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The Faith, Assurance, and Perseverance of the Saints

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Introduction

The first section deals with the nature of saving faith.

The great Church Fathers took great pains to set before the professing church the difference between Saving Faith and Spurious Faith.

Charles Hodge, a great Princetonian and author of *Systematic Theology, Vol. III*, in his chapter “Different Kinds of Faith” points out that the Bible teaches there is a Speculative or Dead Faith, a Temporary Faith and Saving Faith. ([Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY, 1952] p. 68])

Robert Dabney, a great Southern Presbyterian, divides Faith as Temporary, Historical, of Miracles, and Saving Faith.

James P. Boyce, the principal founder of Southern Seminary, and author of *Abstract of Systematic Theology*, in his chapter on Faith, he divides Faith as follows: Implicit Faith, Historical Faith, Temporary Faith or Delusive Faith and Saving Faith. ([Escondido, California: Reprinted by The den Dulk Christian Foundation, Copyright 1987] p. 385ff).

The second section deals with the biblical doctrine of assurance—almost a lost doctrine in modern evangelism. This section will make an important and necessary distinction between salvation and assurance of salvation. It is a most valuable doctrine for biblical counseling the unconverted, and those who are believers but lack the assurance of their salvation. It will also be helpful in counseling those who have the hope of the hypocrite (Job 8:13 “... the hope of the hypocrite shall perish.”)

The third section addresses the subject of the Perseverance of the Saints’ and shows the antinomian error of eternal security as is generally taught. It will show that all those who are savingly joined to Christ are preserved and kept for all eternity and those who are preserved persevere to the end.

In the fourth section we will consider the lost doctrine of the Bible, the biblical doctrine of self-examination. Self-examination is vitally related to the other three doctrines we have considered and I thought that we must include self-examination in these studies.

In the last section we will consider the Gospel of the Saints or the Gospel, our Trust which is indeed the good news of the glorious grace of God revealed to us in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of our Blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

These Five doctrines can be studied separately but should never be studied independent of each other, they are vitally related and need each other to understand and establish all three.—*Ernest C. Reisinger*

1. The Faith of the Saints

Just over four hundred years ago, late in October, a young Augustinian monk, professor of theology and pastor in Wittenberg, Germany, in the fire of his zeal for Christian truth, nailed 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church. He had left the study of law and entered the priesthood, seeking to be justified before God. His name was Martin Luther. As a result of studying the Scriptures, he discovered biblical truths that had long been covered and obscured by the ritual and rubble of Rome. One of the great truths then restored to the Church was justification by faith alone.

The issue before us today is not a denial of justification by faith alone, but rather a perversion of that doctrine. Present-day preaching often excludes the possibility of spurious faith; however, religious deception is the worst kind of deception because of its eternal consequences. We must distinguish properly between justifying faith and spurious or counterfeit faith.

The Bible very clearly warns against spurious faith; therefore, I wish to direct attention to its warnings and note some differences between spurious and true believers. I intend to cite biblical cases of spurious faith, showing that the Scriptures teach the existence of belief which is not saving faith. I propose also to define true faith and give biblical examples of that faith which savingly joins one to Jesus Christ for all eternity.

Spurious or Counterfeit Faith

The Bible teaches that there is a spurious faith. In the parable of the sower, Jesus spoke of *temporary faith*. “They on the rock are they, which, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, which for a *while believe*, and in time of temptation fall away” (Luke 8:13). These believers received the word with joy and believed for a season; but in the time of trial, they fell away. They lacked root and fruit; and they did not continue.

Paul spoke of “Believing in vain” (1 Cor. 15:2). This is non-saving faith. Though it has many marks of true saving faith, the evidence of temporary faith soon appears. It lacks the following characteristics of saving faith: (1) continuance in trusting Christ, and in devotion to Him and His service; (2) desire to be useful in Christ’s church; (3) attendance to Christian duty; (4) love of prayer and the Word of God and of assembling with God’s people in worship; (5) devotion to loving the people of God as such; (6) progress in knowledge of self, sin, and the Savior; (7) progress in loving holiness and hating sin, with increased conviction of and humility concerning personal sinfulness.

A very vivid example of spurious faith is the case of Simon Magus. Of him it is written, “Then Simon himself *believed* also; and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip” (Acts 8:13). He expressed such faith that Philip took him to be a genuine Christian and admitted him to Christian privileges. Yet Peter later told Simon that he would perish

with his money, warning him, “You have neither part nor lot in this matter: for your heart is not right in the sight of God. For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness, and bound by iniquity” (Acts 8:20-23).

A man may believe *all* the truth contained in Scripture, as far as he is acquainted with it; indeed, he may be familiar with far more truth than many genuine Christians. And as his knowledge may be more extensive, so his faith may be more comprehensive. He may go even as far as Paul had. Although Paul believed all the Scripture before his conversion, his faith was not saving faith. Note also Agrippa. “King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe” (Acts 26:27). But this faith did not save him.

James speaks of *dead* faith (James 2:17, 26), the giving of mere mental assent to certain historical facts. He also speaks of *devils’* faith (James 2:19). This is a religious appropriation of these facts. The demons have a sound confession. They believe in the person (“Jesus, thou Son of God”) and the power (“art thou come to torment us?”) of Christ (Matt. 8:29).

It is indeed searching and solemn to discover how much the Bible speaks of unsaved people having faith in the Lord. Though it seems incredible, there are those willing to have Christ as their Savior, yet who are most reluctant to submit to Him as their Lord, to be at His command, and to be governed by His laws. But more shocking still, there are unregenerate persons who profess Christ as Lord, and yet are not in possession of saving faith. The scriptural proof of this assertion is found in Matthew 7:22, 23: “Many will say to Me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!” Here is a large class (many) who profess subjection to Christ as Lord, who do many mighty works in His name, and thus can even show you their faith by their works, and yet theirs is not saving faith. “Depart from Me,” said Jesus.

It is impossible to say how far non-saving faith may go or how close it may resemble true saving faith. Saving faith has Christ as its object; so has spurious faith. “Many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did. But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men,” (John 2:23, 24). Saving faith is wrought by the Holy Spirit; so also spurious faith has an apparent spirituality and may even partake to some degree of illuminating grace (Hebrews 6:4). Saving faith is a receiving of the Word of God; so also is spurious faith. “But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles.” (Matt. 13:20, 21). Saving faith will cause a man to prepare for the coming of the Lord; so will spurious faith. Both the foolish and the wise virgins had the lamp of profession—they all *trimmed their lamps* and said “Lord, Lord”—but half heard the answer, “I know you not” (Matt. 25:1-13). Saving faith is accompanied with joy; so is spurious faith. “They on the rock...receive the word with *joy*” (Luke 8:13).

When we realize how far spurious faith can go in its counterfeits, we are prone to say, “All this is very unsettling and confusing.” Yes, it is distressing! But, if we value our souls or care for the souls of others, we will not dismiss this subject lightly. Since the Bible teaches that there is a faith in Christ which does not save and that it is easy to be deceived, we must earnestly seek the help of the Spirit. The Spirit Himself cautions us at this very point. “A deceived heart has turned him aside” (Isa. 44:20). “The pride of your heart has deceived you” (Obad. 3). “Take heed that you are not deceived” (Luke 21:8).

Satan uses his cunning and power most tenaciously and successfully in convincing people that they have saving faith when they do not. He deceives more souls by this stratagem than by all other devices combined. How many Satan-blinded souls will read this and say, “It does not apply to me; I know that my faith is genuine.” Satan dissuades many from heeding that most salutary exhortation: “Examine yourselves, whether you are in the faith; prove your own selves” (2 Cor. 13:5). We will consider this text later.

Our Lord’s parables show that He continually warned against self-deception. Spiritual houses often look the same until the storm of God’s judgment comes (Matt. 7:24-27). Then it is revealed that one house is spurious (built on sand) and one is genuine (built on rock). Wheat and tares look so much alike that only the Lord Himself can separate them (Matt. 13:24-30).

Failure to recognize the Bible’s teaching on counterfeit faith has led to other errors. The tendency is to treat spurious believers as saved but not consecrated or filled with the Spirit. The folly is often compounded by calling those who give no Bible evidence of saving faith *carnal Christians*, since they do not act like Christians. The solution to this unbiblical dilemma is sought in some kinds of second experience or second work of grace. Thus there is constant appeal to the *carnal Christian*, who in reality is a spurious believer, to finally surrender to Christ’s lordship and be filled with (even baptized in) the Spirit.

The great theologians of the past recognized that the Bible distinguishes between spurious faith and saving faith. Charles Hodge speaks of *historical* or *speculative faith*, *temporary faith* and *saving faith* (Systematic Theology 3:67-68). James P. Boyce, one of the greatest Southern Baptist theologians and principal founder of their first seminary, speaks of

implicit faith, *historical* faith, *temporary* or delusive faith, and *saving* faith (*Abstract of Systematic Theology*, pp. 389-94). With these great men of God, we hold tenaciously to that great hopeful and liberating truth of the Bible—justification by faith alone. But we also recognize that faith which is alone is not the faith which justifies.

True Saving Faith Described

Regeneration is inseparable from its effects, one of which is saving faith. Without regeneration it is morally and spiritually impossible to savingly believe in Christ. Except a man be born again, he cannot see, he cannot understand, he cannot come to Christ (John 3:3; 6:37, 44; 1 Cor. 2:14). Regeneration is the renewing of the heart and mind; and the renewed heart and mind must act according to their nature.

Regeneration is the act of God alone. But faith is not the act of God. It is not God who believes in Christ for salvation; it is the sinner. Although it is by God's grace alone that a person is able to believe, faith is an activity of the person alone. In saving faith we receive and rest upon Christ alone for salvation. True, this is a strange, and to some extent, undefinable mixture. But this is precisely what the Bible teaches. This is God's way of salvation, expressing His supreme wisdom, power, and grace.

The Acting of True Saving Faith

True justifying faith is, in the Lord's deep wisdom and condescension, variously expressed in Scripture according to its different actings toward God and its outgoings after Him. True faith is sometimes spoken of as a desire for union with God in Christ—as a *willing*. And the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely. (Rev. 22:17). Scripture also speaks of *looking* to Him. "Look unto me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth" (Isa. 45:22; this text was used of God in Spurgeon's conversion). This may be the weakest act of faith. True faith is also expressed as *hungering* and *thirsting* after righteousness" (Matt. 5:6).

True faith sometimes goes out in the act of *leaning* on the Lord; the soul taking up Christ as a resting-stone because God has so offered Christ. Though He may be a stumbling-stone and a rock of offense to others, true faith is not ashamed of Him (Rom. 9:33). The acting of true faith is sometimes expressed in Scripture as *trusting* and *staying* on God. He keeps in perfect peace those whose minds are *stayed* on Him. *Trust* in the Lord, for with Him is everlasting strength (Isa. 26:3, 4). They that *trust* in the Lord shall be as Mount Zion, which abides forever (Ps. 125:1). The Lord has made promises to this way of faith's acting, knowing that in this way true faith often goes out after Him.

True faith embraces Christ in whatever way the Scripture holds Him out to poor sinners. To the *naked* soul, destitute of a covering to keep it from the storm of God's wrath, Christ is *fine raiment* (Rev. 3:17, 18). Accordingly, faith's work here is to "put on the Lord Jesus" (Rom. 13:14). To the soul that is *hungry* and *thirsty* for something that will everlastingly satisfy, Christ Jesus is "*milk, water, the bread of life, and the true manna*" (Isa. 55:1, 2; John 6:48, 51). True faith will "*go, buy, eat, and drink abundantly*" (Isa. 55:1; John 6:53, 57). To the soul that is *pursued for guilt* and is not able to withstand the charge, Christ Jesus is the *city of refuge*. The poor guilty man exercises true faith by fleeing to Christ for refuge, laying hold on the hope set before him (Heb. 6:18).

In a word, whatever way Christ may benefit poor sinners, He declares Himself able to do. True faith desires Christ in whatever way He holds Himself out in the Scriptures. If He is held out as a *Bridegroom*, true faith goes out to Him as a *bride*. If He is held out as a *Father* (Isa. 9:6), true faith takes the place of a *child*. If He is held out as a *Shepherd*, true faith takes the place of a sheep. If He is set forth as Lord, true faith acknowledges Him to be the *Sovereign*. True faith desires Christ and aspires to be conformed to His image.

It is important to remember, in considering the actings of true saving faith, that every true believer does not manifest all these various actings and exercises of faith, for their condition does not require them. Not everyone in the New Testament is told to sell his possessions (Mark 10:21). Surely, not everyone dares say, "though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15). Many would not have pursued Christ like the woman of Canaan (Matt. 15:22-28) but in discouragement would have given up.

There is, however, one thing common to all who possess true saving faith; that is, a heart-satisfaction with God's plan of salvation by Christ. When one is pleased with God's method of satisfying His justice through Christ's person and work and when the soul and heart embrace that plan, then one is believing unto salvation. Saving faith is not a difficult, mysterious, hardly attainable thing. We must first acknowledge it to be God's gift, above the power of flesh and blood. God must draw me to Christ. "No man can come to Me, except the Father which has sent Me draw him" (John 6:44). "For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ...to believe on Him..." (Phil. 1:29).

Shall that which consists much in desire be judged a mysterious, difficult thing? If men have but a true appetite, they have a mark of true saving faith. They are "blessed that hunger after righteousness" (Matt. 5:6). If you desire, you are welcome (Rev. 22:17). Is it a matter of such intricacy and difficulty earnestly to *look* to the exalted Savior (Isa. 45:22)? Is

it mysterious or difficult to receive that which is sincerely offered and declared to be mine if I will but accept it? “Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it” (Ps. 81:10). Such is justifying faith.

“It was the glory of our Protestant Reformation to discover again the purity of the evangel. The Reformers recognized that the essence of saving faith is to bring the sinner lost and dead in trespasses and sins into direct personal contact with the Saviour himself, contact which is nothing less than that of self-commitment to him in all the glory of his person and perfection of his work as he is freely and fully offered in the gospel” (John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied*, p. 112). Here, Professor Murray gives us a superb definition of justifying and saving faith.

This is the faith of God’s elect, and by it they are able to believe to the saving of their souls. This faith is the work of the Spirit in their hearts and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word. By this kind of faith, God’s sheep hear His Word and believe to be true all that is revealed in the Scriptures. Where this faith is, there is a yielding of obedience to the commands, a trembling at the threatenings, and an embracing of the promises of God for this life and the life to come. The principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life. Justifying faith, therefore, includes *knowledge, conviction, and trust*.

Differences between Spurious and True Faith

There is a hope that shall perish (Job 8:13, 14) and a hope that makes not ashamed (Rom. 5:5). Likewise, there is a faith which saves and a faith which damns. The need to distinguish between the two is vital on the contemporary church scene. “There is a generation that is pure in its own eyes. Yet is not washed from its filthiness” (Prov. 30:12). “There is a way that seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death” (Prov. 14:12). These searching passages have a very real application to our church membership today.

This brings us to our last consideration; that is, the differences between spurious faith and justifying faith, or false believers and true believers. There are many differences, but I point out four that separate the wheat from the chaff, the genuine from the counterfeit.

The first difference is that spurious believers want Christ, but *not without exception*. They want the grace of Christ, but not the government of Christ—like the prodigal son who wanted his father’s goods but not his father’s government. They desire the benefits of the cross without bowing to the implications of the crown. They want to go to heaven, but not by the narrow way that leads there. They desire the free gift of eternal life, but will not receive it with empty hands. Yes, they want Christ, but not without exception. They want Christ and their other lovers also. They want to be saved from the consequences of sin, but not from sin itself. But our Lord came to save from sin. This is clear from the very first chapter of the New Testament. “And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins” (Mt. 1:21). Jesus is not just a hell insurance policy, but a Savior from sin and its consequences.

True saving faith wants Christ *without exception*. This is illustrated by our Lord’s parables in Matthew 13. “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Matt. 13:44). Again, “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it” (Matthew 13:45, 46). The treasure and the pearl is Christ; and saving faith wants *Him without exception*.

The second difference between spurious believers and true believers is that true faith wants Christ as He is offered in the Scriptures; that is, the only Mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5). As Mediator, Christ has three offices: Prophet, Priest, and King of His church. First, as Priest, Christ procures pardon and peace by His sacrifice on the cross and maintains peace by His intercession. Second, as Prophet, Christ is wisdom—teacher and counselor in all things. Third, as anointed King, Christ rules and reigns over the true believer in all things and protects them from all their enemies.

Spurious believers want Christ only as a Priest to procure pardon and peace, but not as a Prophet to instruct them or as a King to rule over them. We are not saved, however, by one of the offices of Christ, but by *Him*. “He that has the Son has life” (1 John 5:12). If we have *Him*, we must have Him *in all of His offices*.

The third difference is that spurious believers never close with Christ and the inconveniences that follow. They want Christ but have never done what Jesus commanded—that is, counted the cost (Luke 14:25-33). Every serious Christian knows that the Christian life is not a gospel hay ride. All is not “happy, happy, happy” or “jolly, jolly, jolly.” The language of the Christian life is also “I war,” “I fight,” “I wrestle.” Jesus was honest about this. Any serious study of Luke 9 and 14 will underscore just how honest Jesus was at the outset in His inviting men to follow Him.

True faith wants Christ and all the inconveniences that follow. It costs to be a Christian. I am not talking about the price of redemption. That is infinite. We are redeemed with the precious blood of Christ. I am talking about what it costs to live a Christian life. It costs you nothing to *become* a Christian; but it may cost you everything to be a Christian.

The fourth difference between spurious and true believers is that the spurious believer's heart is not changed, and, therefore, his faith is not operative. Simon Magus believed, but his heart was not right in the sight of God (Acts 8:13, 21). True faith is operative, purifying the heart (Acts 15:8, 9).

In summary: (1) Saving faith wants Christ without exception. (2) Saving faith receives Christ in all of His offices—as Prophet, Priest, and King. (3) Saving faith receives Christ and all the inconveniences that follow. (4) Saving faith is operative, purifying the heart. None of these things are true of spurious faith.

We must distinguish properly between justifying faith and spurious faith. The consequences of remaining in deception are too enormous to neglect self-examination. There is a faith which will not save and men must be warned of its fatal consequences. We are justified by faith alone, but true faith has distinguishing traits. That faith which is alone is not the kind of faith that justifies.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, The just shall live by faith (Romans 1:16, 17).

Faith & Obedience

We may try our faith by its obedience. This choice, excellent faith is an obedient faith; that is, true faith on the promise works obedience to the command. Abraham is famous for his obedience; no command, no matter how difficult, came amiss to him. But what was the spring that set Abraham's obedience going? "By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed, and he went out" (Heb. 11:8). As it is impossible to please God without faith, so it is impossible not to desire to please God with faith.

Faith is not lazy; it inclines the soul to work; it sends the creature not to bed, there to sleep away his time in ease, but into the field. The night of ignorance and unbelief is the creature's sleeping time; but when the Sun of Righteousness arises and it is day in the soul, then the creature rises and goes forth to his labor. The first words that break out of faith's lips are, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?"—*William Gurnall*

"Nevertheless, when the Son of Man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?" Luke 18:8. How valuable faith must be, friends, if the Son of Man will seek for faith, and pass by every one of those who have it not. Oh, how essential it is that we have the right faith! How necessary that our faith be the gift of God.—*John Booth, 1908*

2. The Assurance of the Saints

These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God.—I John 5:13

Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things ye shall never fall.—II Peter 1:10

It is necessary to have a clear understanding of the biblical teaching of assurance for all spiritual counseling. It is just here where many poor souls are misled and often deceived about their salvation. Here is where the pastor or personal worker functions as a spiritual surgeon.

It is also important because a well-grounded assurance is related to joy, comfort, and Christian service. How can one have the *joy* of salvation if he is not sure he is in possession of salvation? How can one have the *comfort* of salvation if he does not have the assurance of salvation?

Assurance is a God-given conviction of our standing in grace stamped on the mind and heart by the Spirit of God supernaturally. It is a conscious and experimental discerning relationship with God.

William Cunningham, a respected theologian, said, "We believe that the prevailing practical disregard of the privileges and duty of having assurance is, to no inconsiderable extent, the cause and effect of the low state of vital religion among us." *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* ([London, England: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967]. p. 111ff).

James Denny, the author of *The Death of Christ*, a great classic on the atonement, said, "The acid test of any version of Christianity is its attitude toward assurance. Some regard it as a presumption; some regard it as a duty; the New Testament proclaims it as a fact."

Thomas Goodwin said, "Assurance is the 'White Stone' (Rev. 2:17) which none knows but he that receives it."

What does the Bible teach about assurance?

First, the bible teaches that there is a false assurance in which unconverted men sometimes indulge, in which they are deceived, and in which they will finally be discovered. It is possible to place one's hope on insufficient grounds: "The hypocrite's hope shall perish" (Job 8:13). Moreover, "The heart is deceitful..." (Jer. 17:9), and "... if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself" (Gal. 6:3). Men are easily deceived in religious matters. The Pharisees were sure they were "*right with God*" and sought to evangelize others: "Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you compass sea and land to make one proselyte [convert], and when he is made, you make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves" (Matt. 23:15).

It is because of the possibility of religious self-deception that we have the many warnings in the New Testament about the spurious believers. The two houses in Matthew 7 both looked sound and true, but when the storm of God's judgment came, it was manifest that one was real (built upon the rock); the other was not real (built upon the sand). This is one of our Lord's warnings about religious deception. The ten virgins in Matthew 25 all had the lamp of profession and assurance, but five were self-deceived and thought they had assurance saying, "Lord, Lord"; Jesus had to say, "... verily I say unto you, I know you not." He said the same thing in His great sermon to those who had much assurance. Hear them express their assurance: "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name and in Your name have cast out devils? and in Your name done many wonderful works?" They had much assurance, but our Lord said to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of iniquity." The Bible teaches that there is a false assurance and gives many warnings against it.

Second, the Bible teaches that there is a true assurance in which believers are not deceived, but rather confirmed, and in which they will not be confounded. This assurance rests upon God's infallible Word: the graces of which the Word speaks in the believer's heart and the testimony of the Spirit which enables the believer to confirm the one by the other. "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God" (Rom. 8:16). "We know that we have passed from death unto life..." (1 John 3:14).

Since there is a false assurance and a true assurance, a logical question is, What is the difference? A. A. Hodge, one of the great theologians of Princeton Seminary, answered this question in the following manner:

- A. *True assurance*—begets unfeigned humility.
False assurance—begets spiritual pride.
- B. *True assurance*—leads to increased diligence in practice of holiness.
False assurance—leads to sloth and self-indulgence (Ps. 51:12, 13, 19).
- C. *True assurance*—leads to candid self-examination and a desire to be searched and corrected by God. ("Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" Ps. 139:23, 24).
False assurance—leads to a disposition to be satisfied with appearance and avoid accurate investigation.
- D. *True assurance*—leads to constant aspiration after more intimate fellowship with God, which is not true of false assurance. ("Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it does not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is. And every man that has this hope in him purifies himself, even as He is pure" (1 John 3:2, 3). *Evangelical Theology* ([Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976]. p. 303ff).

It is not the strength of one's convictions which proves the validity of his assurance, but the character of one's convictions.

Third, the Bible teaches that a true believer may lack assurance. The man in Mark 9:24 cried, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." When he said, "*I believe*" he was safe, but when he said, "*help my unbelief*" it showed that he was *not sure*.

It is of great importance to be clear about the distinction between faith and assurance. It explains things which an inquirer in religion sometimes finds hard to understand. Faith, let us remember, is the root, and assurance is the flower. Doubtless you can never have the flower without the root; but you can have the root without the flower.

Faith is that poor trembling woman, who came behind our Lord in the crowd and touched the hem of His garment.

Assurance is Stephen, standing calmly in the midst of his murderers, saying, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.”

Faith is the penitent thief crying, “Lord, remember me.”

Assurance is Job sitting in the dust, covered with sores, saying, “I know that my Redeemer liveth.”

Faith is Peter’s drowning cry as he began to sink, “Lord, save me.”

Assurance is, later, that same Peter, declaring before the council, “There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved,” and, “we cannot but speak the things we have seen and heard.”

Faith is Saul praying in the house of Judas at Damascus—sorrowful, blind, and alone.

Assurance is that same aged Paul, now a prisoner, calmly looking into the grave saying, “I know whom I have believed,” and, “There is a crown laid up for me.”

Faith is life. How great the blessing! Who can tell the great gulf between life and death? Yet life may be weak, sickly, unhealthy, painful, trying, worn, burdensome, joyless, to the last.

Assurance is more than life. It is health, strength, power, vigor, energy, comfort, and joy.

Faith is heaven by and by.

Assurance is heaven on earth

To know the difference between faith and assurance is important in counseling sinners, seekers, and Christians.

Fourth, the Bible teaches that believers should seek to attain a well-grounded assurance.

Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure; for if you do these things you shall never fall (2 Peter 1:10).

And we desire that everyone of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end (Heb. 6:11).

He that has such a hope can sing, even in prison, as Paul and Silas did.

Fifth, the Bible teaches that a true believer’s assurance may be shaken, diminished, and intermitted because of negligence, sin, temptation, or trial. David, in Psalm 51:12 is crying for assurance to be restored: “Restore to me the joy of Your salvation; and uphold me with Your free Spirit.” Hear him cry, “Lord, why do You cast off my soul? Why do You hide Your face from me? (Ps. 88:14). True believers may forfeit their assurance, and yet they are never entirely destitute of that seed of God, and therefore will not be left to sink into utter despair; and their assurance may, by the operation of the Spirit, be in due time revived.

Sixth, the Bible teaches that assurance, instead of encouraging believers to indulge in sin, excites them to the pursuit of holiness. True biblical assurance cannot be attained or preserved without close walking with God in all His commandments and ordinances blameless. “Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as he is. And every man that has this hope in him purifies himself, even as He is pure” (1 John 3:2, 3).

Before I make any effort to set out the differences that exists between the God-centered and the man-centered approach in respect to assurance, I want to point out that the ground of salvation and the ground of assurance are two different things. I will do this by asking two questions and will show that the two questions have two different answers.

The first and the most important question anyone can ever seriously ask is, *What must I do to be saved?* There is only one answer to this question: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved....” “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.” “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to your cross I cling.”

The second question is, *How do I know that I have believed to the saving of my soul, that is, How do I know that my faith is saving faith?* This has to do with assurance, and there are three answers to this question. To state it another way, there are three grounds of assurance, or three elements of assurance. When speaking about the grounds of assurance be very clear we are speaking of the ways a believer comes to true assurance, *not the ground on which his salvation rests.*

The *first* ground of assurance is the promises of God made alive or real by the Spirit of God. It is not just the promises of God alone. There must be the work of the Spirit—the Word and the Spirit. The Spirit must apply the Word by opening the sinner’s understanding. The sinner has two problems. He needs sight because he is spiritually blind, and he needs light. The Bible is the light, “a lamp unto our feet.” But light does not help blind people to see. They also need sight. For this reason I emphasize that the first ground of assurance is not only the promises of God, but the promises of God made real or alive by the Spirit of God.

This may be called direct assurance, and this aspect of assurance is of the essence of faith because the principal acts of saving faith consist of accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification and eternal life, and it is impossible for one to rest upon Christ for salvation without believing or trusting that he shall be saved by Him. Whoever rests upon a person for doing a certain thing in his favor must have a persuasion or assurance that he will

do that thing for him. Thus, this aspect of assurance is so essential to faith that without it, there can be no faith, human or divine. To believe a report is to be persuaded or assured of the truth of the report; to believe a promise is to be persuaded or assured that the promiser will do as he has said. In like manner, to believe in Christ for salvation is to be persuaded or assured that we shall be saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, because of the nature of saving faith, this aspect of assurance is of the essence of faith. This direct element of assurance is the exercise of faith in Christ. It is an indispensable duty which can never be superseded by any amount of evidences.

This direct exercise of faith in Christ is the unfailing source of relief and comfort in the Christian's darkest doubts. For in some of the dark and defeated hours, the Christian will find nothing to assure him by looking inward or by looking for external evidences. We must look to Christ alone, the Son of righteousness, shining still, unchanged and unchangeable—shining in all His glory behind the clouds which may cast a dark and doubtful shadow on our souls.

Again, I want to emphasize, this is not just a promise intellectually grasped or memorized; it requires also the illumination of the Spirit. There is no other cause that can make the promises of salvation effectual but the Spirit of God.

The *second* ground of assurance is the witness of the Spirit.

The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God (Rom. 8:16).

He that believes on the Son of God has the witness in himself... (1 John 5:10).

Here we have (1) the Christian described (“He that believes on the Son of God...”) and (2) internal satisfaction (assurance) experienced (“...has the witness in himself...”).

There are differences among the best of theologians and preachers in regard to the manner in which the Spirit gives this testimony; however, there is no disagreement that the witness of the Spirit is one of the grounds of assurance. The greater part of respected divines agree that the Spirit witnesses by means of His operations or the effect produced by Him in the hearts of believers. They reject the idea of an *immediate* testimony or some revelation apart from the Scriptures, and hold that the work of the Spirit is the testimony which He gives, assuring believers of their adoption, and consequent safety.

By the witness of the Spirit, I understand what the great evangelist and preacher, Jonathan Edwards, expounds. Edwards speaks very strongly against the opinion that the Spirit witnesses by way of immediate suggestion or revelation, and he declares that many mischiefs have arisen from this false and delusive notion.

What has misled many in their notion of that influence of the Spirit of God we are speaking of, is the word witness, its being called the witness of the Spirit. Hence they have taken it, not to be any effect or work of the Spirit upon the heart, giving evidence from whence men may argue that they are the children of God; but an inward immediate suggestion as though God inwardly spoke to the man, and testified to him, and told him that he was His child, by a kind of secret voice, or impression: not observing the manner in which the word witness or testimony is often used in the New Testament; where such terms often signify, not only a mere declaring and asserting a thing to be true, but holding forth evidence from whence a thing may be argued and proved to be true. Thus (He. 2:4), God is said to bear witness, with signs and wonders, and divers miracles and gifts of the Holy Ghost. Now these miracles, here spoken of, are called God's witness, not because they are of the nature of assertions, but evidences and proofs. So also Acts 14:3; John 5:36; 10:25. So the water and the blood are said to bear witness (1 John 5:8), not that they spake or asserted anything, but they were proofs and evidences. Indeed the apostle, when in that (Rom. 8:16), he speaks of the Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are the children of God, does sufficiently explain himself, if his words were but attended to. What is here expressed is connected with the two preceding verses, as resulting from what the apostle had there said, as every reader may see. The three verses together are thus: “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God; for you have not received the Spirit of bondage again to fear; but you have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba Father: the Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.” Here what the apostle says, if we take it together, plainly shows that what he has respect to, when he speaks of the Spirit's giving us witness or evidence that we are God's children, is his dwelling in us, and leading us to behave towards God as to a Father. Religious Affections, ([London, England: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1961], pp. 131, 137).

This witness of the Spirit to the sonship of believers must never be divorced from the other activities of the Spirit in the sanctification of believers. The Spirit opens their minds to understand the Scriptures. The Spirit unveils to them more and more of the glory of Christ. The Spirit sheds abroad in their hearts the love of God. He stirs up other holy affections and adorns them with the fruits of the Spirit.

The *third* ground of assurance is Christian character and conduct, or assurance by evidence of regeneration, or assurance by the marks of grace. We could call this *First John* assurance, for one could not read this Epistle without seeing that Christian character and conduct have something to do with assurance.

John is writing to strengthen assurance. He tells us that his purpose for writing this Epistle is that believers might *know* they have eternal life—assurance.

These things have I written to you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may believe on the name of the Son of God (1 John 5:13).

Let us ask three questions about this verse: (1) To whom is John writing? “Unto you that believe.” (2) What is his purpose for writing? “That you may know...” (assurance). (3) How are they to know? By “*these things*” that he has written. Not by going back to the Gospel; he wrote that for a different reason, namely, that men might believe and have life through Christ.

But these are written, that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you might have life through His name (John 20:31).

Well, what are these things that he has written in his little Epistle? We might call “these things” the birth marks of the second birth, or tests of eternal life. And they all have to do with Christian character and conduct, and are evidences of being born again. Therefore, Christian character and conduct have something to do with true biblical assurance: “these things have I written to you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that you may know that you have eternal life...”

Let us look at some of the birth marks of the second birth, or tests of eternal life:

First, the *test of belief* is a birth mark of the second birth. “Whosoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God...” (1 John 5:1). That birth mark includes:

1. A belief in the Christ of the Bible as he is offered in the gospel—Prophet, Priest, and King of His church.
2. A belief that reaches the whole man—his mind, his affections, and his will.
3. A belief that has been revealed and applied by the Holy Spirit in regeneration.
4. A belief acknowledged by the sinner in his response to the Savior.
5. A belief that is apparent in the fruits of faith and repentance.

Second, the *test of obedience* is a birth mark of the second birth: “And hereby we do know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He that says, I know Him, and keeps not His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keeps his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby we know that we are in Him” (1 John 2;3-5).

Bear in mind, John is not, in this passage, telling men how to be saved, or he would have told them what he did in his Gospel: “Behold the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). In this passage he is talking about knowing that we have eternal life, and he is saying that obedience has something to do with knowing we are born again.

Third, the *test of love* of the brethren is a birth mark of the second birth: “We *know* that we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren...” (1 John 3:14); “... every one that loves is born of God, and knows God” (1 John 4:7). Love of the brethren therefore has something to do with knowing we are born again—assurance.

Fourth, the *test of the doing of righteousness* is a birth mark of the second birth: “... you know that everyone that does righteousness is born of Him.” (1 John 2:29). Therefore, the doing of righteousness is an evidence of the new birth and has something to do with knowing we are born again—assurance.

There are other tests of eternal life in this little Epistle, but these are sufficient to make my point, that is, that Christian character and conduct has something to do with true and full assurance and that the doctrine of assurance is vital in counseling sinners, seekers, and those who make a profession.

There are three elements to a well-grounded assurance:

1. The promises of God made real by the Spirit of God.
2. The witness of the Spirit.
3. Christian character and conduct.

To hold exclusively to the first element of assurance without the second and third is *antinomianism*. To hold exclusively to the second without the first and third is *hypocrisy* or the *deepest self-delusion or fantasy*. To hold exclusively to the third without the first and second is *legalism*.

Let me illustrate this by three questions and their biblical answers. These three questions should concern every person who is serious about his own soul and serious in evangelizing others.

1. What is the only safe ground of a sinner’s hope?
2. How does that only safe ground become the ground of my hope?

3. How am I to know that the only safe ground has become, and continues to be, the ground of my hope, so that I may be assured that my hope is not the “*hope of the hypocrite*” that shall perish, but the hope that “*maketh not ashamed*”?

Each has its own answer, and be sure not to confuse the answer of one of them for the answer of either of the others.

1. The only safe ground of the sinner’s hope is the sovereign mercy of God, exercised in consistency with His righteousness, through the atoning sacrifice of his Son, made known to us in the gospel revelation

2. The only way in which this safe ground of hope can become the ground of my hope is believing the Word of the truth of the gospel.

3. And the only way in which I can obtain permanent, satisfactory evidence that the only safe ground of hope has become the ground of my hope, is by continuing to believe the gospel, and by living under the influence of the gospel believed.

The Difference

In the area of counseling inquirers, there is a vast difference between a God-centered approach and a man-centered approach in respect to assurance. In the man-centered approach the inquirer is usually give assurance by the counselor with the use of syllogistic reasoning. For example:

Major Premise: He that believes in Christ is in the state of grace and shall be saved (John 3:16; Acts 16:31).

Minor Premise: I believe in Christ.

Conclusion: Therefore, I am saved; I have eternal life.

There is much truth in this aspect of assurance. But the question still remains, Do I truly believe, or do I believe as those our Lord mentioned in John 2:23, 24?: “Now when He was in Jerusalem at the passover, in the feast day, many *believed* in His name, when they saw the miracles which He did. But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men.” They believed but were not saved because Jesus did not commit or entrust Himself to them.

In John 12:42, 43, Jesus tells us that many among the rulers believed but they would not confess Him. Surely they were not saved. Again, Jesus teaches that there are those who believe for a while, but in the time of temptation fall away: “They on the rock are they, which, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have not root, which *for a while believe*, and in the time of temptation fall away” (Luke 8:13). They were believers but were not saved.

Our syllogism, therefore, is not the only or conclusive truth about biblical assurance. By syllogism alone, we could prove that no one knows Christ and therefore no one is saved.

And hereby, we do know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He that says, I know Him, and keeps not His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him (1 John 2:3, 4).

Major Premise: He that knows Christ keeps His commandments. He that says he knows Christ but does not keep His commandments is a liar.

Minor Premise: No one keeps all of Christ’s commandments at all times.

Conclusion: No one know Christ, and, therefore, no one is saved.

God-centered evangelism teaches that there is much more to true biblical assurance than a syllogism. The God-centered view of assurance is that assurance has three elements, and for a well-grounded assurance, all elements are not only important but related to each other.

In God-centered evangelism the preacher or personal worker never tries to do what only the Holy Spirit can do. The biblical view of assurance will put all preachers and personal workers out of the assurance business!

Let me now give two illustrations of the God-centered approach from that immortal volume by John Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and an example from the life and diary of the great missionary, David Brainard.

Evangelist speaks to a seeking sinner under conviction:

Evangelist came to him, and asked, Wherefore dost thou cry?

He answered, Sir, I perceive by the Book in my hand, that I am condemned to die, and after that to come to judgment; and I find that I am not willing to do the first, nor able to do the second.

Then said Evangelist, Why not willing to die, since this life is attended with so many evils? The man answered, Because I fear that this burden that is upon my back, will sink me lower than the grave; and I shall fall into Tophet. And, Sir, if I be not fit to go to prison, I am not fit to go to judgment, and from thence to execution; and the thought of these things make me cry.

Then said Evangelist, If this be thy condition, Why standest thou still?

He answered, Because I know not whither to go. Then he gave him a Parchment Roll, and there was written within, Fly from the Wrath to come.

The Man therefore read it, and looking upon Evangelist very carefully, said, Whither must I fly?

Then said Evangelist, pointing with his finger over a very wide field, Do you see yonder Wicket Gate? The man said, No: then said the other, Do you see yonder Shining Light? He said, I think I do. Then said Evangelist, Keep that Light in your eye, and go directly thereto, so shalt thou see the Gate; at which, when thou knockest, it shall be told thee what thou shalt do. *Pilgrim's Progress* ([Edinburgh, Scotland, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977], pp. 3,4).

Note several lessons from this evangelism:

1. Evangelist did not give him a one,-two,-three sales-pitch and wring a decision out of him and pronounce him saved.
2. He pointed him to the Narrow Gate.
3. He taught him to follow the light that God put on his path, and he would get more light.
4. He did not try to play the Holy Spirit and give him assurance.
5. Later in the book Evangelist met with him to give him additional instructions.

In the second example, again from *Pilgrim's Progress*, Hopeful was converted through Faithful's testimony in Vanity Fair. Long after his conversion, when Hopeful and Christian were a bit weary on the way, in a place called *enchanted ground*, they tried to encourage each other by sharing their testimonies. The following is part of how Faithful dealt with Hopeful, a vivid lesson in personal evangelism and an illustration of the God-centered principle of the personal worker not trying to do only what the Holy Spirit can do—give assurance.

We break in on this conversation between Christian and Hopeful. Hopeful had been telling Christian about the conviction of sin, and at this point in the conversation he begins to tell how Faithful dealt with him.

Chr. And what did you do then?

Hope. Do! I could not tell what to do, till I brake my mind to Faithful, for he and I were well acquainted, And he told me, that unless I could obtain the Righteousness of a man that never had sinned; neither mine own, nor all the Righteousness of the World could save me.

Chr. And did you think he spake true?

Hope. Had he told me so when I was pleased and satisfied with mine own amendments, I had called him Fool for his pains, but now, since I see mine own infirmity, and the Sin that cleaves to my best performance, I have been forced to be of his opinion.

Chr. But did you think, when at first he suggested it to you, that there was such a man to be found, of whom it might justly be said, That he never committed Sin?

Hope. I must confess the words at first sounded strangely, but after a little more talk and company with him, I had full conviction about it.

Chr. And did you ask him, What man this was, and how you must be justified by him?

Hope. Yes, and he told me it was the Lord Jesus that dwelleth on the right hand of the Most High: And thus, said he you must be justified by him, even by trusting to what he hath done by himself in the days of his flesh, and suffered when he did hang on the Tree. I asked him further, how that Man's righteousness could be of that efficacy, as to justify another before God? And he told me, He was the Mighty God, and did what he did and died the Death also, not for himself, but for me; to whom His doings, and the worthiness of them, should be imputed, if I believed on him.

Chr. And what did you do then?

Hope. I made my objections against my believing, for that I thought he was not willing to save me.

Chr. And what said Faithful to you then?

Hope. He bid me go to him and see; then I said it was Presumption; he said No, for I was Invited to come. Then he gave me a Book of Jesus his inditing, to encourage me the more freely to come; and he said concerning that Book, That every jot and tittle thereof stood firmer than Heaven and earth. Then I asked him what I must do when I came: and he told me, I must entreat upon my knees, with all my heart and soul, the Father to reveal him to me. Then I ask'd him further, how I must make my supplication to him? And he said, Go, and thou shalt find him upon a Mercy-Seat, where sits all the year long, to give pardon and Forgiveness to them that come. I told him, that I knew not what to say when I came. And he bid me say to this effect:

God be merciful to me a Sinner, and make me to know and believe in Jesus Christ; for I see, that if his Righteousness had not been, or I have not Faith in that Righteousness, I am utterly cast away. Lord, I have heard that thou art a merciful God, and hast ordained that thy Son Jesus Christ should be the Savior of the World; and moreover, that thou art willing to bestow upon such a poor sinner as I am, (and I am a sinner indeed) Lord, take therefore this opportunity, and magnify thy Grace in the Salvation of my soul, through thy Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

Chr. And did you do as you were bidden?

Hope. Yes; over and over, and over.

Chr. And did the Father reveal His Son to you?

Hope. Not at the first, nor second, nor third, nor fourth, nor fifth; no nor at the sixth time neither.

Chr. What did you do then?

Hope. What! why I could not tell what to do.

Chr. Had you not thoughts of leaving off praying?

Hope. Yes, and hundred times twice told.

Chr. And what was the reason you did not?

Hope. I believed that that was true, which had been told me, to wit, That without the Righteousness of this Christ, all the World could not save me; and therefore thought I with myself, if I leave off, I die, and I can but die at the Throne of Grace. And withal this came into my mind, If it tarry, wait for it, because it will surely come, and will not tarry. So I continued Praying, until the Father sewed me his Son.

Chr. And how was he revealed to you?

Hope. I did not see him with my bodily eyes, but with the eyes of mine Understanding; and thus it was. One day I was very sad, I think sadder than at any one time of my Life; and this sadness was through a fresh sight of the greatness and vileness of my Sins. And as I was then looking for nothing but Hell, and the everlasting Damnation of my Soul, suddenly, as I thought, I saw the Lord Jesus looking down from heaven upon me, and saying, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.,

But I replied, Lord I am a great, a very great Sinner: And he answered, My Grace is sufficient for thee. Then I said, but Lord, what is Believing? And then I saw from that saying [He that cometh to me shall never hunger, and he that believeth on me shall never thirst] that Believing and Coming was all one; and that he that came, that is, ran out in his heart and affections after Salvation by Christ, he indeed believed in Christ. Then the water stood in mine eyes, and I asked further, But Lord, may such a great Sinner as I am, be indeed accepted of thee, and be saved by thee? And I heard him say, and him that cometh to me, I will in no wise cast out. Then I said, But how, Lord, must I consider of thee in my coming to thee, that my Father may be pleased aright upon thee. Then he said, Christ Jesus came into the World to save Sinners. He is the end of the Law for Righteousness to everyone that believes. He died for our Sins, and rose again for our Justification: He loved us, and washed us from our Sins in His own blood: He is mediator between God and us: he ever liveth to make Intercession for us. From all which I gathered, that I must look for Righteousness in his Person, and for Satisfaction for my Sins by his Blood; that what he did in Obedience to his Father's Law, and in submitting to the Penalty thereof, was not for himself, but for him that will accept it for his Salvation, and be thankful. And now was my heart full of joy, mine eyes full of tears, and mine affections running over with love to the Name, People, and Ways of Jesus Christ.

Chr. This was a Revelation of Christ to your soul indeed; But tell me particularly what effect this had upon your Spirit?

Hope. It made me see that all the World, notwithstanding all the righteousness thereof, is in a state of Condemnation. It made me see that God the Father, though he be just, can justify the coming Sinner: It made me greatly ashamed of the Vileness of my former life, and confounded me with the sense of mine own Ignorance; for there never came thought into my heart before now, that showed me so the beauty of Jesus Christ: It made me love a Holy Life, and long to do something for the honour and glory of the name of the Lord Jesus; yea, I thought that had I now a thousand gallons of blood in my body, I could spill it all for the sake of the Lord Jesus.

Pilgrim's Progress (Edinburgh, Scotland, 1977], pp. 161-165).

Again, note, there is the absence of salesmanship—no decisionism—and Faithful does not try to play the Holy Spirit and give assurance.

Now, let us see this same principle from the life of that great missionary, David Brainard:

July 2. Was obliged to leave these Indians at Crossweksung, thinking it my duty, as soon as health would admit, again to visit those at the Forks of Delaware. When I came to take leave of them, and spoke something particularly to each of them, they all earnestly inquired when I would come again, and expressed a great desire of being further instructed. And of their own accord agreed, that when I should come again, they would all meet and live together during my continuance with them; and that they would do their utmost endeavors to gather all the other Indians in these parts that were yet further remote. And when I parted, one told me with many tears, “She wished God would change her heart”, another, that “she wanted to find Christ”; and an old man that had been one of their chiefs, wept bitterly with concern for his soul. I then promised them to return as speedily as my health and business elsewhere would admit, and felt not a little concerned at parting, lest the good impressions then apparent upon numbers of them, might decline and wear off, when the means came to cease; and yet could not but hope that He who, I trusted, had begun a good work among them, and who I knew did not stand in need of means to carry it on, would maintain and promote it.

At the same time, I must confess that I had often seen encouraging appearances among the Indians elsewhere prove wholly abortive; and it appeared the favor would be so great, if God should now after I had passed through so considerable a series of almost fruitless labors and fatigues, and after my rising hopes had been so often frustrated among these poor pagans, give me any special success in my labors with them. I could not believe, and scarce dared to hope that the event would be so happy, scarce ever found myself more suspended between hope and fear, in any affair, or at any time, than this.

This encouraging disposition and readiness to receive instruction, now apparent among these Indians, seems to have been the happy effect of the conviction that one or two of them met with some time since at the Forks of Delaware, who have since endeavored to show their friends the evil of idolatry. And although the other Indians seemed but little to regard, but rather to deride them, yet this, perhaps, has put them into a thinking posture of mind, or at least, given them some thoughts about Christianity, and excited in some of them a curiosity to hear, and so make way for the present encouraging attention. An apprehension that this might be the case here, has given me encouragement that God may in such a manner bless the means I have used with Indians in other places, where there is as yet no appearance of it. If so, may His name have the glory of it; for I have learned by experience that He only can open the ear, engage the attention, and incline the heart of poor benighted, prejudiced pagans to receive instruction. Jonathan Edwards, *The Life and Diary of David Brainard*.

It is important that every serious person who seeks to evangelize must study the biblical view of assurance as it relates to counseling and evangelizing.

SUMMARY

A good summary of the biblical doctrine of assurance is found in the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith:

CHAPTER 18 OF THE ASSURANCE OF GRACE AND SALVATION

1. Although temporary believers and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favor of God and in a state of salvation, which hope of theirs shall perish; yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, 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.
2. This certainty 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.
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 a 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.
4. 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.

I pray that all who read these words can sing with the blind hymn writer—Blessed Assurance, by Fanny Crosby.

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

*Perfect submission, perfect delight,
Visions of rapture now burst on my sight:
Angels descending bring from above
Echoes of mercy, whispers of love.*

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

*This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Saviour all the day long;
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Saviour all the day long.*

3. The Perseverance of the Saints

Perseverance is one of our Baptist distinctives. A biblical doctrine that is not held by all of our Christian friends in some other denominations. When our Baptist fathers used the expression “The Perseverance of the Saints” they meant that a true Christian cannot be ultimately lost. You have heard many polemic arguments and discussions on this topic—Once saved always saved. There have been many sermons and many books written on this subject—a much misrepresented and abused doctrine.

Now, if this is a true biblical doctrine how do we account for all those who make a profession, get baptized, join the church and fall away and we see them no more. Serious people should have some questions about all of those who disappear from the church, and many times become the worst kind of apostates. Some times they become anti-Christian—agnostics.

Well, it is this doctrine “**the perseverance of the saints**” that I wish to address in this chapter.

My text for this subject is found in Jeremiah 32:40 “I will make an everlasting covenant with them, (His people) that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put my fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me.” I will not turn away from them—that is **preservation**. They will not turn away from Me—that is **perseverance**.

A good paraphrase of verse 40 would be: “I will make an everlasting covenant with them, promising never again to leave them, but only to do them good. I will put a desire into their hearts to worship me and they shall never leave me. I will not turn away from them and they shall not depart from me.”

Just a word about the context of this verse. In this chapter we have Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, imprisoned by King Zedekiah because the king did not like the prophet's message. Get rid of the preacher if you don't like his message—it convicts me of sin—it makes me uncomfortable.

This is just one of three things that always happens when the truth of God is preached in the power of the Spirit:

1. Get rid of the messenger who delivers the message that convicts them, or
2. Leave the church, that is, get away from the place where the true message is being preached, or
3. Get right with God (I have seen all three happen.)

V.V. 1-5, Jeremiah was shut up in prison by Zedekiah.

V.V. 6-15, we have the buying of a field which is a pledge of deliverance—the buying of this land, by divine appointment.

The whole purpose of this prophecy is to show that after a long time the Jews would return to their own country, for God would restore them and their captivity would have an end. God's purpose, then, was to give them hope of deliverance, but yet they were admonished to wait patiently for the end of their exile—"I will not depart from them"

In V.V. 16-25 we have the prophet's prayer. A wonderful lesson on prayer. It would sure change our church prayer meetings if Christians would study the many prayers in the Bible. Our prayer meetings would not sound like we were in the waiting room in the city hospital. I do not mean we should not pray for the sick, but it should not occupy the principal part of the prayer meeting. You study this prayer.

In V.V. 36-44 God promises their gracious return because of His covenant—N.B. V. 37, "Behold, I will gather them out of all countries where I have driven them in My anger, in My fury, and in great wrath; I will bring them back to this place, and I will cause them to dwell safely." I will not turn away from them.

V. 40, speaks of an everlasting covenant and I want to consider it in this meditation. **God's Preservation**—I will not depart from them. They shall not depart from Me—The **Saint's Perseverance**.

This text (V. 40) puts two things together that should never be separated, because if you separate them you have a half truth which, when given for the whole truth, is the worst kind of deception.

I want to emphasize how important it is to hold the two sides of this truth together.

Three questions that we should always ask when we open the Book of God:

1. What does it say?
2. What does it mean?—not always easy to come by.
3. How does it apply?—sometimes painful.

My approach to this doctrine of the perseverance of the saints will be by making two statements as to just what the Bible teaches on this important subject. After each statement I will give appropriate Scriptures to support both statements.

First Statement

The Bible teaches that all those who are savingly joined to Jesus Christ are kept and preserved for His eternal kingdom (I did not say all who make a profession). But all who are savingly joined to Jesus Christ.

Just two passages of Scripture that sets forth the truth of the first statement: Romans 8:29, 30; 35, 38, 39, "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Our Lord's illustration of this doctrine is found in John 10:26-29, "But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. My sheep hear My voice and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My Father's hand, My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand." (More about this passage later.)

Why is it true and biblical that "all who are savingly joined to Jesus Christ are kept and preserved for his eternal kingdom"? There are three biblical reasons to establish the truth of the first statement.

Why are they kept and preserved?

1st. First, they are kept and preserved because of God Almighty's immutable unchanging plan and purpose, expressed vividly in John 6:38, 39 Jesus said, "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of the Father who sent me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day."

2nd. Secondly, they are kept and preserved because of Christ's purchase and His prayer. He purchased some sheep and He is satisfied with his purchase. Isaiah expressed it beautifully, "He shall see the travail of his soul and be satisfied." N.B. satisfied not defeated—not disappointed, but **satisfied** with his purchase. Then, there is his prayer—let me take you into our Lord's prayer chamber to hear Him pray. John 17:9, 15, "I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one."

Another beautiful example of our Lord praying—Luke 22:31, 32, And the Lord said, “Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren.”

Thank God we are kept and preserved because of His prayer, even when we do not pray for ourselves—put your name in Simon Peter’s place.

(1st) We are kept and preserved because of the Father’s plan and purpose, (2nd) Because of the Son’s purchase and prayer.

3rd. The third reason that we are kept and preserved is because of the indwelling power and sealing of the Holy Spirit. Eph. 1:13 “In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.”

Eph. 4:30, “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”

“Sealed unto; the day of redemption.” Oh, my friend, when God Almighty seals you, you are **safe**.

These three reasons as to why we are kept and preserved for Christ’s eternal kingdom are so important because they involve all the Persons of the God-Head—the work of the Triune God. Think of it!!

A God who is all wise in planning and all powerful in performing. An all sufficient Savior who is able to save, keep, and satisfy. The power and presence of the Holy Spirit who efficaciously applies all that the Father planned and all that the Son purchased. Father, Son and Holy Spirit keeping and preserving all who are savingly joined to Jesus Christ:

- Not all professors
- Not all who walk aisles
- Not all who are baptized
- Not all who teach or preach.

No! No! But all who are **savingly** joined to Christ.

These are marked by two basic evidences: Repentance toward God and Faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ.

We must remember that the Bible teaches that there are temporary believers, Luke 8:13 “But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away.” In 1 Cor. 15:2 it speaks of “believing in vain.”

Yes, there is such a thing as:

Head faith—that is giving intellectual assent to some historical facts.

Dead faith—religious appropriation of these facts.

Devil’s faith—“...the devils believe and tremble” (James 2:19).

The Second Statement

The first statement had to do more with the sovereign side of things, that is, God’s **Preserving His Own**.

The second statement is: Only Those Who Persevere in Holiness and Obedience Have Any Reason to Believe That They Are of His Eternal Kingdom.

My text, Jeremiah 32:40, has both sides of the coin: “I will not turn away from them....”—Preservation-Sovereignty.

“They will not depart from Me.”—Perseverance—Human responsibility.

Most of the errors on this subject is a result of not keeping these two things together. The Bible puts them together and what God has joined together let no man put asunder.

We must not teach half truths for the whole truth—which is often done with the blessed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Let me give an example of this error of teaching half truths for whole truths. I saw an example of this error in my early Christian experience.

Not long after I was converted I joined the U.S. Navy and soon found myself sailing to the South Pacific. On the ship I met some professing Christians—some real Christians—some not real.

A Personal Experience to Illustrate This Point

On this ship (USS Westmorland—APA 104) we had Bible studies and prayer meetings. They were well attended when we were in enemy territory preparing for an invasion. There was one young man on our ship who was the son of a Baptist preacher, his name was Dozer. He was a very nice, handsome, young man. He sang all the hymns better than the rest of us and he could pray better than the rest of us—we loved him and welcomed him to your meetings.

The strange thing about him was when we would get to port he would go ashore and it was “wine, women and a different kind of song.” His friends would bring him back to the ship so drunk that he did not know where he was. I was just a very young Christian and I did not know anything about Christian doctrine, and especially the antinomian doctrine of “eternal security.” In fact, I did not know the difference between eternal security and social security !

I did not understand how this could be. One moonlit night just off the Island of Okinawa I saw him standing alone at the rear of the ship looking at the beautiful moonlight wake. I remember it very well because I had often wanted to ask him about how he reconciled his belief and his conduct. I walked up beside him and put my arm around him and said, “Dozer, I am just a young Christian and I do not understand this. I love you very much but I wish you would explain your conduct.” He said, “My father is a Baptist preacher and he taught me that once you are saved you are always saved.” I said, “I do not know your father but my Bible tells me that no drunkard shall enter the kingdom of God.” This is a very vivid example of a father teaching his son a half truth for a whole truth. He did not teach his son as David taught Solomon.

David, in his dying days taught his son the perseverance side. (1 Chronicles 28:9). “As for you, my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and serve Him with a loyal heart and with a willing mind; for the LORD searches all hearts and understands all the intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will be found by you; but if you forsake Him, He will cast you off forever.”

Only those who persevere in holiness and obedience have any reason to believe that they are of His eternal kingdom.

Now, I want to give some Scriptural support for the second statement—the perseverance side—the human responsibility side.

(Mt. 24:10-13). “And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. “But he who endures to the end shall be saved.” Persevere to the end.

(John 8:30-32) “As He spoke these words, many believed in Him. Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, If you (abide) continue in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” In this passage our Lord defines discipleship.

In Matthew 25:1-12, Jesus gives us a parable of the ten virgins. They all had the lamp of profession. They were all professors. But Jesus said to half of them—“I never knew you.” They were not all possessors.

Study the “IF” Passages

1 Cor. 15:1, 2, “Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, **if** you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.” N.B. “**If** you hold fast”— that is persevering, that is human responsibility.

Colossians 1:22, 23 “...in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight— **if indeed you continue in the faith**, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister.” N.B. the “**If**”

A few days before my son went off to Lehigh University I thought we should spend a few days together. We went to Hershey, Pennsylvania, stayed in one of Hershey’s beautiful hotels, played golf on one of their beautiful golf courses and ate delicious Hershey’s New York Strip Steaks.

I told him I would not preach to him but I just wanted to read the book of Hebrews together and I wanted him to underline the word “**if**” as we read the whole book of Hebrews. Forty years later he showed me his Bible with all the “if’s” underlined. This is an exercise that I recommend.

Hebrews 3:12-14 “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called “Today,” lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ **if** we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end” (N.B. V. 14 that is perseverance).

We often hear the expression “eternal security.” I do not like this expression, (eternal security) because it is not found in the Bible and is very misleading. This expression was never used by the great church fathers; however, there is an expression that comes close to the expression “eternal security” and that is “eternal salvation.”

Hebrews 5:8, 9, “...though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who **obey Him.**” It is a gospel of behavior as well as belief.

Here you see obedience and eternal salvation are related. And be sure of this—where God’s salvation comes to sinners obedience and holiness will be a part of it.

You have probably heard the expression “Once saved always saved and it doesn’t matter what you do.” That is error—error and heresy—that is unbiblical. The Bible teaches: Once saved always saved and it does matter what you do.

There is no contradiction between preservation and perseverance. No! No! The same people who are kept and preserved for Christ’s eternal kingdom are those who persevere. Why? Because the same Lord who is preserving them is persevering **IN** them. See it in Phil. 2:12, 13 “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do his good pleasure.”

Several years ago I was speaking at a retreat for young people (senior high and college) at Harvey Cedars, New Jersey. After one of the evening meetings a young girl, about eighteen years old came up to me and said, “I assume from your message that you do not believe ”eternal security.” I told her that if it was in the Bible I believed it. She assured me that it was because her father, who was a missionary, taught her that she would never perish. Again, I asked her where in the Bible it said that. She was not sure so I thought I would help her and asked her to turn to John 10:26-28. She immediately said that was the passage.

John 10:26-28 “But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.”

I suggested to her that we look at the characteristics of the sheep found in these verses.

Two characteristics of the sheep:

1. They hear His voice—and what is that?

A disposition to know the will of God.

2. An obedient foot—and what is that?

A disposition to do the will of God—they follow Me.

I assured her that her father had taught her right, that is, if she had these two characteristics—a desire to know the will of God and a desire to do the will of God—she had every reason to believe that she had eternal life and that she would never perish.

There are three ways people read John 10:26-28:

1. Some like to add an **If** they follow Me—don’t add or delete the “ifs”

2. Some read it and all they can see is **never perish, never perish.**

3. The correct way—they hear My voice and they follow Me and I give unto them (the sheep) eternal life and they shall never perish.

There is no promise of salvation to those living in open rebellion and sin.

No assurance for Peter when he was denying the Lord.

No assurance for David when he was committing adultery with Uriah’s wife.

No assurance for Samson when he was sleeping with Delila.

The late Professor John Murray (one of the great theologians of our generation) summed it up better than I can say it. In his book “Principles of Conduct” speaking of the Covenant of Grace he raises the following question: “Do believers continue in the covenant relationship and in the enjoyment of its blessings irrespective (apart from) of persevering obedience to God’s commands?”

Answer: “It is one of the most perilous distortions of the doctrine of Grace, and one that has carried with it the saddest records of moral and spiritual disaster, to assume that past privileges, however high they may be, guarantees the security of men irrespective of perseverance in faith and obedience.” *Principles of Conduct* ([Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING CO. 1957], p. 199).

My text has both sides of the coin—“I will not turn away from them” and “They shall not depart from Me.” Don’t separate what God joins together. Both are true and only both are true.

I want to close this chapter with a **warning**—Because true Christians do stumble and fall, and make many crooked steps, backslide. What should be our attitude towards those who seem to have fallen away? There is a warning found in the words of John the Baptist, speaking of Jesus, in Mt. 3:12, “His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Three lessons from this passage as to our attitude:

1. There will be a separation of the true and the false—wheat and chaff.
2. That separation is not now.
3. That separation is not by us—the winnowing fan is not in our hands.

It is not a sin to say I do not know.

It is not the ninth inning yet—the ball game is not over

The Bible teaches that all who are savingly joined to Jesus Christ are kept and preserved for His eternal kingdom and He will persevere in them unto the end. Our text says: I will not turn away from them and they will not depart from Me.

If you are not a true sheep cast yourself on the mercy of the Great Shepherd of the sheep who is able to save to the uttermost all that come to God through Him.

4. The Self-Examination of the Saints

Self-Examination: Duties and Dangers

There are few subjects or exercises more neglected and yet more important to professing Christians than the subject of this chapter. This duty of self-examination may be called the lost doctrine of the Bible. It has been abandoned by the great body of professing Christians, including non-lordship teachers.

It is much easier to keep up external appearances or judge others than to scrutinize your own condition within. It is hard to read the tablet of one's own heart and to discover whether it is indeed a living epistle of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Self-examination is not only difficult but also potentially dangerous. Our true moral and spiritual state can be disclosed only by the Spirit and the Word. Since the final judge of the heart is God alone, the ultimate judgment belongs to the One whose eyes are like a flame of fire and who sees right through the deeds and thoughts of all creatures. The final word belongs to Him. And yet His revealed Word gives us guidance on how to perform the important duty of self-examination.

In a previous chapter we considered the biblical doctrine of assurance, which is so closely related to self-examination that perhaps one should not be taught apart from the other. On the subject of this chapter, as with all the major doctrines we have been examining, the non-lordship teaching differs sharply with the lordship teaching. Few, if any, non-lordship teachers believe in self-examination at all.

The lordship teachers agree that, if not properly directed, self-examination can become morbid introspection. They emphasize that in carrying out this duty the Christian is meant to feel not the guilt of a condemning judge but the shame of an erring son. This duty poses no danger if we remember the comforting words of Romans 8:1: "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit."

That self-examination is a duty is clearly set out in many passages, such as Psalms 77:6; 139:23-24; 1 Corinthians 11:28-32; 2 Corinthians 13:5; and 2 Peter 1:10. For the purpose of this study we will confine ourselves to just two passages, 2 Corinthians 13:5 and 1 Corinthians 11:28-32.

2 Corinthians 13:5

Paul makes it very clear that self-examination is a duty when he writes: "Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Prove yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified" (2 Cor. 13:5).

Other versions translate this verse as follows:

- "Put yourselves to the proof, to see whether you are holding the Faith. Test yourselves. Surely you recognize this fact about yourselves—that Jesus Christ is in you! Unless indeed you cannot stand the test!" (TCNT).
- "You should be looking at your selves to make sure that you are really Christ's. It is yourselves that you should be testing, not me. You ought to know by this time that Christ is in you, unless you are not real Christians at all" (PHILIPS).

The word translated “disqualified” in the NKJV is rendered “reprobates” in the KJV. Rather than meaning reprobate in a strict theological sense—that is, judicially abandoned to perdition—it means failing to pass the test, unapproved, counterfeit.

The two most common errors in managing the duty of self-examination are (1) examining by a false standard or a false conscience, and (2) examining in such a way that leads to morbid introspection. While we must discover our sin and guilt, this process should drive us to the gracious Sin-Bearer; not to despair, discouragement, or morbidity, but to fresh forgiveness, fresh assurance, joy, and peace. That is what the Lord’s Supper is all about (which we shall see later).

Three things are very clear in this text:

1. Self-examination is a duty: “examine yourselves”; “prove yourselves.”
2. The purpose of this duty is to know “whether you are in the faith.”
3. The force of this duty is found in the words “unless indeed you are disqualified” or “except ye be reprobates” (KJV).

What Is Self-Examination?

First, self-examination is setting up court in your own conscience. This is a strange court because (1) you are the one on trial, (2) you are the lawyer presenting the case, and (3) you are the judge.

Second, self-examination is a spiritual inquisition.

Third, self-examination is an anatomy of the heart in which a person discloses the condition of his heart much as a watchmaker takes a watch apart to find defects.

Fourth, self-examination is a spiritual dialogue with yourself. It is not questioning the promises of God, as the non-lordship teachers would have us think, but rather questioning if we are among those to whom the promises are applicable. The proper exercise of this duty will keep us from coming under God’s judgment. “If we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged” (1 Cor. 11:31).

In Jesus’ parable in Matthew 22:12-13, He makes it clear that God will judge us as to whether we belong in His royal presence: “[The king] said to [one of the wedding guests], ‘Friend, how did you come here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. Then said the king to the servants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

The point is this: if you don’t ask the questions, God will.

In spite of the clear command to “examine yourselves,” the non-lordship teachers insist that self-examination leads to doubting God’s promises and to morbid introspection. They tell us to look to God, not to ourselves. They say, “Just tell us about justification.”

Surely, there is no more important doctrine in the Bible than justification by faith alone, and we are justified most freely by His grace alone, not any goodness we could find in ourselves. But the question must be asked, Who wants to be justified? Only those who see their need to be justified. And who wants forgiveness? Only those who sense their need of forgiveness. Though non-lordship teachers say, “Tell us about mercy, not self-examination,” again we ask, Who wants mercy? Only those who see they are guilty. Where misery is not felt, mercy is not found.

Self-examination is like a title search in religion. Counterfeiters do not want their money examined. But imagine if everyone on the rolls of our churches would take this duty seriously and pursue it biblically.

1 Corinthians 11:28-32

That is what we are urged to do every time we take the Lord’s supper. Paul writes:

“... let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we could judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world” (1 Cor. 11:28-32).

This text teaches that self-examination is a preparatory command and is therefore very essential. The old Presbyterian church in my home town used to have what they called a “Preparatory Service” on the Friday night before the Sunday communion service. This preparatory service was meant to be a time not of morbid introspection but of discovering sin and guilt in order to come to the table for fresh forgiveness, joy, peace, and assurance that “Christ is mine and I am His.”

Self-examination thus has a twofold purpose. It is meant not only to show us who is not a Christian, but also to show who is a Christian, and who therefore has all the benefits and blessings promised by God.

I once had a long-time friend and business associate whom I had every reason to believe was a true Christian; he was everything and did everything a Christian is meant to be and do. Yet sometimes he would go into deep depression and

almost despair because he lacked assurance. He didn't understand self-examination, and thus he was robbed of comfort and assurance. He knew that Christ was sent to redeem men. He knew that a ransom had been paid on the cross for sinners. He knew that hell is avoidable. He knew that sin is pardonable and heaven is attainable. He knew that justification is freely offered. He also knew that it is all upon the condition of faith. but he did not know whether he had the kind of faith that entitled him to the promises and privileges of true believers. Proper self-examination solved his depressed state.

Why Is Self-Examination a Necessary Duty?

Self-examination is necessary for three reasons:

1. There is a difference between common grace and saving grace.
2. There is a difference between true faith and spurious faith.
3. Everyone reading these words is either in the state of grace or in the state of nature. That is, either you have been changed by the power of the gospel into the state of grace, or your nature is as it was when you came from your mother's womb.

Two families may be reading these words—the family of God, and the family of the Devil. You are in one or the other, for they are the two families that make up the entire world. Regardless of your blood relations or your outward affiliations, you need to examine yourself to know to which family you truly belong:

- There was a Cain in Adam's family.
- There was a Ham in Noah's ark.
- There was an Ishmael in Abraham's household.
- There was a Judas among our Savior's apostles.
- And at the Last Day the whole world will be divided into sheep and goats, those on the right hand and those on the left hand.

It is necessary to inquire whose we are. There is such a thing as having a right hope on insufficient grounds. "The hope of the hypocrite shall perish" (Job 8:13).

This duty of self-examination requires diligence. That is why Peter said, "Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble" (2 Peter 1:10).

Have you ever asked yourself, Do I have the distinguishing traits of Christian character—not something I did in the past, but now? Can you answer that honestly? The self-deceived are in the most hazardous condition. When Jesus said, "Tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you" (Matt. 21:31), to whom was he speaking? He was speaking to self-deceived, religious people. Why? The harlot knew she was a harlot; the tax collector knew he was a tax collector. But the unconverted religious crowd was lost and did not know it. No one is at a greater disadvantage of obtaining true faith than those who have settled for a false faith.

Six Directives for Proper Self-Examination

Because of the dangers and perils associated with self-examination (its neglect and its abuse), let me offer six directives on how to perform this duty:

1. You must ***know what the marks of a true Christian are***, that is, the distinguishing marks of a true Christian. He is not someone who is perfect. Nor is he someone who is indistinguishable from the world.
2. ***Make the Word of God the rule or standard of your examination***, not the standards of men, churches, counsels, or conventions. The Bible is the standard of examination. For an honest look at yourself, it is necessary to take the candle of God's Word into your soul. A Christian sins (1 John 1:8, 10) but does not sign a peace treaty with sin. Every little weed in your spiritual garden does not condemn you to perdition. The best of gardens have some weeds, though not so many as would choke off fruitful growth.
3. ***Do not trust your heart's first reaction***: "He who trusts in his own heart is a fool" (Prov. 28:26). Your feelings may deceive you.
4. ***Pray for the assistance of the Spirit***. The Word is a mirror. But a mirror in a dark room is useless. The Spirit is the light. (1) The Spirit gave the Word. (2) The Spirit is necessary to understand the Word. (3) The Spirit is necessary to apply the Word. The Word and the Spirit work together, as mirror and light.

If you have the Word without the Spirit, you will dry up. If you have the Spirit without the Word, you will blow up. If you have the Spirit and the Word, you will grow up.

5. When you do find the marks of grace, *do not rest on the marks of grace for salvation*. We are not justified by our evidence. We may draw comfort from the evidence of our justification but must not have the least inclination of founding our hope on our marks or evidences. Marks and evidences are signs of our justification, not causes or instruments. Christ's righteousness only is our wedding garment. Liberty is a sign of the prisoner's pardon. But it was the Judge that set him free. His freedom is evidence of the court's action, not his own. Don't miss this point. Be sure, therefore, to distinguish between the cause of our justification and the marks or evidences by which it is made known.

6. *Don't come to conclusions about your relationship to Christ when it is wintertime in your soul*. Every true Christian knows of times when the heavens are brass. It is because of the wintertimes in our souls that self-examination is linked to the Lord's Table (1 Cor. 11:28). There we get a fresh start. A fresh view of ourselves will give us a fresh view of Christ, His love, and forgiveness of sin by His shed blood. The Lord's Supper was ordained because Christians still sin and still need to repent. The Christian life is one of lifelong repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. As we come to the Lord's Table, we make forgiveness fresh.

At the Table, Jesus is still for those who groan under the burden of sin. He is still the Great Physician. He is still the City of Refuge for the malefactor. He is still the Lifter-up of the downcast. The duty of self-examination, if managed properly, keeps faith in Christ and repentance toward God fresh and vigorous. As A. A. Hodge has written: "True assurance leads to candid self-examination and to a desire to be searched and corrected by God. False assurance leads to a disposition to be satisfied with appearance and avoid accurate investigation" (*Confession of Faith* [London, England: The Banner of Truth, 1958], p. 239).

Do You Pass the Examination?

There is no greater sign of a lack of saving faith than the neglect of self-examination. Paul said, "Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith" (2 Cor. 13:5). If you never do that, I believe I can draw from the text—"except ye be reprobates" (KJV)—that you are reprobate.

Do you pass the test? Do you feel the power and presence of Christ? Are you pretending something that is not real? Do you "have a name that you are alive, but you are dead" (Rev. 3:1)? (Though this passage refers to the church, it can also be applied to individuals.)

I do not wish to confuse anyone, and above all, I do not want to confuse those who have never professes to know Christ. I have been writing about the duty of self-examination for those who profess to be Christians, not about how to become a Christian.

Let me direct some words to you who make no profession of faith. You cannot go to heaven on your mother's religion, your father's religion, or your church membership. Therefore, I urge you to see Christ as your only hope. You need to be righteous before God, and you are not. This is where Christ enters the picture. Christ is our Righteousness. Come to Him.

A poem written by Robert Murray McCheyne sets forth Christ as our Righteousness.

Jehovah Tsidkenu—The Lord Our Righteousness

*I once was a stranger to grace and to God,
I knew not my danger, and felt not my load;
Though friends spoke in rapture of Christ on the tree,
Jehovah Tsidkenu was nothing to me.*

*I oft read with pleasure to soothe or engage,
Isaiah's wild measure and John's simple page;
But e'en when they pictured the blood sprinkled tree,
Jehovah Tsidkenu seemed nothing to me.*

*Like tears from the daughters of Zion that roll,
I wept when the waters went over his soul;
Yet thought not that my sins had nailed to the tree,
Jehovah Tsidkenu— 'twas nothing to me.*

*When free grace awoke me, by light from on high,
Then legal fears shook me, I trembled to die;
No refuge, no safety in self could I see...
Jehovah Tsidkenu my Saviour must be.*

*My terror all vanished before the sweet name;
My guilty fears banished, with boldness I came*

*To drink at the fountain, life-giving and free
Jehovah Tsidkenu is all things to me.*

*Jehovah Tsidkenu! My treasure and boast,
Jehovah Tsidkenu! I ne'er can be lost;
In thee I shall conquer by flood and by field
My cable, my anchor, my breastplate and shield.*

*Even treading the valley, the shadow of death,
This "watchword" shall rally my faltering breast
For when from life's fever my God sets me free,
Jehovah Tsidkenu my death-song shall be.*

An Example of Self-Examination

The following is an example of how self-examination is practiced in the Christian Reformed Church, in preparation for the Lord's Supper (from *The Psalter* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1927], p. 60):

That we may now celebrate the supper of the Lord to our comfort, it is necessary, before all things, rightly to examine ourselves; and further, to direct it to that end for which Christ has ordained and instituted the same—namely, to His remembrance.

The true examination of ourselves consists of these three parts:

First: Let every one consider by himself his sins and accursedness, that he may abhor himself and humble himself before God, considering that the wrath of God against sin is so great that He, rather than to leave it unpunished, has punished it in His beloved Son, Jesus Christ, with the bitter and shameful death of the cross.

Second: Let every one examine his heart whether he also believes this sure promise of God that all his sins are forgiven him only for the sake of the passion and death of Jesus Christ, and that the complete righteousness of Christ is imputed and freely given him as his own—yea, so completely as if he himself, in his own person, had satisfied for all his sins and fulfilled all righteousness.

Third: Let every one examine his conscience whether he is minded henceforth to show true thankfulness to God in his whole life, and so walk sincerely before His face; likewise, whether he, without any hypocrisy, heartily laying aside all enmity, hatred, and envy, earnestly resolves henceforward to live in true love and unity with his neighbor.

Self-Examination expressed in Psalm 139

*O Lord, my inmost heart and thought Thy searching eye doth see;
Where'er I rest, where'er I go, My ways are known to Thee.*

*Each spoken word, each silent thought, Thou Lord, dost understand;
Before me and behind art Thou, Restraining by Thy hand.*

*If I the wings of morning take To some remotest land,
Still I shall be upheld by Thee And guided by Thy hand.*

*From Thee, O Lord, I cannot hide, Though darkness cover me;
The darkness and the light of day Are both the same to Thee.*

*Search me, O God, and know my heart, Try me, my thoughts to know;
O lead me, if in sin I stray, In paths of life to go.*

A WORD TO THE READER

Solomon tells us to buy the truth (Prov. 23:23), but he does not tell us what it costs—yet we must get it however costly it may be. We must love it both shining and scorching. Every parcel of truth is precious, like filings of gold. We must either live with it, or we must die for it. As Ruth said to Naomi, "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay, and nothing but death shall divide you and me" (Ruth 1:16); so must gracious spirits say, Where truth goes I will go, and where truth is I will be, and nothing but death shall divide me and the truth. A man may lawfully sell his house, land, and jewels, but truth is a jewel that exceeds all price, and it must not be sold. It is our heritage, "I have taken Your testimonies as a heritage forever" (Psa. 119:111). It is a legacy that our forefathers have bought with their blood, which should make us willing to lay down anything, and to lay out anything, that with the wise merchant we may purchase this precious pearl (Matt. 13:45), for it is worth more than heaven and earth. It will cause a man to live happily, die comfortably and reign eternally. And now, if you please, read the work and receive counsel from me:

1. You must know that every man cannot be excellent, yet he may be useful. An iron key may unlock the door of a golden treasure; yea, iron can do things gold cannot do!

2. Remember that it is not hasty reading, but serious meditation on holy and heavenly truths, that makes them prove sweet and profitable to the soul. It is not the mere touching of the flower by the bee that gathers honey, but her abiding

for a time on the flower that draws out the sweet. It is not he that reads most, but he that meditates most that will prove to be the choicest, sweetest, wisest and strongest Christian.

3. Know that it is not the knowing, nor the talking, nor the reading man, but the doing man that at last will be found the happiest man. If you know these things, blessed and happy are you if you do them (John 16:14)— “Not every one that says Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that does the will of my Father” (Matt. 7:21). Judas called Christ Lord, Lord, yet he betrayed Him. Ah! How many Judases we have in these days, those that kiss Christ yet betray Him; that in their words profess Him, but in their works deny Him; that bow their knee to Him, and yet in their hearts despise Him; that call Him Jesus, and yet they will not obey Him for their Lord.

Reader, if it is not strong on your heart to practice what you read, then why do you read? Do you do it to increase your own condemnation? If your light and knowledge is not turned into practice, the more you know the more miserable you will be in the day of recompense; your light and your knowledge will torment you more than all the demons in hell. Your knowledge will be the rod that will eternally lash you, the scorpion that will be forever biting you, the worm that will everlastingly gnaw on you. Therefore read, and labor to know, so that you may do. Otherwise, you will be undone forever (as Luther said, God loves not the questioner, but the runner). When Demosthenes was asked what was an orator’s first part, what the second, what the third, he answered, Action! I may say the same, if any should ask me what is the first, second and third part of a Christian, I must answer, Action! That man who reads so that he may know, and also labors to know so that he may do, will have two heavens—a heaven of joy, peace and comfort on earth, and a heaven of glory and happiness after death.—Thomas Brooks

5. The Gospel of the Saints

“We have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel...” (1 Thess. 2:4)

“According to the glorious gospel of the blessed God which was committed to my trust.” (1Tim. 1:11)

THE TWO VERSES QUOTED ABOVE teach us that we are trustees of the glorious gospel of God. It is an awesome responsibility to be a trustee, a steward of that divinely inspired message, which has to do with life and death, yes, heaven and hell. As long as there is sin in the world, as long as men die, the divinely inspired message will be very relevant.

No one in this world needs help as much as those who lack the gospel. They lack everything that would do them good. A throne without the gospel is a devil’s dungeon. Wealth without the gospel is fuel for hell. All building without the gospel is building on sand.

Every true minister and every true Christian longs to see a revival of true religion that will affect personal conduct, piety in the home, and the social and moral standards in the community. It is my deep conviction that such a revival will not be seen unless there is a recovery of the gospel of the grace of God. True revival will not come by some new methods of church growth or more religious machinery or more conventions or more symposiums or conferences. It will only come by the powerful preaching of the divinely inspired message we call the gospel, that gospel which no human mind could conceive or invent.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12, that gospel, designated as our trust, is twice called the gospel of God. It is the message that saves souls and builds New Testament churches. It is what the great apostle preached: “I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain” (1 Cor. 15:1-2).

What Is The Gospel?

John Brown offers the best definition of the gospel that I have found.

The Saxon word Gospel, like the Greek word of which it is a literal translation, signifies agreeable intelligence, a joyful announcement, good news, glad tidings; and is, in the New Testament, ordinarily employed as a descriptive designation of the revelation of Divine mercy to our lost world,—the divinely inspired account of the only way in which guilty, depraved, and miserable men may be delivered from sin and its consequences, obtain the Divine approbation and favor, be raised to the true dignity and excellence of their intellectual and moral nature in the knowledge of God and conformity to His mind and will, and be made happy in all the variety, and to the full extent, of their capacities of enjoyment, and during the whole eternity of their being, by the free grace of

God, and “through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” (John Brown, *The Resurrection of Life: An Exposition of 1 Cor. XV* [Edinburgh: William Oliphant and Sons, 1851])

There is power in this gospel, “the power of God to salvation” (Rom. 1:16) to make “everyone who believes” be what he or she is meant to be. No tidings were ever so joyful as those announced in the gospel, and no benefits were so good as those exhibited in it.

There is an appalling ignorance in the world as to just what the gospel is and what it does when it is savingly received. This ignorance also exists among church people. Let me illustrate from a personal experience.

Years ago when I was president of a small construction company, I had three women call on me one Monday morning. The receptionist tried to direct them to someone else in the office; however, they insisted on seeing me. My secretary prevailed upon me to see them. When I reached the front office, sure enough, there were three nice ladies. They said they were from a local church. They wanted to sell me a cookbook (not very useful in the construction business). They had heard I was religious and was a sure touch for a contribution. I soon learned that I was about to buy a cookbook and I thought I might at least inquire what the church was going to do with the proceeds. They were not quite sure what the money was going to be used for, so I thought I would help them with an answer. “It would be a good idea to use the money to spread the gospel.” My suggestion was met with perfect unanimity—they all thought it was a good idea to use the money to spread the gospel. Then, to be sure, I asked them, “What is the gospel?” Their answers underscore the prevailing ignorance in the church. The first woman said, “The gospel is the Ten Commandments”; the second one said, “It is a symbol of Christ”; the third said, “It is the golden rule”—to which responses I was prompted to ask if they were all members of the same church!

The word *gospel* is used at least ninety times in the New Testament. Mark calls it “the gospel of Jesus Christ” (Mark 1:1) and “the gospel of the kingdom of God” (Mark 1:14). This gospel must first be preached to all nations before the end (Mark 13:10). It is also called “the gospel of peace” (Eph. 6:15), “the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24), “the gospel of your salvation” (Eph. 1:13), and “the everlasting gospel” (Rev. 14:6).

Generally the phrase “the gospel” is used variously to mean:

- the teachings of Christ and His apostles.
- the history of Christ’s birth, death, resurrection, and ascension.
- the preaching of the Word of Christ, particularly, the doctrines and offers of salvation through Him.

But the gospel, in its strict and proper meaning, signifies good news, glad tidings, joyful announcement in the form of a divinely inspired message. That message contains information needing explanation and application, and it includes invitation.

The gospel is a message communicated in words, but not in words only. “For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake” (1 Thess. 1:5).

For my purposes in this chapter, I will confine my thoughts to the gospel message in its strict and proper meaning. This message has four ingredients, all of which must be present in order to have the biblical gospel. (The substance for these four ingredients is taken from J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1961].)

Four Essential Ingredients

The First Ingredient: God

The gospel is a divinely inspired message about God. This ingredient is often overlooked or partly omitted. It is about God the Creator and Judge of all the earth and our relationship to Him, that is, the Creator-creature relationship. As Creator He has absolute claim on us creatures. We must know what He requires of His creatures. The Creator-creature relationship must be established before the Redeemer-redeemed relationship will make sense.

Jesus came to reconcile us to God. The gospel is a message about *God*. It tells us who He is, what His character is, what His standards are, and what He requires of us, His creatures. It tells us that we owe our very existence to Him, that for good or ill we are always in His hands and under His eye, and that He made us to worship and serve Him, to show forth His praise and to live for His glory. These truths are the foundation of theistic religion. Until they are grasped the rest of the gospel message will seem neither cogent nor relevant. It is here, with the assertion of man’s complete and constant dependence on his Creator, that the Christian story begins.

We can learn again from Paul at this point. When preaching to Jews, as at Pisidian Antioch, he did not need to mention the fact that men were God’s creatures; he could take this knowledge for granted, for his hearers had the Old Testament faith behind them. He could begin at once to declare Christ to them, as the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes.

But when preaching to Gentiles, who knew nothing of the Old Testament, Paul had to go further back, and start from the beginning. And the beginning from which Paul started in such cases was the doctrine of God's creatorship and man's creature-hood. So, when the Athenians asked him to explain what his talk of Jesus and the resurrection was all about, he spoke to them first of God the Creator, and why He made man:

"God... made the world.... He gives to all life, breath, and all things. And has made... every nation... that they should seek the Lord" (Acts 17:24-27). This was not, as some have supposed, a piece of philosophical apologetic of a kind that Paul afterwards renounced, but the first and basic lesson in theistic faith.

The gospel starts by teaching us that we, as creatures, are absolutely dependent on God, and that He, as Creator, has an absolute claim on us. Only when we have learned this can we see what sin is, and only when we see what sin is can we understand the good news of salvation from sin. We must know what it means to call God Creator before we can grasp what it means to speak of Him as Redeemer. Nothing can be achieved by talking about sin and salvation where this preliminary lesson has not in some measure been learned.

The Second Ingredient: Sin

The gospel is a divinely inspired message about sin. When we ask, What is sin? immediately we are faced with the law—the Ten Commandments. "Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). By the law is the knowledge of sin. The first message of the cross is Christ's satisfying divine justice; the very base of the cross has to do with eternal justice.

This is why in days gone by parents taught their children the Ten Commandments. In the catechism the children learned the Ten Commandments, not because they thought they would be saved by keeping the commandments, but because the commandments would show them their need to be saved by the matchless grace of Christ.

It is interesting to note in reading the life of John Paton, the great Presbyterian missionary to the New Hebrides, that the first thing he taught the pagans was not John 3:16, but rather the Ten Commandments. The same thing was true of John Elliot, the first missionary to the American Indians. His first sermon to the Indians was the Ten Commandments. We might ask Why? The answer is very clear: that they would be made conscious of their sin against their Creator and see their need of a Savior. Sin is the transgression of the law. Jesus is a Savior from sin, not just from the consequences of sin. We learn this from the very first chapter in the New Testament: "She will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). Notice, it does not say save His people *in* their sins, but *from* their sins. This divinely inspired message is about sin—not just life's casualties.

In the Bible the very idea of sin is that it is an offense against God, which disrupts a man's relationship with God. Unless we see our shortcomings in the light of the law and the holiness of God, we do not see them as *sin* at all. For sin is not a social concept; it is a theological concept. Though sin is committed by man, and many sins are against society, sin cannot be defined in terms of either man or society. We never know what sin really is until we have learned to think of it in terms of God, and to measure it not by human standards but by the yardstick of His total demand on our lives.

What we have to grasp, then, is that the bad conscience of the natural man is not at all the same thing as conviction of sin. It does not, therefore, follow that a man is convicted of sin when he is distressed about his weaknesses and the wrong things he has done. It is not conviction of sin just to feel miserable about yourself and your failures and your inadequacy to meet life's demands. Nor would it be saving faith if a man in that condition called on the Lord Jesus Christ just to soothe him and cheer him up and make him feel confident again. Nor would we be preaching the gospel (though we might imagine we were) if all we did was to present Christ in terms of a man's felt wants. ("Are you happy? Are you satisfied? Do you want peace of mind? Do you feel that you have failed? Are you fed up with yourself? Do you want a friend? Then come to Christ; He will meet your every need..."—as if the Lord Jesus Christ were a fairy godmother or a super-psychiatrist.) No, we have to go deeper than that. To preach sin means not to make capital out of people's felt frailties (the brainwasher's trick) but to measure their lives by the holy law of God. To be convicted of sin means not just to feel that one is an all-round flop but to realize that one has offended God, and flouted His authority, and defiled Him, and gone against Him, and put oneself in the wrong with Him. To preach Christ means to set Him forth as the One who through His cross sets men right with God again. To put faith in Christ means relying on Him, and Him alone, to restore us to God's fellowship and favor.

It is indeed true that the real Christ, the Christ of the Bible, who offers Himself to us as a Savior from sin and an Advocate with God, does in fact give peace, and joy, and moral strength, and the privilege of His own friendship to those who trust Him. But the Christ who is depicted and desired merely to ease life's casualties and make us more comfortable is not the real Christ. He is a misrepresented and misconceived Christ—in effect, an imaginary Christ. And if we teach people to look to an imaginary Christ, we have no grounds for expecting that they will find real salvation. We must be on our guard, therefore, against equating a natural bad conscience and sense of wretchedness with spiritual conviction of sin, and so failing to impress upon sinners the basic truth about their condition—namely, that their sin has alienated them

from God and exposed them to His condemnation, hostility, and wrath, so that their first need is for a restored relationship with Him.

It may be asked, What are the signs of true conviction of sin, as distinct from the mere smart of a bad conscience, or the mere disgust at life that any disillusioned person may feel? There seem to be three signs.

1. Conviction of sin is essentially *an awareness of a wrong relationship with God*: not just with one's neighbor or one's own conscience and ideals for oneself, but with one's Maker, the God in whose hand one's breath is and on whom one depends for existence every moment. To define conviction of sin as a sense of need, without qualification, would not be enough; it is not just any sense of need, but a sense of a particular need—a need for restoration of fellowship with God. It is the realization that, as one stands at present, one is in a relationship with God that spells only rejection, retribution, wrath, and pain, for the present and the future; and a realization that this is an intolerable relationship to remain in, and therefore a desire that, at whatever cost and on whatever terms, it might be changed. Conviction of sin may center upon the sense of one's guilt before God, or one's uncleanness in His sight, or one's rebellion against Him, or one's alienation and estrangement from Him. But always it is a sense of the need to get right, not simply with oneself or other people, but with God.

2. Conviction of sin always includes *conviction of sins*: a sense of guilt for particular wrongs done in the sight of God, from which one needs to turn and be rid of them, if he or she is ever to be right with God. Thus Isaiah was convicted specifically of sins of speech (Isa. 6:5), and Zacchaeus of sins of extortion (Luke 19:8).

3. Conviction of sin always includes *conviction of sinfulness*: a sense of one's complete corruption and perversity in God's sight, and one's consequent need of what Ezekiel called a "new heart" (Ezek. 36:26) and our Lord called "a new birth," that is, a moral recreation. Thus, the author of Psalm 51—traditionally identified with David, under conviction of his sin with Bathsheba—confesses not only particular transgressions (vv. 1-4) but also the depravity of his nature (vv. 5-6), and seeks cleansing from the guilt and defilement of both (vv. 7-10). Indeed, perhaps the shortest way to tell whether a person is convicted of sin is to take him through Psalm 51 and see whether his heart resonates to the language of the psalmist.

The Third Ingredient: Christ

The gospel is a divinely inspired message about Christ, not any Christ, or one conceived by imagination or contrived by your own mind. There are many, many Christs on the religious market, but there is only one true biblical Christ. He is the one who came by a virgin's womb, suffered and died vicariously on a Roman cross, rose victoriously from a borrowed grave—and now has been exalted to a throne and wears the victor's crown. He is the Almighty's authorized Prophet, Priest, and King of His church. We must ask: Who is He? What did He do? Why did He do it? And where is He now?

Two points need to be made about how we declare this part of the message.

1. *We must not present the person of Christ apart from His saving work*. It is sometimes said that it is the presentation of Christ's person, rather than of doctrines about Him, that draws sinners to His feet. It is true that it is the living Christ who saves, and that a theory of the atonement, however orthodox, is no substitute. This remark usually implies, however, that doctrinal instruction is dispensable in evangelistic preaching, and that all the evangelist need do is paint a vivid word-picture of the Man of Galilee who went about doing good, and then assure his hearers that this Jesus is still alive to help them in their troubles. But such a message could hardly be called the gospel. It would, in reality, be a mere conundrum, serving only to mystify Who was this Jesus? we should ask, and What is His position now? Such preaching would raise these questions while concealing the answers, and thus it would completely baffle the thoughtful listener.

The truth is that you cannot make sense of the historic figure of Jesus until you know about the *incarnation*—that this Jesus was in fact God the Son made man to save sinners according to His Father's eternal purpose. Nor can you make sense of His life until you know about the *atonement*—that He lived as man so that He might die as man for men, and that His passion, His judicial murder, was really His saving act of bearing away the sins of the world. Nor can you tell on what terms to approach Him now until you know about His *resurrection, ascension, and heavenly session*—that Jesus has been raised, enthroned, and made King, and now lives to save to the uttermost all who acknowledge His lordship.

These doctrines, to mention no others, are essential to the gospel. Without them, there is no gospel, only a puzzle story about a man named Jesus. To regard the teaching of doctrines about Christ as opposed to the presenting of His person is, therefore, to put asunder two things that God has joined. It is really very perverse. Indeed, for the whole purpose of teaching these doctrines is to throw light on the person of the Lord Jesus Christ and to make clear to our hearers just who it is that we want them to meet. In ordinary social life, when we want people to know whom we are introducing, we tell them something about him and what he has done. And so it is here. The apostles themselves preached

these doctrines in order to preach Christ, as the New Testament shows. In fact, without these doctrines, you have no gospel to preach at all.

2. *Likewise, we must not present the saving work of Christ apart from His person.* Preachers and personal workers have sometimes been known to make this mistake. In their concern to focus attention on the atoning death of Christ as the sole sufficient ground on which sinners may be accepted with God, they have expounded the summons to saving faith in these terms:

“Believe that Christ died for your sins.” The effect of this exposition is to represent the saving work of Christ in the past—dissociated from His person in the present—as the whole object of our trust. But it is not biblical to isolate the work from the Worker. Nowhere in the New Testament is the call to believe expressed in such terms.

What the New Testament calls for is faith in Christ Himself, trust in the living Savior, who died for our sins. Thus, strictly speaking, the object of saving faith is not the atonement but the Lord Jesus Christ who made atonement. We must not, in presenting the gospel, isolate the cross and its benefits from the Christ whose cross it was. For the persons to whom the benefits of Christ’s death belong are just those who trust His person and believe not simply on His saving death but on *Him*, the loving Savior. Paul said, “Believe on the *Lord Jesus Christ*, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31). Our Lord said, “Come to Me... and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28).

This being so, one thing becomes immediately clear. The question about the extent of the atonement, much agitated in some quarters, has no bearing on the content of the evangelistic message at this particular point. I am not asking here whether Christ died in order to save every single human being, past, present, and future. Nor am I inviting you now to make up your mind on this question if you have not done so already.

Obviously, if a preacher did not believe that Christ died for everyone, his gospel preaching would not say that Christ did. You do not find such a statement in the sermons of George Whitefield or Charles Spurgeon, for instance.

But even if an evangelist believes that Jesus died for all people, he need never say so when preaching the gospel. For preaching the gospel, as we have just seen, means inviting every sinner to come to Jesus Christ, the living Savior, not describing the extent of the atonement. The truth is that Christ, by virtue of His atoning death, is able to forgive and save all those who put their trust in Him. What has to be said about the cross when preaching the gospel is simply that Christ’s death is the ground on which Christ’s forgiveness is given. And this is all that has to be said. The question of the designed extent of the atonement does not come into the story at this point.

The New Testament never calls on any man to repent on the ground that Christ died specifically and particularly for him. The basis on which the New Testament invites sinners to put faith in Christ is simply that *they need Him*, and that *He offers Himself to them*, and that *those who receive Him are promised all the benefits that His death secured for His people*. What is universal and all-inclusive in the New Testament is the invitation to faith and the promise of salvation to all who believe.

Our task in carrying out our trust is to reproduce as faithfully as possible the New Testament emphasis. To go beyond the New Testament, or to destroy its viewpoint or shift its stress is always wrong. The New Testament knows only of a living Christ, and all apostolic preaching of the gospel holds up the living Christ to sinners. But the living Christ is Christ who died, and He is never preached apart from His death and its reconciling power. It is *the living Christ, by virtue of His reconciling death*, who is the burden of the apostolic message. The task of carrying out our trust is to preach *Christ... in His character as the Crucified*. The gospel is not, “believe that Christ died for everybody’s sins, and therefore for yours,” any more than it is “believe that Christ died only for certain people’s sins, and so perhaps not for yours.” The gospel is, “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for sins, and offers Himself to be your Savior.” This is the message we are to take to the world. We have no business to ask them to put faith in any view of the extent of the atonement. Our job is to point them to the living Christ and summon them to trust in Him.

It was because they both grasped this that John Wesley and George Whitefield could regard each other as brothers in evangelism, though they differed on the extent of the atonement. Their views on this subject did not enter into their gospel preaching. Both were content to preach the gospel just as it stands in Scripture. They proclaimed the living Christ to sinners and invited the lost to come to Him, through whose death there is life.

The divinely inspired message must *always* contain His person and the doctrines about Him. We have all met those who are so doctrinally sound that they are sound asleep. They are as doctrinally straight as a gun barrel and just as empty. To avoid this, the divinely inspired message must be His person and His work.

The Fourth Ingredient: Faith and Repentance

The gospel is a divinely inspired summons to faith and repentance.

A summons is a call by authority to appear at a named place. It is a call to a duty. We summon an ambulance; we summon a fire truck; we summon the police. We do not call 911 and say, “Would you like to come to this terrible

accident?” We do not call the fire department saying, “Would you please consider coming to this terrible fire?” No, when we call the police, firemen, or ambulance, it is an appeal to their duty, not an option.

In our civil law, a summons is a citation to appear in court. It is a written notification signed by the proper authority and served on the person to appear in court at a certain, specified place, day, and time.

Likewise, in the Scriptures a summons is not optional. The call to faith and repentance is a call to duty, a call issued with the voice of authority. It is given in the imperative mood.

When the people of Capernaum asked our Lord, “What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?” He answered, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent” (John 6:28-29). John put it like this: “And this is His *commandment*: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ...” (1 John 3:23). In both of these passages we have a summons, a command to believe—a summons to faith.

The apostle Paul also issued a summons to the Athenians:

“God... *commands* all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). Thus we see that the fourth ingredient of the gospel is a summons to faith and repentance.

Although repentance is missing from much evangelistic preaching today, Jesus unmistakably preached repentance: “Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel’” (Mark 1:14-15). The apostles also preached repentance: “So they went out and preached that people should repent” (Mark 6:12). Jesus taught His followers that remission of sins was inseparably linked to repentance: “... repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47). Peter preached repentance: “Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’” (Acts 2:38); “Repent therefore and be converted” (Acts 3:19). Paul, reviewing a three-year ministry with the Ephesian elders, reminded them that repentance was an ingredient in the gospel he preached: “I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:20-21).

Faith and Repentance Inseparable

In response to these and many other passages, the question is often raised, Why, when the Bible speaks of forgiveness of sin and eternal life, does it sometimes just say “believe,” sometimes, “repent,” and still other times, both?

The answer to this question is found in the definition of *repentance* found in the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

Q. 87. What is repentance unto life?

A. Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.

Notice that repentance is not only turning from sin to Christ, but also the apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ—that is, faith. This teaches us that faith and repentance are Siamese twins—inseparably joined together in God’s salvation. Where there is true faith, there will always be evangelical repentance; and where there is evangelical repentance, there will always be saving faith.

There is spurious faith and a legal repentance that do not apprehend the mercy of God in Christ. A clear example of this is found by comparing Peter and Judas. The Bible says Judas repented and then went out and hanged himself. Judas did not embrace the mercy of God in Christ. His kiss of betrayal was not a greater sin than Peter’s curse of denial, but Peter did not hang himself. After his denial, Peter remembered the words of Jesus and wept bitterly. He clearly embraced the mercy of God in Christ.

The answer to our question Why does the Bible sometimes just say “believe,” other times just “repent,” and sometimes both? is that they are inseparably joined together in the application of God’s salvation. Thus, in every case, the Bible is calling for the same response.

True repentance is always consistent with true faith. Spurious repentance dwells on the consequences of sin rather than on sin itself. I have known some sinners so disturbed with the fears of hell and thoughts of death and eternal judgment that, to use the words of one old preacher, “They have been shaking over the mouth of hell by their collar, and have almost felt the torments of the pit before they went there.” Such fears may come with true repentance, but they are not the essential part of repentance. As John Bunyan in his *Holy War* has well said, “Diabolus often beats the great hell-drum in the ears of Man-soul, to prevent their hearing the trumpet of the gospel which proclaims mercy and pardon.”

Any repentance that keeps a sinner from believing in Christ is a repentance that needs to be repented of. Any repentance that makes a sinner think Christ will not save him goes beyond the truth of the Bible. Yes, it goes *against* the

truth. Any repentance that leads to despair and remorse but does not embrace mercy is a repentance of the Devil and not of God.

A person may feel he has done wrong but go on sinning all the same, feeling that there is no hope and that he may as well continue seeking the pleasures of sin since he cannot, so he thinks, have the pleasures of grace and forgiveness. That is spurious repentance. It is the fire of the Devil, which hardens the heart in sin, and not the Lord's fire of mercy, which melts the heart in repentance. In Peter's repentance, he wept bitterly, yet embraced the mercy of God in Christ. One old Puritan, on his sick bed, expressed it this way: "Lord, sink me low as hell in repentance; but lift me high as heaven in faith."

To put it yet another way, true repentance is to sorrow bitterly for sin you know should damn you, but to rejoice greatly in Christ as if the sin were nothing at all. Repentance strips a person of self-righteousness, and faith clothes him with Christ. Repentance purges the soul of dead works, and faith fills the soul with living works. Repentance pulls down, and faith builds up. Repentance orders a time to weep, and faith gives a time to dance. Together these two make up the work of grace within, whereby men's souls are saved.

The repentance we ought to preach is one connected with faith. Thus, we may preach repentance and faith together without any difficulty whatsoever. Like twins, they are born at the same time. To say which is first is beyond my knowledge. They come to the soul together, and we must preach them together.

Spurgeon said, "So then, dear friends, those people who have faith which allows them to think lightly of past sin, have the faith of devils and not the faith of God's elect."

Our need to repent and believe continues until our dying day. Rowland Hill, when he was near death, said he had one regret, and that was that a dear friend who lived with him for sixty years would have to leave him at the gate of heaven. "That dear friend," said he, "is repentance; repentance has been with me all my life, and I think I shall drop a tear as I go through the gates to think that I can repent no more."

First Thessalonians 1:9 sets forth three things that happen in every true conversion to some degree: "They [believers in Macedonia and Achaia] themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God." Paul says that the Thessalonians (1) turned to God (faith) and (2) turned from idols (from sin—repentance) (3) to serve the living and true God (evidence of repentance).

At the center of these three responses, and inseparable from faith and good works, is repentance. Repentance and faith are sacred duties and twin graces wrought in our souls by the regenerating Spirit of God, whereby, being deeply convicted of our guilt, danger, helplessness, and of the way of salvation by Christ, we turn to God with unfeigned contrition, confession, and supplication for mercy; at the same time heartily receiving the Lord Jesus Christ as our Prophet, Priest, and King, and relying on Him alone as the only and all-sufficient Savior.

Law and Gospel Inseparable

We have seen that the gospel is a divinely inspired message about God, about sin, and about Christ, and a summons to faith and repentance.

If repentance and faith are inseparable, then the law and the gospel are likewise inseparable. What I mean is that anyone who is an enemy of the law is also an enemy of the gospel. And no one can be an enemy to the gospel without being, at the same time, an enemy to the law. Every enemy to the gospel is, in the same degree, an enemy to the perfection, spirituality, and honor of the law.

The law and the gospel are in such harmony with each other as to have no divided interests. Therefore, someone who is destitute of unfeigned love for the doctrines and promises of the gospel, however strict his profession of religion may be, is really an *antinomian*, an enemy to the honor of the holy law. He is also an adversary to the honor of the law if by rejecting the spotless righteousness of Jesus Christ tendered to him in the gospel, he refuses to present the *only* righteousness, by which the law can be magnified and made honorable. He is an enemy, likewise, to the authority and honor of the law as a *rule of duty*. For by his disbelief of the promises of the blessed gospel, he refuses to receive that grace from the fullness of Christ, without which he cannot honor the law by so much as a single act of acceptable obedience.

If a person has experienced a saving knowledge of the gospel, he or she will undoubtedly *evidence it* by obedience of heart and life to the law in the hand of Christ as a rule of duty. People can never perform holy obedience to the law so long as they remain ignorant of the gospel. But when they begin spiritually to discern the truth, suitableness, and glory of the doctrine of redeeming grace, they will then begin to perform spiritual and sincere obedience to the law of Christ as a rule. "He died for all [who were given Him by the Father] that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again" (2 Cor. 5:15). When someone spiritually discerns and sincerely loves the grace of the gospel, he at the same time sees and loves the holiness of the law. The consequence will be that he will

sincerely and cheerfully desire to obey the law. He will yield this obedience not only because the authority of God obliges him and the love of Christ constrains him, but also because he discerns the beauty of the holiness of the law itself and loves it.

A true believer is, in proportion as he is sanctified, rich in faith and in good works. Although the exercise of graces and the performance of duties gain nothing for the believer at the hand of God, yet they themselves are unspeakably great gain to him. He counts it a privilege and a pleasure to have duties to perform, and to have a disposition given him to perform them to the glory of his God and Savior. For, as there can be no happiness without holiness, so too the believer is comfortable and happy in proportion as he is holy. The more he believes and applies the gospel, trusting cordially in the Lord Jesus for his salvation, and the more his faith works by love, so much the more communion with Christ and enjoyment of God are his infinite portion. The legalist expects happiness *for* his duties, but the true believer enjoys happiness *in* them.

What Always Accompanies Saving Faith?

The answer to that question is found in the most succinct definition of a Christian in all the Bible: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). This little verse speaks of three characteristics of the person who has saving faith.

In Christ: The Essence of True Religion

The expression “in Christ” is used 240 times in the New Testament. Indeed, it is the essence of true religion. If I could ask only one question to help a person determine his relationship to his Maker, it would be this: *Are you in Christ?* Everything God has for you is *in Christ!* “Of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30).

- In Christ is our justification.
- In Christ is our sanctification.
- In Christ is our adoption.
- In Christ is our wisdom.
- In Christ is our righteousness.

“In Christ” signifies a personal relationship. It expresses the most exalted relationship that can exist—an inseparable relationship, an indestructible relationship, an unspeakable relationship that cannot be defined in word only.

New Creation: The Effects of True Religion

The second important truth found in 2 Corinthians 5:17 concerns the effects of regeneration: “new creation.” Regeneration is the powerful, supernatural work of the triune God. God the Father planned our redemption; God the Son prayed for it (John 17) and purchased it; God the Spirit effectually applies it in regeneration.

We can explain *what* the Spirit does, but *how* He does it let no man pretend to know. “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). So it is with regeneration.

All Things New: The Evidence of True Religion

The third important truth found in 2 Corinthians 5:17 is the evidence of regeneration: “Old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”

How does one know if he or she is regenerate? Regeneration is known by its effects. Regeneration always includes (1) the enlightening of the mind, (2) the convicting of the conscience, and (3) the renewing of the will. It is by the work of the Spirit that (1) the natural blindness is removed, (2) the natural enmity is subdued, and (3) the natural man becomes a new creature in all his views, feelings, desires, affections, aims, habits, and hopes.

This new creature enters into a new conflict in his soul. It is the conflict that Paul refers to in Romans 7, between the law in his members and the law of his mind. An unconverted person may be conscious of a conflict between sin and the conscience. But the new creature in Christ has a different conflict, that is, a conflict between sin and the will. The difference between the two (sin and conscience versus sin and the will) consists entirely in the position of the will. In the unconverted, the will is on the side of sin, and both are opposed to conscience. In the new creature, the will is on the side of conscience, and both are opposed to sin.

Finally, do the law and the gospel agree with and subserve the honor of each other? Most certainly. Then, let believers always take heed that they do not set them in opposition to one another. Beware, O believer, of ever setting the law in hostile opposition to the gospel, or the gospel in opposition to the law.

John Newton summarized it very well.

Clearly to understand the distinction, connection, and harmony between the Law and the Gospel, and their mutual subserviency to illustrate and establish each other, is a singular privilege, and a happy means of preserving the soul from being entangled by errors on the right hand or on the left. (John Newton, Works [London: Banner of Truth], 1:350)

Examination and Invitation

Do you desire to know whether you are “experimentally” (experientially) acquainted with the grace of the gospel? Pray that the Lord may examine and test you, and then ask yourself some questions: Do I know spiritually, and believe fervently, the doctrines of this glorious gospel? Do I spiritually discern the excellence and suitableness of the plan of redemption exhibited in the gospel; and do I heartily approve, so far as I know them, all the parts of that wonderful scheme? Do I eagerly comply with the invitations and accept the offers of the gospel? Do I frequently endeavor to embrace and trust the promises of it, and do I place the confidence of my heart in the Lord Jesus for *all* the salvation promised in the gospel?

Do I love the gospel, so as to delight in reading and hearing and meditating on it? Do I love and admire the gospel because it is the doctrine, the only doctrine, that is “according to godliness,” or because it is the only mirror in which believers so contemplate the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ as to be “changed into the same image from glory to glory, by the Spirit of the Lord”? And do I find that, under the transforming and consoling influence of the gospel, I in some measure delight in the law of God according to the inward man, and run in the way of *all* His commandments?

If you can answer these questions in the affirmative, you may confidently conclude that you have attained, in some happy measure, that supernatural and first-hand knowledge of the glorious gospel which is the beginning of eternal life in the soul, and is inseparably connected with evangelical holiness in all manner of your conduct. You accept your duty, in the faith of the promise, to grow daily in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and never be moved away from the hope of the gospel. But, if you cannot answer in the affirmative so much as one of these questions, you ought to conclude that you are yet a stranger to the grace of the gospel. And, instead of yielding to despair, you should, without delay, come as a sinner to the Lord Jesus, who is given for a light to the Gentiles.

