

**FAITH AND ASSURANCE IN THE  
TEACHING AND EXPERIENCE OF  
THOMAS HALYBURTON (1674-1712)**  
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Born at Duplin near Perth in 1674, the son of a silenced Covenanting minister, Thomas Halyburton fled to Holland as a child along with his sister and widowed mother to escape the persecution of the Covenanters. Eventually he became parish minister of Ceres in Fife from 1700 to 1710, and Professor of Divinity in the New College (St Mary's), St Andrews, from 1710 to his death in 1712.

Halyburton was highly regarded in nineteenth-century Scotland. Hugh Martin described him and William Cunningham as 'the two greatest theologians that Scotland has ever produced'. Rabbi Duncan, who put Halyburton's autobiography in the same category as those of Augustine and Bunyan, classified him with Hermann Witsius as a minor John Owen. John Macleod suggests that

had he lived to see the age of Owen – 66 – or Witsius – 72 –, he might have left a more enduring monument by putting his mark, should he do nothing more, on the ministry that he trained and on the theological teaching of an age that stood in need of the corrective which his teaching was fitted to furnish.<sup>1</sup>

His writings influenced the lives of George Whitefield and John Wesley and carry commendatory prefaces by Isaac Watts. Archibald Alexander of Princeton highly esteemed his analysis of Christian experience as that of a distinguished biblical theologian and mature observant Christian.

Attention is drawn to Halyburton in connection with the subject of faith and assurance for two reasons. First, in his *Memoirs* he has given a rational account of his own experience, subjected to the test of Scripture, and throughout his sermons and writings he has clearly expounded his views of the nature and relation of faith and assurance. Secondly, he belongs to the period just prior to the Marrow controversy.

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<sup>1</sup> John Macleod, *Scottish Theology in Relation to Church History since the Reformation*, 3rd edit. (Edinburgh, 1974), p. 124.

An evangelical pastor and scholar who saw himself firmly in the tradition of both Calvin and the Westminster Divines, he shows, and indeed embodies in himself, the essential identity of their teaching on faith and assurance. He does this in a way which avoids the charges of both legalism levelled against some evangelical opponents of the Marrow and of unbiblical views of faith, atonement and assurance levelled against the Marrowmen, partly because of their defence of terminology capable of interpretation in an unbiblical sense, as the eighteenth-century debate and subsequent controversies related to the subject demonstrate.

The intention of this paper is not to refer repeatedly to different views in the ongoing discussion of faith and assurance, but to state the position advocated by Halyburton and illustrated in his experience, in the hope that this will throw light theologically and pastorally on the theme. We shall let him speak to us on the subject.

### **I. Halyburton's Spiritual Experience, as Recorded by Himself**

Halyburton was steeped in the Bible from childhood. In Rotterdam, in addition to the instructions of his mother and three sermons and two lectures in the Scots Church each Sunday, he heard two sermons and two lectures and attended a prayer meeting and a catechising session during the week. Throughout childhood and youth he was no stranger to convictions of sin, and found that attempts to amend and repeated covenants with God failed to give him more than temporary peace. He was convinced that he would never find peace till he obtained an assurance of the truths of religion beyond anything he had experienced, but while he could not bring himself flatly to deny God, his native ungodliness combined with his study of metaphysics and natural religion to keep him in a state of great uncertainty.

The ineffectiveness of the arguments by which he attempted to strengthen his belief in God made him look beyond his own knowledge and ability for the confirmation he sought. As a young chaplain in a nobleman's house he became involved in arguments against deism. The reading and reasoning and religious exercise by which he tried to fortify his belief in God's existence left him unsure and strengthened his conviction that such certainty as he sought could not be found

apart from divine revelation. His reformations left his soul empty of Christ, and through the ministry of the Word the law in its spiritual meaning drove him into such a state that while he was weary of his life he was afraid to die. Incidentally, the power of the Word to convince him of sin was a significant factor in delivering him from his questioning of the being of God.

### *'A Discovery of the Lord'*

It was then that he got his 'outgate' or deliverance through 'a discovery of the Lord as manifested in the Word'.<sup>2</sup> The Lord revealed that there was mercy, redemption and forgiveness with him. He manifested Christ in his glory, and let him see that he was pleased with Christ and that he

notwithstanding His spotless purity, His deep hatred of sin, His inflexible justice and righteousness, and His untainted faithfulness, pledged in the threatening of the law, might not only pardon, but, without prejudice to His justice or other attributes, be just in justifying the ungodly! The reconciliation of these seemingly inconsistent attributes with one another, and with the salvation of sinners, quite surprised and astonished me.<sup>3</sup>

Along with this he was given insight into the fact that in the gospel call the word of salvation was sent even to him, and he tells that

when this strange discovery was made of a relief, wherein full provision was made for all the concerns of God's glory, and my salvation in subordination thereto, my soul was by a glorious and sweet power carried out to rest in it, as worthy of God and every way suitable and satisfying in my case.<sup>4</sup>

He had previously read and considered most of the passages which now came alive to him without their bringing him relief. They now affected him as they did because 'the Lord shined into my mind by them... to give me not merely some theoretical knowledge, but "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ"'.<sup>5</sup> This light gave

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2 Thomas Halyburton, *Memoirs*, (Edinburgh, 1847), p.99.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101..

4 *Ibid.*, p. 102.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 102-3.

him a knowledge distinct from anything he had before, which delivered him from the darkness which had overpowered his mind and gave him composure and the proper use of all his faculties. Although he had come to 'a deep rational conviction'<sup>6</sup> that the Scriptures were the Word of God, the fact that the Word was the means of conveying to him all that he knew in this affecting way about God and guilt and grace was the evidence to him of the divine origin and authority of this Word, which carried most weight and brought peace to his mind.

Various discernible effects followed this discovery, such as concern for the glory of God – finding the Lord's yoke, or precepts, easy – the exercise of evangelical repentance – desire for the Lord's presence in his ordinances – love to all who had anything of the Lord's image. Two effects of this manifestation of the Lord in his Word are of special interest in relation to our theme:

First, an approbation of God's way of saving sinners by Jesus Christ, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which I take to be the true scriptural notion of justifying faith;...<sup>7</sup> second, a humble, but sweet and comfortable, hope and persuasion of my own salvation, answerable to the clearness of this discovery; that is, rising in strength, or growing more weak and less discernible, as the discoveries of the way of salvation were more or less clear and strong.... This is what I take for gospel assurance, with the worthy Dr Owen.<sup>8</sup>

In his account of his experience he expands a little on both this faith and this assurance.

### *Faith and Assurance*

Speaking of his faith, Halyburton says:

Now this discovery of the Lord's name brought me to trust in Him, and glory only in the Lord. I found my soul fully satisfied in these discoveries, as pointing out a way of relief altogether and in all respects suitable to the need of a poor, guilty, self-condemned, self-destroyed sinner, beaten from all other reliefs, and who has his mouth stopped before

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6 *Ibid.*, p. 162.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 105.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 114.

God.... In this I rested as a way full of peace, comfort, security, and satisfaction, as providing abundantly for these ends I desired to have secured. And this approbation was not merely for a fit, but ever after in all temptations it discovered itself.<sup>9</sup>

Speaking of his assurance, he says that when he was satisfied as to the way of salvation, 'I was freed from that disquieting fear that in trusting to it I was trusting to that which would fail. I was satisfied that I could not fail otherwise than by missing this way. I doubted of myself, but nor of the way.'<sup>10</sup> He goes on to say that by this discovery the Lord

did powerfully draw my soul to close with it; and in so far as I cleaved to and closed with this, in so far, considering the former discovery of the safety of this way, I could not doubt of the issue.... While I clave to and reposed with satisfaction on what I was convinced was safe I could not, in so far as I leaned to this, but be quiet and composed about the issue; which shows how nearly allied faith and assurance are, though they are not the same, and therefore no wonder that one should be taken for the other.<sup>11</sup>

He found that as he walked in the way of duty 'this hope insensibly and secretly grew', but 'nothing so soon marred this hope as the least appearance of self and stirring of pride'.<sup>12</sup> He concludes:

This way which the Lord discloses is safe for a self-condemned sinner. I am safe in practical adherence to it. The further I go, and the closer I in practice cleave to this way, hope of this salvation increases the more.<sup>13</sup>

For a time, he was wholly taken up with the glory of the Lord and with spiritual things, with the result that he was both happy and humble. But he was soon in conflict with indwelling sin, questioning the truth of his experiences, and learning that as yet he was 'little acquainted with the way of faith's improvement of Christ for sanctification, and a trade with the throne of grace for supplies to help in time of

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9 *Ibid.*, p. 105.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 114.

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 114-5.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 115.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 115-6.

need'.<sup>14</sup> This experience taught him 'that the grace that is sufficient for us is not in our own hand but in the Lord's'.<sup>15</sup> It also taught him not to judge of his state by his frames.<sup>16</sup>

### *Christian Experience*

Thomas Halyburton's *Memoirs* reveal a man who watched carefully over his spiritual life and his conduct, frequently examined himself as to his walk with God, was sensitive to sin and to any departure in heart from the Lord and any loss of the sense of the Lord's favour, often in conflict with self and unbelief, and at times despondent on account of the view he got of his guilt and corruption, but could say on his deathbed, as he looked back on his experience of conversion:

The God of glory appeared to me; and the first sight I got of Him was such as it won my heart to Him so that it was never loosed; though I have had many wanderings, yet I can say, I was never myself till I won back to the centre again.<sup>17</sup>

As a Christian it was his concern to experience a peace and assurance dependent on the Word, centred upon Christ and his atoning work, and enjoyed in a course of obedience principally motivated by 'a constant improvement of the blood of Christ by faith and a sense of forgiveness kept on the soul'.<sup>18</sup> Typical of his experience is an entry dated 12 January 1709:

This night I got such a view of my guilt that nothing could have kept me from despondency but a view of that grace that cannot be measured but is best conceived by that astonishing evidence of it (Romans viii.32), 'He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?' In the view whereof I desire to live and die and spend eternity.<sup>19</sup>

In spite of all that he found discouraging in himself he was able to testify that from the time when he came to know Christ he had never doubted his need of Christ or the suitability and

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14 *Ibid.*, p. 133.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 153.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 295.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 193.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 206.

sufficiency of Christ to save him and that all his expectations were grounded in Christ.

Under disquietments occasioned by sin, nothing save Christ could quiet me.... The Lord has been pleased to determine my heart to choose the way of salvation revealed in the gospel through faith's acceptance of, and resting on, Christ Jesus for wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption.<sup>20</sup>

On his deathbed he testified:

I bless the Lord that when I stood trembling under the terrors of God's law He seasonably saved me from despair by some discovery of the blessed way of salvation for self-destroyed sinners through a slain Saviour; even such a discovery as made me resolve to part with all that I might have the field, Christ the treasure hid in it, and pearl of price. There is nothing I dread so much as a mistake in this matter. It is Christ only that will answer me and my case, and without Him I am undone; on Him – the efficacy of His sufferings, the power of His resurrection, and of His whole mediation, as revealed in the Gospel – do I build all my hope.<sup>21</sup>

What he said of himself on his deathbed was probably true of his Christian course as a whole: 'What I have is not a flashy and very sensible joy; yet, I bless His name, I am much composed and have solid clear Scripture manifestations of God and the things of God.'<sup>22</sup>

## **II. The Position on Faith and Assurance Stated more Dogmatically in Halyburton's Writings and Sermons**

His experience, theology and preaching reveal a beautiful consistency originating in the influence upon each of the Word of God. *Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. Thomas Halyburton* is the volume by which he is best known. But for his theological position we can also draw on the following: *Natural Religion Insufficient, and Revealed Necessary, to Man's Happiness in his Present State*, a discussion of Deism; *The Great Concern of Salvation* (Edinburgh, 1817),

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20 *Ibid.*, pp. 215-6.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 251.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 272.

delivered as a course of sermons on man's natural state, recovery by faith in Christ, and the Christian's duty; *An Essay Concerning the Nature of Faith, or, The Ground upon which Faith Assents to the Scriptures*; *A Modest Enquiry whether Regeneration or Justification has the Precedency in Order of Nature*; *An Enquiry into the Nature of God's Act of Justification*; and various published sermons.<sup>23</sup>

### 1. Descriptions of the faith which is instrumental in salvation

We have already noted Halyburton's description of justifying faith as 'an approbation of God's way of saving sinners by Jesus Christ, to the praise of the glory of His grace'.<sup>24</sup> In *A Modest Enquiry* he says that 'faith is the outgoing of the soul of a poor sinner convicted of his own ungodliness, that sees nothing in himself but sin and guilt, after Christ for righteousness'.<sup>25</sup> In *The Great Concern of Salvation*, referring to the counsel given to the Philippian jailer, he notes that

it is not said, Believe the Lord Jesus Christ, but believe on Him, or in Him. It is not simply to give credit to His word, and take as truth whatever He has said; but it is to rely on Him, to put our trust in Him, as one that is able to save such as come unto God through Him.<sup>26</sup>

The 'principal thing' in faith is the acceptance of Christ upon... Gospel terms, [which includes] (i) a renunciation of all other things... no expectation of relief from any of these things corrupt nature is wont to incline us to rely on.... (ii)... a consent of will to the terms of the Gospel as good and desirable.... (iii)... an acquiescence and rest of soul in Christ Jesus for salvation.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> All, apart from *The Great Concern*, published in *The Works of the Rev. Thomas Halyburton...* (Glasgow, 1833).

<sup>24</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 105.

<sup>25</sup> *Works*, p. 556.

<sup>26</sup> *Great Concern*, p. 176.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 208-10.



He widens this description of faith in *An Enquiry into the Nature of God's Act of Justification*.<sup>28</sup> He asserts that in faith

1st. There is an assent unto the truths concerning Christ, His nature, person, and offices.... 2dly... There is the receiving act of faith, whereby we accept of, or receive, Christ, John 1.12.... This receiving... supposes an act of the mind or judgment approving of Christ as meet for the purpose for which He is proposed. It formally and directly imports the will's consenting to, closing with, or being pleased with, Him as such.

This receiving includes 'an acquiescence or rest of mind in this consent, so that the soul is come to a point that it has no other way to look and that if it has but Him it is safe. This', says Halyburton,

is that cleaving to the Lord which some call trust or adherence, and it respects the way, or is the fiducial confidence as to the safety of the way whereon trust, expectation or fiducial confidence, as to the event, follows.... 3dly. There is in faith, or there follows upon the foregoing acts another, viz. that which is commonly called the fiducial act, or trust; that is, the soul, in expectation and confidence of relief by Christ, throws itself upon Him.... The ground of it is the promise or the engagement of the faithfulness of God, for the salvation of believers, and that as specially applied by God, to this sinner, and the application discerned by him.

This special application is 'a confidence, persuasion, or belief that our sins are forgiven'.

Halyburton recognises that there were some, 'among whom were many of our first reformers', who at least seemed to make this 'fiducial act, strictly so called, to be the justifying act of faith', but he dissents from this opinion on the ground that it cannot be a person's duty to believe that his sins are forgiven except 'upon supposition that he is antecedently justified by faith'. He agrees with John Owen that the faith that justifies is not a persuasion of one's own salvation but 'the heart's approbation of the way of justification and salvation of sinners by Jesus Christ, proposed in the Gospel, as proceeding from the grace, wisdom and love of God, with

<sup>28</sup> *Works*, pp. 562f.

acquiescency therein as to its own condition'. What saves the sinner, according to Halyburton, is confidence in the Saviour which causes one to cast oneself upon him, and not confidence that one has done this and that one is consequently saved. These were not the same, but though he distinguished them Halyburton recognised their close connection: 'While I claved to and reposed with satisfaction on what I was convinced was safe I could not, in so far as I leaned to this, but be quiet and composed about the issue; which shows how nearly allied faith and assurance are, though they are not the same, and therefore no wonder the one should be taken for the other.'<sup>29</sup>

## 2. The relation between faith and assurance

Halyburton emphasises first an assurance which he regards as essential to faith, and secondly an assurance which he regards as consequent upon faith though in some way implicit in faith.

i. In looking at his view of the *assurance essential to faith*, we notice first his strong insistence on assurance as to the authority of the Word upon which faith relies. The assent of faith is given to what it knows concerning God and self and salvation on the testimony of God's Word. In *An Essay concerning the Nature of Faith*, he describes faith in general as knowledge which 'depends upon the testimony of credible witnesses'.<sup>30</sup> Saving faith, or divine faith, is assent to what is known on the testimony of God.

Such an assent is intended as some way answers to the unquestionable firmness of the testimony of the God of truth... such an assent, or receiving of the word of God, as is attended with that reverence, submission of soul, resignation of will, and subjection of conscience, which is due to God... a firm conviction leaning upon the strongest bottom, able to stand against and withstand the strongest objections.<sup>31</sup>

The assent of faith is characterised by assurance as to the truth and reliability of the Word of God. The *ground* of this assurance is the Word itself – not that the Spirit has given

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<sup>29</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 115.

<sup>30</sup> *Works*, p. 505.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 507.

faith,<sup>32</sup> not the authority of any human being or church,<sup>33</sup> not the rational arguments for the truth of the Christian religion, however useful they are,<sup>34</sup> not the miracles accompanying the giving of revelation,<sup>35</sup> not any private voice, whisper or suggestion from the Spirit of God, separate and distinct from the written Word,<sup>36</sup> not merely that the Bible says that 'all Scripture is given by inspiration of God',<sup>37</sup> not because the contents of Scripture correspond with our own ideas on these things.<sup>38</sup>

The formal reason or ground whereon I assent to, or receive, the whole Scriptures and every particular truth of God speaking in them, and speaking every truth they contain, evidencing itself to my faith, when duly exercised about them, and attending to them, by their own divine and distinguishing light and power.<sup>39</sup>

A sinner's warrant for believing is 'Thus saith the Lord'.

The *theoprepeia* or God-becoming impress of Majesty, Sovereignty, Omniscience, Independence, Holiness, Justice, Goodness, Wisdom and Power, is not only a sufficient and real, but in very deed the greatest objective light and evidence imaginable.<sup>40</sup>

It is on the basis of the authority of this word that Christ is proclaimed to sinners who need him and salvation is promised to those who receive Christ.

The assured assent of faith to the Word of God has sufficient ground in the authority of the Word, but it is only *secured* by divine power. All have a duty to believe the Word: 'The Scriptures demand our assent, and offer no evidence but this of God's authority.'<sup>41</sup> But sin has rendered man unable to believe and 'light, however clear, cannot of itself supply the

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32 *Ibid.*, p. 529.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 529.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 530.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 530.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 531.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 531.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 531.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 532.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 522.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 520.

defect of the discerning power'.<sup>42</sup> Faith is God's gift, and the assured assent to the truth of God's Word which is essential to faith is constrained by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. Faith does not stand in human wisdom but in the power of God (1 Cor. 2:5). That assurance regarding the truth of God's Word is not habitually as strong as it should be is due not to any defect in the Word but to defect in our discerning faculty arising from the workings of sin.<sup>43</sup>

Halyburton concludes: 'How justly divine faith may be said to be infallible, as standing on an infallible ground, the faithfulness and truth of God in the word... the ground is firm, and cannot fail, the scriptures cannot be broken.'<sup>44</sup>

In his view of the assurance essential to faith we notice secondly his insistence on the assurance which characterises the believer's receiving and resting upon Christ, the believer's approbation of the way of salvation revealed in the Word. Wherever faith exists the Word accompanied by the Spirit's enlightening and enabling power has brought the sinner some assurance as to the suitability and sufficiency of Christ and the way of salvation in him for such a sinner as he confesses himself to be. This assurance will keep the believer, however much he doubts himself and his faith, from abandoning his hope in Christ.

The most discouraged soul, from the first moment of believing, at its worst condition, cannot think of giving up with its interest in this way, upon any terms. This can never be accounted for otherwise than by supposing that amidst all its shakings there is some trust, expectation or hope of salvation in this way. The ground of this hope, trust or expectation, certainly is the promise of God, cleared or set home by the Spirit of God at the soul's first closing with Christ.<sup>45</sup>

He said of his own experience at times, 'I doubted of myself but not of the way'.<sup>46</sup> What he believed about the assurance essential to faith appears in his confession on another occasion:

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42 *Ibid.*, p. 635.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 539.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 545.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 561.

46 *Memoirs.*, p. 114.

no alteration of my condition has ever been able to shake from under me a conviction of the following particulars, since the Lord first convinced: 1. That the Lord Jesus Christ is such a Saviour as became the grace, mercy, love, wisdom, holiness, righteousness, justice and power of God to provide; and on the other hand, such a Saviour as became sinners' needs, their desires; and therefore deserves their acceptance, as fit, suitable, sufficient to 'save all that come to God through Him', and that even to the uttermost.... 2. That I do need Him in all His offices.... 3.... that it is my desire above all things to 'be found in Him' (Phil. 3, 9, 10); and never doth sin reduce me to that pass that I dare admit a thought of the insufficiency of this way of salvation to save me, or of having recourse to any other, or of abandoning this.... 4... In one word, I have no hopes of any mercy in time or eternity, but only through Him; it is through Him I expect all, from the least drop of water to the immense riches of glory.<sup>47</sup>

If one is to entrust oneself to Christ one must have some measure of assurance as to his suitability and sufficiency for oneself, and that assurance will be such as to keep the soul following after him. This is the assurance of faith, of which we should seek to have the fullest degree in our approaches to God through Christ.

ii. In considering Halyburton's idea of the relation between faith and assurance we notice that there is *an assurance consequent upon faith though in some way implicit in faith*. We noted already his explanation of why people sometimes (mistakenly, he thought) regarded assurance of grace and salvation as an essential element of faith:

While I clave to, and reposed with satisfaction on, what I was convinced was safe, I could not, in so far as I leaned to this, but be quiet and composed about the issue; which shows how nearly allied faith and assurance are, though they are not the same, and therefore no wonder the one should be taken for the other.<sup>48</sup>

The first point he is making is that the assurance essential to faith – the assured assent of his soul to the truth and his

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 211-2.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

assured approbation of the way of salvation through Christ which made him as a sinner cast himself on Christ alone for salvation – had in it the seeds from which assurance of personal salvation grew. The assurance which was the consequent or reflex of faith arose initially from the direct act of faith. It is ‘consequent in order of nature’ to the justifying act of faith and to some degree accompanies it.<sup>49</sup> He expounds his position thus:

I do not mean that the believing soul has always at first closing with Christ such a steady and full persuasion that its sins are forgiven, that eventually it shall be saved, so that it does boldly pronounce and speak out so much to others, or even resolutely assert it within itself; nor do I mean that it has such a clear view of its own graces that it can reflect and conclude confidently from the sight of them, its election, justification and certain salvation.... But that which I mean is that the first saving manifestation of Christ to a convinced sinner, pursued by the law, conscience and Satan, not only determines the soul to close with Him... but thereon also immediately follows such an expectation, trust and humble confidence, as engages the soul ever after to follow the Lord in a way of duty, without despairing as to the saving issue; yea, not without secret hope, though this afterwards in times of temptation is variously clouded, that in due time it shall obtain a merciful issue. This persuasion and humble confidence is really particular to the sinner himself and his own salvation, though through the humbling impressions he has of himself at the time, his own guilt, and the awe he has of God upon his spirit, he fears to express it directly and particularly to himself.... When poor disquieted believers, through the power of temptation and confusion upon their minds, deny any such persuasion or confidence, yet by its effects it is evident to others that at any time they have it. Doth not their resolute adherence to duty, in spite of all discouragements, and their refusing to quit their claim, or try other ways suggested, plainly bewray some such secret persuasion?<sup>50</sup>

Secondly, he recognised that there are factors which may prevent a believer drawing the comfortable conclusions

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49 *Works*, p. 563.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 563-4.

regarding his own state warranted by his faith. He claims that all believers

have a gracious experience of begun deliverance from wrath... of begun salvation from the dominion of sin... some beginnings of a deliverance from the guilt and filth of sin in their approaches to God... some experience of the freedom of Christ's subjects... the beginnings of heaven in some refreshing tastes of the gracious communications and intimations of God's love to their souls.... That they are not more clearly discerned to the comfort of such as have them is, past all peradventure, in a great measure owing to their own negligence and want of observation.<sup>51</sup>

In spite of this he recognises the power of temptation and Satan and deals kindly as well as firmly with unassured believers.

Thirdly, assurance of personal salvation is attainable and is to be sought, as we know, he says, 'by the account we have of the experiences of believers in the word of God... from the testimony of believers in our day'.<sup>52</sup> God's glory is involved in this, for we cannot thank God for the gift of faith if we do not know that we have it.<sup>53</sup>

This is not only knowable, but it may be more easily discerned than most do apprehend. Were we but, with any measure of seriousness and concern, turning our eyes inward, we could not but know how our hearts stand affected toward Christ and the gospel-method of salvation.<sup>54</sup>

Fourthly, Halyburton is biblical and confessional in his teaching on how assurance is to be sought. In his discussions of the subject he is concerned to deal pastorally with those who lack assurance because as unbelievers they have nothing to be assured of, those who have assurance but no biblical basis for it, and those who lack assurance though they have faith. It is necessary to be aware of the marks by which faith is known, since some are deceived and others are unassured. But people should examine their normal condition rather than their condition when they are down through temptation or

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51 *Great Concern*, pp. 226f.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 228.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 234.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 229.

despondency, they should enquire as to the being rather than the degree of faith, and they should depend on the Spirit to come to satisfactory conclusions.

He repeatedly emphasises the biblical basis and warrant of faith. Just as the healthy have no need of a physician and Christ came to call *sinners* to repentance, only convicted sinners will believe in Christ. Ministers must labour to bring men to a sense of sin. But the warrant for believing is not their convictions but the command, invitations, entreaties and encouragements addressed to sinners and the promises given to believers.

The minister dealing with the convicted sinner is not to bid him look inward to see whether he be regenerated and truly repents; and if he find not these not to expect justification or go to Christ for it. Such an enquiry before justification is vain and preposterous, and it is impossible ever to believe on these terms: but he is with the apostle, Acts XVI, directly to press, 'believe on the Lord Jesus Christ'. And on the other hand the sinner, like the poor jailer, without any such previous enquiry for qualifications in himself, should directly cling to Christ for righteousness, as one altogether lost in himself and destitute of any qualifications that can avail him.<sup>55</sup>

He is able on the authority of the Word to promise salvation to sinners who believe. 'Whoever will take Him and use Him shall have Him.'<sup>56</sup>

In keeping with this is was his concern to focus the attention of unassured Christians on Christ and the biblical way of salvation. He was aware that much lack of assurance was due to lack of clarity here. Amongst much good, biblical evidence for unassured believers he stresses three significant points:

Study the nature of the covenant of grace well... particularly study to know the ground of your acceptance with God and of your admission and access into a covenant relation: it is not your freedom from sin, it is not freedom from gross sins, not is it anything wrought in us or by us, but only the sovereignly free grace of God in Christ, which glories in removing the greatest offences, in bestowing the

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<sup>55</sup> *Works*, p. 557.

<sup>56</sup> *Great Concern*, p. 207.



choicest mercies upon the chief of sinners. Therefore none can be ruined, whatever his sins be, who is willing to owe salvation to free grace in Christ.... There is here great encouragement to such as are great sinners, but none to any to be so.

Study the condescension of the covenant to the state of believers, who carry with them still a body of sin and death, while they are here in this house of their pilgrimage. It accepts of sincere obedience, it provides influences for enabling believers to perform it, it provides pardon for failings.

Study acquaintance with the springs of that covenant-peace which believers enjoy in their walk with God. It is not their own merit, but God's mercy; it is not their own blamelessness, but the efficacy of Christ's blood to take away spots; it is not the evenness of our walk and our freedom from trips, but it is the testimony of a good conscience bearing witness that it is our exercise to have and keep 'a conscience void of offence toward God and man', by continual dependence on God in Christ for mercy to remove sin and grace to help in time of need. Endeavour to understand these things well and you will then be soon eased of many of your fears.<sup>57</sup>

True believers desire to subject their faith to biblical tests to ensure that they are not deceived. Halyburton takes much time to explain false and true marks of faith. He presents the evidences of believing in a way that relates them to faith and to Christ as the basis of assurance, and makes clear, as he says in a sermon on Matthew 17:15, 'that our reasonings will not quiet our souls: peace and joy are only to be had in believing: and divine manifestations are needful to draw out and strengthen faith'.<sup>58</sup> He cautioned those who had long been concerned about religion but were still unable to know what to make of their religion seriously to investigate whether they were really in Christ and whether they were seeking to maintain communion with Christ.<sup>59</sup> In his application of 2

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 289-90.

<sup>58</sup> Thomas Halyburton, *Five Sermons Preached Before and After the Celebration of the Lord's Supper* (Edinburgh, 1721), p. 71.

<sup>59</sup> *Five Sermons*, p. 98.

Corinthians 4:16-18 to those who feared they had no interest in the unseen things commended there he makes four points:

1. Faith... gives a taste of the goodness of these things... and the more tastes ye get, the more fully will you be secure of your interest in them.... 2. The more ye look at them, the more like ye will be to them, 2 Cor. 3.18... and surely conformity to them is one of the best evidences of our interest in them. 3. Faith much exercised grows into that highest stature, the full assurance of faith, and that is what ye would be at. 4. The exercise of faith will lead you to fear the Lord... Heb. xi.7, and so put you upon God's secrets, Ps. 25.14.<sup>60</sup>

In *The Great Concern of Salvation* (pp. 241-59), he argues that it is not enough for a person to say that he believes, or to be free from doubts, or to be moral, or to have convictions, or to have some understanding of biblical truth, or to enjoy listening to the Word, or to multiply religious duties, or to have experiences some change for the better, or to have a faith which does not deal with the Mediator, whether a 'cradle faith', a rational faith, or a temporary faith. He then proceeds to discuss the ways in which the existence of saving faith is manifested, noting that by the ordinary influence of the Spirit these marks may be discerned in a way that will 'at least keep from disquieting and sinking discouragements'.<sup>61</sup> The first mark of faith is indistinguishable from faith itself: the 'heart's choosing, embracing, and approving God's way of saving sinners renunciation of all other pretended ways'.<sup>62</sup> Secondly, 'Wherever saving faith is it will discover itself by leading the believer to an approbation of the whole law of God, not only as holy, just and spiritual, but as good'.<sup>63</sup> Thirdly, 'wherever there is faith it raises Christ high, and places Him on the throne, both in the mind and in the affections'.<sup>64</sup>

'This assurance... grows only upon adherence to the Lord's way, and is strengthened by a successful pursuit of

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60 *Works*, p. 665.

61 *Great Concern*, p. 260.

62 *Ibid.*, pp. 261-8.

63 *Ibid.*, pp. 268-72.

64 *Ibid.*, pp. 272f.

salvation in the Lord's way.'<sup>65</sup> According to Halyburton assurance of personal salvation has its roots in faith, is the reflex act of faith in Christ, is enjoyed only in the path of obedience, can be strengthened by reflecting on the evidences of grace because these streams lead one back to their fountain, and is dependent on the work of God the Holy Spirit.

### III. Conclusion

This account of the experience and teaching of this 'great little man'<sup>66</sup> on the subject of faith and assurance has been presented with particular regard to its usefulness for the pastor. It may also illustrate the introductory suggestion that his writings exhibit the essential identity and legitimate logical and pastoral development of the teaching of Calvin and the Westminster Divines in this area. In subsequent discussion there was often polarisation and confusion as opposing parties isolated seemingly contradictory emphases which were originally consistent formulations of truth in response to different pastoral situations. Halyburton's formulation is free from the extremes of controversial statement which frequently obscure that consistency in treatments of the theme.

Charles Bell admits that 'the writings of Halyburton bear all the unmistakable marks of Calvin's theology' but asserts, on the basis of his recommendation of 'self-examination and syllogistic trials of faith', that he is 'not able to maintain this Evangelical teaching'.<sup>67</sup> This seems to ignore the Christ-related rather than human-related nature of faith in the teaching of Halyburton, his claim to biblical warrant for his position that the assurance which is logically at least incipient in faith is capable of degrees, needful of encouragement and subject to testing, and his reduction of all self-addressed questions to the question of what one thinks of Christ. It ignores the fact that this foremost Scottish theologian of his day, fully aware of the tensions alleged, regarded himself as consistent with both Calvin and Westminster and considered the doctrine which he taught consistent with maintaining the particular intent and

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<sup>65</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 115.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>67</sup> M. Charles Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance* (Edinburgh, 1985), p. 145.

efficacy of the redemption secured by Christ and proclaiming the gospel to sinners everywhere.

Perhaps someone will do for our Scottish tradition what has been done by Paul Helm<sup>68</sup> and Joel R. Beeke<sup>69</sup> for the English and Dutch Calvinists and provide an alternative interpretation of the developments of Scottish theology to that given by Dr Bell. Careful study of Halyburton is a useful starting point for building up evidence for the case that it is in the mainstream of Confessional Calvinism in Scotland (as represented by him), and not in the channel associated with McLeod Campbell, that one finds teaching on faith and assurance which is consistent with Westminster, Calvin and the Word of God.

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<sup>68</sup> Paul Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Edinburgh, 1982).

<sup>69</sup> Joel R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation* (New York, 1991).