



Safe in Christ

a primer on assurance

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THEOCAST

PUBLICATION

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Introduction

Toward the end of my eighth-grade year, my school had a spring formal. That meant it was a dance where the girls wore dresses, and the guys wore ties. It was a big deal in my world at the time. At the dance, there were two songs that everybody could not wait to hear. One was “Water Runs Dry” by Boyz II Men. The other was “I’ll Be Missing You” by Puff Daddy and the Family.

“I’ll Be Missing You” was prompted by the shooting death of another rapper, The Notorious B.I.G. (known simply as “Biggie” to his fans). Puff Daddy, along with Faith Evans and the group 112, recorded the song as a tribute to their friend. The beginning of the second verse goes this way:

*It’s kinda hard with you not around
Know you in heaven smilin’ down
Watchin’ us while we pray for you
Every day we pray for you¹*

Okay, time for a serious question: how did Puffy know that Biggie was in heaven? For that matter, how do *you* know that *you* will be with God forever? How do *I* know? On the last day, will we be counted among the righteous? In our sane moments, we quickly realize that we each have broken all of God’s commandments. We

1. Puff Daddy and the Family, “I’ll Be Missing You,” track 16 on *No Way Out*, Bad Boy/Atlantic Records, 1997.

have never really kept a single one of them. And we all still struggle mightily with sin. Our lives are often a mess. They are anything but clean and steady. As the Anglican minister and hymn writer, John Newton, wrote of himself, we are all riddles to ourselves; we are heaps of inconsistency.² We have nothing to say in our own defense. We find ourselves not doing the things we want to do. We find ourselves doing the things we do not want to do (cf., Romans 7:15, 19). How could God ever accept us, let alone love us? What kind of hope is there for people like us? How can we know that we have peace with God—now and forever?

Many have said that the Reformation was the recovery of the biblical doctrine of assurance. That is our conviction here at *Theocast*. By the doctrine of assurance, we mean the truth that sinners can be assured of their standing before God. They have peace with Him, are in a state of grace, and will never be put to shame. These wonderful truths are at the heart of the Gospel. Sinners, who are truly guilty and corrupt, are safe and secure in Christ by faith. Praise be to His name.

I am assuming you picked up this little primer because you want to know—or know more—of the assurance that is yours in Jesus Christ. What follows is simply a conversation between three pastors. We all have different backgrounds and experiences. We each have different struggles and weaknesses. Like you, we are sin-sick wretches who are trusting Jesus for righteousness, for the satisfaction for our sins, for our peace, and for our security.

We hope that you are encouraged in Christ. He is enough.

Justin Perdue
Asheville, NC

2. Cf., John Newton, *The Works of John Newton*, vol. 6 (London: Hamilton, Adams, & Co., 1824), 98.



The Search for Assurance

Justin Perdue: At *Theocast*, we hear from our listeners on a regular basis. If we were to boil down all of their questions, I would say that 80% to 90% of the correspondence relates to the issue of *assurance*—assurance of salvation, assurance of having peace with God, and eternal security.

I think if most people were honest, they'd admit that they have wrestled with questions like: How can I know that I am saved? How can I know that I'm secure and that I have peace with God? If I have peace with God now, does that mean that I will have peace with Him forever?

It might seem like just a theological exercise, but I believe there is nothing more relevant for our day-to-day lives. This matters for your Tuesday and for your Thursday. It matters for every day of your life.

Jimmy Buehler: Speaking for myself, I became interested in the doctrines of Christianity when I was a teenager—around 15 years old or so. It wasn't until college, however, when I really began to question my assurance, and began to wrestle with my sinful nature that seemed to still be present in my Christian life.

As I struggled with this question, I realized that I was looking for assurance from my own performance, and from how well I could live the Christian life. Like a lot of people, I was tying my salvation status to my spiritual disciplines. In other words, my spirituality was based on my personal Bible reading and my prayer life.

Just to be clear, those are not bad things. As we often point out, our generation lives in such a blessed time because we are able to read the Bible in our own language, and we have many accessible translations (which was not true in many earlier centuries).

It is a blessing to be able to talk to the God of the universe in prayer. But in my search for assurance, I really began to struggle when I would miss days of prayer, or when I would miss days of personal Bible reading. I would become emotionally wrecked over it. It would make me feel so stressed because I was judging my relationship with God based upon those things.

Even when I would wake up early, make myself a nice pot of coffee, and sit down to read Scripture and pray, I would be troubled inside. I would have all these thoughts and feelings rushing through my mind, telling myself that “the only reason I’m doing this is so that I will feel better about my Christian life.” I developed a mentality that if I began a day with Bible reading and prayer, then I would have a good day. That is how I felt good about my spiritual life.

This mentality carried on throughout much of my life. To be honest, I still battle against it, even though I know it is wrong. I would say that almost daily, even now, I find a lot of comfort in the way I perform my Christian life. For all those years, my assurance was so intrinsically tied to my feelings and my emotions. It was my “affections” for God that told me how well I was living the Christian life.

Jon Moffitt: I grew up in a revivalistic Arminian background. When I say *revivalistic*, I mean that my family went to tent revivals. We heard a lot of fiery preaching. From our perspective, preaching was supposed to be intense. The hotter and harsher the preaching, the better. I remember walking out of church services and hearing people thank the preacher for delivering a verbal beating in his sermon, because they “really needed to hear it.” That was my world for 20 years.

By the term *Arminian*, I am speaking of a certain type of belief system which does not accept that God is responsible for electing individual people to salvation. Arminians believe it is man's free choice to either accept or reject God's offer of salvation. Essentially, if you buy a life insurance policy from God, then you are good to go, but it is up to you to buy it or not. I actually heard preachers refer to salvation as "life insurance" and "fire insurance."

Revivalism and Arminianism often tend to go together.

Justin Perdue: Essentially in that system, God has made it possible for man to be saved, but He has left it up to man to make the right decision.

Jon Moffitt: That's right. Arminians reason out their theology by asking, "How can God truly be loving if He's forcing people to love him? It must be our choice to love Him." Since salvation is based on making the "decision for Christ," then it follows that the way in which a person finds his assurance is based upon that decisive moment. We call this idea *conversionism*.

In my case, there was a moment in my youth where I went forward during an invitation (sometimes called an "altar call"), and Mr. Thompson shared the Gospel with me, and then asked me if I wanted to say the *Sinner's Prayer*. I got down on my knees, and I repeated whatever he told me to say. I recorded the date in my Bible.

For years, I based my assurance that I was a Christian on that event; that time I went into the back room, and I knelt down with Mr. Thompson. I held onto it for years and years.

When I was growing up, people would ask, "Do you have a time? Do you have a moment that you knew for sure that you gave your life to Jesus?" My moment was written down—that time I said the *Sinner's Prayer*.

I have heard countless stories of people who doubted if they truly meant what they said when they first recited that prayer as a kid. To

calm their fears, they would pray it again, but would attempt to do so with more sincerity in their hearts. Of course, this would lead to people receiving multiple baptisms. I was personally baptized twice: once as a little kid, and then again at age twelve.

I know many people, including my wife, who suffered from a fear of dying in their sleep because they were unsure that they truly meant the Sinner's Prayer when first said it. They would hop out of bed, say the Sinner's Prayer again, just to make sure they were saved in case they died.

Justin Perdue: It comes across as though people think that we are saved by our sincerity.

My own story has included a lifelong struggle with anxiety. This would cause me to have unsolicited thoughts of horrible things happening to me or my family. I tend to be very pessimistic and assume that bad things will happen rather than good things.

This anxiety would also hinder my assurance as a Christian. My constitution is one that lends itself to a real struggle with peace and assurance. I was converted as young as maybe 10 years old. I'm confident that I was trusting Christ by 12 or 13. I was baptized at age 14. However, during my later teenage years and into my early twenties, I was constantly wrecked over whether I was really saved. I probably rededicated my life around 150 times.

I can remember my experience so vividly. I would read Matthew 7:21-23, where people come before Jesus and say, "Lord, look at the things that we did." And He would say to them, "Depart from me, I never knew you."

That passage would haunt me constantly. "I know that's going to be me," I thought. "I'm going to stand before Christ at the end of history, having meant to follow Him with all of my heart, and He's going to say, 'I never knew you. Depart from me.'"

Similar to Jimmy's struggle, I was always very focused on my obedience. I grew up in a very moralistic, legalistic kind of church

environment where there was a strong emphasis on our performance and what we were doing. I always felt like Martin Luther before his conversion, in that I knew that I was failing and I could never do enough.

I was also always haunted by the flaws in my feelings and in my sincerity. I'd worry that I was not sincere enough. I'd worry that I was not *feeling it* enough.

The moments when I did have some semblance of assurance occurred when I was hyper-emotional about Jesus or about the things of the faith. If I was moved to tears, I felt safer. But that never lasted long.

It honestly was not until I encountered reformed theology that I found real assurance. I learned that being a Christian does not mean that I won't still battle sin all the time.

Jimmy Buehler: Justin, you brought up Matthew chapter 7. There are many other passages in scripture along those lines. One that comes to mind is when Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross" (Matthew 16:24).

In my Christian life and walk, there would be moments where I thought that I was really nailing it—as though I was the only one that was taking up my cross. Then there would be moments I'd questioned whether I even knew what cross-bearing means or what that looks like.

When somebody is struggling with assurance, they are struggling in the deepest recesses of their own heart to know whether or not they are a Christian. Their underlying assumption is that their assurance is intrinsically connected to their feelings, emotions, and thoughts.

Honestly, that thought process is like a deep black hole; once you start going down there, it is very difficult to escape. Passages like Romans chapter 7 have brought me a lot of comfort, since even Apostle Paul himself wrestled with his own "flesh"—his own sinful nature.

2

The Struggle Is Real

Jimmy Buehler: Let's shift the conversation a bit. What are some of the things in contemporary Christian culture that rob believers of their assurance?

SIMUL JUSTUS ET PECCATOR (SAINT AND SINNER SIMULTANEOUSLY)

Jon Moffitt: There have been certain theological movements which have created doubts in some people, especially if misunderstood. These ideas include the Lordship of Jesus Christ, becoming a radical Christian, or even the discipleship movement. We'll define them in a moment, but I would say that all of them are a confusion of what Luther was clarifying—the saint-sinner reality. Luther merely rediscovered what was written in Scripture, that the believer is a sinner and a saint at the same time. Just because a person becomes justified, does not mean that God has removed their sinful nature. He has given you a new nature, but the old nature still remains. He has given you a new life, but the old life is still present. That is why Paul says that our flesh battles against our spirit.

At *Theocast*, we often emphasize the theme of the struggle between the Christian's new nature and his unredeemed flesh. The new nature loves God and wants righteousness. The flesh is still susceptible to temptation and sin. The Christian engages in a lifelong struggle between the two.

Becoming a Christian is very much like shining a light into a filthy room, which allows us to see the clutter for the very first time. Despite having clearer vision, the Christian is still living in the clutter, and still lying down in a bed of sin. The new light reveals the clutter for garbage for what it is, but it does not remove its presence. This makes the Christian uncomfortable.

Consider the famous struggle of Paul, described in Romans chapter 7. Paul anguishes over doing “the things I don’t want to do” (v. 15). His frustration is obvious when he cries, “Wretched man that I am! Who will save me from this body of death?” (v. 24). Most of the time, Christians doubt their assurance because they still sin, or they still want to sin. What they don’t realize is that their struggle against sin makes them just like the Apostle Paul.

Assurance has to be found in the settled fact that *Jesus saved me*, rather than because *I walked towards salvation and Jesus*. The assured Christian must believe that by God’s sovereign grace, He came to this earth and He saved me. That is intrinsic to the reformed faith. Maybe one more sentence: “Assurance must be grounded in the work of Jesus for us, not in our efforts or our feelings about Him.

If you do not believe that, then you will always question your salvation based on your own flaws. You might wonder, “Did I truly walk *enough* towards Jesus? Did I *truly* accept him? Am I holding onto Him tightly *enough*?” However, as we are told in John chapter 10, Jesus is the one who holds on to us, and no one takes us out of His hand.

MODERN PERSPECTIVES ON DISCIPLESHIP

Justin Perdue: Next, let’s explore the topic of discipleship and how it is emphasized in the broader church. A trend of having a hyper-focus on discipleship exists within evangelicalism in general, and even more so amongst the Calvinistic evangelical crowd.

For the sake of clarity, please understand that every Christian is a

disciple. To be a Christian is to be a disciple. There are not two types of Christians. The Bible does not distinguish between those who are simply Christians and the really serious types who are *disciples*.

In modern church vernacular, discipleship is a broad subject that covers things like personal holiness and obedience, personal spiritual disciplines, and our affections toward God and the things of God. These are all heavily emphasized amongst those who champion discipleship to the extent that *they* become the focus. In discipleship culture, things like disciplines, affections, and obedience are talked about constantly.

Inevitably, when those things become the main emphasis, Christians are being pointed back in on themselves.³ Essentially, the implication is that if you want to know that you'll be with the Lord forever, here are the things that you need to be doing. How consistent have you been in Bible reading, praying, and family worship?

How are your affections? How are your feelings toward God? Is there a trajectory of improvement in your life, in terms of how you feel about God and the things of God? Are you more passionate about the things of God now than you were before?

Next, how is your obedience? Are you obeying God's Word better now than you were a month ago, or a year ago, or a decade ago? Are you more excited about obedience? Does obedience come more easily to you now?

In all of this, the implication is that if you are not doing well enough, you should be concerned.

Jimmy Buehler: It's all about the trajectory.

Justin Perdue: Notice that none of the things I mentioned have anything to do with the work of Christ outside of you and *for you*.

3. This is the issue. It is not that obedience, or reading the Bible, or praying are bad. Of course not! The issue is the question of emphasis and focus—is the focus Christ or the Christian's performance?

All of that has everything to do with you—and your assessment of yourself. At *Theocast* we often say that we are always looking outside of ourselves to save what’s wrong in us. This is in line with the reformed tradition. If you’re pointing people inside themselves in any way—to their own obedience, to their own affections, to their own disciplines, to their own performance—there is no secure place to stand.

We use the term *navel gazing* a lot to describe what often goes on in the church. What we mean is that people are looking at their own navels all the time. They’re looking at themselves, rather than having their gaze fixed upon Christ and upon the work of Christ, which stands objectively outside of them as their solid rock. The only place for a believer to find assurance is on solid rock, not on sinking sand. The only solid rock is Christ, and His righteousness counted to us.

NEW SACRAMENTS: FEELINGS AND SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

Jimmy Buehler: The Christian Church throughout history has used the word *sacrament*. The sacraments have been historically understood as ways in which we visibly see the Word of God applied to our lives.⁴ Historically, Protestants have understood there to be two sacraments: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. However, in modern contemporary evangelicalism, one could infer that the concept of sacraments has grown to include additional things like personal spiritual disciplines and corporate singing time.

In other words, many evangelical circles elevate singing in a Sunday morning church service to the level of a sacrament. This is because singing is the place where we “feel God’s grace or presence,” or we “receive God’s grace.” They might ask, “Did you feel

4. See 1689 London Baptist Confession, Of the Lord’s Supper (30.1).

something during the singing time? Did you get goosebumps?”

Other examples are the acts of Scripture reading and prayer. You might be asked, “When you woke up early and dug into the Bible and prayed, did you get something out of it?” That is a comment that I receive all the time while teaching high school students. “Well, I just don’t get anything out of it,” they say. That makes them feel lacking in their assurance.

That is a common theme when it comes to these evangelical “sacraments” of personal spiritual disciplines and worship. The misconception is that if we’re not feeling some sort of emotional confirmation, then something is wrong with us as Christians. I’d like to point out that when God’s grace becomes something you receive based upon something *you* do, then it is no longer God’s grace.

Justin Perdue: That’s right. That portrays grace as conditional, rather than freely given. It is no longer unmerited favor from God.

Jimmy Buehler: Absolutely. These “evangelical sacraments” seem to be things that are done to gain God’s favor. That is in contrast to the historic understanding, where the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper were things that happened *to you*. In other words, someone places you under the water in baptism; somebody gives you the bread and the cup during the Lord’s Supper. These things are outside of you; they are objective realities.

Even in a modern evangelical sense, the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper has become a place of undue stress and anxiety when we are compelled to examine ourselves. Certainly there is room for self-examination in biblical Christianity, but at the same time, the Lord’s Supper points us to certain objective realities. Namely, that as surely as I eat this bread, so also can I trust that Christ’s body was broken for me. As surely as I drink this wine, so also can I trust that the blood of Christ was shed for me.

Justin Perdue: I think that the way in which evangelicals treat the sacraments is really just a symptom of a larger systemic problem. The way that evangelicals talk about baptism and the Lord's Supper seems to present those sacraments as primarily being about our own devotion to God, rather than God's devotion and commitment to us. That is a problem. It illustrates the kind of fundamental paradigm shift that we are advocating.

Everything in the Christian life—the sacraments included—has more to do with God's commitment and God's devotion to us; His work to save us in spite of ourselves. The Christian emphasis should never be about our devotion to Him, because our devotion ebbs and flows, sometimes by the moment. We have no shot if we stand there. But if we stand on God's faithfulness and His commitment to us, okay, now we have something that we can actually sing about! Something we can actually rejoice over. Something that we can rest in.

RADICAL CHRISTIANITY AND LORDSHIP SALVATION

Jon Moffitt: Let's look to Paul for an example. If you examine Paul's epistles—Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, for instance—what does he do? He points us to the objective realities of Jesus Christ. He talks about what Christ has done: His identity, His nature, His faithfulness, and His power. He then talks about how all of that is ours to receive by faith alone.

Then Paul goes after the Galatians harder than anyone, because of their corruption of the Gospel. His rebuke shows us that it is a grave error to believe that God accepts you as faithful or righteous on the basis of Christ's death *plus your works*.

I would say there are Christian movements out there that have good intentions, but their lack of clarity has caused people to lose their assurance. I think they're trying to help them with their Christian life. To help them to avoid being *nominal* Christians or

lazy Christians—but this doesn't help with their assurance.

People in these movements might challenge others to “make Jesus the Lord of your life.” They teach that there are two levels of Christians: those who make Jesus their Lord, and those who don't. They just call it *Lordship*. This is a form of rebranding or rededication of one's life.

Our response to that is Jesus *is* Lord. You cannot make Him anything other than He is. You may accept Him for who He is, but you cannot make Him that. I would also reiterate that there are not two classes of disciples.

Jimmy Buehler: Absolutely. I would say that within the Radical Christianity mindset, there is no room to live a normal Christian life. There is no room to be boring, so to speak; to be an ordinary Christian. They portray the Christian life as non-stop activity. One might think, “My goodness; if you have free time, and you're not using it to evangelize your neighborhood and do spiritual disciplines, then *are you actually saved?*”

We use a term called *pietism* to describe an obsession with what we call the interior of the Christian life. Pietism includes how good you feel about Jesus, your affections for Jesus, your actions for Jesus. We contrast that with *confessionalism*, which emphasizes the exterior of the Christian life. Confessionalism points to the objective realities of Christ, whereas pietism likes to ask the question, “Are you even saved?”

In confessionalism we like to ask, “Is God gracious? Is God good?” That is where we direct people to focus. There we will find assurance, rest, hope, peace, life, faith, and trust. All of those things are outside of you. The reformation era term is *extra nos*, Latin for “outside of yourself.” We look for assurance outside of ourselves—in Christ.

The Sufficiency of Christ

Justin Perdue: Now, let's consider Christ and His sufficiency, and why that is such glorious news. I'll begin by clearly reiterating that our biblical understanding is that a Christian is, at the same time, both *saint* and *sinner*. Believers are justified by faith in Christ; we are declared righteous by God, and we are safe in Him. However, as long as we are in these earthly bodies, we will still struggle against our corruption that we inherited from Adam.

This means that we desire to do good because we're born again, as Paul describes in Romans 7. We have God's Spirit within us. We delight in God's law in our inner being. There are good things that we want to do, and we find ourselves not doing them, at least not to the extent we want. There are bad things that we don't want to do, and we sadly find ourselves doing those things much more often than we want. This is how we describe the internal war that goes on inside a Christian. This war is waged between our spirit and our flesh. Paul says in Galatians 5:17 that the flesh (the sinful nature) seeks to "keep you from doing the things you want to do."

This great struggle exists for every Christian. I want in my inner being to obey God and glorify God and do righteousness, yet I find that I am unable to pull it off. God tells me that I'm His child, but I feel like I'm His enemy because I'm sinning. I hate it, and I know God hates sin.

So what is a Christian to do? What answer can we give? The answer has to be found outside of ourselves. It's found in Jesus

Christ. Scripture assures us of the sufficiency of Christ in many places, including one of my favorite passages, Hebrews 10:11-14. There we hear about how Christ has made a sacrifice once and for all, and that it is utterly sufficient. His sacrifice is so complete that He sat down at the right hand of God, signifying that redemption was over and there was nothing left to be done because he had done it all. Then, according to verse 14, “He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”

Your life is changing. You are being conformed to the image of Christ. It is important to remember that sanctification is a process. It is ongoing, and while it is occurring, the results seem to be all over the place from our perspective. Sometimes it is going well, and sometimes it is not going well at all. But at the end of the day, we are safe in Christ because He has perfected us for all time.

Jon Moffitt: Amen. I can remember that I was driving on the way to seminary, talking to a good friend of mine, and he mentioned Galatians. It was there that the reformed faith finally started to make sense—the puzzle pieces all came together. In Galatians 3:1, Paul writes,

Oh foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

That is the error of those who say we are grafted into Christ by faith, but then make progress by our performance. Paul renounces this idea. Instead, your justification (your right standing before God; Him declaring you righteous) and your sanctification (you are being transformed into His image) are both works of the Spirit that come to us by faith.

Therefore, your progress in being transformed must be dependent upon God, by faith. You cannot gauge your Christian progress merely on the basis of how many years you've been a believer and how well you've performing relative to that. You might ask, "Why am I still struggling with the same sin that I struggled with when I got saved?"

Many Christian testimonies make it sound as if they no longer struggle. I would reiterate how the New Testament warns us that we have to be aware of Satan, who is coming to deceive and tempt us, and that our flesh is going to war against our spirit.

At the end of Colossians 2, Paul tells the church that they have all of these things (submit to regulations—"Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch"), and these things sound spiritual and wise—but they are of no value for stopping the flesh. Then, at the beginning of chapter 3, Paul immediately directs them to look to Christ, who has completed His work and is now seated at the right hand of the Father.

In other words, your fight against sin, your assurance, and your protection is always based upon what Christ has done. We always try to make this distinction: we are saved by His faithfulness, not by our faithfulness.

Justin Perdue: If somebody were to press me and ask, "Justin, how do you know that you'll make it to heaven? How do you know that you are elect? How do you know you are eternally secure?" My answer to that would be quite simple. The answer is Christ. My confidence is in Jesus. I'm thinking about Christ's words in John chapter 6. He talks so intimately to us and says that "all that the Father has given to me will come to me, and I'll never cast you out" (6:37). Jesus goes on to promise that He'll lose none of those the Father has given Him. He'll lose none of us who are in Him by faith, but He'll raise us up on the last day (6:39).

Later, in John chapter 10, Christ tells us that we are in His hands

and that nobody can pluck us out (10:28). Then in John 15, we find that we have been united to Him and apart from him, we can do nothing (15:5). We, as believers, are safe and secure in Him.

At the end of the day, our confidence is wholly and completely in Christ, and only Christ. It is His sufficiency that gives us assurance—not our obedience, not our performance, not our sufficiency. It makes all the difference to understand that my security rests not on the fact that I will never fail, but on the fact that Jesus will never fail me. I can rest there.

SIN, SANCTIFICATION, AND THE CHURCH

Jimmy Buehler: I know there will be objections, so I will try to anticipate them and respond. First, people may ask, “Are you saying that I can do whatever I want?”

No, that is not what we are saying. Paul makes it overtly and abundantly clear in Romans chapter 6 that, just because God gives His grace, we don’t just go on sinning. We are arguing that we fight sin from our position of rest in Christ, not in order to win rest for ourselves. We fight sin by resting in the objective realities of Christ.

Another question might be, “If sanctification is directed by Christ and not by me, how do I grow as a Christian?”

As we study the New Testament epistles, we notice that often the commands and imperatives are corporate realities; Christians do them together as a body. This may be hard to imagine if you come from our overly individualized American culture. We need to be ever mindful that as we grow as a Christian, we don’t do so as an island. We grow within the context of the larger communion of the saints—the gathered church and its corporate worship.

Within the gathered church, we find what is often referred to as the *ordinary means of grace*. For example, we sit under the preached Word of God; we remember the promises made in our baptism, and we look to the promises that God gives us in the Lord’s Table.

We have confidence that God will indeed grow us and sanctify us—at any rate He desires (could be fast or slow). He desires, and however He sees fit under the ordinary means of grace within the gathered church.

Justin Perdue: The Romans 6 reality that you mentioned is critical for our understanding. Paul addresses the question, “Should we sin all the more, that grace may abound?” (v. 1). He responds not with law, commands, or threats. Instead, he responds by heralding the reality of our union with Christ by faith. We were once *in Adam*, where we fell and were ruined. We are now *in Christ*, and so everything that is Christ’s is ours.

Through our union with Christ, we have been raised to walk in newness of life (v. 4). We have been set free from the dominion of sin, and we are now under grace (v. 14). And we have become obedient from the heart (v. 17). When we were slaves of sin, the fruit we got from our actions was death (v. 21). But now, in Christ, the fruit we get leads to sanctification and eternal life (v. 22).

It is our union with Christ that will carry the day in our sanctification. It is our union with Christ that ensures us we will be sanctified. So, in every area of our Christian life—including our sanctification—our confidence is always and only Jesus.

Jon Moffitt: Each one of us is considered a confessional Christian. We each hold to a confession, or a document that provides an explanation of Scripture as a whole. In the reformed confessions, we affirm that our assurance has to have a foundation that is unshakable, and that assurance is in Jesus Christ.

People may ask, “What about our fruit? What about examining ourselves?” This area is where a person’s assurance gets damaged the most. Our assurance cannot come merely from our own good works. Good works may bolster, or add to your assurance (we will explain this in greater detail below). Many Christians have

found encouragement by seeing God transform their lives, but the moment you flip the priority, and you base the foundation of your assurance upon your own level of good works, then you will never feel safe or secure.

Let me ask you this: are you sure that you did those good works in the Spirit or in the flesh? In other words, did you do those good deeds for the glory of God, or for some lesser motive? The distinction is important, because Paul tells us that on the last day, the works that were done in the flesh will burn up and be of no use (1 Cor. 3:10-15). Do you truly want to bank your eternity upon something that may burn?

Jimmy Buehler: Good point. When you seek assurance in your own fruit and what you have accomplished for Christ, you're actually *undermining* your own assurance. It is the exact opposite outcome from the one you desire. You are constantly going to be stressed, anxious, and worried that your efforts were not enough.

Conversely, what we are trying to put forth is that true rest is found in the objective promises of God in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The works of Jesus are complete and sufficient in a way our own personal efforts never will be. That is what motivates and drives the believer toward a life of love and good works.

4

Confusing Good Works and Assurance

Justin Perdue: Earlier we spoke of how our good works and the fruit of the Spirit can bolster our assurance (LBCF 16.2). We agree with that point completely, and the reformed confessions affirm that as well. But we want to blow up the notion that we can derive a sense of peace before God from our good works, our obedience, or the fruit in our lives.

It is a guarantee that the Holy Spirit of God works in all of us who are trusting Christ. At *Theocast*, we are monergistic in our understanding of salvation. By *salvation* we mean how believers are justified, sanctified, and glorified. By *monergistic* we mean there is one worker who carries out salvation, and that is God. We participate in our own growth and sanctification, in as much as we participate in life by being alive.

The Holy Spirit is at work in us. We are promised that; it's a guarantee. I believe one of the things that the Holy Spirit works in us to produce is peace before God (cf., Romans 5:1-5). The love of God has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). He works in us to give us peace.

But in the Spirit doing so, it is not as though He has given us something *within ourselves* from which to draw our peace. We tend to think that the Holy Spirit will work in us to produce things in us, and that we can then look to those things to find our peace. No. The

Spirit works in us to provide us peace before God by strengthening, confirming, and sustaining our faith in Christ. He teaches us more about Jesus's sufficiency and His adequacy in our place. The Spirit does not transform us so that we can then look to our own transformation as the ground of our peace.

We must understand that distinction, or we are never going to know security. In any of our moments of clarity in self-examination, we are going to see that even our best works are tainted with sin; they're mixed. Nothing that we are doing is perfect.

Jon Moffitt: If you look at the law given to Moses at Sinai, it required perfection. Failing in any single point of the law makes you accountable for breaking the whole thing (Galatians 3:10; James 2:10). The person who tells "a little white lie" is going to be convicted right alongside the person who committed murder.

Please understand that the law is not a sliding scale, relative to human behavior. God does not grade on a curve. His law is rigid, and only pure holiness will escape its condemnation. The law is comparative to Christ, who demonstrates for us the holiness of God.

Christians who look to their behavior for assurance may be tempted to lower the standard of God's law in order to be found worthy. But ask yourself: do you offer your good works to God perfectly, every time that you do them? Is there a second of your life—from the moment that you were born again—that you could not be held guilty of some sin?

We are commanded to love God with all of our hearts, and to love our neighbors. Furthermore, we cannot please God unless our obedience is by faith. You mean to tell me that you lived your entire life loving God, loving your neighbor, and exercising complete faith? And you did this without fail, every second from the moment of your regeneration?

I can guarantee that you haven't, because it is impossible to achieve perfection with the sinful nature. Therefore, if you are

going to search for peace in your performance, as Justin says, you will have little to no peace at all.

Jimmy Buehler: If your ground of assurance is sought in your performance, and specifically your obedience to the Christian life, then one of two things is likely going to happen; perhaps both.

1. You will come to a place where you realize that your obedience is not enough, and you will become an emotional train wreck because you never find the assurance that you're seeking.

2. If you establish the grounds of your assurance in your obedience, you may become self-righteous, a person to whom no one measures up. Since you've convinced yourself that your works are sufficient, then you become the standard by which you measure everybody else's obedience, and you become—

Justin Perdue: —an intolerable human being.

Jimmy Buehler: Oh, absolutely. People who seem to find their assurance within themselves often become some of the least tolerable people to be around. Every achievement in their own life becomes a measuring stick that they kind of wave in front of other people.

Please be mindful of that. If you ground your assurance in yourself, then you're either going to become an emotional train wreck, or you're going to become a self-righteous person that nobody can stand.

Justin Perdue: It's true.

Jon Moffitt: These folks do not understand the difference between law (that which we must do) and the Gospel (that which has done for us). They mix them, and that's where pride comes in.

Justin Perdue: Correct. In the Gospel, there are no imperatives. The law tells us to do things, but the Gospel tells us that everything has been done for us. We receive it, believe it, and trust it.

It is crazy that being assured through faith, trust, and reliance upon Christ is almost viewed as a presumption by many. “Don’t be presumptuous. Do not presume upon God, that simply by faith, trust, and reliance, all is well.” Of course, nobody would ever say that, but that is the implication: that you are presumptuous if you are basing your assurance on simple faith and trust in Christ.

The way some people talk, it is as though we need to do all kinds of things in order to qualify ourselves. If we do enough, then we can call ourselves Christians—and it is absolutely crazy. It is contra-gospel. People who imply such things are enemies of the cross of Christ.

When people say (or imply), “you’re not sincere enough,” or “you’re not dedicated enough,” or “you don’t feel the right ways,” my response is, “well, no I don’t, but (humbly) take a number and get in line, because none of us do.” In saying that, we are not justifying sin. We are not trying to give sin a pass. Every redeemed person wants to obey and to feel appropriately! We are simply talking honestly about what and who we are—that we are all sin-sick wretches who are desperate for the work of Christ in our place. So let’s point one another to Him, and herald the good news that the work and merits of Christ are applied to us through simple faith, trust, and reliance upon Him.

HOW DO I KNOW I’M SAVED?

Jon Moffitt: People often ask, “How do I know I’m elect? How do I know if I’m saved? How do I know that God truly has transformed me?” When we get these questions, we often ask them a question in return: “Why do you think this?”

The number one answer is a faulty form of self-examination. They are looking at their own emotion. They’re looking at their own

dedication. They're looking at their own discipline. They're looking at their own decision.

God so loved the world that He sent His Son; His Son came and died that you might live.

The Holy Spirit comes and regenerates you and breathes that life into you. Do you believe that to be true? Do you trust in anything else other than Jesus Christ as your representative? Do you believe that it is by faith alone that God justifies? My friends, if you believe that, then you are saved. If you do not believe it, then you are not saved.

To the weary believer who is examining his own life, I want to encourage you to stop examining your life, and instead examine the Gospel. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians—who were debauched people—he says, “I want to make nothing known among you except for Christ and Him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). Why? He does it because he wants to turn their eyes to Christ, rather than to themselves.

The Corinthians were not actually struggling with their assurance. They were presuming upon God and living in sin. Whether people are struggling with their assurance or struggling with sin, the solution is the same, which is Christ and Him crucified. The glorious Gospel is what brings us out of sin and into assurance.

Jimmy Buehler: When people ask, “How do we know that we saved?” I would remind them of how Jesus rose from the dead. The day He rose—Easter Sunday 2,000 years ago—was the day that we were saved.

The other thing that I would do is point out that the faith that we have, however frail, is a *gift* of God. I think the evangelical world acknowledges that our faith is a gift, but the minute we bring assurance into the conversation, people ask, “How's your faith?”

Well, wait a minute. Faith itself is a gift, in which God has by the Holy Spirit breathed life into me and given me faith. It is never

about the *quality* of my faith. It is always about the *object* of my faith, which is Christ and Christ alone.

Jon Moffitt: Just to that, how much faith is enough to have assurance?

Jimmy Buehler: *Any* faith!

Justin Perdue: Yeah, that's right. *Any* faith.

Jon Moffitt: No matter how weak it is.

Justin Perdue: Right. Each Christian's faith can ebb and flow by the moment. At one moment I may feel like my faith is "strong." The next moment I may feel like my faith is faltering. That has been the experience of all the redeemed of all time.

That is why we say "any" amount of faith is enough. When Jesus gave an illustration about the kind of faith that will move mountains, He didn't talk about having a large amount of faith; He talked about a very small amount. I think we often miss the point of what He's saying there.

Furthermore, I think that many evangelicals become Roman Catholic in the way that they think about the Christian life. Allow me to explain. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) was an ecumenical council of the Roman church held in response to the Protestant Reformation. Session 6 of the council addressed justification. It declared that good works *preserve* and increase the justice that has been credited to us. Canon 24 condemns anyone who doesn't believe that.

Now, no evangelical would say that our good works increase our justification. However, I think that there are tons of evangelicals that implicitly, if not explicitly, believe that our good works keep us justified. They would agree that we are justified by faith, but then

they think that we do good works and we obey so that we *remain* in good standing.

That is not the Gospel. That is not Protestant theology. It is Roman Catholic theology. This error is massive in its scope, and it is rampant. You cannot reverse engineer the relationship between justification and good works—you cannot flip it on its head—or you kill the whole thing. It is not accurate to say (or think), “Do good works so that you keep yourself saved.”

We trust Christ alone, and then we will do good works. But please note: those good works are produced supernaturally by the Spirit of God. They are the fruit *of the Spirit*. Those good works were prepared beforehand for us to walk in (Ephesians 2:10). And those works are not in any way meritorious unto justification.

Jimmy Buehler: So let’s just play a little game, shall we? You might ask a person, “How do you know that you’re saved?”

Person: “Well, I trust Christ, and I feel like my life reflects that,” they say.

Jimmy: “Okay, let’s talk about that. So how does your life reflect that?”

Person: “I read Scripture, and I pray.”

Jimmy: “How much Scripture do you read?”

Person: “I read a little bit every day.”

Jimmy: “How do you know that’s enough?”

Person: “Well, I feel like compared to other things—”

Jimmy: “How do you know that you pray enough?”

Person: “Well, I feel like—”

This conversation could go on and on. You would begin to peel back all of the layers of their own obedience. Eventually, what you would find is that the person is trusting in their own quantity of faith—how much faith they have. But how can you know that level of faith is enough?

What we are trying to say is that we are saved because God

promised to save us through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Period. End of story.

Jon Moffitt: He made me a promise, and I trust that promise.

Jimmy Buehler: That's right. That is all we are trying to say.

Justin Perdue: He always keeps His promises.

Jimmy Buehler: The minute that you mingle even the smallest shred of something that you did with what Christ has done, welcome to Catholicism.

Justin Perdue: Right. Now your salvation hinges on your own cooperation.⁵

Jon Moffitt: There's a quote by the reformer John Calvin that says, "all the sorrows we endure contribute to our salvation and final good."⁶ This is from his commentary on Romans chapter 5. Sorrows expose our frailty and need of salvation. Sorrows are the constant internal arrow pointing us to look outside of ourselves to find our final relief that can't be found here on earth.

Do you know what sorrows and trials and suffering are? They are the sins of our lives coming to the surface. What is exposed by sorrows, suffering, and trials is how horrible we are at saving ourselves. We are horrible at it, and we cannot do it. When you attempt it, the only thing you really contribute is sin. That is the only thing

5. Roman Catholic theology emphasizes our cooperation with the grace of God in order to be saved. It is not that faith is not a part of the Roman schema; it is. However, according to Rome, there are works we must do alongside that faith in order to attain salvation.

6. John Calvin, commenting on Romans 5:3-5, in *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. John Owen (Ingersoll, Ontario: Devoted Publishing, repr. 2018), 140.

that you have ever contributed, and sorrows and suffering are the proofs of that.

It is so dangerous to think that a level of your own obedience would ever bring assurance. As an exercise, let's examine one of the most famous Christians in the New Testament: The Apostle Peter. He promised that he would die for Jesus. Then, when confronted by a little girl, he buckled and completely denied Christ. People will say, "Well, Peter didn't have the Holy Spirit at that time." True, but years later he buckled again, even while indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and Paul had to come in and rebuke him for denying the Gospel (Galatians 2:11-21).

The point here is that we, as sinful creatures, have a tendency to rely on our flesh and good works. By doing this, we are establishing our assurance on things that are imperfect, and even behaviors that may be demonstrated by people outside of the faith. For example, I know good Mormons who read the Bible and love their neighbors. But that does not represent grounds for assurance. Nothing a person ever does will be enough to be accepted. Therefore, we stand firm on the principle of *sola fide*: "faith alone."

Jimmy Buehler: Agreed. I know plenty of Muslims who live a far more "spiritual life" than many Christians, but all of their works combined do not place them one step closer to God.

Justin Perdue: We could spend a lot of time discussing all the things that are preached and promoted in the church that you don't need Jesus for. Michael Horton wrote an entire book called *Christless Christianity* on that very subject. So much of what exists and is encouraged in the American church—in the Western church—you need Christ for none of it.

What we need Christ for uniquely is to atone for our sins, to satisfy the wrath of God, and to provide us with righteousness—and Jesus has done that work perfectly. That is the message to the sinner

out there. That is the comfort to the person who struggles with his or her own corruption. That's what we want to say to the person who wrestles with feeling like God's enemy, while being promised that you're His child.

The message is: "Sinner, Jesus Christ and His work in your place is sufficient to satisfy for your sin, and to provide you with all the righteousness that you will ever need. It is counted to you completely by faith, and so you are in Christ. You are absolutely safe. God has made promises to us, and He is faithful to keep every one of them. Ultimately, *that* is our confidence."

My favorite benediction text is 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24. "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely"—so there we have sanctification—"and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." What a lofty thing.

Then Paul gives us this assuring statement: "He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it." We are resting not in our own faithfulness, but in God's faithfulness. We trust that God has called us, that our faith is a gift from Him, that Christ is enough, and that God will ultimately bring us home to heaven. We are not looking anywhere inside ourselves for assurance. We are looking outside of ourselves to God in Christ.

Jon Moffitt: I would like to point out to readers that all three of us are pastors, and each of us practices church discipline within our congregations. We all agree that sin is damaging to the believer's rest. Sin actually steals from our assurance.

We do not think someone could profess Christ and go live in sin. That goes against Galatians 6:1, which tells us that when we see a brother trapped in sin, we should go to him to restore him. Please understand that we are not justifying sin. Please don't mistake our message for *easy believism* or *antinomianism*.

What we are saying is that God is the one who sanctifies us, but

we cannot find assurance within ourselves. Those who are pursuing assurance through means of good works or personal discipline never find rest. I think they actually stay in sin longer, because Paul says that you cannot overcome sin with the flesh (Col. 2:23). It has to be overcome through the Spirit. I believe that those who do indeed find rest are the ones who truly see growth.

Once more, I want to reiterate that *good works* is not a dirty phrase. We are not saying that living in sin is okay. We are talking to the one who struggles with sin, announcing that rest is found in Christ, not in your own faithfulness to God.

Justin Perdue: We also believe that the transformation of a Christian's life is real.

The great irony is that when we take our focus off of ourselves and our own transformation, and we rest in Christ, trust Him completely, and concern ourselves with loving our neighbor, that is when the most substantial transformation happens. It seems counterintuitive, but that is how the Lord works.

5

Conclusion

If you have struggled to find assurance, one simple primer will not be the final solution to remove all doubts and fears. We create spiritual habits over time. We fall back on what we have always heard or been taught. I have walked many down this road, and I've heard the same sentence over and over again, "I know what you are saying is true, it's just hard to believe it."

Resting in Christ is something you must learn to do. We must learn to create new habits when faced with sin and temptation. We must learn to create thought habits that remind you of your identity in Christ. God adopted you unconditionally; you did not adopt yourself.

Your good works will never be enough for God to accept you as righteous. This is why we walk by faith. Faith in the Gospel. Faith in what Christ did for us, not in what we will do for him. Our minds must be reprogrammed away from the pietism that has been ingrained into us. We have been trained to look to our performance to find our security. The Gospel points us to Christ's actions on our behalf to find our security. There will be a thousand and one *what-ifs* as you walk down this road. The answer to each one is found on the cross of Christ when he cried out, "It is finished!"

No level of obedience—including your emotional highs—will ever be considered by the Father when you stand before him. EVER! That would be grace plus works. We are saved by grace (Eph. 2:8-9). We are receiving favor from God that we do not deserve. That is what grace means. When the Father looks at you, he doesn't see

your good works. He sees you clothed in the righteousness of His Son. Jesus took on our garments so that we could take on His (2 Cor. 5:21). The gift of this garment has no conditions added to it. It's a free gift. Those who wear this garment, Jesus says he will "give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:28).

Every day you must make a choice. You can choose to believe the words in your head that cause you to doubt yourself. Or you can choose to believe the words of the one saving you. Does Jesus have the power to save those He promises to save? John writes, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13). Our faith alone is what promises assurance. No one in the history of the universe has created faith within themselves. Faith is a gift that comes to us from God, and it comes to us by grace (Eph. 2:8-9). It must be a gift. Otherwise, we have reasons to boast that we had faith when others did not. If you believe that God saves sinners through Jesus Christ, that is a gift from the Father to you. A special gift. A gift that is precious.

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE WAS NEVER MEANT TO BE LIVED ALONE

God, in His gracious design for the believer, did not leave us to struggle alone. This quest for assurance you find yourself on was never to be traveled alone. Many would live in a constant state of fear if they had to figure this out on their own. Paul tells the Ephesian church,

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love (Eph. 4:15-16).

Your growth is found within the body of Christ. It is there we find our strength, our hope, and have our assurance built up. Week after week, we have the ordinary means of grace that God has given to the church to provide comfort, hope, and growth to our faith. When we are too weak to believe the truths of the Gospel, the Word is preached over us, and the Spirit strengthens our faith. We receive the table as a physical representation of the Gospel to strengthen our faith in what we are receiving from God, not what we are offering Him in service. Remembering our baptism and observing others being baptized is another physical reminder of what has happened to us. We were cleansed by the blood of Christ. Our old self died with Him, and we were raised to a new life. This was done to us, it is not something we do to ourselves. We receive the preached Word, the table, and baptism as a means to remind us of where we find our standing before God.

This is why it is so vital for Christians to faithfully participate in a local body. It is here we find comfort and give comfort. It is here our family brings us to Christ in the Word and table when we have no strength to believe. Even in our daily lives as Christians, we look to something outside of ourselves to sustain us, not in our ability to believe or obey on our own. We use the church to create new habits of thought. And in turn, we love and care for others who struggle alongside us.

Weary pilgrim, rest can be found. Today, believe in what God has done for you, in spite of you who are or what you have done. God has never placed a limit on your repentance. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Who is the one that is faithful? The Father. It is just for Him to forgive us, because He has punished Jesus for all of our sins, past, present, and future. Our confession is the reminder that, even though we still fail Him time after time, God will always be faithful to forgive. That is the faithfulness we must trust. Not our faithfulness to obey, but God's faith-

fulness to forgive. God has never put a limit on our forgiveness. No sin is too great that Christ's blood will not cover it.

Focus not on what you can get away with, but on the grace and mercy you have received. Rejoice and rest. Set aside anything, including sin, that would prevent you from looking unto Jesus, "the founder and perfecter of our faith" (Heb. 12:2). We keep our eyes on Jesus, for it is there we find our hope and purpose for life.

We pray that you find a good church that will lead you to trust in what Christ has done for you as the only grounds of your assurance.

Jon Moffitt

Spring Hill, TN

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