

## *Why Do Believers Doubt?*

Note the title! Yes, true believers can doubt. Sadly, it is so. It ought not to be, but it's one of those stubborn facts of life – one which will not go away simply by wishing it so. Accommodating the words of Christ (Matt. 26:11; Mark 14:7; John 12:8), it seems we have to accept that 'we will always have the unassured among us'. Why is this? Why do *believers* doubt? As I have explained, one reason is that many are on the wrong spiritual diet. Just as a lack of vitamin D and calcium can produce rickets in children, so misdirected or bad teaching can lead to all sorts of spiritual maladies for believers, including doubt and excessive introspection. Some of it stems from the misinformed preaching they heard before they were converted, and then go on hearing after their conversion. Downright error, of course, will be even more devastating! It happened in the New Testament. And that is why Paul and John (and others) wrote to certain believers – Paul confronting the Judaisers, and Paul and John the proto-Gnostics.<sup>1</sup> Take Paul, writing to the Colossians:

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ (Col. 2:6-8).

Here is Paul's argument: believers have a responsibility. As he tells us: 'See to it that no one takes you captive'. 'See to it!' Captive? Literally, 'makes a prey of you', from the verb *sulagōgeō*, 'to carry

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<sup>1</sup> Gnosticism is very difficult to tie down. Although it flourished from about the 2nd century, the early church faced it in embryo. It involves denial of the true humanity of Christ, a special 'knowledge' available only to the elite, and a tendency to antinomianism. John wrote to deal with it in his day. But notice that John, in prosecuting his argument against Gnosticism and antinomianism did not once mention the law, let alone draw on what would become Calvin's third use of it. Just in case it needs saying, 1 John 2:3; 3:22-24; 5:3 do not refer to the law of Moses.

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off as a captive or slave’; here, ‘to make a slave of by false teaching’. ‘See to it that no one takes you captive *through hollow and deceptive philosophy*, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ’. Here is the point: false teaching, if imbibed and followed, enslaves true believers. And what does slavery produce? Fear, loss of hope, grief, sorrow, and such like.

This passage is not unique. Consider the following:

I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and *put obstacles in your way* that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they *deceive the minds* of naïve people (Rom. 16:17-18).

I am afraid that just as Eve was *deceived* by the serpent’s cunning, *your minds* may somehow be *led astray* from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ (2 Cor. 11:3).

Some people are throwing you into *confusion* and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ (Gal. 1:7).

There are many rebellious people, mere talkers and *deceivers*, especially those of the circumcision group. They must be silenced, because they are *ruining* whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach (Tit. 1:10-11).

I think the case is made. False teaching brings bondage, and bondage brings loss of assurance and joy.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Take 1 Cor. 8:9. This has nothing to do with assurance, but note how believers can be badly affected by what they see other believers doing. In light of this, think how bad *teaching* might cause true believers to stumble. Gill: The apostle tells believers who knew they had liberty that ‘they ought to be cautious, lest they should be the means of offending, or causing to offend, such who were weak in the faith, and had not that knowledge of Christian liberty they had. Not [that] the use of their power and liberty is here denied, but the abuse of it is guarded against... being attended with very bad consequences’. Matthew Henry spoke of ‘the mischief such freedom might do to weaker Christians, persons that had not the same measure of knowledge... Weak Christians may be ignorant, or have but a confused knowledge of the greatest and plainest truths... They were weak in their understanding... contracted... guilt... and so greatly polluted themselves... We should be careful to do nothing that may occasion weak Christians to defile their consciences’. See also Rom. 14 – 15. The principle applies to teaching.

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Paul, we know, was deeply concerned about the Galatians and their loss of joy (Gal. 4:15), and, as John told us, one of the reasons behind his writing his first letter was to bring the believers back into the joy and assurance they had lost.<sup>3</sup> How had the Galatians lost their joy? By listening to the law preachers. How had John's readers lost their joy? By listening to the Gnostics. And so on. The first believers all had the witness of the Spirit at their conversion. But some of them lost their joy – and their assurance – through false teaching.

Now come to our time. We live in the culture of inclusivism induced by Christendom. In saying this, I am speaking about the churches, not merely society. What am I talking about? By 'inclusivism', I mean the way in which we treat unbelievers in our churches, assemblies or meetings, addressing them as believers.<sup>4</sup> It takes many and varied forms, but I am thinking, for instance, of the ambience of 'friendship-evangelism'. Where such an atmosphere of inclusivism prevails, preaching to sinners is severely muted, and the way sinners are dealt with is fundamentally changed. In all this, we radically depart from the New Testament. Unbelievers, under such a system, are badly damaged, deluded as to the way of salvation, and possibly deceived to their eternal ruin. Do we not see the evidence all around us, staring us in the face? This evidence – the production of many unconverted professors (Ishmaels not Isaacs as one old saint called them) – can only increase the longer it goes on. The harvest will be grim, not only for the individuals concerned, but for the churches. As for those who are genuinely converted under such a system, is it surprising that many of them, as it were, suffer birth damage as a result of mishandling at the point of conversion? We know of the consequences of such mistreatment in the physical realm. Does the same not apply in the spiritual realm?

Now think of those who are existing in an atmosphere of (overt or incipient) law teaching, including preparationism, where they are taught by men who never mention the witness of the Spirit, or, perhaps refer to it only to stress that the experience is beyond the reach of most believers. And say this has been going for decades, if not centuries? It is surely not surprising that such people, if they are

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<sup>3</sup> In Appendix 3, I justify these claims with regard to 1 John.

<sup>4</sup> See my *Infant* pp271-274,292; *Baptist* pp327-332; *Glorious* pp186-195.

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genuinely converted, nevertheless are totally confused about the witness of the Spirit – if they think about it at all. The effect that this must have on assurance is patent.

How can we help believers who are struggling with lack of assurance because of this kind of teaching? Unless we are prepared to say that those who do not have a clear experience and understanding of the witness of the Spirit are not converted,<sup>5</sup> that assurance is an essential mark of faith,<sup>6</sup> then we must have a way of helping *true believers* who are so damaged.

And many are damaged in this way. If we live on a diet of misguided (or worse) teaching, one in which we are constantly given the legal view of assurance,<sup>7</sup> and told how it is virtually impossible for us ever to get assurance, then it can hardly be wondered that loss of joy will be our inevitable lot!

This is such a vital matter, let me substantiate it by one or two more illustrations. Have you heard of Émile Coué de la Châtaigneraie? A French psychologist, living from 1857-1926, Coué gave the world ‘the Coué method’, in which a patient repeats the mantra: ‘Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better’. The patient says this to himself daily, twenty times a day, including first thing in the morning and last thing at night. And to a certain extent it works. The idea, repeated and reinforced, becomes a reality. I suggest that if believers are reared on a diet of legal preaching, where they are told repeatedly that sanctification is the way to assurance, told repeatedly that introspection is the key, and told repeatedly that even so the struggle will probably be fruitless – a kind of dark Couéism, Couéism in reverse – it can hardly be surprising if believers end up lacking assurance.

Put it to the test on a related issue. We know that the believer, as he comes to faith, is united to Christ, dies to the law, and is delivered from the law. This, beyond question, is the plain teaching of the New Testament, especially Romans 6 – 8.<sup>8</sup> Very well. Imagine a teacher who insists – and keeps insisting – that in order

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<sup>5</sup> Which some people do say.

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix 1.

<sup>7</sup> I will fully explain my terms, and justify my claims, in the following chapter.

<sup>8</sup> See my *Christ* for all my supporting evidence.

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to die to the law, and be liberated from the law, believers must struggle for it, long for it, pray for it, seek it, agonise for it – over many years – but continually warns his hearers and readers that most of them will never get there. What do you think will be the effect on his hearers?

So it is with assurance. If believers are taught by one who never mentions assurance by the witness of the Spirit – let alone argues for it from Scripture – or tells them that it comes only to the favoured few, and then only after a protracted and tormenting struggle – is it likely that such unfortunate believers will become assured? This preacher, probably wrestling with his own lack of assurance, is hardly best placed to help others beset by the same difficulty.

And a ministry lacking a proper emphasis on the Spirit is not fanciful! It can happen. It has happened. Remember the men at Ephesus:

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them: ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’ They answered: ‘No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit’ (Acts 19:1-2).

How did that manifest itself do you think?

Here’s another illustration. Do you remember Hiroo Onoda – that Japanese soldier who was found in the jungle – the one who for almost thirty years did not know that the Second World War had finished in 1945, or at least refused to believe it? He had seen a leaflet telling him the war was over, but he wouldn’t believe it – and he remained in bondage, fighting a lost cause.

What about us today? I am saying that many believers are taught into a lack of assurance. Instead of listening to the Spirit – maybe the ‘still small voice’ or ‘gentle whisper’ (1 Kings 19:12), or ‘whisper divine’<sup>9</sup> – they listen to the strident warnings of those who tell them again and again that assurance is only really possible to

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<sup>9</sup> J.Stocker: ‘Great Father of mercies, thy goodness I own,/ And the covenant love of thy crucified Son;/ All praise to the Spirit, whose whisper divine/ Seals mercy, and pardon, and righteousness mine’ (*Gospel Hymns* number 51).

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the favoured few, and that after years of struggle. This *is* happening today.

Just a minute! Isn't the Spirit sovereign? He overcomes Satan himself, and all the bondage he has produced, to regenerate the dead sinner, doesn't he? Can't he, therefore, break through the clinging fog of doubt which is so prevalent in many circles today? Yes, of course he can. Why, then, should any believer doubt his salvation? Why doesn't the Spirit witness with his spirit, and give him that assurance? Indeed, doesn't the Scripture say that the Spirit *does* witness to the believer, *does* anoint and seal him? So why, I ask again, should any believer doubt?

I do not find it easy to answer these questions. Except in this way: the same argument could be used on more than assurance. Take the law. As I have said, the New Testament teaches us plainly that when a sinner trusts Christ he dies to the law, is united to Christ, is married to Christ, and in this way – and only in this way – he bears fruit to God; namely, produces a life of sanctification. Indeed, the New Testament teaches that unless a man has died to the law, he cannot be married to Christ, he cannot bear fruit to God (Rom. 7:1-6). How is it, then, that so many believers deny such teaching – many openly asserting the direct opposite; namely, that the believer *is* under the law, the ten commandments, for sanctification? Are these believers not sanctified? Are they not married to Christ? Of course they are – even though they don't understand the teaching of Scripture, even though they deny the very scriptures which teach the doctrine. Despite this gross mistake, they are, nevertheless, sanctified in Christ! But how is such ignorance possible? Why has the Spirit not taught every believer on the law? How is that there are any believers who advocate the law as the perfect rule for the children of God?

I can't answer that. I don't know. But I am not prepared to say that Reformed believers who argue strongly for the law are not sanctified believers. Some might. But I dare not. I prefer to live with the conundrum. I will do all I can to teach such believers a better way, trying to help them get off the treadmill, pointing them to the Scriptures, pointing them to Christ – and yet, all the time, I have to go on living with the unresolved difficulty of how it's all possible.

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Take the believer's union with Christ. Isn't this plainly taught in Romans 6? Of course it is! Yet how is it that so many believers remain in ignorance of the great truth – ignorant of an experience that all have – including these very believers – through their trust in Christ? How is it that Lloyd-Jones, when preaching that chapter, had to confess that he had looked in vain in the Congregational hymn-book for hymns on the subject – all the entries in that section speaking in terms of 'fellowship', something quite different to 'union with Christ'. While the phrase 'in Christ'<sup>10</sup> is ubiquitous throughout the New Testament, how is it that the great majority of believers remain sadly ignorant of their status in Christ – with consequent loss of the joy this must bring?

How is it that some Christians argue vehemently against free and sovereign grace (almost picturing God as one who borders on being impotent), and for the freedom of the will of man, yet continue to thank God for converting them, and pray for others to be converted? Why thank God for what they say he couldn't do, and ask him for what they say he can't do? Why not concentrate on what they claim to be the real power behind the throne – the free will of man? I don't know. But it happens! And confusion spells trouble!

Another example of what I am trying to say, and one closer to the matter in hand, may be found in the sorrow brought about by ignorance and misunderstanding over the state of the believing dead, and the return of Christ. This was not unknown in apostolic times (1 Cor. 15:1-58; 1 Thess. 4:13-18). How did Paul get the Thessalonians out of the sorrow brought about by their ignorance over the truth? By instructing them in the gospel, and taking them to Christ: 'Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus...' (1 Thess. 4:13-14). The same, I suggest, goes for assurance by the Spirit. If I may accommodate the apostle's words: 'Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about the witness of the Spirit, or to grieve like doubters, who have no assurance. We believe that Jesus gave us his Spirit...'

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<sup>10</sup> The GNB translates 'in Christ' as 'in union with Christ'. Excellent!

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So, while a lack of assurance *can* indicate a lack of conversion, I am sure that most *unconverted* will have no qualms about their state,<sup>11</sup> whereas genuine believers will think of the possibility of being deceived, and dread it. They know what it is to pray:

Test me, O LORD, and try me, examine my heart and my mind (Ps. 26: 2).

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting (Ps. 139:23-24).

In other words, believers who fear that they might not be truly converted are, in truth, giving evidence that they are! Who else but the Spirit could make a sinner so long for Christ, long to be assured, and dreads to think he might be deceived?<sup>12</sup>

In short, the great contemporary source of that cursed doubt suffered by many believers is the near-ubiquitous emphasis on law (in one form or another – the law of Moses, recipe preaching, or conformity to rule), on works, on sanctification for assurance, and on introspection (overt or incipient). And this stifles the voice and witness of the Spirit. On the reverse side of the coin, the signal lack of preaching and teaching today on the work of the Spirit (and, I am sorry to have to say, to this I have to plead guilty), the absence of reinforced teaching on the Spirit directing believers to Christ, leads many true believers into a miasma of doubt. But this does not mean that such victims – I use the word advisedly – are not true believers.

Consider the Gospel Standard Strict Baptists. I speak of what I know, having had some association with them, both by experience, and by studying their teaching and writing about it. Alas, a believer reared in that denomination will find it almost impossible to come to biblical assurance and express it. The whole atmosphere is against it. Indeed, the air is heavy with the notion that doubt is good and spiritual, and doubt is the only way to be sure of one's safety in Christ! And yet, in my experience, the spirituality of such people

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<sup>11</sup> Jude spoke of 'men [who] are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you *without the slightest qualm*' (Jude 12) – and that despite the apostle's warning (1 Cor. 11:27 – 32).

<sup>12</sup> Some unbelievers, I admit, might wish to avoid hell, and that's all. But this, again, will be fed by defective gospel preaching.



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often knocks into a cocked hat the ‘spirituality’ of believers outside their circle! What a puzzle!

The particular form of trouble I am concerned with here – and which I will explore in the following chapter – is legal assurance, that which is brought about by legal preaching as opposed to gospel preaching. This, I contend, is responsible for much of our introspection and lack of assurance. Speaking as an Englishman, centuries of Puritan teaching have penetrated me to such an extent that it is in my genes and DNA.<sup>13</sup>

And in all this, I am thinking not only of overt legal preaching. Sadly, there is a great deal of the incipient variety: preaching rules, regulations, conformity, and not Christ. And this is often coupled with a low, desiccated view of justification by faith.<sup>14</sup> And the incipient, perhaps more than overt, form of legal preaching carries the can for much of our lack of assurance, and our consequent fear and doubt, and loss of joy.

A.W.Pink analysed this lack of assurance:

*The assurance of some of God's dear children has been hindered by a defective ministry. They have sat under teaching which was too one-sided, failing to preserve a due balance between the objective and the subjective aspects of the truth. They have been encouraged to be far more occupied with self than with Christ. Knowing that many are deceived, fearful lest they also should be, their main efforts are directed to self-examination. Disgusted, too, by the loud boastings of empty professors, perceiving the worthlessness of the carnal confidence voiced by the frothy religionists all around them, they hesitate to avow the assurance of salvation lest they be guilty of presumption or be puffed up by the devil. Indeed, they have come to regard doubtings, fears and uncertainty, as the best evidence of spiritual humility.*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Take the sabbath. My father was not a believer, but in the 40s and 50s he would not allow me to play in the street on Sunday (which, because of Puritan teaching, was thought to be the sabbath), my mother would never dream of hanging washing (laundry) on the line, and we had clothes known as ‘Sunday best’. ‘Better the day, better the deed’ was the general catch-phrase to cover any misdemeanour.

<sup>14</sup> See my *Four*.

<sup>15</sup> Pink, emphasis mine.

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While I acknowledge that Pink would *not* agree with me as to the ‘defective ministry’ in question, he has surely put his finger on the spot. It’s time we took a hard look at legal teaching on assurance – that which is responsible for the widespread lack of joy among believers today.