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How Does the Assurance of Salvation in Baptist Theology Nurture the Christian Psyche for Obedience?

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A. Assurance of Salvation in Baptist Theology

In light of the international nature of this journal and of the existence of Baptist churches around the world, clarifying what is meant in this essay by the term “Baptist” seems especially important. Given the essay’s focus on a topic that is controversial among the diverse representatives of “Baptist theology,” indicating the writer’s

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position on the issue is necessary, and staying focused on the question in view will be essential. This first section of the essay describes the dimensions of Baptist theology that inform my approach to the assurance of salvation and then articulates my position on the topic. Having established the appropriate theological framework for the issue, the second section will focus on ways that a Baptist understanding of the assurance of salvation can nurture the Christian psyche for obedience.

1. Baptist Perspective in This Essay

Although “Baptist” appears in the name of multiple denominations across the globe, it primarily labels a doctrinal practice characteristic of the churches aligned with these denominations: believers’ baptism by immersion. This practice is linked not only to a matrix of theological convictions, particularly regarding soteriology and ecclesiology, but also to Baptists’ zeal for obeying the Great Commission. Since I am writing as a member of a church within the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) in the United States, this denomination’s confessional document will provide doctrinal parameters for the essay. However, the *Baptist Faith & Message 2000* (BFM) is carefully worded to permit two major views on salvation and assurance—both traditional Baptist soteriology and Calvinist doctrines—to coexist and cooperate as Southern Baptists, even though key doctrinal convictions are irreconcilable.² Readers are advised to keep in mind that my theological position, once clarified below, will be assumed, not argued, throughout the essay.

a. Baptist Faith & Message 2000 (BFM)³

The BFM will be cited at various points, but the portion of text most directly addressing assurance of salvation appears in Article V:

² See Eric Hankins, “A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God’s Plan of Salvation,” <http://sbctoday.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/A-Statement-of-Traditional-Southern-Baptist-Soteriology-SBC-Today.pdf> and <http://connect316.net/the-statement/>; Thomas K. Ascol, *Traditional Theology and the SBC: An Interaction with, and Response to, the Traditionalist Statement of God’s Plan of Salvation* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2012); Rick Patrick, “The Rise of Soteriological Traditionalism,” *Theological Matters* (blog), Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, September 6, 2016, <https://theologicalmatters.com/2016/09/06/the-rise-of-soteriological-traditionalism/>; *SBC Voices* (blog): search results for “traditional salvation,” <http://sbcvoices.com/?s=traditional+salvation> (ongoing debate); Ken Keathley, “Does Anyone Really Know If They Are saved? A Survey of the Current Views on Assurance with a Modest Proposal,” paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society Regional Meeting at Criswell College in Dallas, March 2, 2002.

³ “The Baptist Faith and Message,” *Southern Baptist Convention* web site, <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp>.

“God’s Purpose of Grace.” The article’s first paragraph defines and elaborates on “election” as “the gracious purpose of God, according to which He regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners”—four actions covered in Article IV: “Salvation.” The second paragraph of Article V states:

All true believers endure to the end. Those whom God has accepted in Christ, and sanctified by His Spirit will never fall away from the state of grace, but shall persevere to the end. Believers may fall into sin through neglect and temptation, whereby they grieve the Spirit, impair their graces and comforts, and bring reproach on the cause of Christ and temporal judgments on themselves, yet they shall be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.

Neither the term “assurance” nor “eternal security” appears in the BFM. Instead, the statement employs the language of endurance and perseverance. However, the power to ensure that “true believers endure to the end” or “persevere to the end” is ascribed to God on account of the believer’s saving faith. To “fall away from the state of grace” is deemed impossible.

b. Grassroots Baptist

Unfortunately, many individuals who are members of Baptist churches do not know what the BFM says, and too many receive inadequate doctrinal instruction. Nevertheless, those at the grassroots level who have even a vague idea of what distinguishes Baptist theology from the teaching of other Christian denominations often ascribe at least two theological ideas to Baptists: (1) believing the Bible and (2) “once saved always saved,” expressing confidence in the believer’s eternal security. For individuals and churches whose spiritual health is reflected in the alignment of their lives with Scripture, adherence to belief in eternal security does nurture obedience and does not warrant the critique that this doctrine inevitably salves the conscience of people who are actually unregenerate, encouraging antinomianism rather than obedience. The position on assurance of salvation reflects, in this essay, both the BFM and this grassroots understanding of assurance as taught in many, if not most, Baptist churches.

c. Anabaptist Roots

This essay’s approach to assurance of salvation also reflects the Anabaptist roots of Baptist theology, particularly in the connections between soteriology and ecclesiology forged by the Radical

Reformers' emphasis on discipleship. For Anabaptists, "divine forgiveness entailed a radical transformation of one's whole being from which followed personal holiness 'without spot or wrinkles.'"⁴ Likewise, a believer's "commitment entailed externally visible change of life."⁵ Hillerbrand explains the impact on ecclesiology:

This vision of the sanctified life of the individual believer had its corollary in the vision of the community of believers. . . . Anabaptist baptism became the outward sign of the commitment to an amendment of life. The person baptized voluntarily chose to make a confession of his or her Christian commitment and thereupon received baptism.⁶

Theoretically at least, according to Baptist ecclesiology, the lives of the individuals who profess faith in Christ will give demonstrable evidence of the ongoing sanctification process of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Rooted in Anabaptist theological convictions that "no one was to be baptized without committing himself to the discipline of the community,"⁷ the doctrine of assurance of salvation in Baptist theology does not constitute freedom to live for oneself but freedom from the bondage of sin and death. This freedom is secured in God himself, in whose triune name—"the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19)—a reborn believer is baptized, thereby committing "himself to a life of obedience in the fellowship with other believers."⁸

2. Baptist Position on Assurance in This Essay

The understanding of assurance of salvation in Baptist theology that is operative in this essay reflects the Southern Baptist Convention's confession of faith (BFM), my perception of what Baptist churches teach at the grassroots level, Anabaptist roots, and, most importantly, what the Bible says. Within this framework, I will contend that the assurance of salvation that truly nurtures the Christian psyche for obedience is grounded in the biblical revelation of who God is and what

⁴ Hans J. Hillerbrand, in the Preface to *Early Anabaptist Spirituality: Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. Daniel Liechty (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), xx.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xix.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xx. Cf. John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 106.

⁷ Walter Klaasen, "Anabaptism: Neither Catholic Nor Protestant," *Christian History 5: Radical Reformation: The Anabaptists* (1985), <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-5/anabaptism-neither-catholic-nor-protestant.html>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

He has done. The security of the believer's salvation depends not on that person's spiritual maturity, evidenced in obedience, but on (1) the faithfulness of the Father, (2) the sufficiency of salvation given through the Son, and (3) help from the Holy Spirit. These dimensions of God's character and work are introduced briefly here, but the second section will more directly link these to the believer's spiritual growth as manifested in obedience.

a. Faithfulness of the Father

A particularly rich biblical picture of salvation—adumbrated in the Old Testament and fleshed out in the New—is that of adoption. Romans 8 explicitly employs the metaphor. Having described Christians (“those who are in Christ,” v. 1) as people in whom God's Spirit dwells (vv. 9-13), Paul elaborates:

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “*Abba*, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory (vv. 14-17; cf. Gal 4:1-7).

The biblical portrayal of salvation in terms of adoption not only summons application of the binding legal transaction that takes place in a human courtroom when a child is adopted but also heightens the familial nature of human relationships within the body of Christ.

John similarly describes followers of Christ as God's children, but he emphasizes the change in identity and consequent transformation of life that take place at a child's birth. Speaking of Christ, he writes: “Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God” (John 1:12). In addition, John's Gospel includes the encounter with Nicodemus in which Jesus insists that one “must be born again,” i.e., “born of the Spirit” (John 3:3-7). Much later, John exclaimed, “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1; cf. Gal 3:26-29).

The strength of Scripture's depiction of salvation in terms of becoming a child of God, whether in the language of “new birth” (1 Pet 1:3, 23; cf. Jms 1:18) or of adoption, lies in the Father's faithfulness.

His active, unwavering commitment to his covenant relationships, which is attested throughout the canon, assures the authentic Christian of a relationship with God that is eternally secure. On one hand, as Charles Stanley points out, “To lose one’s salvation, one would have to be unadopted! . . . Could you ever really put your total trust in a heavenly Father who may unadopt you?”⁹ On the other hand, the Parable of the Prodigal Son depicts the security of one who “is born of God” (1 John 5:1). The lost son “was of the conviction that by abandoning his father and wasting his inheritance, he had relinquished his position in the family. His father, however, did not see things that way at all. In his mind, *once a son, always a son.*”¹⁰ The analogy funding this relationship as a portrait of a born-again Christian’s relationship with God may break down only when considered in terms of an unreliable human father who disowns his biological child, in which case it is impossible to undo being the biological parent of a child.

b. Sufficiency of Salvation Through the Son

Scripture clarifies the content of the gospel by which people are saved: “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:1-4). In Jesus’s death on the cross, the sinless sacrifice has been made (2 Cor 5:21) and the debt of man’s sin has thereby been paid in full (Jn 19:30). To become a child of God requires faith in his Son, Jesus Christ, “whom he appointed heir of all things” (Heb 1:1-3) and to whom he has given “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Matt 28:18). Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6; cf. 1 Pet 1:19). He is the giver of eternal life (John 6:27) and promises that no one can “snatch” from his hand anyone to whom he has given eternal life (John 10:27-30). God gives eternal life through Christ as a gift of unmerited grace (Rom 6:23), so that “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1; cf. Col 2:14). The believer has “been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. . . . For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (Heb 10:10-14). His blood is adequate to secure the believer’s forgiveness and reconciliation with the Father

⁹ Charles Stanley, *Eternal Security: Can You Be Sure?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 41.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

(Col 1:19-22). Assurance of salvation, therefore, rests on the finished work of Christ on the cross.

c. Help from the Holy Spirit

Christ's triumph over sin through his blood inaugurated the new covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31:31-34 (cf. Luke 22:20; Heb 9:12-15, 28). As Jesus promised, he asked the Father to send "another advocate to help . . . and be with . . . [believers] forever—the Spirit of truth" (John 14:16; 16:7). "The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans" (Rom 8:26). Scripture also explains that those who have believed in Christ "were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance" (Eph 1:13-14). Having "set his seal of ownership on us, and [having] put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come," God "makes . . . [his children to] stand firm in Christ" (2 Cor 1:22). These metaphors constitute promises of the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian, and as promises made and kept by God, they are true and reliable (2 Cor 1:20).

Ultimately, salvation in all aspects¹¹ is a work of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is also true for assurance of salvation in Baptist theology. When a person repents of sin and entrusts his life in faith to Christ, he is "a new creation" (2 Cor 5:17)—i.e., a regenerate person. God's unchanging character and his works—past, present, and future—secure the salvation of those who respond in faith.

B. Obedience in the Christian's Life

The expectation that the lives of people professing salvation from sin should be characterized by obedience to Christ and the teachings of Scripture is thoroughly biblical, historically a significant feature of Baptist ecclesiology, and clearly an emphasis of Anabaptism. Describing Anabaptist spirituality, Arnold Snyder concisely expresses the Radical Reformers' vision of discipleship as a link between soteriology and ecclesiology:

The Anabaptists spoke not of 'faith alone', but of the 'obedience of faith'. True faith entails a new birth, a spiritual regeneration by God's grace and power; 'believers' are those who have become the spiritual children of God. The

¹¹ Article IV of the BFM summarizes: "In its broadest sense salvation includes regeneration, justification, sanctification, and glorification."

beginning of the Anabaptist path to salvation was thus marked not be a forensic understanding of salvation by ‘faith alone’, but by the entire process of repentance, self-denial, faith, rebirth and obedience. It was this process that was marked by the biblical sign of baptism.¹²

Likewise, in Baptist theology, regenerate church members, by definition, have publicly testified to their new life in Christ through baptism by immersion, “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:18). Also by definition, prior to a church’s admitting these individuals into the publicly identifiable local fellowship, through the candidates’ public submission to baptism, the lives of regenerate church members have borne witness to the reality of having already been baptized by the Holy Spirit¹³ “into the Body of Christ”—that is, the reality of having already experienced “the moment of regeneration” that coincides with the individual’s response of repentance and faith.¹⁴ The ideal espoused in upholding regenerate church membership reflects what Harold Bender has classically called “the Anabaptist vision,” which, he proposes, included “a new conception of the essence of Christianity as discipleship”:

The Anabaptists could not understand a Christianity which made regeneration, holiness and love primarily a matter of intellect, of doctrinal belief, or of subjective “experience,” rather than one of the transformation of life. They demanded an outward expression of the inner experience. Repentance must be “evidenced” by newness of behavior. . . . The whole life was to be brought literally under the lordship of Christ in a covenant of discipleship, a covenant which the Anabaptist writers delighted to emphasize. . . . The true test of the Christian, they held, is discipleship. The great word of the Anabaptists was . . . “following” (*nachfolge Christi*). And baptism, the greatest of Christian symbols, was accordingly to be for them . . . the pledge of a complete commitment to obey Christ, and not primarily the symbol of a past experience. The Anabaptists had

¹² C. Arnold Snyder, “Anabaptist Spirituality,” in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip Sheldrake (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 104.

¹³ Having witnessed the Holy Spirit’s unique manifestation of His acceptance of Gentile believers, Peter concluded, “‘Surely no one can stand in the way of their [the Gentiles’] being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we [Jews] have.’ So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” (see Acts 10:43-48). Throughout the New Testament, baptism followed the response of repentance and faith.

¹⁴ BFM, Articles 2.C. (“God the Holy Spirit”) and 4.A. (“Regeneration”), which defines regeneration as “the new birth, [which] is a work of God’s grace whereby believers become new creatures in Christ Jesus. It is a change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Repentance and faith are inseparable experiences of grace.”

faith, indeed, but they used it to produce a life. Theology was for them a means, not an end.¹⁵

With a view toward considering how a believer's assurance of salvation can nurture continued obedience, this section will first consider what are the marks of such obedience and what motivates a Christian's obedience.

1. Marks of Obedience

Scripture consistently highlights obedience as personal response to God in the sense of doing what he commands, not doing what he forbids, and thereby proving sincere love for and gratitude to him. Obedience is marked both by outer aspects subject to general observation and inner aspects hidden from view. Both an observable "a lifestyle of obedience" (outer aspect) and "an attitude of willingness to obey" (inner aspect) can strength assurance for the genuine believer.¹⁶

a. Outer Aspects

When a person professes faith in Jesus Christ, submitting to baptism by immersion is an initial "act of obedience symbolizing the believer's faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Saviour, the believer's death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead."¹⁷ Walking "in newness of life" capsulizes the ongoing changes to be expected in the believer's conduct and attitudes. In Baptist theology, such outwardly observable conformity of life to God's Word provides good evidence of the reality of the believer's new

¹⁵ Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 18 (April 1944): 67-88; repr., <https://www.goshen.edu/mhl/Refocusing/d-av.htm>. In the latter sentences of this paragraph, Bender includes the following note (n.28): "The German (Luther) translation of I Peter 3:21 calls baptism 'Der Bund eines guten Gewissens mit Gott.'" Bender includes his translation of this version in the original text as "covenant of a good conscience toward God."

¹⁶ Lavonn D. Brown, *My Salvation: Secure!* Falls Creek Edition (Nashville: Convention Press, 1986), 50-51.

¹⁷ Article VII: "Baptism and the Lord's Supper," BFM. Cf. this excerpt from the *Schleitheim Confession*: "**First. Observe concerning baptism:** Baptism shall be given to all those who have learned repentance and amendment of life, and who believe truly that their sins are taken away by Christ, and to all those who walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and wish to be buried with Him in death, so that they may be resurrected with Him, and to all those who with this significance request it [baptism] of us and demand it for themselves. **This excludes all infant baptism, the highest and chief abomination of the pope.** In this you have the foundation and testimony of the apostles. Mt. 28, Mk. 16, Acts 2, 8, 16, 19. This we wish to hold simply, yet firmly and with assurance." Michael Sattler, *The Schleitheim Confession of Faith, 1527*, trans. J. C. Wenger, *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 19 (1945): 247-253; repr., [http://courses.washington.edu/hist112/SCHLEITHEIM CONFESION OF FAITH.htm](http://courses.washington.edu/hist112/SCHLEITHEIM%20CONFESSION%20OF%20FAITH.htm).

identity as child of God, i.e., as a regenerate member of the family of God.¹⁸

For the genuine believer, the outer aspects of obedience may or may not provide an accurate measure of spiritual health, especially because hypocrisy and legalism remain as temptations. In contrast to a Reformed emphasis on diagnosing apparent lack of perseverance as proof that the person must not be saved after all, and in contrast to an Arminian emphasis on the possibility of apostasy, Baptist theology stresses the biblical emphasis on the personal relationship with Christ and the identification with him depicted in believer's baptism.

b. Inner Aspects

While failures in outward obedience can prompt doubt about a person's salvation, both on the part of observers and the believer in question, evidence of spiritual transformation of the mind, will, and emotions within the person may not be as obvious. Jesus underscores the necessity of having a clean heart in the Sermon on the Mount (e.g., Matt 5:21-32).

When a regenerate member of a Baptist church partakes of the Lord's Supper, the worship service often includes at least the reminder of Scripture's injunction to examine oneself in preparation for the eating and drinking thereof (1 Cor 11:27-28; 2 Cor 13:5). To practice self-examination, the believer reflects not only on the presence or absence of outward, visible evidences of obedience but also probes the inner character and dispositions that only the Holy Spirit brings to light and cleanse. Again, in contrast to the Reformed emphasis on unconditional election, which may produce anxiety over whether one has been predestined to be saved or condemned, and in contrast to the Arminian emphasis on the necessity yet uncertainty of perseverance, Baptist theology maintains the balance of biblical teaching regarding

¹⁸ In recent years, Southern Baptists have increasingly expressed concern for the doctrine of regeneration. One professor writes, for example: "Our churches have in practice attenuated the New Testament standard of regenerate church membership. We are uncertain whether we should expect evidence of regeneration beyond consent to be led in a prayer of faith. Baptists once looked for the New Testament signs of repentance, humility, and a changed life. They judged in charity, but they accepted the responsibility to judge. We now tend to think it uncharitable to look for such evidence." See Gregory A. Wills, "Southern Baptist Identity: A Historical Perspective," in *Southern Baptist Identity: An Evangelical Denomination Faces the Future*, ed. David S. Dockery (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 85. Also see *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4, no. 4 (Winter 2000), which is devoted to the theme "Church Discipline." An article by Wills is included in this issue: "Southern Baptists and Church Discipline" (4-15).

the sovereignty of God and man's opportunity freely to receive or reject the free gift of salvation.

2. Motivations to Obedience

a. Extrinsic vs. Intrinsic

Extrinsic motivation “is instrumental in nature. It is performed *in order to* attain some other outcome.”¹⁹ Understanding that extrinsic motivators “generate desire for the consequence of the activity” rather than producing “desire to engage in the activity for its own sake”²⁰ sheds light on why persons who misunderstand salvation commonly do not live in obedience to the Lord. For example, a person motivated by desire for certainty about being with his deceased wife again after he dies may repeat a prayer intended only as a guide and believe that he is saved when in fact, he has not repented of sin or entrusted his life to Christ. This is but one example of the tragic results of failing to emphasize discipleship. A lifestyle of obedience may begin with certain extrinsic motivations but is seldom sustained without cultivating “desire to engage in the activity for its own sake,” i.e., intrinsic motivation.²¹ Hughes and Laney describe in these terms what Jesus is doing in the portion of the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5:17-48. Starting with “the Pharisees’ standard of righteousness: obedience to the law,” Jesus

applied that law not only to the external deeds that a person might do, but also to the attitudes and thoughts in the depths of a person's heart. Fulfilled law is no longer the law imposed upon a person from the outside, but that which is written on the heart and becomes an integral part of that person (cf. 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44). If the law becomes internalized, obedience becomes instinctive and pleasant, not something a person is forced to do. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus called his hearers to move from external obedience to an obedience motivated by the law written upon the heart (5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44; 6:19-24).²²

¹⁹ Lisa Legault, “Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation,” in *Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences*, ed. V. Zeigler-Hill and T. K. Shackelford (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 1; https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Lisa_Legault/publication/311692691_Intrinsic_and_Extrinsic_Motivation/links/5856e60d08ae77ec37094289/Intrinsic-and-Extrinsic-Motivation.pdf

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Robert B. Hughes and J. Carl Laney, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1990), 401.

While Scripture is replete with exhortations to obedience; promises of rewards and punishments; and accounts of chastisement, judgment, and restoration, the Lord himself makes possible an intrinsic motivation for obedience by giving the believer a “new heart” and “new spirit” (Ezek 18:31; 36:26).

b. Servile vs. Filial

The Anabaptist “theology of discipleship” is exemplary in stressing “the inseparability of belief and practice, faith and life.”²³ An anonymous tract, bundled with seven other items produced by sixteenth-century Anabaptists (Swiss Brethren), provides a helpful distinction for understanding motivations of Christian obedience. “A Tract on Two Kinds of Obedience” elaborates on differences between “servile and filial” obedience.²⁴ Servile obedience is extrinsically motivated, having “its source in a love of reward or of oneself.” Furthermore, the “servile looks to the external and to the prescribed command of his Lord.” In contrast, filial obedience is intrinsically motivated by “the love of the Father” and “ever does as much as possible, apart from any command.” Furthermore, the “filial rejoices in the chastisement of the Father” and “has its treasure and righteousness in the Father whom it obeys only to manifest His righteousness.”²⁵

With these thoughts about motivation to obedience in mind, we return to apply the Baptist understanding of assurance of salvation outlined earlier to the question of how this theological position nurtures the Christian psyche for obedience. To review, I argued that in Baptist theology, assurance of salvation depends on the identity of the triune God and what he has done as revealed in Christian Scripture. At least three truths can secure the believer’s assurance that salvation received by faith is a permanent and irrevocable—(1) the faithfulness of God the Father, (2) the sufficiency of salvation through the Son, and (3) help from the Holy Spirit. How do these nurture the Christian psyche for obedience?

²³ Harold S. Bender, “The Anabaptist Theology of Discipleship,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 24 (Jan 1950): 43.

²⁴ “Two Kinds of Obedience: An Anabaptist Tract on Christian Freedom,” trans. and ed. John C. Wenger, *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 21 (Jan 1947): 18-22.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

3. How Assurance Nurtures Obedience

a. A Secure Identity

First, using the language of adoption and inheritance, Scripture depicts believers as children of God (e.g., Rom 8:15-17). The new legal status or covenant relationship between the believer and the Father is secured by the death and resurrection of the Son and guaranteed by the Holy Spirit's residence (Gal 4:1-7). Just as an adopted son legally gains both the rights and responsibilities of a father's natural-born heir, so the believer's identity is secure in Christ Jesus the Son. That identity endures not on the basis of anything the son does or does not do but on the basis of the Father's unchanging faithfulness to his covenant relationship with the one who, in Christ, has been born again. Obedience to God's Word need not be motivated by a fear of punishment or rejection because the Father has freely given grace "in the One he loves" (i.e., in the Son, Eph 1:6; see 1 John 4:18). However, because believers enjoy the status of sons adopted by God the Father, they can expect to be chastened by him (Heb 12:5-17). A father disciplines his children because he loves them. Grounded in the assurance that the Father will never leave or abandon his children (Deut 31:6, 8; Matt 28:2; Heb 13:5), the sons and daughters of the King can approach his throne with confidence (Heb 4:16) and grow in discernment for obeying the Lord as they fellowship with him (1 John 1:3; 2:15-16). The security of the believer's identity as a child of God engenders filial obedience rather than servile obedience.

In addition, the security of identity in the Father also entails belonging to a family, a community of other sons and daughters with whom to serve and fellowship. Anabaptists' practice of believer's baptism expressed "a commitment to discipleship and brotherhood within the church."²⁶ The members of this extended family are responsible not only to love and take care of each other but also to hold one another accountable. Anabaptists, therefore, regarded "church discipline as necessary to the life of the true church."²⁷ When practiced, church discipline has served as "the Baptist remedy" for preserving the

²⁶ John E. Colwell, "A Radical Church? A Reappraisal of Anabaptist Ecclesiology," Tyndale Historical Theology Lecture, 1985, *Tyndale Bulletin* 38 [1987]: 120.

²⁷ James Leo Garrett, Jr., "The Roots of Baptist Beliefs," in *Southern Baptist Identity: An Evangelical Denomination Faces the Future*, ed. David S. Dockery [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009], 148-19.

testimony of the church and restoring “those who at one time gave visible evidence of regeneration and joined the church but later by their actions betrayed their profession of faith.”²⁸ In this regard, the practice presupposes the doctrine of assurance of salvation in that the church family pursues with love a family member who needs help and restoration. Rightly practiced, church discipline takes seriously the fact that the disobedience of the wayward brother or sister in Christ has not dissolved the family ties or forfeited the Father’s love.²⁹

Through imagery drawing on a key relationship in human experience, Scripture portrays God’s character and the enduring nature of the covenant promises received at salvation within which regenerate church members are bound to Christ and to their Christian family. A truly regenerate church manifests the holiness of God in the obedient lives of its members and, for that reason, must take sin seriously enough to confront members, as prescribed in the New Testament, with loving truth that bears witness to God’s characterization of himself in Scripture. Throughout the canon, God reveals that he is holy and that he calls his people, therefore, to be holy (e.g., Lev 11:44-45; 1 Pet 1:16).

Obedience is even more deeply cultivated in the believer who belongs to such a church. The members share a secure identity as children of the living God and quickly learn that what one family member does affects all the others. The members’ responsibilities to one another as a family foster obedience both individually and corporately through mutual encouragement, shared identity and mission, and high levels of accountability. Dry duty to rules and regulations is displaced by loyalty to loved ones as motivations to obedience. Fears of disappointing, disgracing, or even bringing harm to those who love you “no matter what” are greater deterrents to disobedience than threats of punishment or exhortations to individual believers without the security of such a support system.

²⁸ Hammett, *Biblical Foundations*, 106.

²⁹ Yarnell points out that Anabaptist “Pilgram Marpeck, among others, argued for the granting of sufficient time to people so that the Holy Spirit might work upon them and demonstrate his fruit in their lives. Love, patience and the avoidance of hasty judgements [*sic*] were key to redemptive church discipline.” See Malcolm Yarnell, “Anabaptist Spirituality,” in *The Pure Flame of Devotion: The History of Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honour of Michael A. G. Haykin*, ed. G. Stephen Weaver Jr. and Ian Hugh Clary (Kitchener, ON: Joshua Press, 2013), 168.

b. A Stable Foundation

In Isaiah 28:16, “the Sovereign LORD says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who relies on it will never be stricken with panic.”³⁰ The New Testament clearly identifies Jesus as this cornerstone. Ephesians 2:19-22 speaks confidently of “Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” in whom both Gentile and Jewish believers are “joined together” and “built together” as one “whole building . . . a holy temple in the Lord . . . a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” The determination of God to “make all things new” (Rev 21:5), including and especially a people with whom he can dwell (Rev 21:2-3, 27), draws attention to the way God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has revealed himself fulfilling his purpose of ultimately destroying every vestige of sin that separates people from him and bringing them into a new identity as his own people. For Baptist theology, Christ’s work of redemption, described in Ephesians 2:1-18, is the unshakable foundation of the believer’s assurance.

Only within the new covenant, established in the death and resurrection of Christ, is any measure of holy, obedient living possible. As a “new covenant” community, a regenerate church is composed of “new covenant” individuals—people who have been made new through the blood of Christ (Luke 22:20; Heb 9:15; 12:22-24). Historically, the dangers of including unregenerate people as church members have helped cement Baptists’ convictions regarding believer’s baptism. By limiting baptism to believers only³¹ and limiting church membership to those baptized, a church would logically have only regenerate church members.³² The ordinance as practiced by

³⁰ Cf. Ps 118:22; Zech 10:4; Matt 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11.

³¹ In terms of church membership, B. H. Carroll forcefully underscored the distinctiveness of the Baptist conviction that salvation is essential to baptism and church membership: “Here, if nowhere else, Baptists stand absolutely alone. The foot of no other denomination in Christendom rests on this plank.” B. H. Carroll. *Baptists and Their Doctrines: Sermons on Distinctive Baptist Principles*, compiled by J. B. Cranfill (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1913), 6; transcribed by Madison Grace for the Center for Theological Research, 2006; <http://www.baptisttheology.org/baptisttheology/assets/File/Baptistsandtheirdoctrines.pdf>.

³² Hammett, *Biblical Foundations*, 99. Jason K. Lee (“Baptism and Covenant,” in *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches*, ed. Thomas White, Jason G. Duesing, and Malcolm B. Yarnell III [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008], 135-36) explores the connection in Baptist history between the commitment to believer’s baptism as the point of entrance to church membership and the conviction that local congregations are true churches established and joined through the affirmation of a church covenant. John Smyth recognized baptism as an individual’s visible testimony demonstrating “a person’s agreement to the eternal covenant” offered by God.

Baptists also contributes to the new believer's resolve to walk in obedience.

Believer's baptism not only dramatizes the gospel message of Jesus's death and resurrection but also establishes the event in the memory of the church, of lost people who witness it, and of the one baptized. McClendon describes baptism as the enactment of one's confession of the trinitarian name into which the new disciple is baptized:

[B]aptism points to, refers to, the life story of Jesus himself. . . . baptism focuses the candidate's own life story: as a brother or sister takes this step the narrative of his or her life is brought out of obscurity, laid before God in repentance and faith, and decisively turned into God's new path in the company of the baptized community. In baptism, one's own conversion is confessed and oriented. . . . baptism brings these two narratives, Christ's and the candidate's, together in the company of all the saints. When one is baptized, the reference is both to Jesus' story and to one's own story—and these are in baptism confessed to be one with the church's story. Thus the identification with Jesus as the incarnate, obedient, crucified, and risen One . . . is a narrative identification (just as in the resurrection, Jesus' identification with God consists in a narrative linking of his life with the life of God—Rom. 1:4). . . . our baptisms recapitulate and claim as our own his resurrection.³³

In baptism the believer takes a first step of obedience that moves beyond assent to action.³⁴ Baptist theology here is deeply rooted in the Anabaptist understanding of water baptism as

the visible, outward seal and testimony, before the believing community, that a covenant had been made with God in the heart to turn away from self-will and to accept God's will in all things, following after Christ in obedience even unto death. The public commitment and promise of water baptism was . . . a public seal of the spiritual baptism which preceded. . . . Baptism also bound members to fraternal admonition and discipline . . . Baptized individuals were expected to manifest a Christlike life, measured by the biblical witness of Christ's words and example.³⁵

³³ James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Volume 1* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 267. Also see McClendon's argument for understanding baptism as a "performative sign": James Wm. McClendon, Jr., "Baptism as a Performative Sign," *Theology Today* 23 (1966): 410-11. Cf. BFM, Article VII: "Baptism and the Lord's Supper": "Christian baptism . . . is a testimony to his [the believer's faith] in the final resurrection of the dead."

³⁴ BFM, Article VII: "Baptism and the Lord's Supper": "Christian baptism . . . is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer's faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Saviour, the believer's death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus."

³⁵ Snyder, "Anabaptist Spirituality," 104-5.

The immersion in water publicly enacts a picture of how seriously God views sin and testifies to the new disciple's identification with Christ's death and burial, by which he has received forgiveness and freedom from sin. Emerging from the water announces the disciple's new, resurrected life. Baptism thus experientially applies the truth of Scripture to one's life going forward (see Rom 6:8; 1 Thess 5:10; 2 Tim 2:11). It represents "a clean start" for the new Christian, formally identifies him with the local church, embodies confidence in Jesus's eschatological promise of his presence, and sets him on a path of obedient discipleship, including commitment to the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20).³⁶ In this way, assurance of salvation is anchored in the sufficiency of the Son's saving work, with which the believer has consciously, deliberately, and publicly identified his own life.

In Baptist churches that still uphold the Anabaptist practice of limiting the celebration of the Lord's Supper to baptized members, distribution of the elements is "preceded by an examination of relationships and the 'worthiness' of participants (1Cor. 11.23–29)."³⁷ For Anabaptists, not only did celebration of the Lord's Supper commemorate the suffering and death of Christ, but it was also an occasion for celebrating "again the covenant of Christ's living members with Christ the head and with each other."³⁸ In both respects, the believer's assurance of salvation further nurtures his psyche for obedience. Regular celebration of the Lord's Supper reinforces the believer's identity as a child of God and as a member of God's family, as well as of their expectations for obedient discipleship. Furthermore, the time of self-examination preceding the Supper reminds believers to confess sin and commit themselves anew to "walk in the light, as he [the Son, Jesus Christ] is in the light" (see 1 John 1:5-9).

³⁶ Cf. Snyder's description of the Anabaptists' "emphasis on spiritual regeneration": "Setting out on the narrow way of salvation through repentance, self-denial, trust, rebirth, and obedience was a commitment that fell to every man and woman personally—no infant could repent, be reborn, or promise to live a new life in obedience to Christ. . . . the Anabaptists were convinced that the Christian life could not be private, subjective or individual, but rather would necessarily be lived in full view of the world, in the incarnate body of Christ in the world. Water baptism marked the beginning of the outer life and witness to the new spiritual being in Christ." *Ibid.*, 104.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 105. Cf. BFM, Article VII: "Baptism and the Lord's Supper": "Being a church ordinance, it [Christian baptism by immersion] is a prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and the Lord's Supper."

³⁸ *Ibid.*

c. Enduring Hope

At a basic level, “regenerate church” designates a “gathered”³⁹ community of regenerate individuals—people who were dead (Eph 2:1), cut off by sin from fellowship with God, and who, having “passed from death into life” (John 5:24), are now “alive to God” (Rom 6:11), “made alive by the Spirit” (1 Pet 3:18), “born again” (John 3:3-8), regenerated. In each one God the Holy Spirit dwells (1 Cor 6:19). Regenerate, Spirit-filled individuals are gathered as a regenerate church. Because God is present in and among these individuals and this community, by virtue of the new covenant established by the blood of the incarnate Son on the cross, they are “a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17). Therefore, they are—individually and collectively—distinctive in the conformity of their lives to Scripture—i.e., in obedience to the Lord. In contrast, a group of people or institution that calls itself a church but whose members are *not* actually regenerate, having never consciously surrendered to God’s authority in Christ mediated through Scripture,⁴⁰ is either devoid of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit or the benefits of the Holy Spirit’s presence are limited to the individuals whose “fruit,” Jesus says, demonstrates that they are indeed his disciples (John 15:1-17).

With assurance of salvation, to which the Spirit provides internal testimony (Rom 8:16), the believer is enabled by the Holy Spirit to walk in obedience to the Lord and his Word. “Through the Holy Spirit,” God pours his unconditional love into the hearts of his children (Rom 5:5), thereby enabling them to obey Christ’s “new command” to love one another (John 13:34; 2 John 1:5). Obedience to Jesus’s commands then reinforces the assurance that the disciple has indeed “come to know him” (1 John 2:3-11).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus indicated that a person whose life has “its foundation on the rock” is one who hears his words “and puts them into practice”—i.e., obeys Christ (Matt 7:24-25; Luke 6:48-49). Paul referred to Jesus Christ as the one and only foundation (1 Cor 3:11) and as “the chief cornerstone” for the “foundation of the apostles and prophets” on which God’s church is built” (Eph 2:19-20). Not only does the saving work of Christ supply a stable foundation for regenerate

³⁹ See especially Jesus’s promise in Matthew 18:20—“For where two or three gather in my name, there I am with them.”

⁴⁰ See Francis Watson, *Text, Church, and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (London: T&T Clark, 1994), 223-31: “Access to the reality of Jesus is textually mediated.”

people to walk in obedience, but also the words of Jesus and the entire canon of Scripture supply the means by which the Holy Spirit convicts people of sin, draws them to the Savior, nurtures their faith, awakens understanding of Scripture, convinces of the truth, directs the believer's steps, gives discernment for avoiding sin, and nurtures the believer's psyche for obedience.

God the Holy Spirit, who has authored the written text of Scripture, inscribes his "laws" in the mind and on the heart of one who has been born again, who has therefore been given "a new heart" (Ezek 36:26-27; Heb 8:10). Rather than merely as an external authority, God's living and personal voice in Scripture is welcomed in the context of covenant relationship. Harrisville underscores the dynamic relationship between God's authority manifested through the biblical text and the posture of the reader or hearer toward this authority, not construed as an external pressure but "in terms of its power to evoke the resolve to live or die by it."⁴¹ He writes,

Ultimately, the authority of the Bible stems from its self-authentication in the heart and mind of believers. At bottom, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments derive their authority as sole and final rule for faith and life from their power to evoke assent and trust, to wring a "yes! yes!" from deep inside their readers and hearers; such power as to cut them adrift from whatever allegiances they once may have owed.⁴²

As Harrisville points out, neither the fact that God speaks in and through his Word nor the power of his Word to accomplish his purposes is dependent on the church's reception. Nevertheless, only regenerate churches made up of regenerate, Spirit-filled readers—i.e., individuals who have repented and entrusted their lives to Christ—are thereby enabled by God himself to be radically and confidently obedient.⁴³

Conclusion

The view of assurance of salvation espoused here—from a Baptist perspective that draws heavily on Anabaptist roots—finds its basis in the character and work of the triune God of Christian Scripture. The

⁴¹ Roy A. Harrisville, "The Loss of Biblical Authority and Its Recovery," in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1995), 48.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Bender ("The Anabaptist Vision") draws attention to evidence that "the Anabaptists not only proclaimed the ideal of full Christian discipleship but achieved, in the eyes of their contemporaries and even of their opponents, a measurably higher level of performance than the average."

security of the believer's identity as a child of God is dependent on the faithfulness of God the Father, the sufficiency of salvation given through the Son, and help from the Holy Spirit. In Baptist theology, God's children dramatically testify to their new life in Christ through baptism as a public act of obedience and identification with the body of Christ—i.e., with a regenerate church following Christ in obedient discipleship. Jesus's saving work and Word provide a stable foundation for both individual believers and regenerate churches to walk in obedient fellowship. With the abundant help available from the presence of the Holy Spirit, believers characteristically exercise filial rather than servile obedience in gratitude for the enduring hope of eternal life secured in the victory of Christ over sin and death, attested in his Word, and actively transforming their lives for his glory (Rom 15:4).



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