point in the Smalcald Articles was pastoral before it was polemical. The “new spirits” were teaching people that sin could not harm them. The Lutheran Confessions saw that such a message does not comfort sinners; it hardens them. It removes the warning that God himself put in Scripture for their rescue. A Christian who drifts from Christ needs to hear that he is in danger, not so that he will try harder, but so that he will come home.

It misunderstands what faith is

OSAS often treats faith as a transaction completed at a point in time, after which the account is settled. But in the Confessions and in Scripture, faith is a living trust in Christ that clings to his promise. It is not a box checked once; it is a hand that holds. A hand can be opened. A person can let go.

This is where the charge of “works righteousness” misses the point. OSAS teachers often say that if salvation can be lost, then we must be keeping ourselves saved by our works. But the Confessions do not say that a Christian falls from grace by failing to do enough good works. They say a Christian falls from grace by unbelief: by turning away from Christ, by letting sin rule unopposed, by rejecting the gift. Losing salvation is not failing to earn it. It is refusing to receive it. Nobody is kept by works in the Lutheran account, and nobody is lost for want of them. The question is always whether the gift is being received.

Who Keeps the Christian?

If assurance is not in a past decision or in an examination of my fruits, where is it?

Luther answers in the Small Catechism’s explanation of the Third Article of the Creed. There he confesses that he cannot by his own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to him. Instead the Holy Spirit has called him by the gospel, enlightened him with his gifts, made him holy, and kept him in the true faith, just as he does for the whole church on earth, which he keeps with Jesus Christ in the one true faith (SC II.6).

Look at that verb: *keeps*. The Lutheran answer to “how does a Christian remain in faith?” is not “by his own effort,” and it is not “because he once decided.” It is that the Holy Spirit keeps him. And the Spirit keeps him the same way he called him, through the gospel. The Spirit does not keep Christians by a secret, unmediated decree that operates regardless of whether they hear the Word. He keeps them by speaking to them.

That is why assurance for a Lutheran is always present tense. The question is never “what happened to me at camp in 1978?” The question is “what is God saying to me now?” And what God says now is spoken from outside of me, in words and in water and in bread and the cup. The pastor stands up on Sunday and says, “I forgive you all your sins.” The Supper is placed in your mouth with the words “given for you.” You do not have to reach back into your memory to find these. They come to you, again and again, in the present.

The Formula of Concord takes this same approach to the doctrine of election (FC SD XI). It forbids Christians from trying to peer into God’s hidden decree to discover whether they are among the elect. Instead, it directs them to seek their election in Christ, revealed in the Word and the sacraments. God’s eternal election is real, and it is a comfort, because it means our salvation rests finally in God’s hands and not ours. But the Formula insists the doctrine must never be used either to drive people to despair or to make them secure and impenitent. Election is known in the promise, and the promise is heard where God has put it.

The Ship That Does Not Sink

The most helpful image the Confessions offer for all of this comes from Luther’s treatment of Baptism in the Large Catechism.

The medieval church had taught, following Jerome, that repentance was a “second plank” for those who had suffered shipwreck after Baptism. Baptism was the ship; once you sinned seriously after Baptism, the ship was lost, and you had to cling to the plank of penance to reach shore.

Luther rejects the picture. Baptism, he says, is not broken by our sin. The ship does not sink, because it is God’s ordinance and not our work. What happens is that we fall out of the ship. And if someone falls out, the thing to do is swim back to it and hold on until he is aboard again (LC IV.80–82). Repentance, Luther says, is nothing other than a return and approach to Baptism, taking up again what was begun and then abandoned (LC IV.79).

This one image carries the whole Lutheran position.

Against OSAS, it says that a Christian can truly fall out of the ship. The danger is real. You cannot stay aboard by remembering that you once were.

Against despair, it says the ship is still there. God’s promise in Baptism does not expire when you fall. You do not need to be re-saved, re-dedicated, or re-baptized. You need to come back to what God already gave you.

And against every form of self-examination that turns the Christian inward, it says the thing to look at is the ship, not the swimmer. The Christian’s assurance is not how well he is swimming. It is the vessel God built and put in the water for him.

The Small Catechism says the same in its fourth part: the old Adam in us is to be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance, and a new person is to come forth daily to live before God in righteousness and purity (SC IV.12). Baptism is not a moment we look back on; it is a daily reality we live in. Paul says we were buried with Christ through baptism into death, so that we may live a new life (Romans 6:4). That is the rhythm of the Christian life: dying and rising, falling and returning, every day, to the same unbroken promise.

A Word to Two Kinds of People

The Lutheran rejection of OSAS is not meant to produce anxious Christians. It is meant to put the law and the gospel where they belong.

If you are secure, if you have treated a past experience as a permission slip, if you believe that because you once prayed a prayer you can live as you please and Christ owes you heaven anyway, then the Confessions speak to you as Nathan spoke to David. You are in danger. The one who thinks he stands should take heed lest he fall. Do not presume on a memory. Come back while it is called today.

If you are afraid, if you lie awake wondering whether you have fallen or whether your faith is real or whether you meant it enough when you were eleven, then the Confessions speak to you differently. Stop looking at yourself. Stop auditing the past. The fact that you fear losing Christ is not the mark of someone who has let go of him. Listen to what Christ says to you now. Your Baptism has not sunk. The absolution is spoken to you. The Supper

is given for you. The Holy Spirit keeps you in the one true faith, and he keeps you by these very gifts. You do not need to verify what happened back then. You need only to hear what God is saying today, and it is good news.

As for the man in the casket, and the family at the lunch: we do not canonize a camp decision, and we do not pronounce on a soul whose last hours only God saw. We commend him to the mercy of God. But we also do not tell the living that it does not matter whether they hear Christ's voice today. It matters more than anything. The promise is always spoken in the present tense, and it is spoken to you.

Related Q&A: ["Are My Future Sins Already Forgiven?"](#) and ["What If I Die with an Unconfessed Sin?"](#)

*Scripture quotations are from the NET Bible®. Confessional citations follow Kolb and Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* (Fortress, 2000).*

Scripture quotations are from the NET Bible® copyright ©1996, 2019 by Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C. All rights reserved. Quoted by permission.