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ASSURANCE OF GRACE AND SALVATION





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Tom Nettles

Introduction

The Christian's Great Interest

If a person has a clear understanding of the nature of salvation, then the assurance of it will be a blessing second in value only to the real possession of it. Forgiveness of sins and personal interest in Christ's righteousness and the promise of eternity in the presence of God will bring unmitigated and ever-increasing joy. The possession of such salvation cannot be surpassed in value for a rational creature in time or eternity. The assurance that such a blessing is ours makes living in this fallen world a "light and momentary affliction" (2 Corinthians 4:17) and infuses "joy inexpressible full of glory" (1 Peter 1:8) into this present life. For this purpose, John wrote to the churches a breath-taking, highly textured doctrinal treatise in light of the need to describe the nature of true faith so that the confidence of Christians would be well-settled and the benefits of such assurance could be felt and enjoyed in this life. "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God," John summarized, "that you may know that you have eternal life." This has not only eternal consequences, but present comforts for, "This is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us." The understanding of the will of God has so increased in the assured believer that he asks, not as a double-minded person (James 1:5-7; 4: 2, 3), but as one who delights in the sanctifying and proving purposes of God's will, so that he has this knowledge: "And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him" (1 John 5:13-15).

That God operates in His providence to grant a well-founded assurance to His people serves to transform those events of life that would normally annoy, bring frustration,

anger, and distress. When, however, we learn that God's removal of occasions for worldly rejoicing reveals a heart that values eternal pleasure far more, and this contributes to assurance of salvation, we embrace the occasion for such proof. So Paul taught in Romans 5: "We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Romans 5:3-5). Paul is not saying that our suffering saves us; Christ's suffering saves us, and we are connected savingly to His suffering and resurrection only by faith. "Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). The possession of salvation is immutably established in human experience the moment that "we gain access by faith into this grace in which we stand" (Romans 5:2). Our suffering, however, reveals that the hope given objectively by union with Christ ("We rejoice in hope of the glory of God"), floods the consciousness and purifies the affections so that that objective hope becomes a subjective, conscious certainty that the redemptive love of God, which saved us through the offering of Christ, now grants us a sure joy in a tough pilgrimage.

Peter looked upon God's gift of assurance in the same way. If we are "grieved by various trials" in such a way that our faith is proved genuine, such a process of testing and proving is more valuable than gold. Such faith will be "found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ," and while we await "the salvation of our souls" we find that we indeed love Christ, though we have not seen Him, and our belief in Him even in His physical absence is penetrated with "joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory."

James looked upon the experience of the Christian in this world in the same way. "Count it all joy, my brothers" he admonished the Jewish Christians scattered abroad, "when you meet trials of various kinds." This testing produces steadfastness and steadfastness in its advancing journey gives full Christian maturity. This maturity gives a sense of blessedness and an anticipation of receiving the "crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him" (James 1:2, 3, 12).

God afflicted His Son for our salvation and He afflicts us for our assurance.

The book of Hebrews gives warning about dependence on false hope (Hebrews 2:1-3; 3:12, 13; 4:1, 11; 6:1-6; 10:26-31; 12:3-6, 15, 25; 13:9) but does so to encourage a true assurance. The writer extends the kind of knowledge and experience that might be present even in a false hope that will finally result in a falling away and a crumbling to the opposition in a day of trial. One may live under the influence of extensive knowledge of the gospel

and the transforming and miraculous powers of the Holy Spirit and in the end bear the fruit of thorns and thistles (Hebrews 6:4–6, 8). If the Israelites were punished severely and cast off for their faithless response to the law, of how much greater severity will judgment be for those who have had both law and gospel, who have been participants in a Christ-honoring community in the midst of the Spirit's gracious operations, and yet fail to maintain faithfulness to the gospel in light of worldly opposition. If one has seen the light and the fulfillment, it is a damning move to return to the shadow and the type. Do not stop short of full submission to Christ as the only and eternal hope or resent the opportunities for demonstration of an approved faith. "Do not throw away your confidence ... for you have need of endurance ... that you may receive what is promised" (Hebrews 10: 35, 36).

The purpose of Christ is to save sinners and bring them safely to heaven where their earthly desire for holiness will be consummated. "Christ is faithful over God's house as a Son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope" (3:6). "For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end" (3:14). "We desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end" (6: 11); "So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us" (6: 17, 18). "Since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful" (10:22, 23). "We are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls" (10:39). The faith that saves is the faith that can be tested and approved. The one who may gain assurance of present salvation and the certainty of future glory is the one who pursues an approved faith and welcomes the testings by which it may be demonstrated.

Provoking perseverance which leads to assurance was one of the tasks assigned to the apostles. Not only did Paul proclaim the gospel in its power and purity as the power of God to salvation, he labored for the churches to produce maturity in doctrine and in devotion, for from this flows a double assurance. The first is the assurance of a settled and irrevocable knowledge of the certain truthfulness and beauty and wisdom of the gospel in its fullness. The second is the assurance that we have been true partakers of that work of the Spirit by which Christ and His work have been made precious to us and form the

only foundation of our joy and hope. After writing of God's purpose to present a blameless people to Himself, Paul warns, "If indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard" (Colossians 1:23). In light of this need for a persevering trust in gospel content and growing affection for gospel hope, Paul described a major aspect of his ministry, "Him [Christ] we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me" (Colossians 1:28, 29). He wanted the profession of faith to flow from a true trust in Christ even as Paul's service came from the internal operations of the Holy Spirit. A truly Spirit-prompted-and-produced faith would certainly persevere, would be distinguished from phantasmal appearances of faith, and would eventuate in the double assurance for which Paul labored among the churches. "For I want you to know," Paul told the Colossians, "how great a struggle I have for you ... that [your] 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" (Colossians 2:1, 2).

Seeking consistency with this apostolic purpose, we present an exposition of chapter 18 of the Second London Confession, entitled "Assurance of Grace and Salvation." By the witness of God's Spirit, we pray that this may contribute to true assurance of God's saving work in our hearts and make us more faithful in the unintimidated, yet loving and merciful, proclamation of the full counsel of God.

—Tom J. Nettles



Tom Nettles

The Doctrine of Assurance

Grace Manifest in Godly Confidence

Chapter 16 from *By His Grace and For His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press Press, 2006). [The Revised and Expanded 20th Anniversary edition of this book](#) is available from Founders Press.

Godly assurance of salvation rests upon the Doctrines of Grace. The certainty of unconditional election bequeaths great security to the one who truly discerns the movement of God's grace in his life; the rigorous demands of the doctrine of perseverance eliminate false hopes built on an inadequate foundation; the intensely convicting doctrine of total depravity destroys all rest based on personal merit; the power of the doctrine of effectual call prompts earnest efforts to walk in the Spirit; and the completeness of the doctrine of particular redemption holds out the certainty of a reconciled God to one who truly credits the faithful saying, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."

Perhaps the most succinct yet sensitive treatment of the doctrine of assurance was constructed by the divines of the Westminster Assembly in chapter 18 of the confession they produced. Following their lead virtually word for word, seventeenth-century English Baptists and eighteenth-century American Baptists approved the same view by adopting

the Second London Confession and Philadelphia Confession respectively. Although full exposition of the doctrine of assurance is distilled into one chapter, its important place—indeed, its pervasive and strategic connections—appears eloquently if only subtly in virtually all the soteriological chapters.

In *effectual calling* (Chapter X of the Second London Confession), a man is “enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the Grace offered and conveyed in it” (X.2). In *justification*, though God continues to forgive sin, justified persons may fall under God’s fatherly displeasure; however, through humbling themselves, confessing sin, begging pardon, and renewing faith and repentance, the “light of his Countenance [may be] restored unto them” (XI.5). In *adoption*, those who are justified “are enabled to cry ‘Abba Father’ ” (XII). In *sanctification*, the lusts of the body of sin are more and more weakened so that the saints grow in grace, “perfecting holiness in the fear of God, pressing after an heavenly life” (XIII.3). Although *saving faith*, “whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls” may be weak or strong, it is different in kind from the faith of temporary believers, and it may grow up in many to the “attainment of a full assurance through Christ, who is both the Author and Finisher of our Faith” (XIV.1, 3). *Good works*, actions done in obedience to God’s commandments, not only evidence a true and living faith, demonstrate the believer’s thankfulness, and edify the brethren, they also strengthen the assurance of the believer (XVI.2). Even the section elucidating the decrees of God reflects on the concept of assurance: “The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination, is to be handled with special prudence, and care; that men attending the will of God revealed in his word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election” (111.7).

Although the doctrine of assurance is present in piecemeal fashion throughout the Second London Confession, one welcomes its clear and systematic presentation in chapter XVIII, which treats four major aspects of assurance in its four paragraphs. If they were titled according to subject matter, the paragraphs might well bear the following headings: (1) The Reality of Assurance, (2) The Foundations of Assurance, (3) The Duty to Seek Assurance, and (4) The Temporary Loss of Assurance.

The Reality of Assurance

1. Although temporary believers, and other unregenerate men, may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes, and carnal presumptions, of being in the favour of God, and in a state of salvation, which hope of theirs shall perish; yet such as truly

believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavouring to walk in all good Conscience before him, may in this life be certainly assured that they are in the state of Grace; and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God which [page] hope shall never make them ashamed.¹

This section begins by warning against the deceitfulness of some kinds of assurance. These “false hopes, and carnal presumptions, of being in the favour of God” are doomed to perish. Temporary believers may gain this false assurance and feel they are in a state of salvation. However, based on Job 8:13–14 and Matthew 7:22–23, this assurance is no stronger than a spider’s web and will be crushed by the words “Depart from me, ye that work iniquity.” When Joshua Jones expounded this article in 1792 in a circular letter for the Philadelphia Baptist Association, he was aware that his use of such language as “false hope and counterfeit assurance” could be unsettling. He contended, however, that such an unsettling should lead to a healthy and edifying examination:

But by thus observing, we do not mean to discourage you, dear brethren, from appropriating to yourselves the riches of divine grace, and an assurance of an eternal weight of glory. But there is such a similarity between a sincere Christian and a nominal one, as there is between wheat and tares in the blade, which teaches us that a close inspection ought to be exercised by everyone of us, whether we have in possession a vital principle of true religion.²

Despite the false assurance that many have, those who “truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity,” and seek to live godly before Him “may in this life be certainly assured that they are in the state of Grace.” The quest for true assurance and the inability of many to find it burdened Spurgeon and at times became subject matter for his sermons:

Many sincerely-seeking souls are in great trouble because they have not yet attained to an assurance of their interest in Christ Jesus: they dare not take any comfort from their faith because they suppose that it has not attained to a sufficient strength. They have believed in the Lord Jesus, and they have his promise that they shall be saved, but they are not content with this—they want to get assurance, and then they suppose they shall have a better evidence of their salvation than the bare word of the Saviour. Such persons are under a great mistake; but as that mistake is a very painful one, and exercises the most injurious influence upon them, we will spend this morning in trying, as God shall help us to clear up their difficulty, and to let them see that if they believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, even though they should not have attained to the precious grace of full assurance of faith, yet nevertheless they are saved, and being justified by faith, may rightfully enjoy peace with God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Their mistake seems to me to be this—they look for ripe fruit upon a tree in spring, and because that season yields nothing but blossoms, they conclude the tree to be

barren. They go to the head of a river—they find it a little rippling brook, and because it will not float a “Great Eastern,” they conclude that it will never reach the sea, and that in fact it is not a true part of the river at all.³

Even as Spurgeon sought to apply a balm to the saved-but-uncertain, the Confession of Faith, drawing legitimate conclusions from Scripture, points to the same truth. This truth was distilled from 1 John and Romans 5. “We know that we know him. ... we know that we have passed from death unto life. ... we know that we are of the truth. ... we know that he abideth in us. ... that ye may know that ye have eternal life” (1 John 2:3, 3:14, 19, 24; 5:13). The cumulative effect of these phrases is the demonstration that assurance is possible for the true believer. The citation of Romans 5:2, 5 indicates that the framers of the confession interpreted “hope” in that passage in a subjective sense, identifying it with true Christian assurance. Such assurance, or hope, will not be disappointed.

The Foundations of Assurance

2. This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion, grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith, founded on the Blood and Righteousness of Christ, revealed in the Gospel and also upon the inward evidence of those graces of the Spirit unto which promises are made, and on the testimony of the Spirit of adoption, witnessing with our Spirits that we are the children of God; and as a fruit thereof keeping the heart both humble and holy.⁴

Paragraph two of the confession lays to rest any suspicion that Christian hope or assurance, though subjective in the believer, glimmers and dances but eventually fades and falls with no place to rest. Neither “bare conjectural” nor even “probable” persuasion are adequate terms to describe the assurance of the Christian; only the words *infallible assurance of faith* carried sufficient weight for accurate characterization.

External Evidence of Assurance

By “infallible assurance of faith” (a side note refers to Hebrews 6:11, 19), the confession does not mean that assurance never wavers. Rather, it draws attention to the fact that a concrete object of assurance external to the believer himself bolsters the doctrine. Assurance is not a conjured, psychological peace of mind for its own sake but a humble confidence resulting from an actual peace with God.

The immortal dreamer, John Bunyan, sheds light on this same reality and couches his understanding of the doctrine in a conversation between his Pilgrim and a young lady named Prudence. While discussing the continuance and perplexing nature of indwelling sin, Prudence asks Christian a question, and he responds:

Pru. Can you remember by what means you find your annoyances, at times, as if they were vanquished?

Chris. Yes; when I think what I saw at the cross, that will do it; and when I look upon my broidered coat, that will do it; also when I look into the roll that I carry in my bosom, that will do it; and when my thoughts wax warm about whither I am going, that will do it.⁵

The cross, of course, as in the experience of all Christians, loosed the burden of sin from Christian's back, whence it tumbled into the sepulchre.

Pilgrim does refer primarily to his inner sense of forgiveness as much as he does the historical reality of the atonement. As Christian stood at the cross after seeing his burden loosed, he stood a while to look and wonder. As he began to leave he sang of the forgiveness and ended the song with a couplet: "Blest Cross! Blest Sepulchre! Blest rather be/The Man that was there put to death for me!"⁶

His focus was on the objective reality of the cross. Issuing from this reality came his persuasion that the way of the cross was to be preferred above all the treasures of Egypt. Thus none could render it odious to him, and its power dispelled despair and made him quicken his steps in the journey to the Celestial City. There, indeed, he would see him alive that did hang dead on the cross."⁷

The "broidered coat" represents the imputed righteousness of Christ. This was given him when one of the shining ones stripped Christian of his rags and covered his nakedness with the new clothes. Reliance on any other kind of righteousness gave only false hope, as far as Bunyan was concerned. Ignorance incarnated the false hope of many who maintain erroneous perceptions of the nature of justification:

I believe that Christ died for sinners; and that I shall be justified before God from the curse, through his gracious acceptance of my obedience to His law. Or thus: Christ makes my duties that are religious acceptable to His Father, by virtue of His merits, and so shall I be justified.⁸

This will never do for Bunyan's Pilgrim. Not only is it such a "fantastical faith," but a false faith, "because it taketh justification from the personal righteousness of Christ"⁹ and seeks justification for one's works rather than one's person. It is thus a deceitful faith and "will leave thee under wrath in the day of God Almighty."¹⁰

The righteousness of Christ alone imputed to sinners grants undefiled assurance.

The meaning of the roll, or scroll, is somewhat ambiguous, but it appears to be the witness of the Spirit, using the objective evidence of a changed life to grant assurance of salvation and greater striving for holiness. This scroll was given to Christian at the same time he was marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit. He was admonished to look on it as he ran, and to give it at the Celestial Gate. Christian told Formalist and Hypocrisy that the scroll was "to comfort me by reading as I go in the way."¹¹ Indeed, he was to give it at the Celestial Gate "in token of my going in after it."¹² An afternoon of sleep caused Christian to lose the scroll temporarily. He returned hurriedly to the place it was lost in order to retrieve it. With great joy he found it again, "for this roll was the assurance of his life and acceptance at the desired haven."¹³ Later, when recounting his tale to the porter at the Palace Beautiful, Christian tells that in his sleep he "lost his evidence."¹⁴ Thus, the roll (scroll) appears to be the objective evidence of the new birth, such as the ever-increasing virtues described in 2 Peter 1:5–9, and the sealing of the Spirit.

In addition to his contemplating the cross, the brodered coat, and the roll, Christian receives great joy when he thinks about his destiny, for he knows that he will see the Lord there:

Why there I hope to see Him alive that did hang dead on the cross; and there I hope to be rid of all those things that to this day are in me and annoyance to me. There, they say, there is no death; and there I shall dwell with such company as I like best. For, to tell you the truth, I love Him because I was by Him eased of my burden; and I am weary of my inward sickness. I would fain be where I shall die no more, and with the company that shall continually cry, "Holy, holy, holy!"¹⁵

The joy of assurance, according to *The Pilgrim's Progress*, arises from the contemplation of forgiveness, justification, the changed life, and a new and all-consuming affection for God and his glory.

Very similar ideas form the strength of the "infallible assurance." The word *infallible* does not exaggerate the certainty, for the first element of the foundation is "the Blood and Righteousness of Christ, revealed in the Gospel" (cf. Hebrews 6:17–18). As in Bunyan, the

subjective element of hope finds rest like an anchor upon the sure and steadfast rock of the historical person and work of Jesus.

The scriptural passage cited in support of this affirmation may appear somewhat perplexing. Whereas Hebrews 6:11, 19 naturally supports the possibility of assurance, Hebrews 6:17–18 makes no immediate reference to “the Blood and Righteousness of Christ”:

Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath: That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us.

Evidently the framers of the confession considered the two unchangeable things as a reference to Christ’s immutable righteousness and His once-for-all death. While on the surface this appears strained and without support from the context, on closer examination the reader might conclude that the confession is precisely right. Or, if his spiritual insight gains sufficient excitement, he might even attribute profundity to the confessional reference.

Hebrews 6:20 makes it clear that the hope that is an anchor to the soul hooks upon Christ’s Melchizedek priesthood. After an intervention of sixteen verses that explain the necessity of such a priesthood, Hebrews 7:17 begins to apply all this to the Christ. How He became such and what benefits derive from it constitute the remainder of the chapter. The surety of hope is based directly on the oath of God (7:19–20; cf. 6:17). Through the oath, Jesus was made eternal priest, after the order of Melchizedek, who saves forever those who draw near to God through Him (7:21–25). In his priesthood Jesus is (1) “holy, innocent, undefiled,” and (2) He offered up sacrifices for the sins of the people “once for all when He offered up Himself” (7:26, 27, NASB). Thus, the unchangeableness of God’s purpose is given historical certainty by two things—“the Blood and Righteousness of Christ, revealed in the Gospel”—that we may have strong encouragement.

While Christ’s sinlessness and sacrificial death (his active and passive obedience) relate primarily to justification, the importance of the confession’s utilization of these concepts for assurance must not be diminished. Other elements in assurance fluctuate in the Christian’s experience (cf. paragraph four, to be discussed below), but the righteousness and death of Christ appeared in history—unrepeatable and ineradicable. Thus, when all else may falter, the true believer may still cling to the unchangeable “Blood and Righteousness of Christ.”

Evidence in the Believer

The second element in the foundation of assurance is the necessity for objective evidence in the believer's behavior and attitudes. Similar in part to Bunyan's "roll" and based upon 2 Peter 1:4–11, the confession encourages the believer in recognizing "the inward evidence of those graces of the Spirit unto which promises are made." True biblical assurance cannot come for one who is not increasing in faith, virtue, knowledge, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and Christian love. The presence and augmentation of these qualities render one useful and fruitful in the true knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In 2 Peter 1:10 the apostle speaks of making certain of one's calling and election. Peter does not teach that human righteousness produces divine election. Rather, pursuing a course of holiness (in conjunction with the hearty acceptance of saving truth) provides evidence that one is indeed elect and not merely self-deceived. Paul affirms essentially the same understanding of election and its evidences in 1 Thessalonians 1:4–7.

Robert Hall, pastor of Broadmead Chapel in Bristol, England, confronted errors relating to this very point in an article he wrote confuting antinomianism:

He who flatters himself with the hope of salvation, without perceiving in himself a specific difference of character from "the world that lieth in wickedness," either founds his persuasion absolutely on nothing, or on an immediate revelation, on a preternatural discovery of a matter of fact, on which the Scriptures are totally silent. This absurd notion of unconditional promises, by severing the assurance of salvation from all the fruits of the Spirit, from every trace and feature of a renovated nature and a regenerate state, opens the widest possible door to licentiousness.

As far as it is sustained by the least shadow of reasoning, it may be traced to the practice of confounding the secret purposes of the Supreme Being with his revealed promises. That in the breast of the Deity an eternal purpose has been formed respecting the salvation of a certain portion of the human race, is a doctrine, which, it appears to me, is clearly revealed. But this secret purpose is so far from being incompatible with the necessary conditions of salvation, that they form a part of it; their existence is an inseparable link in the execution of the divine decree; for the same wisdom which has appointed the end, has also infallibly determined the means by which it shall be accomplished; and as the personal direction of the decree remains a secret, until it is developed in the event, it cannot possibly, considered in itself, lay a foundation for confidence. That a certain number of the human race are ordained to eternal life, may be inferred with much probability from many passages of Scripture; but if any person infers from these general premises, that he is of that number, he

advances a proposition without the slightest color of evidence. An assurance of salvation can consequently, in no instance, be deduced from the doctrine of absolute decrees, until they manifest themselves in their actual effects, that is, in that renewal of the heart which the Bible affirms to be essential to future felicity.¹⁶

The Witness of the Spirit of Adoption

The third element mixed into the foundation for assurance (arising from Romans 8:15–16 as its scriptural basis) is, as the confession states, “the testimony of the Spirit of adoption, witnessing with our Spirits that we are the children of God.” While biblical translators vary in their understanding of the nature of this witness (whether internal and subjective, or external and objective; cf. Phillips and New English Bible respectively), the confession apparently treats it in a subjective sense. Thus, the witness of the “Spirit of adoption” complements the first two elements, which are more objective in nature, and becomes the essence of assurance.

One should not consider the witness of the Spirit as a special revelation from God apart from the clear teachings of Scripture or discernible changes in the character and affection of the person. Such special revelations are clearly excluded in paragraph three, cited below. Rather, through the Spirit one learns to trust completely in Christ’s sufficiency and His power to cleanse from sin and bestow His righteousness.

Nor should disengagement of man’s rational faculties be assumed in such a witness of the Spirit, for the Scripture quite clearly affirms that this witness is “along with our spirits.” One’s own rational faculties, his ability to reflect, observe, and draw conclusions, must enter the process, albeit under the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit. This thought finds a parallel in Paul’s formula for sanctification: “... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:12–13, NIV).

The context of Romans 8:15–16 closely aligns inner assurance with at least three gauges to measure the true nature of the supposed Christian’s faith. Through the Spirit the Christian mortifies the deeds of the flesh, comes to a point of humble revelry in God as Father, and determines to live in obedience, even to the point of suffering. These evidences of Romans 8, combined with the spiritual bestowal of the great and precious promises of 2 Peter 1:3–4, place inner assurance and external evidence in a Chalcedonian relationship—they cohere inconfusedly, unchangeably, inseparably and indivisibly.

True assurance keeps the heart both humble and holy. No cocksure arrogance can coexist with an apprehension of the grace of God. If such an attitude does arise, one lacks the full biblical basis of assurance. Arguing from 1 John 3:1–3, the framers of the confession understood that purification of the heart caps the whole doctrine of assurance. The Spirit bears witness to genuine salvation where there is a right relation to the historical person and work of Christ and where there are holy evidences in the believer's life. But from the Spirit's witness to the believer's heart (tantamount to assurance itself) must flow an attitude of gratefulness and a desire to glorify God.

The Duty to Seek Assurance

3. This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true Believer, may wait long and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it; yet being enabled by the Spirit to know the things [page] which are freely given him of God, he may without extraordinary revelation in the right use of means attain thereunto: and therefore it is the duty of every one, to give all diligence to make their Calling and Election sure, that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance; so far is it from inclining men to looseness.¹⁷

This section makes three points: (1) a true believer may lack assurance; (2) everyone is under obligation to seek assurance through the proper use of means; (3) the doctrine of assurance encourages holiness rather than looseness.

The Believer's Struggle for Assurance

Because this “infallible assurance doth not [necessarily] belong to the essence of faith,” a true believer “may wait long and conflict with many difficulties” before he partakes of it.

A popular caricature of the necessity for assurance of salvation states: “If you can have it and not know it, you can lose it and not miss it.” Such a statement indicates a confusion between salvation and assurance, oversimplifies the comprehensive set of factors that contributes to assurance, and betrays a shallow view of the deceitfulness of the human heart. The true believer may at times feel he is “counted with them that go down into the pit” and may ask the mournful question, LORD, why castest thou off my soul? why hidest thou thy face from me?” (Psalm 88:4, 14).

While Spurgeon ministered at Waterbeach, he had many opportunities to observe and counsel people struggling with assurance. One notable case concerned a godly woman whom Spurgeon called Mrs. Much-afraid. Spurgeon tells the story:

I feel quite sure she has been many years in Heaven, but she was always fearing that she should never enter the gates of glory. She was very regular in her attendance at the house of God, and was a wonderfully good listener. She used to drink in the gospel; but, nevertheless, she was always doubting, and fearing, and trembling about her own spiritual condition. She had been a believer in Christ, I should think, for fifty years, yet she had always remained in that timid, fearful, anxious state. She was a kind old soul, ever ready to help her neighbors, or to speak a word to the unconverted; she seemed to me to have enough grace for two people, yet, in her own opinion, she had not half enough grace for one.

One day, when I was talking with her, she told me that she had not any hope at all; she had no faith; she believed that she was a hypocrite. I said, "Then don't come to the chapel any more; we don't want hypocrites there. Why do you come?" She answered, "I come because I can't stay away. I love the people of God; I love the house of God; and I love to worship God." "Well," I said, "you are an odd sort of hypocrite; you are a queer kind of unconverted woman." "Ah," she sighed, "you may say what you please, but I have not any hope of being saved." So I said to her, "Well, next Sunday, I will let you go into the pulpit, that you may tell the people that Jesus Christ is a liar, and that you cannot trust Him." "Oh!" she cried, "I would be torn in pieces before I would say such a thing as that. Why, He cannot lie! Every word He says is true." "Then," I asked, "Why do you not believe it?" She replied, "I do believe it; but, somehow, I do not believe it for myself; I am afraid whether it is for me." "Have you not any hope at all?" I asked. "No," she answered; so I pulled out my purse, and I said to her, "Now, I have got £5 here, it is all the money I have, but I will give you that £5 for your hope if you will sell it." She looked at me, wondering what I meant. "Why!" she exclaimed, "I would not sell it for a thousand worlds." She had just told me that she had not any hope of salvation, yet she would not sell it for a thousand worlds!¹⁸

Similarly does Bunyan describe Mr. Little Faith, who had been assaulted by three thieves, Faint-Heart, Mistrust, and Guilt, and made the entire journey to the Celestial City with no spending money. Although they could not rob him of his jewels, he was never able to derive proper advantage from them that he might finish his course with joy. Not only do Miss Much-Afraid and Mr. Little-Faith walk haltingly and insecurely, but Christian himself at the moment of death feared he would not feel the bottom of the river and would perish before he reached the other side.

The Believer's Obligation to Seek Assurance

Although assurance may elude the justified person temporarily, it is his duty to seek it. The confession assures its reader that assurance may be grasped through the proper use of means “without extraordinary revelation.” The writers did not intend to eliminate or minimize the witness of the Spirit of adoption in the process of gaining assurance, but desired to focus on the necessity of the doctrinal, ethical, and spiritual evidences as the vehicle of the secret working of the Spirit. This position demonstrates a consistent application of the principle enunciated in the confession’s paragraph six of chapter I, entitled “Of the Holy Scriptures.”

The whole Council of God concerning all things necessary for his own Glory, Man's Salvation, Faith and Life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the *Holy Scripture*; unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by Revelation of the Spirit, or traditions of men.

Nevertheless we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God, to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word. ...¹⁹

Because assurance is attainable only in this biblical way, God is glorified when a person seeks it. The gaining of assurance brings glory to God by affecting the believer in three ways: (1) his heart is enlarged “in peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,” (2) he manifests “love and thankfulness to God”; and (3) he is fortified with “strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance.”

The Philadelphia Baptist Association listed three advantages of assurance to those who possess it during their pilgrimage here on earth:

- (1) It enables them to submit, with cheerfulness, to adverse dispensations, upon the account that they are enabled to believe that their heavenly Father does everything for good to them that love him.
- (2) Full assurance of hope enables them to believe whatever God is pleased to reveal concerning himself, because that there is now a greater nearness to God than heretofore, and the more knowledge the believer has of God, the more acquaintance he has with himself, whereby he is made to behold his own impotence and ignorance; for until such time as the believer attains to some degree of assurance, carnal reason will retard his progress in the exercise of faith, particularly in some points that are beyond his rational comprehension.

- (3) The grace of assurance will be of the greatest use in our last conflict with death, knowing that Christ has taken away the sting of death, and that death itself will be destroyed; so that the assured Christian is made to rejoice, that he has no cause to fear that any ill consequence will attend his exit out of time into eternity. ...²⁰

The Encouragement of Holiness

The doctrine of assurance, perceived in this way, encourages holy living. Its caricature pictures a cocksure manner, flippancy toward sin, and slight if any desire for holiness. Such an attitude may be encouraged by some teachings that ostensibly aim at giving assurance, but not by the doctrines of grace. Donald Lake verifies this contention when he rejects what he understands as a Puritan concept of assurance and affirms a view of assurance that calls for a much less personal examination:

From the psychological perspective, we can understand the inherent insecurity of the Puritans whose theology combined a high view of predestination with an almost morbid sense of introspection. The Puritan diaries reveal a constant searching for signs of confirmation that they were numbered among the elect. When we understand the truly universal significance of the atonement, such introspection becomes unnecessary.²¹

The doctrine of assurance taught in the Second London Confession would never endorse such detachment from striving to ascertain one's calling and thus one's election. Rather than "inclining men to looseness," godly and biblical introspection for the sake of assurance develops a tested character, a desire for holiness, and a love for "righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost" (Romans 14:17). For when one knows the grace of God, it truly teaches him "that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts," his life should be characterized by sobriety, godliness, and righteousness in the present world and that he should look for "that blessed hope, and [even] the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:12-13; cf. 1 John 3:1-3).

The Temporary Loss of Assurance

4. True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as by negligence in preserving of it, by falling into some special sin which woundeth the conscience and grieveth the Spirit; by some sudden or vehement temptation, by God's withdrawing the light of his countenance, and suffering even such as fear him to walk in darkness and to have no light, yet

are they never destitute of the seed of God and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart and conscience of duty out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may in due time be revived, and by the which, in the meantime, they are preserved from utter despair.²²

True believers may have their assurance “shaken, diminished, and intermitted.” The paragraph lists four factors that might contribute to such a phenomenon and closes with an affirmation that, in such times, true saving faith continues to produce fruit.

Assurance may be diminished when one neglects to preserve it. The confession lists Song of Solomon 5:3, 6 in support of this point. It might well have added 1 John 3:18–22. Like all Christian graces, assurance must be exercised and cultivated. Loving in deed and truth permits us to assure our hearts before God, and confidence before Him comes when our hearts condemn us not.

Special sin in the believer’s life may also cause the flight of assurance. Such sin wounds the conscience and grieves the Holy Spirit. David’s turmoil and tragic life following his sin with Bathsheba leaps out as the supreme biblical example of this. Psalm 51 presents the spiritual struggle and earnest quest for God’s favor that resulted from David’s repentance.

Sometimes a “sudden or vehement temptation” causes the waning of assurance. Psalm 77 appears to reflect this kind of disposition. The writer cries (verses 7–9):

Will the Lord cast off for ever? and will he be favourable no more? Is his mercy clean gone for ever: doth his promise fail for evermore? Hath God forgotten to be gracious? hath he in anger shut up his tender mercies? Selah.

At other times assurance may fail simply because God withdraws “the light of his countenance” and allows “even such as fear him to walk in darkness and to have no light.” Even after the unshakable confidence painted in the words “I shall never be moved,” the believer may experience a day in which he says that “thou didst hide thy face, and I was troubled” (Psalm 30:6–7). Such times come that we might seek the Lord more earnestly and humbly acknowledge our dependence upon the manifestation of His presence.

Again, the inimitable Spurgeon has adorned this element of the doctrine of assurance with his unparalleled verbal pictures. After discussing the mysterious congruity between the witness of the Holy Spirit and the witness of our spirits that we are children of God, Spurgeon continues:

And so to conclude, this is desirable to the highest degree, for it is the earnest of the inheritance. It is a part of heaven on earth to get an assurance wrought by the Spirit. It is not a pledge merely, for a pledge is given back when you get the thing itself, but it is an earnest; it is one cluster from the vines of Eshcol—one shekel of the eternal wage—money of the free-grace reward—what if I say it is a stray note from the harps of angels!—it is a drop of the spray from the fountains of life; it is one ingot of gold from the pavement of heaven; it is one ray of heavenly light from the eternal Sun of Righteousness. O Christian, if you have ever known assurance, you will pant till you have it again. You can never, after seeing the sunlight, put up with the candle-light of your doubts and fears in the dungeon of despondency. But if assurance be gone, do still hang on Jesus.

When your eye of faith is dim,
Still hold on Jesus, sink or swim;
Still at his footstool bow the knee,
And Israel's God thy peace shall be.²³

As Spurgeon indicated, in harmony with the confession, even in these periods of apparent abandonment, the believer is “never destitute of the seed of God and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren” and other Spirit-wrought graces by which he may in due time be blessed with renewed assurance. The distinction between saving faith and assurance must be maintained. Saving faith continues in pursuit of holiness even in the absence of assurance and preserves a man from utter despair even while he prays, “Help thou mine unbelief.”

Perhaps Francis Wayland, speaking in the last week of his earthly life, summarized the doctrine of assurance in as succinct a manner as possible, giving expression to the calm confidence for which all should pray:

I feel that my race is nearly run. I have, indeed, tried to do my duty. I cannot accuse myself of having neglected any known obligation. Yet all this avails nothing. I place no dependence on anything but the righteousness and death of Jesus Christ. I have never enjoyed the raptures of faith vouchsafed to many Christians. I do not undervalue these feelings, but it has not pleased God to bestow them upon me. I have, however, a confident hope that I am accepted in the Beloved.²⁴

NOTES:

¹ William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969), 274.

² *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association from 1707 to 1807* (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1851), 288–289.

³ *Spurgeon's Expository Encyclopaedia*, Sermons by Charles H. Spurgeon, 15 vols. (n.p., n.d.; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977), 1:269.

⁴ Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 274.

⁵ John Bunyan, *The Whole Works of John Bunyan*, 3 vols., *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Paternoster Row, London: Blackie and Sons, 1875; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977), 108.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁶ The Rev. Robert Hall, A.M., *Works*, 2 vols. (New York: G. & C. & H. Carvill, 1830), 2:327–328.

¹⁷ Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 274, 275.

¹⁸ C. H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 2 vols., revised ed. (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1962), Vol. 1: *The Early Years 1834–1859*, 202.

¹⁹ Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 250.

²⁰ *Minutes*, 288–289.

²¹ Clark H. Pinnock, ed. *Grace Unlimited* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship, Inc., 1975), 44.

²² Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 275.

²³ Spurgeon's *Expository Encyclopaedia*, 1:279–280.

²⁴ Francis Wayland and H. L. Wayland, *A Memoir of the Life and Labors of Francis Wayland, D.D., LL.D.*, 2 vols. (New York: Sheldon and Co., 1867), 2:360.

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