

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine,  
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine,  
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,  
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.

Perfect submission, all is at rest,  
I in my Savior am happy and blest;  
Watching and waiting, looking above,  
Filled with His goodness, lost in His love.

-Fanny J. Crosby



## THE SEARCH FOR FULL ASSURANCE

Over the centuries Christians have struggled with the issue of assurance. Despite the widespread proclamation of the gospel and Bible teaching today, many true Christians still struggle with this extremely important issue. Those in the Arminian tradition tend to say that we can be sure of our present salvation, but we cannot be sure of ultimate salvation. Those of the extreme Calvinistic tradition tend to say that we cannot be sure that we are among the elect and ultimately saved, but those who are the elect can never lose their salvation. Most would agree with Michael Eaton: "I find neither doctrine very encouraging. In fact, both seem rather terrifying."<sup>1</sup>

Evangelical Christianity is unique in affirming that assurance of ultimate salvation is possible here in this world. Muslims believe the only way to be sure of paradise is to become a martyr for Islam. Many medieval Christians also thought that martyrdom was the only sure way to salvation. Catholics believe that even the Pope himself cannot be sure! Is there a middle way which gives evangelical Christians a firm and genuine assurance of ultimate salvation based upon biblical truth? There are millions of Christians who can give a resounding "YES" to this question. However, both extreme Calvinism and Arminianism tend to undermine assurance.

Since the time in 1949 when I put my name in the promise of the Lord Jesus in John 5:24, I have had that assurance. Christ promised eternal life to those who have heard and believed His word, that they shall not come into condemnation, and have already passed out of death into life. Like millions before me, I just took Him at His word and personalized His wonderful promise. Many would respond that this is a naive and superficial under-

standing, and there are other complicating factors which make such an assurance dubious or even impossible. Let us sort out these issues.

### Do all real Christians have assurance?

The question really should be, “should all real Christians have assurance?” The fact is that many genuine Christians do not have perfect or even substantial assurance. A fly in the ointment has been misinterpretation of Hebrews 11:1 to imply that saving faith is equal to assurance: **“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”** This would seem to teach that saving faith is equivalent to assurance, wouldn’t it? Just a minute! A basic rule of interpretation is to see every verse in its context. What is the context of this whole eleventh chapter of Hebrews, the great faith chapter? Is it saving faith or ongoing faith in the life of the believer? Very clearly, the Apostle describes the ongoing faith of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants, especially focusing on Moses. These are the heroes of faith held up as examples to Hebrew Christians of victorious faith, but this does not speak of the way of salvation.

So we must not rule out the possibility, even the probability of true Christians not having a solid assurance of ultimate salvation. We must not write off Christians who lack assurance, but rather instruct, encourage, and exhort them to claim it. An intriguing biblical example of a believer who lacked assurance would be John the Baptizer in prison as recorded in Matthew 11:1-14. He sent his disciples with the question: **“Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?”** Since the Lord Jesus was not inaugurating His kingdom as John had announced, now even he is questioning the identity of the Lord, which he had proclaimed so boldly. Despite John’s temporary lack of faith, the Lord commended him: **“there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist”** (Mt. 11:11).

Certainly assurance is a major goal of all the Apostles’ writings. John is very explicit as to his purpose: **“These things have I written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life”** (1 Jn. 5:13). Some may quibble as to whether eternal life includes an assurance of ultimate salvation or not (a subject for four chapters in Part II), but as to the present assurance there can be no doubt. Simon Peter’s exhortation is also very clear: **“Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”** (2 Pet. 1:10-11, NIV). That he is speaking about the subjective realization of assurance is clear from the preceding exhortation to manifest Christian virtues in our lives. Since the gracious nature of salvation is clear elsewhere, as already observed, this could not be about how to get salvation.

**Much full assurance.** A unique Greek word is used in Paul’s epistles and Hebrews which confirms the above. It is *plērophoria*, which means “full assurance, confidence.”<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the full force of this word is lost in

many translations. Paul used it in 1 Thessalonians 1:5 to describe the way he brought the gospel to them: “**for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.**” Although this is an intensified compound word, Paul added the adjective “much” (*pollē*) to further intensify it, “**much full assurance.**”

He also prayed that the Colossians might attain “... **to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in the true knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ Himself,...**” (Col. 2:2). This parallels Hebrews: “**And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end,**” and the exhortation: “**let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water**” (Heb. 6:11; 10:22). Since this was the Apostles’ purpose for their disciples, there must be a reasonable expectation of its realization in life. Such assurance does not come automatically upon exercising saving faith. Words like ‘eagerness,’ ‘diligence,’ and ‘attain,’ put responsibility upon the believer. Although we are saved by grace through faith alone, assurance of that salvation clearly involves human participation. What are the hindrances and basis for this assurance?

### **What misunderstandings hinder assurance?**

**Subjective introspection.** There are many obstacles to assurance. Instead of focusing on the promises of the word of God, many have looked within themselves for some feelings or experience as a basis of assurance. A relevant saying is attributed to Martin Luther: “Feelings come and feelings go, and feelings are deceiving. My trust is in the word of God; naught else is worth believing.” Evangelicalism is distinguished by seeking to balance the objective truths of the historic Christian faith with the subjective experience of salvation in the life of the believer. Essential to that balance is starting with the objective realities of the person and saving work of Christ. We must not start with subjective experience either for salvation itself or for its assurance.

To start with our subjective personal experience is to put the cart before the horse. For example, Andrew Fuller was raised in an extreme Calvinistic tradition in the midlands of eighteenth-century England (cf. p. 347). As a teenager he struggled to come into assurance because he was looking within himself for some warrant that God would accept him. At the age of sixteen, he cast himself upon Christ and became an outstanding pastor, missions proponent, and theologian. Later he wrote, “I now found rest for my troubled soul; and I reckon that I should have found it sooner, if I had not entertained the notion of my having no warrant to come to Christ without some previous qualification.”<sup>3</sup>

**Passive waiting.** Related to this is the idea that the sinner cannot take any initiative in salvation and must wait passively for God to give salvation

like a lightning bolt. Jonathan Edwards (1703-58), one of the key evangelists of the First Great Awakening in America, struggled with this problem. Although almost everyone in town was anxious concerning eternity, some came into assurance rather quickly, but others found it ten times more difficult to come into assurance, going through soul agony for extended periods of time. Edwards struggled to balance the implications of his Calvinism, which said that there was nothing they could do but “lie at God’s feet and wait His time,” against the need to actively help them to come to faith. But his direct knowledge of biblical truth told him that he must guide them with steps they could take to prepare themselves for the gift of salvation, which is called ‘preparationism.’\*<sup>4</sup> A century later D. L. Moody struggled with a similar problem personally. He thought that God gives salvation arbitrarily like a lightning bolt, but then his Sunday School teacher showed him Romans 10:17: “**So faith comes from hearing, and hearing from the word of Christ.**” He turned to the Bible, faith developed, and he got assurance of his salvation.

**Knowing the time.** Others are confused about knowing *when* they were saved. They think that one has to know exactly *when* one was born again in order to know *that* one has really been saved. Although spiritual rebirth must be an event in time and space, there is no Scripture indicating that one must know the exact time and place of being born again. Indeed, the parallel with physical birth shows that just as a child doesn’t remember the time and place of its own birth, just so a Christian may not be aware of the exact circumstances of one’s own new birth. The important thing for a child is to know that one is alive now; just as the important thing for a child of God is to know that one is alive spiritually now. Just because some Christians can identify the exact moment when they trusted Christ and were saved, does not mean that all genuine Christians must have the same awareness. I know I was saved in the summer of 1949 and that I had been a lost sinner before that. However, I cannot be sure exactly when it happened. Some genuine Christians have even less understanding of a time and place. On surveying my Bible college classes as to how many knew the time and place of their new birth, usually only about half knew when. It is a serious error to write off such Christians as not really being saved. It is a legalism to add additional stipulations for salvation to what has been explicitly revealed in the word of God.

### **What is the basis of assurance?**

Assurance is not some vague and mystical thing reserved for only some elite Christians. It is the clear will of God for all true Christians. Since the basis for this full assurance is clearly spelled out in God’s word, no one need guess or keep wondering about it. Just checking out and understanding what the Bible says is a sure path to full assurance of faith. There are a number of clear factors which enter into attaining biblical assurance.

**The person of Christ.** Clearly, the objective facts of the deity and saving work of Christ are the essential foundations of assurance. From our survey of the Gospels, the identity of the Lord Jesus as God incarnate is vital. It is impossible to have good assurance if one is not clear on the full deity of Christ. The Lord Jesus was not just a good teacher, prophet, miracle worker, or whatever, He was God come to dwell in human flesh (Jn. 1:14-18). After D. James Kennedy gave a great message at Ocean Grove, NJ on the uniqueness of Christ, a lady said to him, "I have been a faithful Congregationalist for over fifty years and have never heard what you preached today." He asked, "What did I preach?" She responded, "That Jesus is God incarnate." Thereupon he counseled both husband and wife and led them to faith in Christ. This was the central issue that Christ had to get clarified with His own nation Israel, and it is the central issue that professing Christians need to face up to today. The person whom we have received by faith and to whom we relate today is God incarnate.

**The work of Christ.** Coupled with the unique person of the Lord Jesus is the foundation of His unique work of salvation in His sacrificial death and resurrection. There can be no assurance apart from this! Christ's finished work on Calvary must be the object of our faith. Unless we understand the basis of forgiveness and justification, we will continue to struggle with the guilt of our sin. The more we understand of the ransom-redemption and the propitiation provided on the cross, the more we can be assured that "Jesus paid it all." These are the objective historical facts upon which our assurance is based. When the Lord Jesus cried out, "**It is finished,**" we understand that God had done everything which was necessary for the full and free salvation of the repentant sinner.

It is also important to understand the subjective, internal dimensions of salvation. When we understand that justification means that God charges our sins to Christ since He bore them on the cross, and now God declares us perfectly righteous in His sight by charging Christ's righteousness to us—only then can we experience the sense of release from the guilt of our sin. This is the redemption-liberation aspect of salvation and the full reconciliation with God which was seen in Chapter 5.

**The Word of God.** These wonderful truths just surveyed are widely available. How do we access them and make them our own? Most people in the world are totally ignorant of these realities. How do we appropriate them for ourselves? We enter into these salvation realities through trusting in the salvation promises in the word of God. Lack of assurance is frequently caused by a fuzzy perception of these promises. But the promises in the Bible are the necessary channel to access Christ's saving reality.

Perhaps a contemporary illustration will be helpful. There is a wealth of information and help available to the whole human race on the internet. However, most are not getting the benefit of it for a number of reasons.

First, one must have a computer or similar device. Secondly, one must have software in the computer which connects with the internet through a phone or cable connection. The message of the Bible is God's appointed means to access His salvation, just as a computer and its software is the appointed way to access the internet. Yet many who have the computer and software don't get much help from the internet because of ignorance of how to use it. They may have learned how to access a few websites and get a little help, but they are very insecure and lost as far as the rest of it is concerned. Just so, many Christians who understand enough of God's message of salvation to be saved, don't have assurance because of ignorance of most of what the Bible teaches. The more one understands, believes, and obeys the word of God, the more likely one will have good assurance of salvation.

**Personal trust.** Hundreds of millions of people in the world have Bibles. Two billion people are professing Christians, but only a small percentage have assurance of salvation in Christ. What is missing? The clear answer is—a personal trust in the finished work of Christ. The gospel must be personally appropriated by each individual. It is not enough to intellectually assent to the truths of the historic Christian faith. Each individual must personally claim for oneself the merits of the sacrifice of Christ and receive the gift of eternal life.

My experience is typical. I had attended Sunday School in an evangelical church faithfully from childhood and always believed that Christ died for the sins of the world. But it wasn't until as an engineering student at the age of nineteen that I claimed salvation for myself and was born again into the family of God. I put my name into the promise of John 5:24. This is why evangelical Christians speak of "accepting Christ as your personal savior."

It is most important to understand the two dimensions of the Christian faith. The first is the objective, historical facts of God's plan of salvation—universal sin and depravity, and the virgin birth, deity, sacrificial death, and bodily resurrection of Christ. These are all foundational. But these objective, historical realities do not automatically save anyone, as important as they are. This is because there is also a subjective, internal, and personal dimension to the Christian faith as well. It takes place right now in our personal lives. It requires a human response to the gospel message—the repentance and faith emphasized in Chapter 6. Failure to grasp these two dimensions of the good news of Christ has been a problem for billions.

An essential part of the foregoing discussion is to put these two elements together—the promises of the word of God and our personal trust in Christ and His saving work. This involves claiming those promises for ourselves and taking God at His word. If we don't take God at His word and claim His promises, we are making God out to be a liar. In the book of Hebrews the Apostle shows that this was the nation Israel's problem: "**For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard. For**

**we who have believed enter that rest ...”** (Heb. 4:2-3a). One of the clearest such salvation promises in Romans 10:8b-10 also emphasizes that trust in Christ is a matter of the heart:

**... the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.**

***The witness of the Spirit.*** Although repentant faith is the responsibility of mankind to exercise, immediately upon man’s believing, the Holy Spirit begins a whole new series of ministries in the life of the new believer. Before a person comes to faith, the Holy Spirit had been actively convicting him of sin, righteousness, and judgment, according to the promise of the Lord Jesus in John 16:8-11. Now the Spirit begins to work in the life in a number of significant ways. Not only is the believer born again, but is also indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9-11), baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13), sealed by the Spirit until the day of redemption (Eph. 4:30), and the Spirit becomes a witness to the new believer that he is saved: **“For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God,...”** (Rom. 8:15-16). Here is the divine confirmation of the reality of faith and salvation. The Spirit begins to give assurance that sins have been forgiven and that one is now a child of God. That assurance may develop immediately or gradually, dependent upon the life situation of the individual. Some people, such as Saul of Tarsus, grasp the implications of salvation more readily and come into full assurance very quickly (Acts 9:19-22). Others struggle to grasp important dimensions of salvation truth, and thus their assurance may be weak at first. We must be careful not to put everybody in a mold and insist that everyone’s experience of salvation should fit a pattern.

***The witness of the life.*** Our salvation does not depend in the least upon human performance. It is totally by the unmerited favor of Christ that we are saved. However, *our assurance* of salvation is heavily conditioned upon human factors. Peter, after speaking of God’s wonderful provision for a life of godliness (2 Pet. 1:2-4) and exhorting us to apply all diligence in showing godly qualities in our lives (1:5-9), goes on to speak about assurance: **“Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these thing, you will never stumble;...”** (2 Pet. 1:10). Although human performance does not contribute one iota to our salvation, Peter is very explicit that our *subjective assurance* of that calling to salvation is very dependent upon our diligence to grow in the Christian life and develop Christian character. Besetting sins and backsliding in the Christian life can be very destructive of the certainty and assurance that God wants us to have. This is one of the main points of John’s first

epistle, which has as its goal that “**you may know that you have eternal life**” (1 Jn. 5:13). Along the way to that goal John emphasized many aspects of the Christian life and character which contribute to or else undermine our certainty.

### **Life Factors which Undermine Assurance**

There are two aspects of the problem of assurance. Some Christians may just question the reality of their own salvation, even though they may have no doubts about the truth of the Christian faith. Others, however, may have more deep-seated doubts about the very veracity of the faith itself. Let us sort out the diverse problems which Christians face.

***Sin and backsliding.*** Any pastor or evangelist can testify to the fact that sin and backsliding in the Christian life can seriously undermine an individual’s assurance of salvation. Actually it should be a no-brainer for any Christian to realize how sin undermines assurance. However, some new Christians might have thought that getting saved would liberate them from all sin in their lives, not realizing that while we are saved from the penalty of sin, the old sin nature within us remains. Unfortunately there has developed within the Arminian tradition a whole movement of a number of denominations called the holiness movement, which teaches that total experiential sanctification is possible here on earth. This would mean that it is possible for a Christian to live a sinless life. However, the Apostle John writing to those saved individuals who believe in the Son of God (1 Jn. 5:13) said, “**If we [believers] say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. ... If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us**” (1Jn. 1:8, 10). John uses some pretty strong language to warn us of the seriousness of this error, since if we deny the problem, we are far from the biblical solution.

Therefore, it is very common for Christians who struggle with sin, especially serious sins, to wonder if they were really born again. They may even think that they need to get born again all over again, since they think that maybe it didn’t take the first time. This was the problem of the Christians alluded to in Hebrews 6:4-7, discussed in detail in chapter 13.

Sometimes Christians who fall into sin stop attending church services and seriously backslide. In such a condition it is no wonder that they lose the assurance of salvation. They need to claim the promise of God, which is sandwiched between the two verses above: “**If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness**” (1 Jn. 2:9). This is not a salvation verse for unbelievers, but a way of restoration for the sinning and backslidden Christian.

***Life’s calamities and discouragements.*** Remember the doubts which John the Baptizer experienced in prison, when things did not turn out the way he expected. A significant number of Christians today are stumbled

by negative circumstances in their Christian lives. They may have had unrealistic expectations as to what the Christian life entails. Perhaps they had been influenced by the contemporary vogue of the “prosperity gospel” to think that every Christian has the right to prosper financially, and when they struggle financially, they question the reality of the gospel. Others may have thought, along with many Pentecostals and Charismatics, that every Christian has the right to be healed. When they or some loved one falls into chronic illness or even dies, their faith and assurance are undermined.

Many may blame God when calamities come into our lives. If God is sovereign, He is to blame! Such thinking overlooks the fact that Christians are not exempted from life’s calamities, which go back to the sin of our first parents and the consequent judgment of God upon the creation, which was originally good (see especially Genesis 3:14-19). Additionally, God judged the earth a second time through the worldwide deluge because of the universal violence, vendettas, and murder permeating the whole human race (Gen. 6). Worldwide weather as we now know it was a consequence of that flood (Gen. 2:5-6; 8:22), and many natural calamities today, such as tornadoes and tsunamis spring from that.

We must also remember that Satan usurped the rule of the earth from Adam in the Garden and now is the “**prince of this world**,” “**the God of this world**,” and the “**prince of the power of the air**.” He has a host of evil angels helping him to keep most of the human race under his control. So we should not be astonished that calamities come in the Christian life.

***Doubts about the authority of Scripture and/or the deity of Christ.***

Since our salvation promises are in the Bible, the word of God, Satan has made the inspiration of the Bible a major target for his attacks. While he sometimes uses atheists and agnostics to attack the veracity of Scripture, he frequently uses religious people, as in Christ’s day. Not only do attacks come from Muslims, Hindus, and other religionists, but also from professing Christians. Christ warned about the “**wolves in sheep’s clothing**” who would seek to undermine the faith of God’s people (Mt. 7:15). Sometimes it is pastors who dishonestly feign belief in the Bible but in their hearts don’t believe it. They preach ethical teaching, but they omit the necessary essentials of salvation truth. Some of them are more honest to make their denials forthrightly, but that still doesn’t make it right.

Frequently it is a religion professor in a college, university, or seminary who attacks the Bible and the Christian faith. Before 1890, all of the Protestant theological seminaries in America, except Harvard, held evangelical views. Due to the impact of destructive higher criticism of the Bible coming from Germany and the United Kingdom and also of Darwinian evolution, virtually all the Protestant seminaries became liberal or modernistic by 1920.<sup>5</sup> The denominational control of the old-line denominations was taken over by these liberals with few exceptions. This means that they did not believe that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, or that Daniel wrote the book of

Daniel, or that the Apostles wrote the Gospels and all of the epistles. Today if you take a religion course in a university or mainline denominational seminary, you will hear denial of the Bible as the word of God on every hand. This has been true also in many Roman Catholic institutions, since Catholic scholars have borrowed critical views from liberal Protestants, as well as from the evolutionary philosophy of the Jesuit, Teilhard de Chardin. Even in professedly evangelical institutions, there is frequently serious compromise with these liberal views. The faith of the students can be seriously undermined by this, as well as their assurance of salvation.

These days such attacks are not limited to the educational sphere. The media is constantly bombarding people with such denials. The “Jesus Seminar” of liberal scholars in Chicago a few years ago concluded that very little of the Gospel records record authentic information about the Lord Jesus. This was not only widely reported in the media, but unbelieving scholars of this type are constantly being used as resource people in the documentaries aired on television, whether done by Peter Jennings, or the Discovery, or History channels. Rarely do they honestly interview evangelical scholars who believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God.

In addition, many evangelical scholars have begun to compromise their evangelical faith with these liberal denials. After graduating from an evangelical seminary, I got permission to audit classes for a few days in my own denominational seminary. In the first class attended the professor denied that Moses wrote the Pentateuch and gave out the liberal destructive higher critical view as truth. A number of Arminian denominations do not have any doctrinal statement on the inspiration of Scripture. Their professors can teach any unbelief that suits their fancy. But even many denominations and educational institutions which have a clear statement on the inerrancy of the Bible are tolerating compromise by their leaders and teachers.<sup>A</sup>

All of this weakens the confidence of Christians in His deity and saving work. Some denial comes from direct unbelief in what the Bible says; some from ignorance of the Bible’s own claims for its inerrancy; some from ignorance of Christ’s own claims about His deity; and some from the fuzzy thinking of those who use a number of subtle interpretive devices to obscure the clear meaning of Scripture.<sup>B</sup> Sometimes scholars can get so immersed in the writings and views of other scholars that they don’t spend time studying the Bible itself.<sup>B</sup> The result is that they have doubts about the full deity of Christ, which in turn undermines confidence that He really is able to

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A. The widespread nature of this problem became clear when the Evangelical Theological Society membership voted in 2003 not to expel two members whose writings have consistently denied the inerrancy of Scripture. It seems that the mindset of tolerance so prevalent in our culture has greatly influenced the thinking of many evangelical scholars. See Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible*.

B. I recently heard a sermon by an Old Testament professor in an evangelical seminary of Reformed tradition, in which he twice stated that he rarely reads the New Testament. Needless to say, there was no explicit explanation of salvation in his message.

provide the full salvation which He promises.

In an exit interview with a departing professor, he expressed surprise when I said that I had close to 100% certainty of the deity of Christ. When I asked him what percentage he could affirm, he replied, "Oh, about sixty percent." This explained student reports that his teaching raised too many questions, which he did not answer. Over half a century that I have been studying the Bible, my conviction has continually grown that the Bible is absolutely true and is absolutely clear on the full deity of Christ.

The most concerted attack on the deity of Christ comes from Muslims, who believe that it is blasphemous to call any man God. This is the major obstacle for Muslims to become Christians. As a missionary to Muslims in the metro New York area Dick Bailey was counseling a Muslim background believer (MBB) who had been struggling with issues of assurance and victory over sin for years. When Dick asked him, "Is it possible that you still have a problem with the deity of Christ?" he responded, "Yes, that's it! I still struggle with this issue." This was the root of his problem! There are other doctrinal errors which also undermine assurance of ultimate salvation.

### **Doctrinal Errors Which Undermine Assurance**

***The unforgivable sin.*** In serving as a Bible answerman on Christian radio, one of the most frequent questions we got was, "What is the unforgivable sin?" Many were confused and feared that they had committed it! However, there is absolutely no need for anybody today to worry about "the unforgivable sin." As usual, it is so important to see the context in which Christ uttered these words (Mt. 12:24-32). Some of the Pharisees had accused Him of casting out demons by Satan's power, when actually it was by the power of the Holy Spirit. After showing them the absurdity of this accusation, He said,

**Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come (Mt. 12:31-32).**

His words have come true in that over the ages many who have blasphemed His name have later been saved, such as Saul of Tarsus. But since the Holy Spirit is the person of the Triune God who applies salvation to the human heart, those whose hearts were so callous and closed to the Spirit's working could not be saved. This was an outrageous, wholehearted hostility toward God, since they saw the incomparable divine Son of God heal the sick, exorcize demons, and even raise the dead. Since no one today has literally seen Christ do such things, probably no one today can commit this sin. In any case, a person who is concerned about such a possibility certainly does not have such a callous heart and should no longer fret about this. We

should focus instead on our Lord's positive statement, "**any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people.**"

***Ignorance of the gracious nature of salvation.*** Most human beings would like to contribute to their own salvation, even if only a little. Evangelical Christianity is totally unique in affirming that salvation is absolutely by the unmerited favor of God and not dependant in the least upon human performance. Every other major religion insists that salvation is achieved by the works of mankind. Islam is the most hard-core in this regard. According to Islamic traditions (*hadith*), when Muhammad was dying, his daughter Fatimah asked him to pray for her salvation. His response was, "Daughter, my prayers will do you no good! Only your own good works will save you!" It is salvation by human merit. The most important word in Hindu philosophy, familiar by now to many westerners, is *karma*. It is a noun of agency coming from the Sanskrit verb "to do," in short it means "works." The second most important word is *dharma*, which means, "custom, religion, etc." Hindus try to achieve *moksha* (liberation) by the mental and physical discipline of yoga and by following cultural and religious customs. The same is true of all the other world religions.

Most of the two billion professing Christians are trying to be saved by human works, even though the Bible is so clear on this. Catholicism had deteriorated so badly in the medieval period that the Reformers' emphasis upon salvation by grace through faith alone was totally rejected by the Roman hierarchy in the Council of Trent (1547-8). Although some Catholics today for the first time are reading the Bible and coming to a more evangelical view of salvation, their accumulated dogmatic system is hostile to salvation by God's unmerited favor. Five of the sacraments, which all Catholics must fulfill for salvation, constitute a system which is at core dependent upon human performance and merit. Although many priests water down the way they communicate to people, as if salvation is only through christening, the other four general sacraments are commonly understood to be essential to ultimate salvation. Since it is never quite clear which sins are mortal and which are venial, and how faithfully one must go to mass, the Catholic is always uncertain about salvation. Even the Pope cannot be sure. There is no real assurance for the Catholic!

Neither can liberal Protestants have any assurance, since they too are in a works salvation. The social gospel of the last century did not even affirm eternal salvation; it was only concerned with human society here and now. Neo-orthodoxy talked about an existential encounter with Christ, but was not clear about who He was, or just what that encounter involved. Now post-modernism denies that there are any absolutes of truth or morality, so there cannot be any absolute truth about salvation either.

Even among Evangelicals we find that extreme Calvinists have real problems knowing for sure whether they are among the elect. If God's election is based upon some secret counsel known only to Him, then how

can we know for sure? The answer to this question is complex and a major portion of the rest of this book will be devoted to answering it. The uncertainty of Christians over the centuries about their elect status arises from the doctrine of absolute predestination. Careful examination of all the passages relating to election and predestination will show that they are conditioned upon God's foreknowledge of who will come to repentant faith. Actually the biblical material is quite simple, but over the centuries theologians have brought in philosophic considerations which have muddied the waters. There is also some confusion about the translation of key words and the interpretation of key passages, which all must be seen in their contexts. We should not allow human philosophy to color our understanding of Scripture or scholarly rationalizations to undermine the simple promises of the Bible.

On the other hand, Arminians can be sure about the present, but not about future salvation. In their view some sin or failure of faith could send them to hell. This also seems like a complex issue and some chapters will focus upon clarifying it (cf. Chapters 12-15). It mostly arises from failure to understand who are being addressed in certain warnings in the Bible and exactly what the nature of those warnings really are. There has been a tendency to be satisfied with a superficial read of what these and other passages actually say, without careful study of the context, the exact words used, and the grammar and syntax of the passages. But one does not have to be a Greek scholar to resolve these problems. Over the centuries, misinterpretation of the warning of Hebrews 6 has been a major hangup for many. On the telephone call-in program, this was the number one question which was asked, month after month.

### **Why have so many struggled with assurance?**

It is shocking to read Archibald Alexander's case studies of conversion experiences from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as collected by this early Princeton theologian. It is so distressing to read page after page of people's struggles to come into the assurance of eternal life, with so little clear biblical guidance given them. It reminded me of the long struggle<sup>C</sup> John Wesley, although an Anglican priest, had to come to salvation and its assurance. Alexander's anecdotes are probably from among his own Reformed tradition. From his narratives it seems that most Christians had little clue as to how to lead a distressed soul into the assurance of salvation. If many of the Reformed preachers of the day had as little assurance as evangelist Asahel Nettleton (cf. pp, 152-3), it is no wonder that lay people were in confusion. On his deathbed he said, "The most that have ventured to say concerning myself is, that I think it possible I may get to heaven."<sup>7</sup> In discussing this book with the pastor (of Calvinistic convictions), we wondered together whether it was D. L. Moody (1837-1899)<sup>8</sup> here in America and

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C. Wesley was heavily into asceticism, mysticism, legalism, & Platonic philosophy in the many years of his struggle. See Robert G. Tuttle, Jr., *John Wesley: His Life and Theology*, pp. 143-155.

C. H. Spurgeon (1834-1892) in Great Britain who set evangelicalism on a better course in the last half of the nineteenth century. Since that conversation, my research has indicated that Andrew Fuller (1754-1815) in Great Britain and the New Divinity theologians of the Second Great Awakening in America had earlier laid the foundation for Spurgeon and Moody (Chaps. 24-25).

Alexander's anecdotes from the early nineteenth century are no better. There seemed to be such ignorance of the simple gospel message and such a prevalence of legalism in both the Calvinistic and Arminian camps that many people struggled for years to come into assurance of salvation. Alexander gives a general impression: "It is a lamentable fact that in this land of churches and of Bibles there are many who know little more of the doctrines of Christianity than the pagans themselves."<sup>9</sup> It is probable that George Whitefield, Andrew Fuller, the New Divinity preachers, Charles Finney, Moody, and Spurgeon may really be key figures in moving Protestants back to a more simple gospel presentation.

## Conclusions

Assurance of salvation is foundational to a stable and victorious Christian life. How can we live in victory and blessing if we are not really sure whether we have been saved or not, or if we are not sure whether God will ultimately send us to hell? It is absolutely imperative that every professing Christian settle these issues related to assurance so as to come into the "much full assurance," "the full assurance of faith," "the full assurance of understanding," and "the full assurance of hope."

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1. Michael Eaton, *No Condemnation: A New Theology of Assurance*, p. 4.

2. G. Abbott-Smith, *Manual Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, p. 365.

3. Andrew Gunton Fuller, *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1833), I, 20.

4. Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, p. 28.

5. Kenneth Kantzer, Staley Lecture at Northeastern Bible College, Essex Fells, NJ, 1970s.

6. See Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old*.

7. Eaton, *No Condemnation*, p. 3.

8. "No man has ever done more for the Christian cause in his generation. He had recruited for Christ many who were leaders in the next." (J. C. Pollock in Woodbridge, ed. *Great Leaders of the Church*).

9. Archibald Alexander (1772-1851), *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, pp. 67-71, 28.