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ASSURANCE

by ALAN R. ROGERS

THE nature and basis of Christian assurance regularly come to the fore as topics for discussion in times of evangelistic endeavour such as we have experienced of late. The author of this fresh examination of the subject is a research student of Nottingham University, and a well-known figure in Tyndale Fellowship circles.

VERY little seems to have been written on this important theme;¹ it does not seem to have attracted the attention which it deserves. But the importance of the subject is obvious. Not only are the results of doubt crippling in a Christian's life, but we are warned in the New Testament of the danger of a false assurance or presumption: "hoping where God hath given us no ground to hope".² We must be clear in our own minds as to where the basis of our assurance lies. There is much wrong thinking on this subject, resulting too often in fideism, or a reliance on past experience. While this does not claim to be an exhaustive inquiry into the doctrine, yet it will serve as an introduction.

THE FACT OF DOUBT

It has well been pointed out that the New Testament is not much occupied with this topic. Something so special had happened to the disciples that they could not help being sure. It was not of themselves, but of God; they saw the fruits of God's work in their

¹ After this was written, my attention was directed to Prof. O. Hallesby's book, *Why I Am a Christian* (I.V.F. edn., 1955), where he deals with this topic. He does not, however, make a clear distinction between intellectual doubt and "moral" doubt; he lays too great a stress upon experiences as evidences of faith; and he regards assurance as a further step after conversion: "After a person has thus been saved, he receives assurance as an extra gift, in addition to forgiveness" (p. 127). See *infra*. His description of the paralysing effects of doubt and his insistence upon the fact that assurance is a gift of the Holy Spirit are both excellent (*passim*, esp. pp. 29-43).

² *The Whole Duty of Man* (1845), pp. 22-3. On false assurance, cf. p. 233, n. 16 *infra*.

lives. One might almost think that, to them, doubt was a sign of unregeneracy.

But to say that the New Testament is not at all concerned with this topic is not true. It does clearly envisage a state of uncertainty in the lives of some believers.³ The First Epistle of John is almost entirely devoted to the confirming of assurance.⁴ And Christian experience also realizes that often in a time of temptation and failure does doubt assail "the weary wrestler". It is not always objective; often we find, on self-examination, that it seems that the signs of our election are missing.⁵ But it is also true to say that in general today the wonders worked by the Spirit are not so *evident* as they were in the first century. None of us can give the reason why. Who dare question the sovereignty of the Spirit? One thing is certain—that the answer does not lie entirely in ourselves. It is true that one major hindrance is the lack of (and often the refusal to acquire) an adequate understanding of what God has done. But that is to suggest one symptom rather than a cause.

It is the lack of such evidences which occasions some doubt. Thus it is only in a very restricted sense that it is true that if we are not sure whether we are Christians, then in fact we are not.

THE BASIS OF DOUBT

The question "From what does doubt arise?" immediately presupposes others of a more disputed kind. It assumes, for instance, that assurance is the normal experience of the regenerate soul, and that doubt is extraordinary. This was the teaching of Calvin and other Reformers, but not of Wesley and others of those who place a higher value on the personal experiences of the soul. Calvin speaks of "that firm and stable constancy of heart which is the chief part of faith".⁶ While he recognizes clearly the fact of doubt and the necessity to confirm faith,⁷ yet he describes faith as "sure and firm, the better to express strength and constancy of persuasion".⁸ Wesley, on the other hand, draws a distinction between

³ But I cannot agree with A. A. Hodge (*Outlines of Theology*, p. 374) that 1 Cor. 9: 27 represents a lack of assurance on the part of Paul. Surely it is Paul's way of expressing the need for continual self-examination and humiliation, lest even he be subject to extreme self-deception, or a false assurance.

⁴ 1 John 5: 13.

⁵ I would stress the word *seems*; what we often forget is that our concern is in itself one of the true signs of regeneracy.

⁶ *Inst.* III. ii. 33.

⁷ *Ibid.* 37.

⁸ *Ibid.* 15.

the faith of a servant, which brings no assurance of sins forgiven, and the faith of a son, which is a higher attainment, the Spirit of Adoption.⁹ While not going further into this very disputed point, it seems to me in view of the very nature of faith and assurance, and in view of the teaching of the New Testament on the Spirit of Adoption, that there is no doubt where the truth lies.

There are two main sources of doubt. The first is intellectual, the second experiential. Doubt may arise from the inherent nature of Christianity, its central emphasis upon a revelation which must be accepted and appropriated by *faith*. But doubt also comes from our experience—or lack of it. We compare our experience with that of other Christians (as far as we are able to see it); or better still, we compare ourselves with the will of God, “our sanctification”.¹⁰ We cannot see this process actually in action; we are conscious too much of our failings. Sometimes we take refuge in the words of the hymn:

And they who fain would serve Thee best
Are conscious most of wrong within—

but yet deep down we doubt, and with good reason.

It is necessary to distinguish carefully between these classes.¹¹ For the one is doubt and the other is concern. The one may lead to indecision and spiritual cramp; the other to despair. The answer to both is Christ, but in different ways. Intellectual doubt must be handled in its own way, and so must experiential.

But it is equally clear that the basis of doubt is the same in both cases. We doubt God. We doubt His Word and especially His promises. This may spring chiefly from a lack of appreciation of the character of God. We fail to see that if God is as the Bible shows Him to be, then His Word must remain sure. Or we may honestly believe all that the Bible teaches, but have no assurance that it applies to us. We can see it in the lives of other people, but not in ourselves.

⁹ Sermons CVI and CX: Vol. III, pp. 199-200, 235-7. Cf. Sermon CXII: *ibid.*, pp. 256 ff.

¹⁰ 1 Thess. 4: 3.

¹¹ A. A. Hodge (*op. cit.* pp. 373-5) draws a like distinction between the “assurance of faith” (meaning “that true faith [which] cannot admit of any doubt as to its object; what is believed is assuredly believed”) and the “assurance of hope” (which is a “matter not of revelation, but of experience; not of faith but of consciousness”). “The first is of the essence of saving faith, and is the assurance that Christ is all that He professes to be, and will do all that He promises. The second is the assurance of our own personal salvation, and is a fruit of faith, and one of the higher attainments of the Christian life.”

ASSURANCE AND FAITH

What should be made quite clear is that assurance is another form of faith. Here again we are faced with a disputed question. Calvin describes it as "the feeling of full assurance, *plērophoria*, which the Scriptures uniformly ascribe to faith".¹² It is the continual personal appropriation of truths which have already been intellectually grasped, and the continual application of these truths to our lives. The use of the word *plērophoria* in the New Testament shows that it bears the sense of "confirming" as well as constant persuasion. Assurance is that basic conviction which moves our wills. Thus, like faith, it involves our whole personality—our understanding, our will and our affections.

This being so, assurance is subject to the same conditions as faith. Faith is the quality which says: "This statement is intellectually understandable and personally desirable. All that I know of God makes it probable. I shall act as though it were true." Thus faith is that quality which involves our whole personality but ultimately and essentially it is not faith until it results in a movement of the will. Faith without an act of the will is mere assent. To quote Calvin again, "That word is not received in faith when it merely flutters in the brain, but when it has taken deep root in the heart".¹³

A GIFT FROM GOD

God calls His people to a life of faith, not an act of faith. And as always, His calling is effectual. He provides the faith. And so it is with assurance. Faith (and therefore assurance) is the unconscious, or at least subconscious¹⁴ attitude which finds expression in the conscious through the medium of the will. Assurance is a gift of God, granted to us at regeneration.

But like faith, assurance can be fed. Indeed that is all that we can do. As it is our duty to grow in knowledge and in grace, to

¹² *Inst.* III. ii. 15. "Feeling" is perhaps an unfortunate word; the Latin term used by Calvin is *sensus*.

¹³ *Op. cit.* III. ii. 16, 36. This is illustrated in the N.T. by the accounts of the offering up of Isaac by Abraham (Gen. 22: 1-14). In Jas. 2: 22 ff. the act is represented as "works", or an act of the will; in Heb. 11: 17 (cf. Gal. 3: 6 ff. and Rom. 4) the same is represented as an act of faith.

¹⁴ By subconscious, I mean here that it is not under the direct control of the will. One cannot *will* oneself into a state of assurance. I do not mean that assurance is unrecognized (subconscious), or unrecognizable (unconscious). Nor does this contradict the fact that I have said above that faith is not faith until it issues in the fruit of the will. It is God who by His Spirit moves our wills as well as our minds.

feed our new natures, to be continually renewed in the inner man by the Spirit, so part of this process is the feeding and developing of the gifts of assurance and faith. The food we use is of two sorts, the external and the internal.

THE INTERNAL EVIDENCES OF FAITH

This is not intended to be a complete list of all the evidences. But the two which most easily spring to mind are both the fruits of the working of the Spirit of God in us. There is the testimony of the Spirit with our spirit—something which cannot be defined but which is nevertheless clearly known by all in whom the Spirit abides.¹⁵

The second evidence, or rather groups of evidences, is the signs of God's working in us. On this point there is much less agreement among Christians both as to the necessity of personal self-examination, the wisdom of it and also the evidences for which to look. The necessity of it is shown from the fact that the New Testament includes self-examination as an integral part of the plan of sanctification;¹⁶ and it is absolutely essential in view of the grave danger of self-deception.¹⁷

Many people are still frightened of the introspection which this may arouse. In some people this fear may perhaps be justified. But it is commanded for believers. It is true that there is danger with this.¹⁸ But the danger which accompanies self-examination is not so much introspection, as the danger of the acceptance of the works of the flesh as the fruits of the Spirit. Busy-ness here and there, attendances at meetings, good works—these are not necessarily the fruits of the Spirit.

The First Epistle of John must be our guide here. "And this

¹⁵ Rom. 8: 16.

¹⁶ E.g., II Cor. 13: 5, "Examine yourselves whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?"

¹⁷ T. C. Hammond (*The New Creation*, 1953, pp. 53-56) has some very salutary remarks to make on the dangers of self-deception. Dr. D. M. Lloyd-Jones (*Westminster Record*, Aug., Sept. and Oct., 1955) has also commented on this subject, on the basis of Matt. 7: 21-23. Here is perhaps the place to mention the same author's *From Fear to Faith* (I.V.F., 1954), which deals with another aspect of this same problem.

¹⁸ Again, there are dangers with all the means of grace. The search for true doctrine can so easily lead to intellectual barrenness; there are the dangers of a false sacramentalism and a deep mystical subjectivism which can ultimately lead to a supersession of the written revelation by direct inner illumination—the danger into which the supporters of the inner light have fallen.

is His commandment, that we should believe on the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another as He gave us commandment. And he that keepeth His commandments dwelleth in Him and He in him: and hereby we know that He that abideth in us, by the Spirit which He hath given us."¹⁹ Time and again the epistle emphasizes these four fruits of the Spirit—faith, love, obedience and the inner testimony of the Spirit. These are not the works of the flesh but the fruits of the Spirit.

THE EXTERNAL EVIDENCES: THE MEANS OF GRACE

First, there is the hearing of the Word of God. This is not necessarily confined to a church context. Personal Bible-study is (or should be) the hearing of the Word of God. By this we feed our new natures. We grow in the knowledge of God and of His will, and in true doctrine. The First Epistle of John tells us that true doctrine is the first essential requirement for true assurance.²⁰ We can have no well-placed assurance in God unless the basic elements of our faith are in accordance with the Word of God.

Secondly, there are the definite provisions which God has provided precisely to strengthen our faith. Baptism (with all that goes with it), whatever the differences between Christians on it, is generally recognized as the sign, or seal, of entry into the covenant in its external form. It is generally the prerequisite for membership of any Christian community. And the Lord's Supper, again, is the seal or sign of that continuous covenant relationship, which is described in John's Gospel in the words: "I will abide in you, and you in Me." Both of these sacraments were given by God, to be signs to us, not of our acceptance of God's grace, or of our faith, but of His plan and His power to execute that plan. They show to us His abiding attitude of favour to us. The remembrance of baptism and the continuous reception of the Lord's Supper remind us of God's dealings with us and give us greater assurance.²¹

For ultimately, our assurance is in Him. We may renew our intellectual grasp of the gospel by a close study of the Word of God, our affections by the sacraments and our wills by self-examination; we may use other means such as the experience of other Christians,²² but finally we must come back to

¹⁹ 1 John 3: 23-24. Self-examination must always be according to the Word of God; this obviates introspection.

²⁰ E.g., 1 John 4: 2, etc.

²¹ This does not, of course, exhaust their meaning.

²² It is often forgotten that godly conversation is a means of grace (cf. Eph. 4: 29).

God.²³ An interest in godliness without God ; in the Christian life without Christ ; in spiritual things without the Spirit—these are some of the signs of unhealthy life. As Christ is mediated to our illumined minds by the Spirit of God through the Word of God ; as we feed on Him and grow to know Him more, so we are driven more and more to our knowledge of Him as the ground of assurance. He cannot fail because of who He is. "I know whom I have believed and am persuaded . . ." ²⁴ says Paul. All these means of grace must be used, not for their intrinsic value, but because they lead us to Him. This is perhaps the hardest lesson of all to learn. But in it is the firm foundation of assurance. "For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart"²⁵ is the way John puts it. He who gave us this gift of assurance will confirm it. "Being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it . . ." ²⁶

"Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which He hath consecrated for us, through the vail, that is to say, His flesh ; and having an high priest over the house of God ; let us draw nigh with a true heart in full assurance of faith . . . let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering."²⁷

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²³ "The Christian will enjoy [assurance] both the more warmly and the more lawfully he actually deals, not only with the promises, but with the Promiser" (Moule, *Outlines of Christian Doctrine*, p. 47).

²⁴ 2 Tim. 1: 12. ²⁵ 1 John 3: 20.

²⁶ Phil. 1: 6. ²⁷ Heb. 10: 19-23.