

**“The ABC’s of the Christian Life: (17)
Following Jesus Christ Rightly: #11. Assurance of Salvation”**

Introduction:

We have attempted in recent weeks to set forth biblical principles and lessons that are foundational and important in order that we might live the Christian life in a right manner. We have addressed the following subjects in regards to following Jesus Christ rightly, which is the essence of the Christian life:

- #1. Joining the Local Church
- #2. The Believer’s Baptism by Immersion
- #3. Seeking First the Kingdom of God
- #4. The Authority and Sufficiency of Scripture
- #5. Keeping Your Heart
- #6a. Understanding Law and Grace (part 1)
- #6b. Understanding Law and Grace (part 2)
- #6c. Understanding Law and Grace (part 3)
- #7. A Life of Prayer
- #8. The Sanctification of the Believer
- #9. Christian Liberty and Toleration
- #10. Our Identity in Christ

Today we address another very important matter that should characterize us, if we are following Jesus Christ rightly. This is the subject of *assurance of our salvation*. To possess a true and full confidence of one’s own salvation is the grounds for a settled peace in one’s soul which will affect many areas of our Christian living. Assurance of salvation produces within us a higher and purer motivation for living before the Lord and it will enhance our service to our Lord and His people.

Assurance of salvation is not a new subject to many of us, for we have addressed it before. Ten years ago, in the summer of 2007, we addressed the subject of assurance of salvation in some detail. At that time we devoted 10 Sundays to this subject, the assurance of salvation.

But it was not that long ago that we gave our attention to this matter. In January of 2016 we spoke of assurance in our study of Paul’s Epistle to the Colossians. Paul wrote in Colossians 2 of his own desire and concern for Christians in the churches to which he ministered that they have assurance of their salvation. We read in Colossians 2:1ff Paul expressing his heart:

We also addressed the subject of assurance nearly 2½ years ago in July of 2015. We were studying the nature of true conversion. We emphasized that one of the great tasks of gospel preachers and churches is to undeceive those with false assurance of salvation in order to bring them to experience true salvation. The Holy Scriptures give many warnings of the danger of presumption, which is to imagine oneself to have salvation when there is no real biblical basis for believing that it is so. We emphasized this reality with these words:

“The importance of our study regarding conversion to Jesus Christ is magnified *because of the many warnings we have in Scripture of ‘many’ who will think that they are converted when Jesus Christ returns, only then to discover they are still in their sins.* The Holy Scriptures press upon all who claim to be converted to be watchful and prepared for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and the great Day of Judgment that will then take place. When the Lord Jesus returns a second time, He will find His professing church comprised of professing believers, some of which are true Christians, some of which are not. All profess to have faith in Him. All claim to be His disciples. All are anticipating the return of the Lord. All are assuming that they will receive their full and final salvation when He comes. But not all are true Christians who profess to be Christian.”

In considering this subject of assurance, let us first reflect upon...

I. The great problem of nominal Christianity

One of the great problems within Christendom today is the great number of people who believe themselves to be true Christians, but they are not, for they are Christians in name only. This problem is linked directly to the common experience of false assurance among those who claim to be Christians. Many have a false sense of security with respect to their salvation. One reason for this problem is due to the ease in which people may gain false assurance, but also due to the difficulty in dispelling false assurance. Actually we could classify people in five groups with respect to their assurance of salvation.

- (1) ***There are some who have a true assurance of salvation and they should have.*** This is because they examined the biblical teaching respecting these things, and have passed the tests in their own conscience regarding their condition. (I think these are much fewer in number as is generally assumed.)
- (2) ***There are some who are true Christians, who do not have assurance of salvation, but they should have.***
- (3) ***There are many in this world who have assurance of salvation, but they should not have.*** They have no legitimate biblical grounds for assurance, for God's Word says of them that they are without hope and without God.
- (4) ***There are some who are true Christians, who have assurance, but the basis of their assurance is faulty.*** They may have a right to true assurance, but they are basing their assurance on the wrong things.
- (5) ***There are those who have assurance, but it is of a weak nature, sometimes they feel assured but at other times they quite despair of their condition.***

The work of biblical evangelism is tied to this matter of assurance. An understanding of the biblical teaching of assurance of salvation will help us to bring others to Jesus Christ. Much of the work of witnessing involves convincing people who have false assurance of salvation that it is false. The fact that they have error in this means they need to be taught rightly. Much of the devil's hold on people in their sins is their false reasoning that they are okay, when they are not. Much of spiritual warfare is the "casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (1 Cor. 10:5). Many of these "arguments" that we must dispel are bases for false assurance of salvation. Many times in winning people to Jesus Christ, we must first convince them that they are not Christians, in order for them to become true Christians. Doubting your salvation is not a curse, if it results in our true coming to Jesus Christ. As we have repeated many times, Spurgeon's words are true,

The greatest blessing is to have true assurance of salvation.

The second greatest blessing is doubt your salvation, for the second will lead to the first.

The Lord Jesus said to some who were righteous in their own eyes, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Luke 5:31f.). Most people falsely think they are "well" in their relationship with God. We are to show them that they are not, so that they will seek Christ.

The Lord Jesus Himself addressed this matter of nominal Christianity. He gave the parable of a wedding procession (Matt. 25:1ff). There were ten virgins who were to be ready to join the wedding party that would occur at an unexpected time. But of five of these women were "wise", but there are also five who were "foolish." The five wise virgins had salvation; the five foolish virgins did not have salvation, but they had thought that they had. In this parable our Lord gave a 50% ratio of professing Christians who will have

salvation and 50% who will only then become aware that they do not have salvation. Can you imagine if the Lord returned today and only 50% of professing Christians were found to be ready for His return and 50% were not? Half of us would enter into the joy of the Lord but half of us would be denied entrance. He will say to them on His left, "Depart from Me; I never know you!" **Charles Spurgeon** wrote of this:

Let us faintly hope that we are not to gather from our Lord's words that one half of the professing Church is composed of those whom He calls "foolish." Yet our Savior would not have spoken of so great a proportion if there were not really a very large admixture of foolish professors with the wise professors of the grace of God.¹

In another sermon **Spurgeon** referenced this parable.² His comments were addressed to the text of **Luke 13:24**, in which Jesus said, "*Many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.*"

So the text teaches us. It does not say "a few may be misled," but "many shall seek to enter in, and shall not be able." That many professors are deceived is clear enough from the language of Christ Himself, both here and in other places. For instance, "Then shall the kingdom of heaven be like unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom; and five of them were wise, and five were foolish." We hope that in our Churches we have not such a division this, for it were fearful to contemplate only one half as sincere, and the other half graceless, having the lamp of profession, without the secret vessel of spiritual life! Yet, so alarming a proportion as five out of ten should make us search ourselves very carefully, lest we be found among the virgins, and among the virgins having lamps, ay, and among those whose lamps are burning, and yet should be cast away as having no oil in our vessels with our lamps.³

The number of truly saved people in any given congregation is a common concern of pastors who have any measure of spiritual sense about them. We ask our Lord, "How many in our body truly know You? How many are 'wise' as these five and how many are 'foolish' as these other five?"

J. C. Ryle (19th c.) voiced concern in his day about professing Christians who were strangers to God's saving grace. He also referenced the parable of the ten virgins.

The professing Church is compared to "ten virgins, who took their lamps and went forth to meet the bridegroom;" all of them had lamps, but only five had oil in their vessels to feed the flame; all of them professed to have one object in view, but five only were truly "wise," and the rest were "foolish." The visible Church of Christ is just in the same condition: all its members are baptized in the name of Christ. But not all really hear His voice and follow Him; all are called Christians, and profess to be of the Christian religion, but not all have the grace of the Spirit in their hearts, and really are what they profess to be. Our own eyes tell us that it is so now: the Lord Jesus tells us that it will be so when He comes again. Let us mark well this description. After all our preaching and praying--after all our visiting and teaching,-- after all our missionary exertions abroad, and means of grace at home, many will be found at last dead in trespasses and sins! The wickedness and unbelief of human nature is a subject about which we all have much to learn.⁴

Now it may be noted that Ryle was speaking of his denomination, the Church of England, that presumed people were born again through their baptism. That kind of teaching will result in many church members who are Christian in name only.

II. True assurance is possible for the true Christian

Although there are many who falsely believe that they have salvation, the Holy Scriptures teach us that assurance of our salvation is possible for us, and we are to use all the means that God has provided for us in

¹ Charles Spurgeon, *Spurgeon's Popular Exposition of Matthew* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), p. 222.

² I have this sermon posted on our website.

³ Sermon by Charles Spurgeon, "Self Delusion", at http://www.thewordoftruth.net/classic_sermons/Spurgeon_1_Final.html

⁴ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels. Matthew* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986, orig. 1856), pp. 31f.

order for us to gain this assurance. We may consider any number of passages that speak to assurance of salvation, but let us consider a passage that underscores both the privilege and responsibility to gain assurance of salvation. The Apostle Peter wrote in his second epistle:

²Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, ³as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, ⁴by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.

⁵But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, ⁶to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, ⁷to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. ⁸For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.

¹⁰**Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure**, for if you do these things you will never stumble; ¹¹for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:2-10)

Peter identified the privileges that we have as Christians in that all that we have is due to God's grace. God imparts these blessing to us through "the knowledge of God and Jesus Christ" (v. 1). He has granted us through this knowledge everything we need in order to live lives in godliness. This is so much the case that we have already "escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust", or as the ESV translates this, "having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire" (v. 4).

But these privileges and blessings of God's grace should not lead us to be idle or to presume that all is okay in that nothing is required of us. We see our responsibility set forth in verses 5 through 9. Peter exhorted his readers to put forth all of their effort to grow as Christians, to become more godly and more holy, to be more Christ-like in their attitudes and behavior. He promised them that if they would do these things, they would assure themselves that they were of the elect and that God had called them unto the salvation that He freely bestows through Jesus Christ. What Peter was stating is that through the use of the means that the Lord has set before us, we can assure ourselves that we are numbered among His elect, that He has called us "into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." We read in verses 10ff these words,

¹⁰**Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure**, for if you do these things you will never stumble; ¹¹for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:2-10)

This passage of 2 Peter 1:3-10 is consistent with the first paragraph in our confession, *The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, which addresses assurance of salvation. It reads,

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 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 hope shall never make them ashamed.⁵

We may conclude from the passage we read in 2 Peter 1 that assurance of salvation may not be as easy to acquire as many are led to believe who attend church. Many are told,

⁵ *The Baptist Confession of 1689*, Article 18, paragraph 1. The verses the confession cite to substantiate this statement include Job 8:13, 14; Matt. 7:22, 23; 1 John 2:3; 1 John 3:14, 18, 18, 21, 24; 1 John 5:13; and Rom. 5:2, 5.

“As long as you believe on the Lord Jesus, you need not consider anything else, certainly not anything you do.” You are not to question yourself at all, for that is a failure to have ‘faith’, that is, to depend upon one’s works, not God’s grace.”

But that is not what the Word of God teaches. We are to use means in order to gain a sound assurance. God has set forth tests by which we may assess our own spiritual standing before God, whether we are true Christians or not. We are commanded to examine ourselves so that we may prove to ourselves that we are true Christians. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth:

“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” (2 Cor. 13:5)

Thankfully, God has provided us tests by which we may perform a self-examination. They may be categorized under three headings. Let us consider the...

A. Three objective tests to a sound assurance of salvation

1. The test of the faith – This has to do with what you believe.
2. The test of fellowship – This concerns whom you love.
3. The test of life – This is the issue about how you live.

You must be able to pass all three tests if you are to have a clean bill of spiritual health. To fail in one test, is fatal to assurance. (1) You may pass *the test of the faith*; you are no *heretic*.

He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.

Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. *He who abides in the doctrine of Christ* has both the Father and the Son. (2 John 9)

(2) But if you fail *the test of fellowship*, your case is hopeless, unless you repent and turn to Christ for cleansing and forgiveness of sin. The test of fellowship concerns whom you love.

If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also. (1 John 4:21f)

To fail this test would mean you are no Christian, but rather a *nominal Christian—in name only*.

If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also. (1 John 4:21f)

(3) But if you fail the test of life, this would reveal that you are no Christian, but rather a heretic.

³*Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments.* ⁴*He who says, “I know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.* ⁵*But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him.* (1 John 2:3-5)

In fact to fail any of the tests is to reveal that in your present condition, unless you repent of your sin, you will die and be damned from God forever. Thankfully, there is true and full assurance to the child of God. But it belongs to those who have seriously and earnestly examined themselves and have found that God has indeed done and is doing a work of saving grace in their lives. As our confession states. True assurance belongs

- to those who truly believe in the Lord Jesus,
- to those who love him in sincerity,
- to those who endeavor to walk in all good conscience before Him;
- they may in this life enjoy assurance
- they may be assured that they will be glorified one day.
- their hope shall never be disappointed; they will stand unashamed before God one day.

B. Three subjective ways in which God gives assurance of salvation

Now aside from these three self-tests above, there are other grounds of assurance of salvation. The three tests that we have identified are *objective* tests that you can see and assess. These are tests that not only you can use, but what others may use as they observe your life. However, by this exhortation to use means to examine ourselves, we are not saying that true assurance of salvation can *only* be attained through the use of means, for the Lord gives assurance of salvation to His people in several different ways. But there is a *subjective* basis of assurance that is unverifiable by others.

There is an assurance that God Himself gives to His own, an assurance that is produced and sustained, and renewed in those times of personal spiritual decline and hardening. It is a personal, spiritual sense of peace or well-being that the Holy Spirit gives to the soul. Several verses may be cited that speak to this. We read this in **1 Thessalonians 1:2-5**.

²We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, ³remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father, ⁴knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God. ⁵For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, *and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance*, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake.

Paul wrote of the assurance that the Holy Spirit gives the believer in **Romans 8:12-17**.

¹²Therefore, brethren, we are debtors -- not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. ¹⁵*For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father."* ¹⁶*The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,* ¹⁷and if children, then heirs -- heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.

There are three different ways in which God imparts assurance to His people.

1. Assurance is possible through believing God's promises in His Word. There is first that which may be obtained through believing and trusting the promises of the Scripture. For example, Jesus said, "All that the Father gives me shall come to me; and him that comes to me I will in *no wise cast out*" (John 6:37). And so, believing the promise, you come unto Him in this manner, knowing that He has promised He will not cast you away from Him.

2. Assurance is possible through passing the tests of Scripture. The *second* "form of assurance is *the passing of the tests* that the Scripture lays before us, particularly those tests that may be seen in 1 John. These are three in number, which we cited above.

3. Assurance is possible through grace imparted directly to the soul by the Holy Spirit. The 20th century reformed and evangelical leader, **D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones**, believed that this was the highest and most convincing manner of possessing assurance of salvation. After writing about the first two ways to have assurance of salvation, he wrote of the third based on the Romans 8 passage we read above. He wrote:

But there is yet another and higher form of assurance: “The Spirit beareth witness with our spirits that we are the children of God.” The first two I have mentioned refer to our spirits; but the Spirit Himself also beareth witness ‘with’ our spirits that we are the children of God. This is the highest and the most glorious assurance of all and it is ‘given’ to us and is not the result of our deductions from the Scriptures. Goodwin, and Owen, and Bolton, John Preston, John Howe and many others of the Puritans, as well as Jonathan Edwards and indeed John Wesley have eloquent teaching concerning this.”

III. What our Lord taught respecting assurance of salvation

We know Jesus of Nazareth inaugurated the promised kingdom of God through His life, ministry, death by crucifixion, and resurrection and ascension from the dead. God brought to realization the fulfillment of His promises to the Jews in His exalted and enthroned Son, Jesus Christ. But when Jesus had begun His earthly ministry, He made it clear that not all Jews would inherit the kingdom. He assumed as Paul would later write, “For they are not all Israel who are of Israel” (Rom. 9:6). In other words, not all are of true, spiritual Israel, who are of physical, ethnic Israel. Our Lord taught that many of the Jews would be cast into outer darkness. He declared that “the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:12). Who, then, could be assured that they had a part in God’s salvation? *Jesus identified those who could have assurance of their salvation in the opening words of His Sermon on the Mount.* He pronounces blessedness upon these, and only these. Let us read **Matthew 5:1-10**:

And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. ²Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying:

- ³“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- ⁴Blessed are those who mourn,
For they shall be comforted.
- ⁵Blessed are the meek,
For they shall inherit the earth.
- ⁶Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
For they shall be filled.
- ⁷Blessed are the merciful,
For they shall obtain mercy.
- ⁸Blessed are the pure in heart,
For they shall see God.
- ⁹Blessed are the peacemakers,
For they shall be called sons of God.
- ¹⁰Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The word “blessed” carried the idea that they were blessed of God, the objects of His favor, and that recipients of His mercy and grace—they have God’s salvation from their sins. Not all would be saved, but “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Not all would be forgiven of their sins, delivered from God’s wrath upon sin, but rather, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” And so, the Lord identified those who could have legitimate assurance that they were the objects of God’s mercy and grace; they may be assured that they were the recipients of salvation.

Now, notice the nature of the tests by which one listening to Jesus could determine if he were the object of God’s favor. Of *the nine beatitudes*, the first *six* of them describe *a condition of a person’s heart*, either an attitude, an aspiration, or an affection. The *seventh* speaks about what he does—he is a peacemaker. And the *eighth* and *ninth* beatitudes describe how he is treated by others. These are the bases of assurance of salvation that Jesus gave to this gathering of listeners. These are indicators that a person has the grace of God operative in

his life. We may conclude that *one of the primary ways of gaining true assurance of salvation is to assess whether or not a work of God's grace is manifest in one's own soul.*

This is consistent with something our confession of faith states about assurance. Paragraph 2 of article 18, which addresses "Assurance of Grace and Salvation", reads as follows:

This certainty (that one has assurance) 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.⁶

You see, the confession is consistent with what our Lord taught the people before Him. If upon personal introspection you see that you are in poverty of spirit, that you mourn over your sins, your hardness of heart, your wrong attitudes and actions before God, and that you long to be right with God, then, if you are looking to Christ for relief, you may be assured that yours is the kingdom of heaven; you will be comforted; you have salvation. If you truly desire that God is served and glorified first, that your own name and advancement is not the primary issue in your life, that is, if you are truly meek, you may be assured that you will have a place in the new earth that God has promised to His people. And similarly, you may be assured that you are numbered among the people of God, for

⁶Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.

⁷Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

⁸Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

The point is this: an honest, reflective, introspection of one's own heart may be the basis of assurance of salvation. For such an inspection will reveal whether or not God is at work in your soul, working grace in your heart, for only those people are the recipients of His salvation.

Now again, some argue that you are not to look at all inward to your own heart condition as an evidence of salvation. But is this not exactly what Jesus was telling His hearers to do in these beatitudes? Some say that you are not to look at all to yourself, but only to the bare facts of what God has done in Christ, and if you accept those facts, if you believe those things to be true, then you may have a right to the only legitimate basis for assurance. But as we see here, the Bible presents other tests by which we are to examine ourselves, not that we simply believe the right things. And not all of them have to do with believing what God has done historically in Jesus Christ in His life, death, and His resurrection. These tests have to do with what God is doing in your heart and life.

Now again, paragraph one of our statement of faith sets forth who it is that may have true assurance of salvation:

*"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 state of salvation, which hope of theirs shall perish; yet **such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring 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 hope shall never make them ashamed.**"*

This statement asserts the following persons may rightly attain assurance:

- to those who *truly believe* in the Lord Jesus (*the test of faith*)
- to those who *love him* in sincerity (*the test of love/fellowship*)
- to those who endeavor to *walk* in all good conscience before Him (*the test of an obedient life*).

⁶ *The Baptist Confession of 1689*, Article 18, paragraph 2. The verses the confession cite to substantiate this statement include Hebrews 6:11, 17-19, 2 Pet. 1:4, 5, 10, 11; Rom. 8:15, 16; 1 John 3:1-3.

They may in this life enjoy assurance. They may be assured that they will be glorified one day. Their hope shall never be disappointed; they will stand unashamed before God one day.

IV. A major reason why true Christians struggle to attain assurance

For most of us, of the second and third tests are the most difficult for us to pass. We reason, “If my assurance is based upon the nature of how I live, how can I ever be assured?” Similarly we may rightly reason, “If my assurance is based upon the inward impulses and attitudes of my heart, then I may be wrong or deluded in thinking that I have God’s favor upon me.” You see, because of the presence of sin in each of us, it is easy for us to think that we do not have enough evidence in our private and public life to demonstrate that we are true Christians. Many times we have cold hearts. We show indifference to God’s Word and His commands. We show ourselves to be all too selfish and self-centered. This is the main reason why true assurance may be a difficult thing to obtain, for when there is a great deal of introspection that takes place and so much that is errant, corrupt and insincere is discovered.

Because of this need and importance of personal introspection, true assurance of salvation may be difficult to obtain. This is why I believe our statement of faith is accurate to scriptural teaching in this matter. We read paragraph two earlier in the article on assurance. Listen to the statement of **paragraph 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 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 his 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.⁷

I would assert that one of the major reasons why *“a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it,” is because he is seeking to whether or not God is doing a true work of salvation in his soul, because he is looking for evidence of a true work of grace in his heart.*

This is the kind of heart work that Christians underwent in the past when God was bringing great revivals of Christianity to churches and nations. This was the common experience of professing Christians in the days of the English puritans both in England and New England in the 17th and 18th centuries. Many books were written by their pastors to address the deep concerns of the professing people of God. Consider these titles which were very widely circulated and read. I will seek to classify them somewhat. There were those books⁸ designed to *comfort struggling Christians with assurance*:

- * *A Treatise on Comforting Afflicted Consciences* by Robert Bolton
- * *The Poor Doubting Christian Drawn to Christ* by Thomas Hooker
- * *The Doubting Believer* by Obadiah Sedgwick
- * *Precious Remedies Against Satan’s Devices* by Thomas Brooks

The Puritans wrote books to teach about *a true work of grace in the soul*:

- * *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*, by Philip Doddridge
- * *The Method of Grace* by John Flavel
- * *The Soul’s Preparation for Christ* by Thomas Hooker

⁷ *The Baptist Confession of 1689*, Article 18, Paragraph 3. The verses the confession cite to substantiate this statement include Isaiah 50:10; Psalm 88; 77:1-12; 1 John 4:13; Heb. 6:11, 12; Rom. 5:1, 2, 5; 14:17; Psa. 119:32; Rom. 6:1, 2; Titus 2:11, 12, 14.

⁸ I gave this list of puritan books in the past.

- * *Gospel Fear* by Jeremiah Burroughs
- * *The Christian's Great Interest* by William Guthrie

They wrote books *to unsettle those who had false assurance*:

- * *The Almost Christian Discovered* by Matthew Mead
- * *The Carnal Professor* by Robert Bolton
- * *The Nature of Saving Conversion* by Solomon Stoddard
- * *Alarm to the Unconverted* by Joseph Aleine

They wrote books instructing professing Christians as to *their responsibility to strive to live for Christ*.

- * *Keeping the Heart* by John Flavel
- * *Pressing into the Kingdom* by Jonathan Edwards

The Puritans wrote many books on *the nature of true saving faith*. The great stress and subject of these books is the internal work of the Holy Spirit, a work of God's grace in bringing a soul to true salvation.

V. A major reason for false assurance in many churches

One of the major reasons for false assurance among professing Christians, is the failure or refusal of ministers of the gospel to press their hearers to probe their hearts with these kinds of issues as a basis of assurance of salvation. Rather, we are told to do just the opposite. We are told that if someone is simply given the facts of what God has done in Christ, including Who He is, what He did in living and dying for sinners, and that He rose again, if we can lead a sinner simply to believe these things, then he has saving faith and has the right and privilege to legitimate assurance of salvation. In other words, only the first of the three tests that we have identified in Scripture is employed. But the issue, the problem at hand, lies in the second and third tests and we are rarely told by many preachers to inspect our hearts as to whether or not a true work of grace is being accomplished by the Spirit of God. Rather, what is only said to us, "Do you believe 'the gospel'?"; that is, as it is popularly and simplistically presented. But people are not commonly led to ask of themselves,

"Am I poor in spirit? Do I mourn over my spiritual poverty? Am I meek? Do I really desire that Christ be honored that God be glorified in my life over against my pursuit for comfort and happiness? Does my soul long for righteousness as a thirsty and hungry soul desires drink and food? Am I merciful and forgiving of others as I desire that God be merciful to me? Do I live and forgive others as God has loved me and forgiven me?"

You see, really at the center of this problem is ignorance of *what it is to be a true Christian* and error respecting the nature of *true saving faith*. **D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones**, the great English reformed preacher and writer of the 20th century thought that this wrong view of saving faith was the great danger of the day. He said once,

It is a matter to which I have frequently referred in passing to the whole course of my ministry, because I have had an increasing conviction that in many ways the most urgent one for us to consider at the present time. If I understand the condition of the church today – and, indeed, during the last fifty years or so – I would say that its great trouble has been that it has fallen into this particular error.⁹

He spoke those words in 1967 as he was introducing a paper on an aspect of Puritanism. He and his friend, **J. I. Packer**, each gave a paper on Puritanism on the occasion of this annual conference for many years. What Lloyd-Jones did in 1967 was call upon a little known movement that had been begun several centuries before,

⁹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans, Their Origins and Successors* (Banner of Truth, 1987), p. 171.

by several forgotten men, who had introduced in their churches an error respecting the nature of saving faith. The movement began to spread among many, particularly among the Baptists of Scotland and England (interestingly, among both Calvinists and Arminians). Lloyd-Jones recounted how some reformed preachers that lived in that day addressed and refuted the error as unbiblical. He then concludes his paper by showing what had formally been discredited as unbiblical has become the common understanding of evangelicalism today.

The error was known as **Sandemanianism**. The teaching was begun in the 1720's by a man named **John Glas**, a minister of the Church of Scotland. His teaching was popularized by his son-in-law, **Robert Sandeman**, from which the teaching derived its name. We do not have time to go into great detail about this, other than to briefly describe what these men taught. They basically emphasized that "only one thing is needful" to become right with God was to believe "the work finished by Christ in His death." Saving faith had nothing to do with the heart. It has nothing to do with the will. It only has to do with believing the apostolic witness about what God has done in Christ. Sandemanianism taught that all you have to do is to believe the gospel, irrespective of your feelings or of the resolve of your will to follow Christ. As long as you believe that Christ died for sinners, and that you are a sinner, you are saved.

"Faith alone", as they defined it, "is the way that you as a sinner may become right with God. You are not to look to your heart or life, you are not to employ two of the three tests that we have shown clearly in the Scriptures, as long as you assent to the truth with your mind, you have saving faith and therefore you may be assured of salvation."

They decried the teaching of others that espoused what we have described this morning. They repudiated any such notion for they wrongly perceived that as introducing works into the way of salvation. They thought that they were safeguarding the doctrine of justification through faith alone.¹⁰

Their teaching about saving faith resulted in their denial that repentance was necessary to salvation. You need not turn from your sins, only believe. Obedience to Christ was not necessary, only believe. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." You should never probe the condition of a person's heart or life, you simply tell him the facts of the gospel. If he believes them, he is saved. That is the common understanding of saving faith in much of evangelicalism today. This is what is assumed by some of the most well-known and "respected" "Bible-believing" preachers. Sometimes it is referred to as the "free grace gospel."¹¹ But the common result is *nominal Christianity*—Christians in name only. There are many people who claim to believe, they have a "form of godliness", but they deny the necessity of the power of the gospel to change their lives.

Lloyd-Jones described in his paper on how this error was dealt with and corrected. The puritans who refuted this idea of saving faith merely being a "notional faith" showed from the Scriptures that saving faith was not merely a matter of the intellect—*what* one believes. Saving faith also involves *how* one believes—from the heart. Moreover, saving faith involves how one responds—with the will in turning from sin to serving God through Jesus Christ. They showed that true saving faith was work of the Holy Spirit, as such, it was life transforming, not merely an intellectual ascent to facts. Moreover, they showed that saving faith was produced by the regenerating work of God—the new birth resulted in saving faith seen in the sinner, not the other way around as is commonly assumed today, which says, "If you believe, you will then become born again."

The short of it is this: There are multitudes throughout this world that are filling churches today, many so-called "Bible-believing churches", but whose lives are scarcely affected by the gospel. If they honestly applied the tests of Scripture to their hearts and lives, they would have to conclude that they have no biblical basis for thinking themselves to be saved. In fact, they would conclude otherwise, they would see that they are

¹⁰ It is very interesting to me that after **John MacArthur** published his excellent book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, in 1988, that **Zane Hodges** of Dallas Theological Seminary wrote his rebuttal in *Absolutely Free* in 1989, he used the false same argument that MacArthur was denying justification through faith alone. Zane Hodges typifies the modern "Sandemanian" that so common place in evangelicalism.

¹¹ I saw a book the other day that I should have purchased. It is by Wayne Grudem, entitled, "Free Grace" Theology: 5 Ways It Diminishes the Gospel." A kindle edition is available at <https://www.amazon.com/Free-Grace-Theology-Diminishes-Gospel-ebook/dp/B01BU6F8IG>.

lost. They would then perhaps begin to cry out, “Lord not only do a work for me, but do a deep heart work within me that I know that I am Yours.”

Let us close reading the fourth and final paragraph of our confession on the assurance of salvation:

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.¹²

May our blessed Lord help us to be wise and informed in these matters, that we might serve Him and His people faithfully.

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,
that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)

¹² *The Baptist Confession of 1689*, Article 18, paragraph 4. Here are the verses that substantiate the statement: Song of Sol. 5:2, 3, 6; Psa. 51:8, 12, 14; 116:11; 77:7, 8; 31:22; 30:7; 42:5, 11; 1 John 3:9; Luke 22:32; Lam. 3:26-31.