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Christian Assurance and Crippling Introspection

Dr. Nathan Chiroma, Lecturer
ECWA Theological Seminary, Jos, Nigeria¹

“Grace with assurance is no less than heaven let down into the soul.”

– Bishop Hopkins. 1680

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Abstract

This paper discusses the idea of Christian assurance and crippling introspection. It is quite common for Christians to look back at their supposed time of salvation and because they did not have some dynamic emotional experience wonder whether they were genuinely saved. Furthermore, the various uncertainties in life often make believers to question the factuality of their assurance. It is true that a

¹ Nathan Chiroma is currently an elder at the Stellenbosch Baptist Church, South Africa and a lecturer at ECWA Theological Seminary, Jos, Nigeria.
See www.sim-nigeria.org/index.php/ministries-topmenu-56/theological-education-topmenu-73.

believer does experience problems, tragedies, dejection, discouragement and sometimes even depression; and this makes him or her to wonder if he or she is still saved. This paper argues that Christian assurance is based on God's character, on God's promises, and on the completed work of Christ on the cross; hence and encouragement to the believer to forge ahead in the Christian race. The paper also highlights the need for perseverance in the midst of crippling introspection.

Introduction

Whether or not an individual has really received the gift of God through Christ and now stands as a child of God has been a question of fundamental interest for nearly all Christians in every age and of every theological predilection. Some underlying questions that many Christians struggle with daily regarding assurance are: Is the Christian conviction based on eternal realities or on doubtful grounds of human reasoning, gullibility or imagination? When all has been said and done, is the Christian still left with a wide margin of uncertainty about his or her assurance or standing before God? These two important questions must be addressed theologically in order to enhance the believer's assurance in the midst of crippling introspection. In this regards, Irvine contends that "we must have a balance in our theology if we are to avoid the pitfalls of faulty religion.² Today, through the impact of post-modernity, many Christians now sense that they are weak, vulnerable, and powerless, as result doubt and fear rule their lives; and as a result people are looking for their weak faith to change to an assured confidence that God does love them, longing for the boldness and freedom that will bring.³ Therefore, the quest for Christian assurance amidst crippling introspection is a legitimate one. Christians should be joyful and have a confidence in their standing before God.

I. What Is Christian Assurance?

Christian assurance is a stunning reality in the Word of God, but this has been seriously attacked through the years. Hence in

² Irvine McGrath, *Theological Foundations for Christian Ministry*. Peabody: Massachusetts (2009), 467.

³ Mason Julian, "The Power of Salvation," *Journal of Theology and Christian Witness*. Vol. 2 (2004):178-200.

contemporary Christianity, assurance is, as a subject, very often ignored. Through history, it has been a major issue; therefore we need to understand it because it has a major bearing on how we live our lives as believers on this earth. No wonder Bryan⁴ rightly notes that one of the things that the Reformation dealt with when the gospel was recovered by the great Reformers was this issue of assurance. And the Reformers taught that the believer can be and should be fully assured of salvation. John Calvin actually taught that assurance is the essence of faith.... Christian assurance here, it needs to be reiterated refers to a believer's confidence that he or she is already in a right stand with God, and that this will issue in ultimate salvation. Thomas Brooks insightfully wrote that "Assurance is the believer's ark where he sits, Noah-like, quiet and still in the midst of all distractions and destructions, commotions and confusions."⁵ It can be argued that assurance is the confidence that God will keep His promises to the believer. This confidence is wrought by the foundation of Christian assurance.

Christian assurance as an important aspect of the gospel teaches the believer that God not only wills to save all His chosen people, but also wills that all of them be assured of their salvation.⁶ Christian assurance points to the divine mercy of God and, it is one and the same mercy for God to love the soul and to assure the beloved soul of His love. According to Henning⁷, to say it differently, the same mercy that God loves His children moves God to cause them to know His love for them, and to know it with certainty. Willing our assurance, God gives us assurance. He gives this precious grace as a free gift. For this reason, assurance is not our own work, our own achievement by our own hard efforts. Neither is assurance bestowed in recognition of the superior spirituality by which a few children distinguish themselves from the rest of the congregation.

With the foregoing in mind, it needs to be stated clearly that God gives us assurance of salvation with the gift of salvation itself. In

⁴ Bryan Sunderland, *Grace and Atonement: Reformation Voices*. Chicago: Moody Press (2006), 89.

⁵ Thomas Brooks *Assurance of the Christian Faith*. London: SCM (1995): 128

⁶ Howard I Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away*. Minneapolis: Bethany (1975), 55.

⁷ Henning Jones, *Soteriology*. Philadelphia: Fortress. (2007), 165.

support of this fact Anderson asserts that assurance of salvation is simply an aspect of salvation, and not the least aspect.⁸ Assurance of salvation, therefore, is the expected, normal spiritual condition and state of mind and heart of every regenerated, believing child of God. Assurance is not unusual, extraordinary, or remarkable in the congregation of believers and their children.⁹ The certainty of Christian assurance as seen in scriptures calls for daily amazement and gratitude. Therefore, lack of assurance by a believer is an abnormality, a spiritual disease—a culpable disease—and thanks to God there is a remedy. God gives assurance as the peculiar work of the Spirit of Christ. The Father elected; the Son redeemed; the Spirit assures (John 14:16).¹⁰ Rostron¹¹ offers a wonderful summary on Christian assurance when he said that Christian assurance bears three notable marks; first, it is immediate (Matt. 9:2; Lk 7:48), secondly, it is complete (Rom. 8:1), thirdly, Christian assurance is free and for all and of God's loving mercy and purpose (Rom. 6:23).

The Bible is true and God cannot lie, hence a Christian must trust God and His word as the genuine source of our Christian assurance. Understanding the basis of Christian assurance is fundamental in understanding the truth of Christian assurance in the midst of crippling introspection.

II. Basis of Christian Assurance

Of great importance to Christian assurance is the knowledge that Christ takes us as believers beyond the region of probability into that of assurance. Our assurance comes with all certainty, it is the assurance of knowledge which the soul can reach, and of which it can be as sure as of life itself.¹² Carson affirms this claim saying our assurance raises from a reunion of sundered souls, a passing over sin, a relationship restored, a bringing together of hearts that love and are

⁸ Anderson Paul, "Assurance of Salvation" In *Ecclesiology, Soteriology and Eschatology* edited by John McGraw, Abingdon: Marcham (2001), 34-39.

⁹ Ibid, 37.

¹⁰ Henning, 176.

¹¹ S. Nowell-Rostron, "Christian Assurance" *Journal of Evangelical Theology*. Vol 14, (2008), 17.

¹² Anderson, 38.

meat for each other.¹³ In this light, Christian assurance of salvation is produced by a number of specific factors. Therefore to fully come to terms with our assurance in the midst of crippling introspection, the discussion will focus on three fundamental truths that will enable believers to hold on to our Christian assurance, namely; our Christian assurance is heavily dependent on God's character, it rests completely on God's promises and it is perfected on the completed work of Christ. Luther contends that:

We must daily more and more endeavor to destroy at the root that pernicious error (that man cannot know whether or not he is in a state of grace), by which the whole world is seduced. If we doubt God's grace and do not believe that God is well pleased in us for Christ's sake, then we are denying that Christ has redeemed us, indeed we question outright all his benefits.¹⁴

A. Christian Assurance Is Totally Dependent on God's Character

Christian assurance rests on God's character. In order to trust a person, we must get to know them and be convinced of the stability and depth of their character. It is the same way with God. Unless we know God, we cannot trust Him to guide us, comfort us, and do the right things in our lives. We can rest securely and feel comfortable and assured in many situations in life because we know God's character and trust Him. Several passages in the Bible speak of God's unchanging character as it relates to his promises of Christian assurance; a few will be mentioned here to buttress this stand. In the epistle to 2 Timothy 1:12 Apostle Paul wrote the following words "I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me." The basis of Paul's assurance is rooted in the character of God. He knew whom he had believed and trusted that God was good and would preserve him.¹⁵ He trusted in the goodness of God and in God's desire to save his people. "Fee articulates that "just as the gospel announces a salvation that God in grace initiated and affected, and through which he rendered death ineffective, so also the same God can be trusted to

¹³ D. A. Carson, *Reflections on Christian Assurance*. A Paper presented at the Annual Biblical Theology Lecture at Tyndale House in June, 1990. 13.

¹⁴ Martin Luther, quoted in Pfurtner, *Luther and Aquinas*, 120.

¹⁵ Thomas D Lea and Hayne P Griffin, *The New American Commentary, Vol 34. 1, 2 Timothy and Titus*. Nashville: Broad Man (1992), 56.

guard to the end the life that has been entrusted to His care.”¹⁶ God’s character can be depended upon completely for Christian assurance. Consequently, Lea, and Griffin, further argued that:

The phrase “for that day” in 2 Timothy 1:12, expresses the duration of the time in which God can guard this deposit. God will guard it until the return of Christ. Paul was affirming that God can keep a life or ministry committed to him in a position of perfect safety. God will keep the recipient of his promises safe to the end.¹⁷

We are challenged to rest in the words of Jesus that “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out” (John 6:37). We need to be constantly reminded that Jesus will never reject anyone who comes truly comes to him, who rests in him for salvation. Salvation belongs to God. Our future is in his hands. Our hope rests in his grace and mercy alone. The savior is Jesus. The means of salvation is faith in him. The ability to believe comes from the Father through the Holy Spirit. For those of us who believe, this is a word of comfort and assurance. As Luther¹⁸ said, it is none of me, and all of God. I rest in the arms of the savior Jesus, knowing my eternity is secured. Christian assurance thus has its bedrock on the ground that God is able to complete the work he started in the life of the believer, and if God cannot lie, then we must be willing to trust His character in the midst of crippling introspection.

B. Christian Assurance Is Completely Dependent on God’s Promises

A promise is only as reliable as the person who makes it. If our assurance of salvation rests on God’s unchanging character, then we can also trust in his promises. His character demands that He is able to keep his promises. God’s promises are sure and true. As a result, Paul wrote to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 1: 20 that “God’s promises are yes and Amen”. If God assures us that he accepts us, we have to trust his promise and believe in Him. If the Bible is trustworthy in telling us how we can be saved it must also be

¹⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *New International Biblical Commentary 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*. Peabody: Hendrickson. (1998), 232.

¹⁷ Lea and Griffin, *The New American Commentary*, 57.

¹⁸ Luther and Aquinas, 120.

trustworthy in how we can have confidence in that salvation. If we will not trust God and His word, who or what can we put our trust? Of great importance is the realization that when we were first saved, God began a new work in us; but you were certainly not a finished product. You had a lot of growing to do. God started something in us, and He is the one that will complete it. We are reminded of the promise that God made for us in Philippians 1:6, "... He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it ...". Commenting on this verse, Winston emphasized that:

God abandons nothing that he undertakes. There are no unfinished worlds or systems; no half-made and forsaken works of His hands. There is no evidence in His works of creation of change of plan, or of having forsaken what He began from disgust, or disappointment, or lack of power to complete them. Why should there be in the salvation of the soul?¹⁹

Strikingly, Matthew Henry notes that "the confidence of Christians in God's promises is the great comfort of Christians."²⁰ It can therefore be argued that Paul had confidence in the Lord that what He had started in the Philippians, He would also continue and complete it based on his character and his promise. However, that is not to say that the Philippians' success was automatic; believers have to cooperate with what God wants to do in their lives. Man's faithfulness and promises may always be suspect, but God's faithfulness and promises is never in question. It is always God's will to continue and complete the good work that He begins in His children.

C. Christian Assurance Is Completely Dependent on the Completed Work of Christ

We can build our assurance on the fact that Jesus Christ died having accomplished all that was necessary to reconcile us to God. His work was a work of completion. When we understand that Christ's work is a work of completion, we find great comfort. It is not a work that remains half way done, but a work that has been done, that has been accomplished, and that has been accepted by the Father. Again we see that the basis of our salvation is God himself. We can have great confidence that God wishes for us to have assurance and that he is ready, willing and able to provide it to us.

¹⁹ Winston Chair, *Commentary on Philippians*. Leicester: Inter Varsity (2000), 92.

²⁰ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the whole Bible*.

The ground of our Christian assurance is the grace of God expressed in the love of Christ in his death for us on the cross. According to Erickson, “Christ died to satisfy a principle in the very nature of God the father”.²¹ To weak, foolish, helpless, and incapable sinners, that is Christian assurance, for it does not rely on us at all, but on the great power of God. Christian assurance turns again and again to the story of the cross of Christ. Erickson further asserts that “there is security for the believer in his or her relationship with God. It is further evident here that the basis of the relationship is Christ’s sacrificial death which is complete and permanent. Although our feelings might change, the ground of our relationship to God remains unshaken.”²² Believers never graduate beyond the cross; they are always returning to it and take their stand there. Wright pointed out that “the Bible’s description of God acting in salvation includes the whole of human life in every dimension, and is not merely an insurance policy for our souls after death.”²³ As believers, when we receive this assurance of the love of God through the cross of Christ, not based on anything in ourselves, but on what God has done for us in Christ, then we understand the world for what it is and we can trust in the sovereignty of our Father in the midst of crippling introspection.

It is essential however, that we strike a balance in our understanding of God’s role in our Christian assurance. David observes that too little self examination can lead unconverted people to take on themselves an indomitable confidence that they are God’s children, protected for time and eternity. Down through the centuries men have looked at their national connections and their various rites and ceremonies and assured themselves that they were true children of God (Jeremiah 7:4; Matthew 3:9; Luke 18:10–14). On the other hand, too much of introspection will concentrate the mind on the act of faith and take it off the object of faith. This will throw up deep-seated doubts that are always disparaging of Christian joy and activity. It is important that Christians should examine themselves, but sometimes we can become so obsessed with looking for the marks

²¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*. Michigan: Baker (1992), 253.

²² *Ibid.*, 264.

²³ Chris Wright, *Salvation Belongs to Our God: Celebrating the Bible’s Central Story*. Leicester: Inter Varsity Press (2008), 16.

of faith that we become paralyzed.²⁴ With this in mind, true faith is grounded, not in what we are or what we have done, but in whom Christ is and what He has done for us

III. The Need for Perseverance

Perseverance is the badge of true saints. The Christian life is not a beginning only in the ways of God, but also a continuance in the same as long as life lasts. It is with a Christian as it was with the great Napoleon: he said, “Conquest has made me what I am, and conquest must maintain me.”²⁵ So, under God, and through the work of Christ, conquest has made us what we are, and conquest must sustain us through the power of the Holy Spirit. Above all, perseverance is necessary in Christian assurance, because the promise of life and glory is settled upon the persevering soul. The write of Hebrews admonishes us that “You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.” (Heb 10:36). The toughest and most discouraging trials are when we are called to obey God’s will when the fulfillment of His promise seems so far away. This is why we need fortitude. Faithfulness during the time when the promise seems unfulfilled is the measure of your obedience and spiritual maturity.²⁶ This fortitude is built through trials, the testing of our faith in the midst of crippling introspection. There is a remarkable accent on perseverance henceforth which Paul mentions in 2 T i m o t h y 4:7, “I have fought a good fight...henceforth is laid up for me a crown of righteousness.” It can be argued that Paul’s terminology, as shown in the preceding passage, leaves us in no doubt that being a successful Christian is not a picnic. It takes a lot more of effort. However, it’s God’s power that we use to overcome. That is why Paul could say it wasn’t him living, but Christ living in him (Ga. 2:20). Our efforts must be to stay dependent on Christ. As we achieve this, the Holy Spirit infuses us with victorious power to live the Christian life in midst of crippling introspection. Indeed, in this sense it is that a gracious soul is nearer its salvation after every victory than it was before, because such is nearer to the

²⁴ Bruce David, *Believer’s Assurance: Underlying Assumptions*. Illinois: Inter Varsity. (1996), 12.

²⁵ Napoleon.

²⁶ Erickson, *Introducing Christian Theology*, 265.

end of the race, which is the time promised for the receipt of the promised salvation (Rom 13:11).²⁷

Even though the basis of our assurance is completely based on the above mentioned three facts, namely; the character of God, the promises of God and the complete work of Christ, the need to persevere is fundamental to Christian assurance. Michael's conclusion on perseverance is an idea I find most appropriate at this juncture. He notes that "the doctrine of perseverance of the saints states that all believers in Christ will be kept by the power of God and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives."²⁸

Conclusion

This paper contends that the primary source of Christian assurance is the objective work of Christ for us. The evidences of grace ebb and flow in the lives of believers, and sometimes we feel that we're not progressing, or actually getting worse. During these times, believers that struggle with Christian assurance will find no comfort by looking for subjective evidences. We must be driven outside of ourselves to a fresh discovery of the free grace of Christ in the character and the promises of God.

Our Christian assurance must not rest in our sincerity or in anything we have done. Rather, our assurance rests entirely in the character of God, the promises of God and the completed work of Jesus Christ. We can have assurance and I pray that believers will find and experience it to God's glory. We must never look beyond our Savior and His cross for the certainty of our assurance. As John wrote "Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the Day of Judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. We love Him because He first loved us" (1 John 4:17–19). We need to cling to Christ alone, then look to our way of living, examine ourselves, and give thanks to God daily if our affections and labors do continue to assure you that we are His own. John reminds us that "these things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son

²⁷ Ibid., 267.

²⁸ Matthew Michael, *Christian Theology and African Traditions*. Kaduna: Yuty (2011). 277.

of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue *to* believe in the name of the Son of God” (1 John 5:13). The consoling words of Samuel Rutherford are appropriate at this juncture:

But weary and wondering soul, you who linger in doubt or fester under the afflictions of remarkable providence, cast aside everything but Christ. Like a weak and naked beggar take no hold but upon Him. “I see faith’s necessity in a fair day is never known aright; but now I miss nothing so much as faith. Hunger in me; runneth to fair and sweet promises; but when I come, I am like a hungry man that wanteth teeth, or a weak stomach having a sharp appetite that is filled with the very sight of meat, or like one stupefied with cold under water, that would fain come to land, but cannot grip anything casten to him. I can let Christ grip me, but I cannot grip Him. I cannot set my feet to the ground, for afflictions bring the cramp upon my faith. All I doth do is to hold out a lame faith to Christ, like a beggar holding out a stump instead of an arm or leg, and cry, ‘Lord Jesus, work a miracle!’ Oh what would I give to have hands and arms to grip strongly. I see that mortification, and to be crucified to the world, is not so highly accounted of by us as it should be. Oh how heavenly a thing it is to be dead and dumb and deaf to this world’s sweet music! As I am at this present, I would scorn to buy this world’s kindness with a bow of my knee. I scarce now either see or hear what it is that this world offereth me; I know that it is little that it can take from me, and as little that it can give me.”²⁹

So, despite adverse circumstances “we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Rom. 5:35). Paul poses the question: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” (Rom. 8:35). In his answer he says; “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (vs. 37).



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²⁹ Samuel Rutherford, *Grace in Winter: Rutherford in Verse*.