

Assurance Instead of Doubt

When Paul declared: ‘The Son of God... loved me and gave himself for me’ (Gal. 2:20), he was speaking with resounding confidence, telling us that he had a solid assurance that he was Christ’s, and that Christ was his. But was he speaking as an apostle, as one specially favoured to be able to make such a declaration, or was he speaking as a typical believer? Can we, as believers, be as sure as Paul? Or was he simply telling the Galatians a wonderful fact about himself, but one which they could hardly hope to share, even after years of struggle?

Such scriptural examples and consequent questions could be multiplied. Is it only Paul, and a select few with him, who can say: ‘In [Christ] and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence’ (Eph. 3:12)?

Is it only the select few who can declare: ‘I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day’ (2 Tim. 1:12)?

Of whom, and to whom, was John speaking when he said: ‘We know and rely on the love God has for us... We will have confidence on the day of judgement... There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment’ (1 John 4:15-18)?

Of whom was Paul speaking when he declared: ‘God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline’ (2 Tim. 1:7)?

And when he told the Romans: ‘You did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship’ (Rom. 8:15), were the Romans special – or did the apostle’s words apply to all believers in his day? Indeed, do they apply to all believers today?

Or do these words apply to a spiritual elite only: ‘Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come’ (2 Cor. 1:21-22)?

Is it only the favoured few who can be addressed like this: ‘You greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to

suffer grief in all kinds of trials... Though you have not seen [Jesus Christ], you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls' (1 Pet. 1:6,8-9)?

And so on.

Can there be any doubt? These words, all of them, were applicable to all believers at the time they were written, they remained so for all believers in all succeeding generations, and they are still applicable to all believers today. Or should be. It's clear that the New Testament speaks of believers as assured, confident of their position in Christ, full of joy – even in the most dire of circumstances, suffering and persecution – and very far from being wretched, doubting and lacking assurance.

Very well. New Testament believers were assured. That, surely, is a given. And this should be the lot of all true believers today. Sadly, many believers are in serious and debilitating trouble over this vital issue. While there is more than one reason for this grievous state of affairs, the one I wish to address at this time is this: too many believers are in doubt because they have far too low a view of their position and privileges in Christ in the new covenant. And this comes about because they are locked in a system of legal preaching, confined in that dark place by a Confession of faith, a Confession which, in reality, is heavy on law, and all that goes with it.

What am, I talking about? Under this legal system, we are told that we must preach the law to sinners to prepare them for Christ, bringing them to a sufficient sense of their sin to make them fit for trusting Christ.¹ Then, once they are converted, we have to take them back to the law for sanctification. Believers, so we are told, are lazy asses, and must be whipped by the law, driven by the law into sanctification.² Then, we are told, for his assurance the believer must look to his sanctification – which he gets under the law. When he can discover sufficient evidence in his works, then,

¹ This is known as preparationism.

² For full documentation, see my *Christ is All: No Sanctification by the Law*.

and only then, may he be assured. In describing this, I have (as far as I know) coined an expression, calling it ‘legal assurance’.

This legal system is scripturally wrong, and damaging both for the unbeliever and believer. In particular, for his assurance and sanctification (and in that order), the believer ought not to look to himself, ought not to look to his feelings, ought not to look to his works, ought not to look to the law. He ought to look to Christ. He must look to Christ for all. That is where the Spirit will take the believer, if he will listen to *him*. To Christ!

Just a minute! How does this square with John’s first letter? Didn’t the apostle set out a series of tests for the believer, tests which involve the believer in self-examination, making him look at his sanctification, and all in order to gain assurance? And what about passages such as: ‘Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realise that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test?’ (2 Cor. 13:5)? Or: ‘A man ought to examine himself’ (1 Cor. 11:28)? Don’t these passages tell a believer to look to himself and his works, and do so for his assurance? And what about Peter’s command: ‘My brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure’ (2 Pet. 1:10)?³ How can my teaching survive when confronted by such scriptures?

In this short article, I cannot possibly deal with such major questions in detail. *But I have not run away from them*. See my book: *Assurance in The New Covenant*. I invite you to read it. All I can do in this short article is to open up the conversation.

The common view of assurance today – if it’s thought about in any depth at all! – has three steps or levels, each rising in importance. *First*, the believer rests himself upon the bare word of God. The Scriptures promise that if I believe I shall be saved (Acts 16:31); I do believe; therefore I am saved. *Secondly*, the believer tests his life by various evidences spelled out in Scripture – in 1

³ And what about the warning passages (Heb. 6:4-20; 10:26 – 11:1; 12:14-29)? I take these warnings as real, and apply them to sanctification as an essential mark of conversion (Heb. 6:11-12; 10:14), though they might refer to rewards (1 Cor. 3:12-15; 4:5). In either case, the writer to the Hebrews included immediate assurances for his readers concerning their salvation (Heb. 6:9; 10:39; 12:22-24,28).

John, for instance. I love the brothers; therefore, I must be saved (1 John 3:14). And, *thirdly*, there is the direct evidence of the inner witness of the Spirit (Rom. 8:16), the sealing of the Spirit (2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30), the ‘anointing’ (2 Cor. 1:21-22; 1 John 2:20,27). ‘He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself’ (1 John 5:10). And we have the repeated experience of ‘being filled with the Spirit’ (Luke 1:15,41,67; 4:1; Acts 2:4; 4:8,31; 6:3,5; 9:17; 11:24; 13:52; Eph. 5:18).

Building on that,⁴ the majority of Reformed teachers argue that assurance is beyond the reach of most believers. A few may get it, late in life, but most will not. Being reared on a diet of law (in some form or another), living in fear, tied to a grinding treadmill of rule and regulation and consequent introspection, most believers are plodding along, gritting their teeth, burdened with doubt, poring over their lack of sanctification, hoping against hope that on their death-bed they might – just might – get full assurance and be able to say: ‘Christ is mine’.⁵ Actually, according to some of their teachers, the height of a believer’s spirituality is to be in doubt and, consequently, to be miserable and fearful! And when such doubting saints come across someone who claims he is assured, ‘presumption!’ can often spring to their lips or into their mind.⁶

⁴ Often following the later Puritans, with whom this legal assurance originated.

⁵ ‘Full assurance’ needs care. The phrase gives the impression that some believers get *full* assurance but, perhaps, most believers have to put up with a *lesser* assurance. This is quite wrong. The ‘full assurance’ in certain versions of Col. 2:2; 4:12; Heb. 6:11; 10:22 means ‘complete, to make full, having been made full’ – yes, ‘assured’, ‘confident’, *but not in the sense we are thinking about*; namely, personal assurance of being in a state of grace. The context in each case makes this clear. Take Col. 2:2, for instance. Believers must be fully confident in their understanding and knowledge of the mystery of God; namely, Christ. Take Heb. 6:11. Believers should always be diligent to make sure they persevere, and so guarantee their entrance into all that God has prepared for his people.

⁶ A reader told me that, when she was converted as a teenager, she wrote to her former Sunday School superintendent to let him know the good news. The gentleman replied with ‘a blistering letter’ telling her ‘she should not be concerned to know she had an interest in Christ, but whether or not he had an interest in her’!

A few believers, however, take a different route. They claim to have gone further, much further. Being specially favoured, they claim to have had some sort of mystical experience that transcends rational thought, a kind of one-off spiritual hammer-blow, and this has given them ‘assurance’.

All this is quite wrong. According to the New Testament, everyone who believes God’s promise in the gospel, repents of his sin and trusts Christ, has the Spirit. He must have the Spirit (John 14:17; Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 12:13). He could only have repented and believed by the power of the Spirit (John 6:44; Eph. 2:8). Furthermore, the Spirit having enabled the sinner to repent and believe, indwells him (John 14:17; Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 3:16; 1 John 4:13), taking away his fear, giving him the spirit of sonship, enabling him to call God his Father, sealing him, anointing him, and witnessing with his spirit that he is indeed a child of God, having adopted him into his family. He does this by taking him to Christ. Moreover, the Spirit goes on leading the believer to Christ, and speaking to him of Christ, glorifying Christ to him, making Christ precious to him: ‘To you who believe, [Christ] is precious’ (1 Pet. 2:7). In this way, the believer is assured, and given inexpressible joy and glory, with an increasing sense of it (Rom. 8:9-17; 2 Cor. 1:21-22; 2 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 3:26 – 4:7; 5:1,13; Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30; 1 Pet. 1:8; 1 John 2:20-27; 3:24; 4:13; 5:6,9-11, for instance). All this was true of New Testament believers.

This is how the believer gets his assurance – not by his works. The believer’s assurance arises, therefore, not from his sanctification under the law, but by the Spirit taking him to Christ in the gospel. Hence my rejection of ‘legal assurance’, and my emphasis on ‘new-covenant assurance’.

For the majority of believers today, however, talk like this is virtually a foreign language; worse, it is a foreign experience, at least consciously speaking. Indeed, even to talk like this is almost certain to bring the dismissing retort: ‘Charismatic!’ If so, let me remind you, reader, of the apostle’s warnings: ‘Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption’ (Eph. 4:30). ‘Do not put out the Spirit’s fire’ (1 Thess. 5:19). And fire, warmth, the burning heart, is precisely what the downcast disciples experienced on the road to Emmaus when

Christ revealed himself to them through the Scriptures (Luke 24:32). And it is this warmth which believers should have today. Sadly, however, most seem to have lost it. Many have never even heard of it.

Believer, if you are being reared on a diet of law, rule and regulation, give it up! Instead of trying to exist on prison rations, feast your soul by meditating upon such scriptures as these:

If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ... Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry: 'Abba, Father'. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory (Rom. 8:9,14-17).

You also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed,⁷ you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:13-14).

More than meditate upon such scriptures. Listen to the Spirit taking you to Christ. Keep your mind and heart fixed on Jesus:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory... Christ is all, and is in all (Col. 3:1-4,11).

If you do, you will be assured. More than that, you will then go on to live a sanctified life to the glory of God in Christ by the Spirit.⁸

⁷ Do not insert a gap here. 'As you believe, in your believing...'. This is what the apostle is saying. See my *Assurance*.

⁸ Read the verses I have omitted, and see.