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Why Is Assurance of Faith Important?



‘Assurance is the conscious confidence that we are in a right relationship with God through Christ’, writes Sinclair Ferguson. ‘It is the confidence that we have been justified and accepted by God in Christ, regenerated by his Spirit, and adopted into his family, and that through faith in him we will be kept for the day when our justification and adoption are consummated in the regeneration of all things.’¹

Assurance has always been a vital subject for Christians. Its importance is more critical now because we live in a day of minimal assurance. Worse yet, many don’t realize that. The desire to have fellowship with God, yearning for God’s glory and heaven, and intercession for revival appear to be waning. That happens when the church’s emphasis on earthly happiness overshadows her conviction that we are traveling through this world on our way to God and glory.

The need for a biblically-based doctrine of assurance is compounded by our culture’s emphasis on feeling. How we feel often takes precedence over what we know or believe. This attitude has infiltrated the church. The dramatic growth of the charismatic

1) Sinclair B. Ferguson, ‘The Reformation and Assurance’, *The Banner of Truth*, cf. p. 30 fn. 1, no. 643 (Apr. 2017): 20.

movement can be attributed in part to a formal, lifeless Christianity, for the movement offers adherents emotional fulfillment and excitement to fill the void created by a lack of genuine assurance of faith and its fruits. Today we desperately need rich doctrinal thinking coupled with vibrant, sanctified living.

This book addresses the questions, difficulties, and issues associated with assurance of faith. Let's look first at eight important reasons for seeking to attain to and grow in assurance.

Soundness of Faith and Life

Our understanding of assurance of faith determines the soundness of our understanding of spiritual life. We can be orthodox in many areas and be unsound in our understanding of this key doctrine of Scripture.

Many people mistakenly assure themselves that they are Christians. They base their salvation on some form of presumption or 'easy believism'. In some cases, they claim that they have been saved from infancy but their lives do not bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work. They may attend church faithfully, enjoy hearing gospel promises preached, participate in the sacraments, get involved in a few church ministries, do some outward good deeds for their neighbors, and live a decent and moral life, but, tested by the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-12), they are not spiritually poor in themselves; they do not mourn over sin, nor are they meek and submissive before God; they do not hunger and thirst after righteousness, etc. They rely on mere head knowledge of the gospel, and have not been born again (cf. John 3:5-8). They have never learned personally in their soul's experience before God that they are 'wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked' (Rev. 3:17).

In many other cases, people claim they were born again based on an emotional response to a hyped-up but watered-down evangelistic sermon or invitation, on raising their hand and coming forward at an evangelistic meeting, or on mindlessly reciting a 'sinner's prayer' from the back of a tract. They know little conviction of sin and have never seen their need as a lost sinner before God. They claim

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forgiveness without repentance. Their supposed ‘new heart’ results in an unchanged life. Their outwardly religious lives or their worldly lives reveal that Christ has not become their Savior and Lord. They are strangers to a personal, experiential acquaintance with Jesus Christ as their prophet, priest, and king. They do not truly fear God, hate sin, love Christ, and pursue holiness.

False assurance generally leads a person into one of two dead ends – the dead end of sentimental emotion or the dead end of dry intellectualism. Living in either of these false gospel cul-de-sacs often results in the rejection of the true gospel that connects the whole man with the gospel – head, heart, and hands. People with false assurance are commonly very hard to reach with the gospel. We fear that tens of thousands who consider themselves to be Christians will wake up in hell to their eternal horror. How dreadful it will be to be self-deceived on the judgment day! No one will enter heaven on that day on false grounds. Many who claim various things they have said or done for Christ, will be told on that day that Christ has never known them savingly (Matt. 7:21-3). Unsound doctrine and godless living will slay their tens of thousands!

One of the problems with people who base their salvation on presumption and easy-believism is that they seldom, if ever, examine whether their faith is genuine and well-founded. Their error could perhaps better be called ‘easy assurance-ism’ than easy believism. They claim assurance without having a foundation for it. Errors about how one comes to assurance can easily lead to false assurance. A right understanding of assurance helps us avoid such presumption.

A false view can also hinder us from having assurance when we should. Some genuine children of God do not believe they are children of God. They embrace a kind of ‘hard believism’, looking for evidences that they have no right to expect. Often they look more at themselves and their works than at Christ and the promises of God. There may be solid, biblical evidence that they are children of God, but they are not satisfied with that. They are their own greatest obstacles in attaining assurance. In this case, too, a proper understanding of assurance of faith is important.

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Those who have a proper understanding of assurance will avoid both ‘easy’ and ‘hard’ believism. On the one hand, assurance will not be regarded as an easy, automatic benefit. They will not be assured of their faith without solid, biblical evidence of faith operating in their lives. They will be aware of the danger of easy believism and will regularly examine or test their hearts and lives by the Word of God. On the other hand, instructed by the Word, they will recognize the evidence of the new birth in their lives and acknowledge its reality. When they have a genuine longing for God and a corresponding hatred for sin, they will acknowledge that these things are worked by the Holy Spirit in them and be comforted by them. They will not despise true, albeit small, marks of grace (Zech. 4:10). It is critical that our assurance can pass the test of soundness of faith and life, even if we have only small measures of the marks of grace that the Bible identifies as the fruit of the Spirit in the saved (Gal. 5:22, 23).

Peace with God and Joy in God

Assurance is inseparable from the peace and comfort of the gospel. Assurance that we are justified from all sin through Christ is necessary if we are to experience peace and joy and hope (Rom. 5:1-3). To experience true peace and joy in the Lord greatly enriches our lives while we are on this earth. That is one reason why Thomas Brooks (1608–1680) titled his book on assurance *Heaven on Earth*.² Assurance is related to the peace, comfort, and joy of the gospel and ought to be cultivated.³

What peace, security, and joy belong to us when we can sing through all the joys and sorrows of life, ‘This mighty God forever lives, our God and Saviour to abide’ (cf. Ps. 48:14); when we can call on God in truth as ‘our Father’ whom we love ‘because He first

2) Thomas Brooks, *Heaven on Earth: A Christian Treatise on Assurance* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1961).

3) J. C. Ryle, *Holiness* (Welwyn Garden City, England: Evangelical Press, 2014), 148–51.

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loved us'; when we can hold sweet communion with Jesus Christ as our Savior and Elder Brother and be confident that we know He will soon come again to take us to Himself to glory; when we can be patient in sufferings because we know that they are short and our joys are eternal! Surely, no one on earth can have so much happiness as the Christian who has a well-grounded certainty that the triune God is his salvation, and that 'to live is Christ, and to die is gain' (Phil. 1:21).⁴

That does not mean that Christians will not have times of sorrow over sin, difficulties, and doubts. But Scripture is abundantly clear that Christians ought to exhibit great peace and great joy in the Lord (Neh. 8:10; Phil. 4:7; Heb. 10:19-25). Even in sorrow, we should always be rejoicing. To do that, we must be fully assured of our faith. Charles Spurgeon said of such believers: 'A fully assured Christian is a very giant in our Israel; for happiness and beauty he standeth like Saul, head and shoulders taller than the rest; while for strength and courage he can match with David.'⁵

Christian Service

An assured Christian is an active Christian. Paul said of the Thessalonians, 'For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance' (1 Thess. 1:5). The preaching of the gospel was so blessed in Thessalonica that there was much assurance – both in Paul and in his hearers. Paul goes on to say, 'So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia. For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing' (vv. 7, 8). How amazing! The Thessalonians, newly converted, sounded out the Word of God – that is, they evangelized – so that

4) Thomas Jones, *The True Christian; or, The Way to Have Assurance of Eternal Salvation* (London: R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1834), 4–5.

5) Charles Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Pasadena, Tex.: Pilgrim Publications, 1973), 7 (1861):549.

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when Paul journeyed further on, from Thessaly into Macedonia and Greece, he discovered that the Word of God had already come there. These people were so zealous for God because, for one thing, they were assured of their salvation.

A Christian without assurance is seldom concerned about good works. Rather, his spiritual energy is consumed by questioning whether he is saved or not. When that question is not resolved, the person halfheartedly helps others in the service of the Lord. The Puritan Thomas Goodwin said that a Christian who has full assurance of faith is ten times more active than one who does not!⁶ And J. C. Ryle stated, 'A believer who lacks an assured hope, will spend much of his time in inward searchings of heart about his own state. Like a nervous, hypochondriacal person, he will be full of his own ailments, his own doubtings and questionings, his own conflicts and corruptions. In short, you will often find that he is so taken up with his internal welfare that he has little leisure for other things, and little time for the work of God.'⁷

Some people think that our business here on earth is only to find salvation; once we are saved we have little more to do until we get to heaven. Conversion is viewed as an end in itself. But that is not the case. We are converted for some very important ends or purposes: to be conformed to Christ and to worship and serve God in order to show forth His praise. Romans 8:29 tells us that God's people are predestinated 'to be conformed to the image of his Son'. And 1 Peter 2:9 tells us: 'Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.' God converts us so that we may be made more like His Son and that we may show forth His praise, so that He may be glorified in us.

6) Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 1:251.

7) J. C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (Cambridge, England: J. Clarke, 1956), 32.

Communion with God

Assurance is valuable because it enriches our communion with God. How can a person have close communion with God when he is uncertain as to where he stands with God? How difficult would it be for a parent to have a close relationship with a child who is unsure of the love of his father? The child never relaxes and accepts expressions of love. In such an atmosphere, a close relationship is impossible.

By contrast, consider the assurance described in the Song of Solomon when the bride says of her husband, 'My beloved is mine, and I am his' (2:16). There is communion here, fellowship, a warm and trusting relationship, love and confidence on the part of the bride that the love between them is mutual. That is the kind of fellowship that the Lord holds out to His people. He often describes His relationship to them in the closest of terms: Father and child, Husband and wife, Bridegroom and bride, Head and body, and a Friend among friends. The Lord uses the most intimate relationships in life to describe the relationship that He wants with His people. Assurance is necessary to realize that kind of relationship.

Holiness to the Lord

Assurance is critical because it makes a person more holy. Speaking of the assurance that flows out of knowing that we are adopted sons of the Father, John says, 'Every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure' (1 John 3:3).

Assurance that does not lead to a more holy walk is false assurance. The person whose assurance is well-founded, who experiences true peace and joy, who is busy in the Lord's service and lives in close fellowship with Him, will lead a holy life. A believer cannot persist in high levels of assurance while he continues in low levels of holiness.

Assurance brings us into close contact with God's power. When we have a trusting relationship with God and confidence in His mercy and grace, our hearts are inflamed with love for God. This love kindles the will and desire to live a holy life. The closer we are to God, the more love we will feel for God and the more holy our

lives will be. A holy person is driven by love to God, for Christ's sake. The love of Christ constrains the holy man (2 Cor. 5:14).

Need for Revival

Assurance of faith is sorely needed today because assurance cannot be separated from genuine revival. What is a revival but large numbers of persons coming into the knowledge of Christ and assurance of grace and salvation through Him?

How true that was of Martin Luther! Read Luther on Galatians. Did he not burn with indignation for the way the church of his day left people uncertain about salvation? By contrast, Luther was filled with the assurance that flows out of the gospel. Search his writings and you will feel the power of what he is saying.

Countering Secularization

Assurance is necessary if we are to be God-honoring Christians in a day of great secularization and apostasy. The gospel has always been difficult to live out in the world. But sometimes opposition to the gospel is especially intense. We are living in such a time. We are living in a bruising time.

We are called to be lights on the lampstand in a day of great darkness, while the devil promotes apostasy on all sides, especially within the church and in our educational institutions. To be lights in such darkness we need much assurance.

One of the best ways to counteract secularization as Christians is to let our light shine with the gifts of peace and joy flowing out of assurance because we are exhibits of the gospel. In Philippians 2:15, Paul's prayer is, 'That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world.' Surely one way that a Christian can shine like a light in this evil world is by living in peace and joy. What idea will the world have about God if God's people don't show that it is a wonderful thing to serve the Lord? The psalmist commands us to 'give thanks unto the LORD, for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever. Let the redeemed

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of the LORD say so, whom he hath redeemed from the hand of the enemy' (Ps. 107:1, 2). What does it say about God if people cannot detect in us the quiet peace and genuine happiness that sets us apart as His children?

Promotion of Biblical Doctrine

The doctrine of assurance is sorely needed today because doctrine itself is largely despised. Few understand Martin Luther's assertion: 'Doctrine is heaven.' Assurance is the nerve center of doctrine put in *use*, as the Puritans would say; that is, God's truth applied to our own lives and to the life of the world. Assurance entwines itself with the work of the Spirit in every link of the chain of salvation, from effectual calling to glorification. It is inseparable from the doctrines of sin, grace, atonement, and union with Christ. It is conjoined with the marks and steps of grace. It touches on the issue of divine sovereignty and human responsibility; is intimately connected with Holy Scripture; and flows out of election, the promises of God, and the covenant of grace. It is fortified by preaching, the sacraments, and prayer. Assurance is broad in scope, profound in depth, and glorious in height.

Conclusion

How important this whole question of assurance is! It is possible to be saved without assurance, but it is scarcely possible to be a healthy Christian without assurance. You may object: 'Doesn't Scripture affirm that God has a special concern for the poor and needy sinner?' Even the most assured child of God is still a poor and needy sinner. If he ever stops being poor and needy in himself, there is reason to doubt whether his assurance is based on solid ground. Christ must increase and he must decrease (John 3:30).

The Lord is near to those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit and sigh for assurance. But it does not follow that to remain forever in such a condition is desirable. If we lack assurance, we should seek it diligently, by the light of God's Word, and with the help of His Spirit.



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Assurance is vital for our spiritual well-being. Some people think assurance indicates superficiality. In their eyes, one is almost suspect if he has assurance. In reality, those who see doubting and fearing as a sign of deep religious experience, and prefer to press on toward God and glory without assurance, have only a superficial understanding of Scripture. A deeper understanding of gospel truth leads us to recognize the work of the Spirit in our hearts, to acknowledge and rejoice in it, and all the more, to rest with childlike faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.