

SECURE in Christ



The *Shorter Catechism*, when defining the benefits that flow from justification, places at the very top of the list “assurance of God’s love” (Answer 36). An old manual, *In Prospect of Sunday*, describes assurance as “the crown and cream of faith,” and adds rather picturesquely, “If faith be the hand, assurance is the ring.”

The problem is that not all Christians are wearing this ring. Many who have called upon the Lord Jesus Christ to be their Saviour admit to a lack of assurance. Since they don’t have the kind of feelings they think they ought to have, they conclude that they cannot really be saved. But God never intended His people to live in crippling anxiety and fear; therefore, His word emphasises the benefits of having assurance of salvation.

Assurance in the Life

Assurance of salvation is produced by a number of specific factors: the plain declaration of the Scriptures, the inward evidence of our graces, and the witness of the Holy Spirit. There is no doubt that the assurance and enjoyment of our salvation depend heavily on the written word of God (1 John 5:13; John 1:12; 6:37). Much like a father showing his son the title-deeds of his estate and pointing to his name clearly written on them, the divine truth of the promises of salvation grip our hearts and assure us of our being in a state of grace.

Inward and outward evidences of saving faith will be apparent in our lives, testifying to our relationship with God and to grace. Sometimes we complicate this by looking for marks of faith when it might be easier to look for faith itself. Faith is not simply assent to a catalogue of facts: it is grasping Christ with the heart. In the language of Charles Wesley, faith says, “Thou, O Christ, art all I want, / More than all in Thee I find.” The crucial test of faith is do we find such beauty in Christ as to desire Him? (Psalm 73:25).

Further, the arguments we use when we pray are very good indicators of what our faith relies on. If we approach God and say, “Lord,

accept me because I'm a good person," our trust is misplaced. Spurious assurance is always accompanied by spiritual pride. However, if we go to God and plead, "Lord, accept me because of Jesus' blood and righteousness," our trust is in the correct place. True faith is grounded, not in what we are or what we have done, but in who Christ is and what He has done for us. The saintly Robert Murray McCheyne gave good advice when he said, "For one look at self, take ten looks at Christ."

It is also true, however, that this faith has certain marks. These are best summarised by the apostle John in his first epistle. For example, John alleges that true faith will manifest itself in love for our fellow Christians (1 John 3:14; 5:1), in obedience to the Scriptures (1 John 5:2–3), and in victory over sin (1 John 5:4–5).

It is essential that we strike a balance in looking for these marks. Too little self-examination can lead unconverted people to take on themselves an invincible confidence that they are God's children, secure for time and eternity. Down through the centuries men have looked at their national connections and their various rites and ceremonies and assured themselves that they were true children of God (Jeremiah 7:4; Matthew 3:9; Luke 18:10–14).

On the other hand, too much introspection will concentrate the mind on the act of faith and take it off the object of faith. This will throw up radical doubts that are always destructive of Christian joy and activity. It is important that people should examine themselves, but sometimes we can become so obsessed with looking for the marks of faith that we become paralysed.

A third factor in assurance is the witness of the Holy Spirit to our own hearts. We have all known Christians who have borne very clear marks of a work of grace in their lives but who have no personal assurance of salvation. Naturally, if these marks are not present, assurance is presumption. But it is never enough to have this outward evidence. We must also have the work of the Holy Spirit in the depths of our hearts, giving us the confidence to go to God in all of His holiness and address Him, "Abba! Father!" (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6).

Assurance Not Essential to Faith

To state, as the *Westminster Confession* does, that assurance is "not of the essence of faith" does not mean that assurance is unimportant. It merely affirms that a person may be a true believer—even lead a life of exemplary godliness—and still lack assurance of his salvation. Rabbi Duncan was tormented day after day by what he called "The same old question: Is John Duncan born again?" Similarly, Charles Spurgeon often experienced deep spiritual depression. Should we conclude that these men were not children of God?

A true believer may come to assurance a long time after his conversion. A person can be in a converted state and still be tormented for months, or even years, with doubts

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regarding his salvation. It is also possible to have our assurance shaken and diminished. We can lose it. Several factors contribute to this. One is the result of direct satanic attack: the devil can cause our joy, peace, and confidence to disappear.

Again, we can lose our assurance due to our temperament. Some people have a predisposition to depression, and this depression tends to gravitate to and feed on the more sombre aspects of theology, ignoring heaven and grace and comfort and mercy and love to concentrate on the biblical teaching about hell or the unforgivable sin.

Sometimes lack of assurance is the result of bad teaching. Christians find themselves being defeated or discover elements of defilement about their lives, and hastily conclude they are not converted. Sound teaching, however, will emphasise the truth that, while it is a sad thing for the Christian to fall and fail, our acceptance before God is a matter of sheer grace. Like Paul, the believer may make the most strident accusations against himself (Romans

7:24), and yet at the same time know that he is accepted by God (Romans 8:35–39).

Most tragically, the believer sometimes loses his assurance because of his own sin. We do something that disrupts our relationship with God, causing us to lose the witness of His Spirit and the confidence to call Him Father.

The Service That Springs from Assurance

What does assurance mean on a practical level? While the lack of it does not affect our standing before God, it certainly affects our service. When Bunyan's Pilgrim went back to look for the roll he had lost, he had to suspend all his other activities. This is what happens when we lose our assurance. We are taken out of the action. Without assurance it becomes very difficult to serve the Lord. Without assurance there is no joy in discipleship, and joy is the lubricant of obedience. The quality of our witness, our worship, and our entire service to God depends on the depth and power of our feelings and affections, and chief among these is this fact of assurance.

The *Westminster Confession* points out that far from "inclining men to looseness," Christian assurance prompts us to obey the Lord. Real assurance sets us working for Him (2 Corinthians 5:14; Psalm 116:1). Nothing will guard us against slackness, steer us away from sin, and drive us to service more than knowing that we are precious to God. For every child of God, seeing the ring of assurance sitting on the finger of faith is a most enlivening experience. ■



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