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Guarded Through Faith: Assurance and the Doctrine of Perseverance

Traumatic world events and nagging questions of belief sometimes cause Christians to be troubled in spirit and to question their assurance of faith. In every generation, believers have struggled with the question of assurance in salvation. As always, the church confronts this issue as both a pressing theological question and as an urgent pastoral concern. Answering these questions anew, we are reminded once again that all doctrine is practical and that the great biblical truths of the Christian faith are meant not only for our intellectual acceptance, but for our spiritual health.

Monday, July 17, 2006

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Many Christians suffer from an absence of Christian assurance. They lack confidence in their salvation and are troubled by nagging doubts, perplexing questions, and a lack of clarity about whether assurance of salvation is actually possible. At the same time, the church has always faced the reality of false professors and those who fall away. These are problems that trouble the soul and raise unavoidable theological questions.

Clearly, now is the time for clarification and for the recovery of a biblical concept of assurance. Beyond the immediate questions of assurance and false professors, the church must also confront superficial and inadequate understandings of assurance—concepts that can actually mislead and confuse.

The Apostle Paul assured the Christians in Philippi of his absolute confidence “that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” [Philippians 1:6]. The logic of that passage is of vital importance. Paul’s confidence was not that the Philippians would be able to preserve *themselves*. To the contrary, Paul’s confidence was established in Jesus Christ and in the promise that Christ would complete the work He had surely begun in them.

Coming to the end of his own life, Paul expressed personal confidence that the Lord would “bring me safely into His heavenly kingdom” [2 Timothy 4:18]. Without this confidence, how could Paul have faced the prospect of his own death? His desire was for fellow believers to experience this same confidence and assurance.

Jesus taught His disciples a great deal about the believer’s assurance, ultimately establishing assurance in the Father’s promises to the Son. In the Gospel of John, Jesus teaches that “this is the will of Him who sent Me, that I would lose nothing of all that He has given me, but raise it up on the last day” [John 6:39]. This is a magnificent promise, and one that makes sense only in light of Jesus’ straightforward revelation concerning the Father’s authority in salvation: “All that the Father gives to Me will come to Me, and whoever comes to Me I will never cast out” [John 6:37]. Those who are in Christ’s hands will never be lost, for they have been called, drawn, and given to Him by the Father Himself. As Jesus the Good Shepherd said in John 10, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand” [John 10:27-29].

Thus a consistent biblical theme emerges from the scriptural text. Jesus assured His disciples that their salvation was rooted in the eternal purposes of God and that those who truly come to faith in Him are safe within God's mercy. No one is able to snatch believers out of the Father's hand, and all who come to the Son are preserved by the Father.

Christians should find great comfort in the biblical promises of assurance. This is because these promises are founded ultimately in the eternal purposes of God, in the Son's accomplished work, and in the Father's vindication of the Son. Those who truly come to Christ by faith are guarded, preserved, and kept by the power of God. Our Lord did not intend His people to be trapped in a maze of doubt and insecurity. To the contrary, Christ instructed His sheep to trust in Him and His promises.

Assurance of salvation is indeed possible — and is a Christian responsibility. Pernicious doubt concerning salvation may be an indication that the believer does not truly trust the character, power, and purposes of God. Thus a believer's insecurity—sometimes disguised as an artificial humility—can be evidence of a heart that does not adequately trust in the promises of God.

At the same time, saving faith is demonstrated in a transformed life. Peter, for example, instructed believers to observe their lives, looking for the evidence of authentic faith and the marks of true discipleship. Peter summarizes his exhortation with these unforgettable words: "Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall" [2 Peter 1:10].

How are believers to make their "calling and election sure?" There can be no question that Peter expected Christians to look and strive for the characteristics which should mark those who have been transformed by the power of God. Thus, the believer's calling and election—the very foundation of the salvation experience—would be evident in a new heart and a transformed life.

Paul also repeatedly warned Christians not to abandon their faith or to fall prey to false teachers. He even went so far as to identify some who had "nullified" the grace of God [Galatians 2:21] and others who had fallen away and abandoned their faith. Demas, for example, "in love with the present world," had deserted Paul and the gospel [2 Timothy 4:10]. Hymanaeus and Alexander had "made shipwreck of their faith" and thus had been handed over to Satan by Paul "that they may learn not to blaspheme" [1 Timothy 1:20].

In pondering biblical warnings like these, most Christians think of the passages in Hebrews which have spawned so many different interpretations. How are we to understand these warnings—particularly as found in Hebrews 6:4-8? No doubt this is a crucial question, for how we interpret this passage is inextricably tied to larger theological issues—including our understanding of the church itself.

The warnings of Hebrews 6 are seen in the clearest light when put alongside Jesus' parable of the sower and the soils as found in Matthew 13 and Luke 8. Comparing the human heart to soils of the field, Jesus pointed to the reality that the church would encounter those who would "believe for a while," but would fall away under testing or persecution. When Jesus identified the shallow soil, He was certainly speaking of those whose faith would be, as described by the Puritans, a *temporary* or false faith. Thus, those who are described as falling away in Hebrews 6 are those who falsely confessed faith in Christ. As with the soil that bore fruit for a time but withered, so with those who have "tasted the heavenly gift" but fall away. Theirs was not a genuine and enduring faith, but a fickle and false faith. This is an urgent and sober warning.

In the final analysis, the gift of assurance rests on the biblical doctrine of perseverance. This doctrine teaches that true believers are those who persevere in and by faith. Their endurance—having been preserved by the power of God—becomes the demonstration of their salvation and the mark of authenticity. The biblical doctrine of perseverance corrects misunderstandings implied by more superficial conceptions of the believer's state. Some teach that anyone who has at any time made a profession of faith in Christ or exercised the slightest belief is secure. These teachers actually argue that true believers may demonstrate absolutely *none* of the marks of gospel authenticity. In other words, such persons never repent of their sins, and may even repudiate the faith—but are supposed to be secure in their salvation. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Furthermore, the doctrine of perseverance harmoniously links the believer's assurance of salvation to the larger scheme of redemption. God's determination to save sinners is affirmed from beginning to end. The believer's faith in

Christ, exercised as an act of the believer's will, is understood to be itself a gift of God and a result of God's calling. Thus, the doctrine of perseverance grounds assurance in the eternal purposes of God, by which God determines to redeem His people through the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, and to preserve Christ's church throughout all the ages.

In his first letter, Peter reminded Christians that the Father "has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." Believers are promised "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" [1 Peter 1:4-5]. The Christian's proper assurance of salvation is God's gift—a gift given to the believer by the very God who has accomplished our salvation. True believers are those who have genuinely responded to the call of the Gospel, whose belief is evident in a life transformed by God's grace, and whose profession of faith in Christ is accompanied by repentance from sin and an eagerness to follow Christ.

Believers do sin, and may sin grievously, but they can never finally remain in sin. Peter promised that God will guard His own through faith, even as salvation will be revealed "in the last time." In the end, the gift of assurance and the doctrine of perseverance take us back to the very essence of the gospel—we are saved by grace through faith. Grace alone . . . nothing more and nothing less.

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