

Appendix 1

'The Essence of Faith'

This phrase, 'the essence of faith', continues to play an important role in the way men think about assurance. Some say that assurance is the essence of faith. Others deny it. Who is right? Is assurance the essence of faith?

I am sure it is not. But...

First of all, what is 'essence'? We could use such words as 'core, spirit, heart, real meaning, quintessence, soul, fundamental nature'; the essence is the basic nature of a thing, the quality or qualities that make it what it is. Now assurance, whatever it is, is not the real meaning of faith, it does not define faith. Assurance lies very close to the heart of faith, and it certainly accompanies faith, but it is not its essence. The essence of faith is 'trust'. Assurance, brought about by the witness of the Spirit, by the seal of the Spirit, by the anointing with the Spirit, is a concomitant of faith, it accompanies faith, it runs alongside faith, it is a consequence of faith – just as inclusion in Christ, justification, liberation from death, sin and the law, the removal of fear, the making of sinners into sons, adopting them into the family of God, the turning of rebels into heirs of God, and so on. All these are the concomitants and consequences of faith. And so is assurance. It is as the sinner trusts Christ that he receives all these benefits and graces of the Spirit, including assurance. But none of them are the essence of faith.

I'm certainly not saying that these graces and experiences are optional extras. Nor am I saying that some believers have some of them, but very few have them all. Certainly not! All these gifts and graces, all of them, always accompany saving faith. But they are not faith's essence. As I say, the core, the heart, the fundamental nature of saving faith is trust, trust in Christ. I am not playing with words. Making assurance the essence of faith goes beyond Scripture, leading to the inevitable conclusion that unless a man is assured he cannot be a true believer. This is quite wrong. For we

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know that some New Testament believers had lost their sense of assurance. Even so, they were believers – as John, in his first letter, wrote to assure them. While I recognise that their experience is not precisely the same as many of today's believers (who seem never to be assured), nevertheless John's teaching still can and must be applied to us today, as I showed in the body of my book.¹

But a sense of assurance is not the only note which is often missing in the believer's consciousness today. Take some of the other accompaniments of faith: inclusion in Christ, liberation from the law, the turning of the enemies of God into his sons, the making of rebels into joint-heirs with Christ, and so on. Every believer is in Christ, every believer is freed from the law, every believer is a child of God, and so on, but, alas, not every believer has an active and vibrant sense of these things. Nevertheless, though such believers are impoverished, they are still believers. So it is with assurance.

In short, while the witness of the Spirit is not the essence of faith, it always accompanies saving faith – as much as union with Christ, justification and all the rest. The witness of the Spirit is given to every believer at conversion. Even so, assurance is not 'the essence of faith'.

¹ See the 'Conclusion'.