

Positional Sanctification and Assurance

Many Christians, alas, go badly astray over the question of assurance.¹ Worse, they go *sadly* astray over it. And this, naturally, enmeshes many of them in a dragging sense of anxiety, sometimes stretched out over many years. One reason for this is that they make far too little use – new-covenant use – of their positional sanctification in Christ.² *And this is precisely the point at which Reformed teaching does so much harm.* Reformed teaching on assurance is legal, and it is this which brings so much misery to many believers, leaving them to flounder, virtually without hope, in the slough of despond. When the Reformed talk of assurance, instead of taking the believer to his positional and ultimate perfection in Christ, they direct him, in effect, to the law. I ask you! How wrong can one be? As the New Testament makes abundantly plain, the believer’s assurance comes as he listens to the witness of the Spirit who, in effect, takes him back to his positional sanctification, and forward to his absolute sanctification, both being in Christ. The believer’s assurance does not come by looking at the law, and concentrating on the feebleness of his personal progressive sanctification under the law. The new covenant takes him to Christ. Grievously, the Reformed, with their legal teaching in such a sensitive and vital area, bring many believers into years of bondage and sadness.

Let me briefly set out the Reformed way of assurance – ‘legal assurance’, as I have coined it. Stemming from the time of the Puritans – not Calvin, I emphasise – the Reformed have looked upon assurance as an experience

¹ For the full argument behind this chapter, see my *Assurance*.

² Which is intimately linked with regeneration and justification, of course. This applies throughout this chapter.

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which, though highly desirable, is out of reach for most believers. As for those who are fortunate enough to be granted the precious experience, even then, they usually get it only by a protracted struggle, a struggle in which they are urged to pore over their sanctification under the law. Only when they see sufficient evidence of good works are they able to rest in the assurance that they truly are in Christ. Hence ‘legal assurance’. And this has spread its tentacles far beyond the Reformed constituency. Many, who would not dream of labelling themselves ‘Reformed’, nevertheless have been infected with this teaching. It has virtually conquered the evangelical world, even though most evangelicals are totally unaware of the background to their dilemma. Nor how to get out of it!

Let me unpack this a little. The common view of assurance today – if it’s thought about 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 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).

As I have explained elsewhere,³ this is the way most Reformed and evangelical teachers today speak of assurance – defining it in these three steps, *and in this order*. And they usually place the third step beyond the reach of most believers.

³ See my *Assurance*.

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This is quite wrong. The New Testament is explicit. When writing to the believers at Ephesus, for instance, Paul set out the true way of assurance under the new covenant:

You... were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, 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).

Here it is. It could not be plainer. The sinner hears the gospel. He believes, he trusts in Christ. He is marked there and then by the Spirit, sealed by the Spirit. This 'sealing' is elsewhere described as 'the witness of the Spirit' or 'the anointing'. And this sealing, witness or anointing is the way the Spirit gives the believer his assurance. Moreover, the Scriptures are explicit: this experience is true of every believer, without exception:

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... We... have the firstfruits of the Spirit (Rom. 8:9,14-17,23).

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).

God... has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come (2 Cor. 5:5).

Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our [your] hearts, the Spirit who calls out: 'Abba, Father'.

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So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir (Gal. 4:6-7).

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption (Eph. 4:30).

Or, as John put it:

You have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth... As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit – just as it has taught you, remain in him (1 John 2:20-27).

This is how we know that he lives in us: we know it by the Spirit he gave us (1 John 3:24).

We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit (1 John 4:13).

It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth... We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son (1 John 5:6,9-11).

It is not without significance, please note, that most of the believers to whom these words were addressed in the first place were believers who were being attacked by law teachers, men who had infiltrated the churches (Gal. 2:4; 2 Pet. 2:1; Jude 4) in order to get believers under the law of Moses (Acts 15:1). We know this state of affairs was widespread among the churches; the amount of space the New Testament devotes to the issue of the law proves as

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much.⁴ It was to believers who were being attacked by law teachers that the apostles wrote in dogmatic terms, telling them that assurance is by the Spirit. It is not by the law!

This sealing, anointing of the Spirit, this witness of the Spirit, is not a one-off experience. The Spirit goes on bearing witness to the child of God, continually taking him to Christ. Do not miss the present, the continuous, tense in Romans 8:16: ‘The Spirit himself *bears witness* with our spirit that we are children of God’. True, the believer can – and should – get clearer views of Christ as he grows in grace and the knowledge of his Saviour (2 Pet. 3:18), but once he is sealed, he is always sealed. Listen to Paul praying for the Ephesians – praying that they would grow in this knowledge of Christ:

For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way (Eph. 1:13-23).⁵

As he prayed for the Colossians and Laodiceans:

⁴ It is quicker to point out where it is *not* than where it *is*. Paul wrote 2 Corinthians to deal with the law teachers. See Galatians and so on.

⁵ See my short address on the passage: ‘Trinitarian Experience’.

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That their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:2-3).

And we know how the Spirit does this: Christ told us. Every believer has the Spirit (John 7:39; 14:17; Acts 10:47; Rom. 8:9-17; 1 Cor. 2:12; 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Gal. 3:2,14; 4:4-7; 5:5,16-26; 6:8; Eph. 1:13-14,17; 2:22; 4:30; 1 Thess. 4:8; 1 John 2:20,27; 4:13; 5:6-11), but this cannot be in order to regenerate him, since he is a believer already, and so must be regenerate.

So what does the Spirit do in every believer? Christ made it clear that it is the Father's will that all men (believers now – and all men in the day of judgement – Philippians 2:10-11) must glorify Christ, that they should 'honour the Son just as they honour the Father' (John 5:23). And it is precisely at this point that the Spirit works in the believer, bearing witness in and to him, showing him the glory of his Lord and Saviour, and going on and on doing so, right to the end. Paul could say: 'The Son of God... loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal. 2:20). Where did he get such assurance? Can there be any doubt? The Spirit bore witness with his spirit, giving him his sense of sonship and adoption, by taking him to Christ, the one who loved him and died for him.

And it was true not only for the apostle. Christ promised the Spirit to every believer:

'Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him'. By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified (John 7:38-39).

As Christ went on to say:

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him

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nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you... the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you (John 14:16-17,26).

And Christ was explicit as to the Spirit's mission with regard to the believer:

When the Counsellor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me... When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you (John 15:26; 16:13-15).

The Spirit's witness with the believer's spirit that he is one of God's children is a vital part of this. The Spirit bears witness to the believer, taking him to Christ, showing him what he has in Christ, what he is in Christ.⁶ In other words, the Spirit gives the believer a growing understanding and appreciation of his positional sanctification. And he goes on doing this. In this way, the believer grows in his assurance and godliness of life; that is, by continually looking to Christ, by listening to the Spirit, the one who always takes him to Christ, and tells him what he is, and what he has, in his Saviour, the believer is deepened in his assurance.

This lies at the very heart of the new covenant, prophesied by Jeremiah (Jer. 31:27-34). The writer to the Hebrews spelled it out:

By one sacrifice [God] has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: 'This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put

⁶ *Assurance* pp71-95.

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my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds'. Then he adds: 'Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more'. And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin. Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith (Heb. 10:14-22).

Note how 'perfect forever' (positional sanctification) leads on to 'full assurance of faith'. Clearly, the inspired writer set out the truth of the believer's positional sanctification in Christ in order to encourage his readers in this full assurance. He was further showing them the way to foster that assurance. Which is? Go on looking to Christ. Remember the writer's overall purpose in writing to the Hebrews. He was doing all he could to prevent his readers reverting to the old covenant. And one of his several arguments, perhaps the climax of his entire reasoning, is this question of the believer's perfection in Christ. Keep looking to Jesus, the writer urges his readers. Don't go to the law, the old covenant:

Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession... Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted (Heb. 3:1; 12:1-3).

In light of this, I appeal to all believers who are in doubt about their status in Christ; I appeal to those who lack assurance, who, by listening to their law teachers, are poring over their works in order to gain some semblance of it: Listen to the Spirit! Look to Christ! Look to who he is! Look to what he has done for you! Look to your positional sanctification – your perfection – into which he has

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brought you by his Spirit. If I may adapt the much-loved words of Helen H.Lemmel:

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in his wonderful face,
And your shades of doubt will melt away,
In the light of his glory and grace.*

That is the first consequence of a proper view of positional sanctification: assurance. And what a consequence it is! How 'vast' a 'benefit'! How rich is the believer! How misguided, how wrong it is to impoverish any believer by trying to get him under the old covenant by urging him to make the law his perfect rule! Believer, you are a child of the new covenant. Enjoy your status, your perfection in Christ. Keep looking to him.

Now for a look at progressive sanctification.