

New-Covenant Assurance

According to the New Testament, everyone who believes God's promise in the gospel, and trusts Christ, has the Spirit.¹ He must have the Spirit (John 14:17; Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 12:13). He could only have believed by the power of the Spirit (John 6:44; Eph. 2:8). Furthermore, the Spirit having enabled the sinner to believe, then 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. 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.

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).² 'Do not put out the Spirit's fire' (1 Thess. 5:19).³ And fire, warmth, the burning heart, is precisely

¹ For this article, I have lightly edited my *Assurance in The New Covenant* pp97-113.

² John Gill: Believers grieve the Holy Spirit 'especially when they entertain any undervaluing [thoughts] of Jesus Christ, whose glorifier he is'.

³ Matthew Henry: 'We quench the Spirit if we do not stir up our spirits, and all that is within us, to comply with the motions of the good Spirit'. Calvin: 'The meaning... is: "Be enlightened by the Spirit of God. See that you do not lose that light through your ingratitude". This is an exceedingly useful admonition... We must, therefore, be on our guard against indolence, by which the light of God is choked in us... It is our part to ask from the Lord, that he would furnish oil to the lamps which

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 believers seem to have lost it.

For some, assurance has become largely a matter of the mind, little to do with the heart. Too often, having been presented with facts, mere facts, facts which we believe – that is, assent to them, or, in the words of N.T.Wright,⁴ ‘learn our lines and join in the drama’ – we end up with so-called ‘assurance’; *and that, for many, is as far as it goes*. And this, if assent is all it is, is not saving. Many preachers, wishing to avoid this sorry state in their hearers, instruct converts to pore over their works, promising them the possibility (but not the probability or likelihood) of assurance after years of struggle. Rarely, these days, does the teacher speak of the inner witness, the burning heart. Too often, as I say, any mention of an emotional heart-warming, or talk of the Spirit’s inner witness, sealing or anointing, is frowned upon as charismaticism – and dismissed.

How is it that New Testament believers enjoyed this assurance, yet many of us today do not? There is no doubt about it. The weakening of our hold on the new covenant – to put it no stronger – is a major contributing factor in this. More! It’s not our hold on the new covenant which is wanted; it’s the new-covenant’s grip on us! Many today, however, instead of sitting

he has lighted up, that he may keep the wick pure, and may even increase it’. Gill thought the apostle may have been referring to ‘the graces of the Spirit, which may be compared to light, and fire, and heat, to which the allusion is in the text: such as faith, which is a light in the soul, a seeing of the Son, and an evidence of things not seen; and love, which gives a vehement flame, which many waters cannot quench; and zeal, which is the boiling up of love, the fervency of it; and spiritual knowledge, which is also light, and of an increasing nature, and are all graces of the Spirit. And though these cannot be totally extinguished, and utterly put out and lost, yet they may be greatly damped. The light of faith may become dim, and the flame of love be abated, and that wax cold. The heat of zeal may pass into lukewarmness, and an indifference of spirit. And the light of knowledge seem to decline instead of increasing’.

⁴ N.T.Wright: ‘Believing and Belonging’ (ntwrightpage.com).

under those who preach the gospel, are listening to men who preach law: either overtly, the Mosaic law (usually whittled down, without scriptural warrant, to the ten commandments, which they call ‘the moral law’); or incipiently, by issuing a cataract of recipes, the rules and regulations. In this way, many believers are being taught into doubt, introspection, bondage and sadness. By law preachers I mean those who mistakenly preach the law to sinners to so-say prepare them for Christ, and bring them to him, who then go on to preach the law to saints to make them progressively sanctified,⁵ and hence to gain some sort of assurance. And all the while they should be preaching Christ – preaching Christ to sinners and saints, preaching Christ for every grace.

It is not just me saying it. I get it from Paul. He said that ‘Christ is all’ (Col. 3:11). Listen to him, speaking when he was languishing in prison, and could not preach – in the usual sense of the word. He knew that others, outside the prison, were taking advantage of his confinement. Some were rubbing salt into his wounds. Others, emboldened by his example, were preaching more fearlessly than before. And Paul rejoiced! Why? Whether men were preaching to mock and hurt him, or were preaching to follow his example, the apostle rejoiced, because, as he said, ‘the word of God’ is preached, ‘the gospel’ is preached; above all, as he said: ‘Christ is preached’ (Phil. 1:12-18). Is this not clear enough? Christ is preached! This is what made the apostle tick, this is what made him rejoice. We must, therefore, preach Christ!

⁵ By ‘progressive sanctification’, I mean the believer’s imperfect (in this life) outworking of the perfect positional-sanctification he has in Christ by virtue of his union with Christ at his conversion. The sinner, on coming to faith, is united to Christ and is justified and positionally sanctified. Thus, in God’s sight, in Christ he is accounted or made righteous, free of sin and condemnation, and perfectly separated unto God. (See, for instance, 1 Cor. 1:2,30; 6:11; Eph. 5:25-27; Heb. 10:10-18; 13:12). In his Christian life, he has to work out his perfection in Christ, and he will be moved to do so by the Spirit under the direction of Scripture; this is his progressive sanctification or holiness of life. But this, alas, is imperfect. The believer will only be absolutely sanctified in the eternal state. I will set out in my arguments on all this in my forthcoming book on sanctification.

If this is not sufficiently convincing, consider Paul's declaration to the Corinthians:

We preach Christ crucified... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God... Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption... I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 1:23-24,30; 2:2).

As the apostle went on to tell them: 'Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!' (1 Cor. 9:16). Do not miss the point: this was Paul's consistent practice, whether addressing sinners or saints. He always preached Christ; he never preached anyone or anything else! He did not preach a creed. He did not preach a confession or a catechism. He preached the word of God, the Scriptures. And that means he preached Christ, for Christ is in all the Scriptures (Luke 24:27,32). See 1 Corinthians 15:1-11. Paul preached Christ as Lord (2 Cor. 4:5). Christ, not law! He did not preach the law to Gentile unbelievers,⁶ and he never preached the law to believers. He would mention the law to them (Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14; Eph. 6:1-4), and use it as an illustration or paradigm (model or pattern), yes, but he always preached Christ. Take those very verses. Read the passages which precede and follow them. What do you find? The apostle never allowed his use of the law to compromise his focus, his theme: Christ! As he told the Ephesian elders:

You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus... I consider my life

⁶ The apostles used the law when addressing unconverted Jews, since the Jews were familiar with it. But they were prepared to use anything to illustrate what they were saying. The fact that they never used the law when addressing Gentile unbelievers showed their wisdom – why use something of which their hearers knew nothing? More, it makes my point. Gentiles were converted to Christ without the use of the law. It cannot be necessary therefore, to preach the law to the unconverted. The law does not prepare sinners for Christ. In any case, sinners do not need to be prepared or made fit for Christ!

worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace... I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God... I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified (Acts 20:20-32).

There is a direct connection between this kind of preaching and the way sinners were converted and enjoyed assurance in New Testament days. And I say there is a connection, today, between legal preaching and our lack of assurance.⁷ The last day will declare it.

In short, assurance comes, not by harrowing introspection, raking over one’s progressive sanctification, but by the witness of the Spirit. This is the apostolic testimony.

But what about these passages (in 1 and 2 Corinthians, 2 Peter and 1 John) which call the believer to self-examination, and the like, in order to assure himself? Don’t they fly in the face of what I have asserted? They do not!⁸

What about: ‘Work out your salvation with fear and trembling’ (Phil. 2:12)? Surely, seeing believers have to ‘fear’ and ‘tremble’, they can hardly be said to be assured, can they? This, of course, is to completely misread the apostle’s meaning in that verse. Look at its context for a start. Paul is saying that believers are never to become smug, self-confident and careless. He’s not remotely calling believers to doubt their assurance in Christ!

John Calvin, commenting on the verse, spoke of the Papists who:

...pervert this passage so as to shake the assurance of faith, for the man that trembles is in uncertainty. They, accordingly, understand Paul’s words as if they meant that we ought, during our whole life, to waver as to assurance of salvation. If, however, we would not have Paul contradict himself, he does not by any means exhort us to

⁷ It could even be that ‘conversion’ is a casualty of today’s preaching. This is no idle concern. Preaching law, especially in its incipient form, can so easily produce conformity and not conversion – fatal!

⁸ For my reasons, see my *Assurance* pp137-177.

hesitation, inasmuch as he everywhere recommends confidence and full assurance. The solution, however, is easy, if anyone is desirous of attaining the true meaning [of the passage] without any spirit of contention. There are two kinds of fear; the one produces anxiety along with humility; the other hesitation. The former is opposed to fleshly confidence and carelessness, equally as to arrogance; the latter, to assurance of faith. Further, we must take notice, that, as believers repose with assurance upon the grace of God, so, when they direct their views to their own frailty, they do not by any means resign themselves carelessly to sleep, but are by fear of dangers stirred up to prayer. Yet, so far is this fear from disturbing tranquillity of conscience, and shaking confidence, that it rather confirms it. For distrust of ourselves leads us to lean more confidently upon the mercy of God. And this is what Paul's words import, for he requires nothing from the Philippians, but that they submit themselves to God with true self-renunciation.

Calvin's words ought to be weighed – not least by those who profess to hold him in high regard: 'Believers [must] repose with assurance upon the grace of God', and not 'direct their views to their own frailty'; that is, their progressive sanctification.

Let me spell out what is at stake, and what is NOT at stake, in all that I have said.

Let me start with the negative. Progressive sanctification is not at issue. Progressive sanctification, godliness of life is essential. If a professing believer is not sanctified in his life-style, he is showing that he is not justified or positionally sanctified. While progressive sanctification does not contribute to our justification or positional sanctification, it is an essential and inevitable concomitant and outcome of both. In all their letters, the apostles wrote to believers, and urged them to greater godliness – in line with the categorical assertion that progressive sanctification is essential and inevitable for the true child of God (2 Cor. 5:17). Thus, if a man has no interest in progressive sanctification, he is demonstrating that he is not saved. There can be no happiness without holiness, since 'without holiness no one will see the Lord' (Heb. 12:14). Progressive sanctification is essential.

Progressive sanctification is also necessary for other believers to recognise the converted: there is no promise that the Spirit will

bear witness with your spirit that I am converted. I can only show you that by my life:

By their fruit you will recognise them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit... Thus, by their fruit you will recognise them (Matt. 7:16-20).

Progressive sanctification also serves as a secondary confirmation for believers who have, for some reason or another, lost their assurance.⁹

No believer is perfect in this life. Sinless perfection, this side of glory, is found only in Christ.

Every believer will suffer persecution, meet trouble, be faced with temptations, come into affliction, and have questions, difficulties and doubts.

None of that is at issue.

And now for the positive. Assurance is primarily by the witness of the Spirit, not by progressive sanctification. It is a fact – a fact, I say – that every believer in the New Testament, at conversion, was joined to Christ, included in Christ, had his spirit of fear removed, received the Spirit of adoption, and had the witness of the Spirit. Every believer had all this, and had it *before* any progressive sanctification could possibly have taken place. And this means that New Testament believers were assured, not by their progressive sanctification, but by the witness of the Spirit.

Yes, through bad or false teaching – maybe in other ways too – some New Testament believers lost their assurance, but the apostles did not write to tell them that this was what they must expect! They didn't tell them that only a favoured few ever get assurance, and most of them get it only on their death-bed!¹⁰ No! Far from encouraging them to go on struggling with their doubt,

⁹ For Calvin on this, see my *Assurance* pp148-150; 'John Turned Upside Down' (the Edocs link on David H J Gay Ministry sermonaudio.com).

¹⁰ See my *Assurance* pp71-95; 'Legal Assurance' (the Edocs link on David H J Gay Ministry sermonaudio.com).

they wrote to restore those doubting believers to their former joy, and restore them at once, there and then.¹¹ And they did it, above all, by taking them back to Christ and free grace. This is the very thing Paul did when addressing the Galatians: he took them back to where they began and where they had left the right road (Gal. 3:1-5; 4:15-16). One thing is certain: no apostle ever sought to ‘help’ doubting believers by preaching introspection and law.

Calvin’s comments on Paul’s demand to the Galatians – ‘I would like to learn just one thing from you’ (Gal. 3:2) – are pertinent here:

[The apostle] now proceeds to support his cause by additional arguments. The first is drawn from their experience, for he reminds them in what manner the gospel was introduced among them. When they heard the gospel, they received the Spirit. It was not to the law, therefore, but to faith,¹² that they owed the reception of this benefit. This same argument is employed by Peter in the defence which he makes to his brethren for having baptised uncircumcised persons (Acts 10:47). Paul and Barnabas followed the same course in the debate which they maintained at Jerusalem on this subject (Acts 15:2,12).

Here is the material point: the Galatian believers had received the Spirit at their conversion, *and they knew it and felt it*. So much so, the apostle could call upon that fact in taking them back to the joy they had lost through the law men. Likewise, it was the evidence of the gift of the Spirit in others that enabled Peter, Paul and Barnabas to speak of *their* conversion.¹³

¹¹ See my *Assurance* pp137-154; ‘John Turned Upside Down’ (the Edocs link on David H J Gay Ministry sermonaudio.com).

¹² Calvin: “‘Faith’ is here put, by a figure of speech, for the gospel, which is elsewhere called ‘the law of faith’ (Rom. 3:27), because it exhibits to us the free grace of God in Christ, without any merit of works’. While there is truth in this, the subjective use of ‘faith’ is in the context (Gal. 3:14).

¹³ It might be that the gift of the Spirit in the above cases referred to the ‘extraordinary’, but Calvin, while not rejecting this view, took the reception of the Spirit to be the ‘ordinary’, quoting Eph. 1:13 in support. In the Galatians’ case, Calvin was right. See Gal. 3:14. Calvin: ‘It was enough for Paul’s purpose, that the Galatians knew that the power of the

Note Calvin's ringing statement: 'When [the Galatians] heard the gospel, they received the Spirit. It was not to the law, therefore, but to faith [that is, the gospel], that they owed the reception of this benefit'. This is of the utmost importance bearing in mind the context of the letter: the law teachers, and the havoc they were causing at Galatia, the damage they were inflicting upon the believers there.

I would only add that Calvin's observation applies to more than the start of the Christian life. It is not under the law, or by the law, that sinners come to Christ. It is not under the law, or by the law, or by looking to the law, that believers get assurance and go on to progressive sanctification, but by the Spirit, under the provisions of the new covenant. Paul had progressive sanctification in mind when he wrote to the Galatians in order to refute the law teachers and to enforce the new covenant. He well knew that only Christ, by his Spirit, in the new covenant can produce vital godliness in the believer. The law cannot do it. And that is why, in his conversion, the believer has died to the law: he has died to the law so that he can be married to Christ and so produce spiritual fruit (Rom. 7:4-6). And that is why the new covenant, and not the law, was the ministry that the apostle gloried in (2 Cor. 3:1 – 4:6). And that is why the new covenant must be our ministry. The law will not prepare sinners for Christ; the law will not bring sinners to Christ; the law will not assure believers or make them progressively sanctified.

In all this, do not miss the vital connection between the gift of the Spirit and Christ's accomplishment in establishing the new covenant. More, do not miss the fact that the gift of the Spirit is a *direct consequence* of Christ's triumph in fulfilling the old covenant and bringing in the new. As Peter told the Jews on the day of Pentecost:

Jesus of Nazareth... being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that he should be held by it... This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses.

Holy Spirit... had accompanied Paul's doctrine, and that believers were variously endowed with the gifts of the Spirit for general edification'.

Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he poured out this which you now see and hear (Acts 2:22-33).

It was just as Christ had promised: 'He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water'. John left us in no doubt as to what Christ meant: 'But this he spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified' (John 7:38-39). The conclusion is obvious. In these days of the new covenant, Jesus, being glorified, now bestows his Spirit upon his elect in order that 'the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we [who believe] might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith' (Gal. 3:14). And we know that the Spirit always glorifies Christ, not himself:

When he, the Spirit of truth, has come, he will guide you into all truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak; and he will tell you things to come. He will glorify me, for he will take of what is mine and declare it to you (John 16:13-14).

Consequently, our part in all this is clear: as the apostle told the Galatians, we must keep in step with the Spirit (Gal. 5:25). Every preacher, therefore, ought to take heed to what Calvin said when commenting on 1 John 5:13-14 – and do it! I stress the relevant passage:

But we ought to observe the way in which faith is confirmed, even by having the office and power of Christ explained to us. For the apostle says that he wrote these things, that is, that eternal life is to be sought nowhere else but in Christ, in order that they who were believers already might believe, that is, make progress in believing. *It is therefore the duty of a godly teacher, in order to confirm disciples in the faith, to extol as much as possible the grace of Christ, so that being satisfied with that, we may seek nothing else.*

Believers who are instructed to look to their progressive sanctification for assurance, are, therefore, being seriously misdirected. They are traversing an unscriptural track. Misguidedly struggling to gain assurance by probing their works, they are on a course which is bound to leave them in constant

suspense. Who can say his progressive sanctification is perfect? Who has enough progressive sanctification? Who can say his progressive sanctification is good enough for assurance? Sadness and bondage must be the result for any sensitive, thinking believer.

Let me illustrate by my own experience. When I was a young believer, I knew I didn't blaspheme, I wasn't committing adultery, I wasn't getting drunk, I never drank. 'I'm a good, spiritual man!', I might have thought. But it wasn't long before I began to see things in a very different light. And now, many years later, I certainly know that's not all there is to it – no, not by a long chalk! There are sins, maybe greater sins, which are more secret, more inward: pride, arrogance, jealousy, bitterness, grudge-bearing, impatience, covetousness, prejudice, resentment, and the like. Am I guilty of them? And what about motive? I preach. Why do I preach? Do I preach faithfully? Do I preach to myself first? Do I always take my own medicine? Where's my heart? How's my heart? What about hypocrisy? And so on and on. Do you see what I mean? In the beginning, it's drunkenness and blasphemy and external sins. Now, it's... I'll never get to the end of it! In myself, I'm a sinner through and through, and if I look within, what do I see? Do I see enough spirituality? Do I have sufficient evidence to show me that I am a believer, that I am a *true* believer, a *sincere* believer, a *strong* believer, a *consistent* believer, a believer with progressive sanctification good enough to make me certain that I'm a true believer? Speaking for myself, I simply cannot discover any hope for assurance by my progressive sanctification. So much for me. Reader, what about you?

But if, following the path marked out by the apostles, the believer is taught and encouraged to look to Christ, Christ bearing witness in his heart through his Holy Spirit, the Spirit bearing witness to Christ, and glorifying him to the believer, bearing witness to all the glories the believer has in his free justification and positional sanctification in Christ, well, then assurance is the result!

Take Richard Baxter and his testimony as to the way legal preaching brings bondage. Not only that! Listen to him pointing to the remedy:

For those doubts of my own salvation, which exercised me many years, the chiefest causes of them were these... because I could not distinctly trace the workings of the Spirit upon my heart in that method which Mr Bolton, Mr Hooker, Mr Rogers, and other divines describe... I was once [inclined] to meditate on my own heart... I was continually poring either on my sins or wants, or examining my sincerity... *but now, though I am greatly convinced of the need of heart-acquaintance... yet I see more need of a higher work, and that I should look often upon Christ, and God, and heaven, [rather] than upon my own heart.*¹⁴

And what about: ‘And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 13:52)? I have no doubt about the reason! Doesn’t the New Testament teach that God decreed the salvation of his elect in eternity past, that he sent his Son into the world to live and die for them in order to save them? Doesn’t it teach that the elect, having been brought by the Spirit to repentance and faith, are perfectly, fully and absolutely justified and positionally sanctified – free of sin and clothed with the righteousness of Christ, without fault or stain, and utterly beyond condemnation? And doesn’t it teach that the believer, contemplating Christ, contemplating his own perfection in Christ, is moved to seek to live to the glory of the triune God who planned, accomplished and applies salvation to him? Doesn’t it teach that when the believer gets to glory, God will reward him for his good works done out of his gratitude to God for his love, grace and mercy?¹⁵ Doesn’t the New Testament teach that the believer has died to sin, law and death, and is alive to God, fruitful to God, liberated and empowered, and has ever increasing glory and unspeakable joy, and has it now? And, in the midst of all this, immediately at the point of faith and union with Christ, doesn’t the Spirit bear witness with the believer, seal him and anoint him? Doesn’t all

¹⁴ Richard Baxter: *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter*, J.M.Dent & Sons Ltd., London, 1931, pp10,113, emphasis mine.

¹⁵ Not that the works merit salvation, of course, but they do bring reward.

this bring assurance? And doesn't all this feed on itself? A *gracious* circle, indeed!

As William Hammond put it:

We are not to live upon the [progressive] sanctification that is wrought in us, but the [positional] sanctification that is in Christ. Otherwise, we shall live upon the streams instead of the fountain... They are truly happy who live by the faith of the Son of God. Blessed are they who see Christ their all in all, and who see nothing at all, indeed, and desire to see nothing at all but Christ alone. While the eye of the soul is steadily fixed on Christ, that soul is perfectly happy, so happy that it cannot be happier, unless in the full fruition of Christ in glory. But the moment we take our eye off from Christ, and look after something else beside the Lord Christ, that moment, I say, our souls are unsettled, confused and distressed. We then become quite uneasy, and utterly miserable; nor can we find any comfort or satisfaction till we return to our rest; that is, to Christ... Never turn your eye from Christ any more, but keep looking to him continually. Behold him as the author and finisher of your faith; look upon him as the alpha and omega, the first and the last, the beginning and end of your salvation (Heb. 12:1; Rev. 1:8,11). And look at nothing else, either within you or without you, but Christ; for in him you are complete (Col. 2:10); in him you are perfect (Col. 1:28); in him you are washed, in him you are sanctified, in him you are justified (1 Cor. 6:11). He is made unto us of God, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30). In him we are perfect and entire, wanting nothing (Jas. 1:4). And this is properly Christian perfection, because indeed this perfection is not inherent in us, but it subsists in Christ, and is ours only by virtue of our union with Christ. Every Christian, truly so called, is one with Christ (1 Cor. 6:17), and therefore purifies himself even as he is pure (1 John 3:3). He is righteous even as he [Christ] is righteous (1 John 3:7). He is merciful as God is merciful (Luke 6:36). He is holy as God is holy (1 Pet. 1:15-16). He is perfect as his Father which is in heaven is perfect (Matt. 5:48).¹⁶

¹⁶ William Hammond: 'A Preface, Giving Some Account of a Weak Faith, and a Full Assurance of Faith; and Briefly Stating the Doctrine of Sanctification; and Showing a Christian's Completeness, Perfection, and Happiness in Christ' in *Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, W. Strahan, London, 1745, xxi-xxiv.

Reader, are you looking to the law – or to Christ? Are you looking to your works for assurance – or to Jesus? Are you a preacher? Do you preach Christ? Preach him, not law! Preach Christ!

As William Gadsby expressed it:

*Immortal honours rest on Jesus' head;
My God, my portion, and my living bread;
In him I live, upon him cast my care;
He saves from death, destruction, and despair.*

*He is my refuge in each deep distress;
The Lord my strength and glorious righteousness;
Through floods and flames he leads me safely on,
And daily makes his sovereign goodness known.*

*My every need he richly will supply;
Nor will his mercy ever let me die;
In him there dwells a treasure all divine,
And matchless grace has made that treasure mine.*

*O that my soul could love and praise him more,
His beauties trace, his majesty adore;
Live near his heart, upon his bosom lean;
Obey his voice, and all his will esteem.*

And Horatius Bonar:

*I bless the Christ of God,
I rest on love divine,
And with unfaltering lip and heart,
I call this Saviour mine.*

*His cross dispels each doubt,
I bury in his tomb
Each thought of unbelief and fear,
Each lingering shade of gloom.*

*I praise the God of peace,
I trust his truth and might;
He calls me his, I call him mine,
My God, my joy, my light.*

*In him is only good,
In me is only ill;
My ill but draws his goodness forth,*

And me he loveth still.

*'Tis he who saveth me,
And freely pardon gives;
I love because he loveth me;
I live because he lives.*

*My life with him is hid,
My death has passed away,
My clouds have melted into light,
My midnight into day.*

To those who still doubt, and still wonder how all this could cure them of their lack of assurance, let me try once more. The witness of the Spirit with your spirit – how and what does he witness to? Christ! Now then tell me: What do you think of Jesus? What has the Spirit enabled you to think and say about Jesus? Is he precious to you? Peter is adamant: ‘To you who believe, [the Lord Jesus Christ] is precious’ (1 Pet. 2:7). Let me put it the other way about: ‘Those who believe call Jesus precious’. Jesus is precious. Can you say that? You can? Can you say: ‘Jesus is precious to me’? You can? Well... how can you say that – except by the Spirit? ‘I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says: “Jesus be cursed”, and no one can say: “Jesus is Lord”, except by the Holy Spirit’ (1 Cor. 12:3). We are not teaching parrots! Nor am I taking Wright’s advice and teaching you to ‘learn your lines’! Now then, will you give up following the prescription of the law men, and believe the apostles instead? Will you now agree that God’s Spirit has borne witness with your spirit, glorifying Christ to you, making him precious to you? In your heart, do you not know that Jesus is precious? Can you not now *say* that Christ is yours and you are his? *Will* you not say it? Surely you can now say and sing:

*Mine, mine, mine,
I know thou art mine.*

You may feel you have to say: ‘I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!’ (Mark 9:24), but you can, at least, now say that you believe. Will you?¹⁷

I would address all hyper-Calvinists in the same vein. It is not presumption to take this road. If you persist in following your teachers and trotting out the pejorative word, remember to whom you are saying it! Not me! Peter!

Christ is precious to you? Then listen to John Newton, writing on the question posed by Christ : ‘What do you think about the Christ?’ (Matt. 22:42):

*What think ye of Christ? is the test
To try both your state and your scheme;
You cannot be right in the rest,
Unless you think rightly of him.
As Jesus appears in your view,
As he is beloved or not;
So God is disposed to you,
And mercy or wrath are your lot..*

If, in Newton’s words, you ‘think rightly’ of Jesus, if Jesus is precious to you, only the Spirit of God could have taught you thus (John 6:44-47). And only the Spirit could have taught you to agree with Peter: you could go to no one else but Christ, for, as you know, he alone has the words of eternal life (John 6:67-69).

Jesus is precious to you? Then listen to C.H.Spurgeon:

You cannot see Christ by mere reason, for the natural man is blind to the things of the Spirit... You will never get to see the real Christ

¹⁷ It has been put to me that in saying this I am returning to assurance by evidences. Not so. John, writing to those who have lost their assurance, appeals to the evidences of regeneration – evidence that a third party has to use – to take them back to joy. Yes, he first argues his case doctrinally, primarily making emphatic testimony to the anointing with the Spirit – but he also is prepared to fall back on these secondary supports. By extension (living with that which was unknown to John – Christendom – that monstrosity which has wrought such grief and havoc these past 1800 years), I am doing something similar (see 1 John 1:7-10; 2:23; 4:2-3,15-16; 5:1-5,10-13,20-21). See also my *Assurance* pp137-154; ‘John Turned Upside Down’ (the Edocs link on David H J Gay Ministry sermonaudio.com).

who is precious to believers except by a personal act of faith in him. The Holy Spirit has removed the scales from the eyes of the man who believes... Our sense of Christ's preciousness... is a proof of our possessing the faith of God's elect – and this ought to be a great comfort to any of you who are in the habit of looking within. If you enquire within yourselves: 'Is my faith worked in my soul by the Holy Spirit?' you may have a sure test. Does it magnify Christ? If it makes Christ inexpressibly dear to you it is the faith of God's elect.

Spurgeon moved on to help his hearers nurture their sense of assurance:

May God grant you to have more of it! Christ becomes growingly precious to us as our faith grows. If you have faith in Christ but do not exercise it every day he will not be very precious to you. But if your faith keeps her eyes fixed on him, she will more and more clearly perceive his beauties. If your soul is driven to Jesus again and again – if your faith anchors in him continually – then he will be, indeed, more and more precious to you. Everything depends upon faith. If you doubt Christ, he has gone down fifty per cent in your esteem. Every doubt is a Christ crucifier. Every time you give way to scepticism and critical questioning you lose a sip of sweetness... The Christian that disputes loses spiritual food. In proportion as you believe with a faith which is childlike, clear, simple, strong, unbroken – in that proportion will Christ be dearer and dearer to you! I recommend you to keep the door of your mind on the chain in these days – for those tramps and vagrants called doubts are prowling about in every quarter – and they may knock at your door with vile intent. The first thing they say, when they are at a good man's door, is: 'I am an honest doubt'. That which so loudly calls itself honest has good need to fabricate for itself a character. The most honest doubt is a great thief – the most of doubts are as dishonest as common housebreakers. Keep doubt out of the soul or you will make small progress in the discovery of the preciousness of Christ. Never entertain a thought that is derogatory to Christ's person, or to his atoning sacrifice. Reckon that opinion to be your enemy which is the enemy of the cross of Christ. Do not suffer your faith to diminish even in the least degree. Believe in Christ heartily and unsuspectingly! If you have a doubt as to whether you are a saint – you can have no question that you are a sinner – come to Christ as a sinner and put your trust in him as your Saviour! It is wonderful how a renewed confidence in Christ's saving grace will bring back all your joy and delight in him, and sometimes do it at once... God grant you, dear brothers and sisters, by faith, to know the preciousness of

Christ – for only to you that believe is he precious! To you that doubt, to you that mistrust, to you that suspect, to you that live in the land of hesitation he is without form or comeliness – but to you that believe without doubt he is precious beyond all price.¹⁸

Martin Luther was another who did what he could to help believers avoid getting into doubt, or bring them out if they had been plunged into it. This was his sound – biblical – advice:

Train your conscience to believe that God approves of you. Fight it out with doubt. Gain assurance through the word of God. Say: ‘I am all right with God. I have the Holy Ghost. Christ, in whom I do believe, makes me worthy...’...

I pause. Luther was right. This is what the Bible teaches. As believers, we must learn to speak to ourselves, in order to remind ourselves of the truth; we have to think biblically about ourselves. As Paul, writing to the Romans on another issue at that time, told them: ‘Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus’ (Rom. 6:11). ‘Count yourselves’? ‘Consider yourselves’ (NASB); ‘Reckon yourselves’ (AV, NKJV). The verb is *logizomai*,¹⁹ a rich word derived from *logos*, ‘reason in terms of speaking or thinking’, meaning ‘to reckon inwardly, count up or weigh the reasons, to deliberate, by reckoning up all the reasons, to gather or infer, to meditate on with a view to obtaining something, to suppose, deem, judge, to think’, and so on.²⁰ Let me list some examples of the various ways in which it is used:

They *discussed* it among themselves and said... (Mark 11:31).

I *consider* that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Rom. 8:18).

So then, men ought to *regard* us as servants of Christ (1 Cor. 4:1).

Not that we are competent in ourselves to *claim* anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God (2 Cor. 3:5).

¹⁸ Sermon number 2137.

¹⁹ A favourite word of Paul. He used it 27 times (not counting quotations) whereas the rest of the New Testament uses it only four times.

²⁰ Joseph Henry Thayer: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Ninth Printing 1991.

I beg you that when I come I may not have to be as bold as I *expect* to be toward some people who *think* that we live by the standards of this world (2 Cor. 10:2).

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – *think* about such things (Phil.4:8).

Paul counselled believers to think, to reason, to reckon in this way; in other words, to apply the truth to themselves, to their consciences. Luther was right, therefore. This is how we, as believers, should treat all gospel truth: we should think in this way, reason in this way, consider ourselves in the light of it, apply it to ourselves, talk to ourselves about it, talk to others about it: ‘Train your conscience to believe that God approves of you. Fight it out with doubt. Gain assurance through the word of God. Say: ‘I am all right with God. I have the Holy Ghost. Christ, in whom I do believe, makes me worthy’.

If I may illustrate. As I understand it, artificial hearing aids pick up all sounds and give them equal weight. In our natural hearing, however, the brain distinguishes the sound it wishes to hear. So it is here. In all the clamour of law, progressive sanctification, calls for introspection, the harrowing quest for assurance and the agonising search for it, with which we are bombarded, we must learn to distinguish the still small voice of the Spirit. And the more we discern his voice, the more we train ourselves to listen to him, the more we reason in this way, the more we read Scripture in this way, the more we hear preaching on this theme, the more we talk to ourselves in this way, then the more distinctly we shall hear the Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are indeed the children of God.

To let Luther go on:

Let the law, sin, and the devil cry out against us until their outcry fills heaven and earth. The Spirit of God outcries them all. Our feeble groans: ‘Abba, Father’, will be heard of God sooner than the combined racket of hell, sin, and the law... Let us not fail to thank God for delivering us from the doctrine of doubt. The gospel commands us to look away from our own good works to the promises of God in Christ, the Mediator... Let us never doubt the

mercy of God in Christ Jesus, but make up our minds that God is pleased with us, that he looks after us, and that we have the Holy Spirit who prays for us... The apostle always has Christ on the tip of his tongue... He talks of Christ continually. As often as he speaks of righteousness, grace, the promise, the adoption, and the inheritance of heaven, he adds the words 'in Christ', or 'through Christ', to show that these blessings are not to be had by the law, or the deeds of the law, much less by our own exertions, or by the observance of human traditions, but only by and through and in Christ.²¹

Charles Wesley, speaking of the Holy Spirit:

*True witness of my sonship, now
Engraving pardon on my heart,
Seal of my sin in Christ forgiven,
Earnest of love, and pledge of heaven.
Come, then, my God, mark out thine heir;
Of heaven a larger earnest give;
With clearer light thy witness bear,
More sensibly within me live;
Let all my powers thine entrance feel
And deeper stamp thyself the seal.*

Let the apostle have the last word. Reader, while not remotely claiming to be standing in his boots, I have written as I have because as Paul declares:

I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you [at Colossae] and those in Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Now this I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words. For though I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ. As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established

²¹ Luther commenting on Gal. 4:6-7. Luther was ambiguous as to whether assurance is essential, but, according to R.L.Dabney, he was more scriptural than Calvin. See Joel R.Beeke: 'Martin Luther on Assurance' (biblicalstudies.org.uk). Alas, as so often with Luther, he wrongly linked this to baptism.

in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving. Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in him, who is the head of all principality and power... Christ is all, and is in all (Col. 2:1-10; 3:11, NKJV).