

“Blessed Assurance”

In my last article I posed the question, “Can I be certain about my eternal destiny?” I also gave three examples of ways in which people can be falsely assured. The question of assurance is clearly an important one and has ramifications—not merely for what happens when we die—but it will impact our daily Christian lives. It’s a blessing from God that Christians are able to have assurance that they’re right with God in Jesus Christ. In spite of this, there have been those who teach that we can never be assured of our salvation until we get to heaven. Cardinal Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621), one of Roman Catholicism’s most formidable theologians, called the Protestant teaching of assurance of salvation a heresy. “The principle heresy of Protestants is that saints may obtain to a certain assurance of their gracious and pardoned state before God.” During the same time period, many in the Protestant Reformation taught that we can be assured of our faith in Jesus Christ in two important ways.

The first way that we can have a genuine assurance of our faith is called doctrinal assurance, also known as the “assurance of faith” or objective assurance. This is the view of the faithfulness of God in the testimony of scripture. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1643-1647)—generally held by Reformed Protestant congregations as a faithful interpretation of Scripture in the parts that it undertakes to explicate—tells us that we have an, “...infallible assurance of faith, founded on the divine truth of the promises of salvation, on the evidence in our hearts that the promised graces are present and on the fact that the Spirit of adoption witnesses with our spirits that we are God’s children.” (WCF 18.2, Modern Version)

It should be noted that the inner testimony of the, “Spirit himself (who) bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Romans 8:16) is not to be understood as some type of immediate revelation on our soul. Rather, this is the work of the Holy Spirit mediated by the Word of God. As the Spirit illumines our minds and hearts we increasingly grow in our love for and belief in Scripture, not least, because of, “The heavenly character of its content, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of its style, the agreement of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full disclosure it makes of the only way of man’s salvation....are many arguments by which it gives evidence that it is the Word of God.” (WCF 1.5, Modern Version) So, then, we have an objective assurance that our faith is genuine, foundationally based on our, Spirit given, understanding of and belief in Scripture.

Along with doctrinal or objective assurance we may add practical or subjective assurance. This is sometimes called “assurance of sense.” This is not merely a feeling. Our senses are finite and limited and they can and do deceive us. Still, our assurance is grounded in the objective and may be experienced in the subjective. Knowing and truly believing objective truth must, necessarily, have a positive effect on our daily lives. Nineteenth century Anglican bishop J.C. Ryle writes, “I bless God that our salvation in no way depends on our own works. But I never would have any believer for a moment forget that our sense of salvation depends much on the manner of our living.” “And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments....” (1 John 2:3)

Coming to know God through his word shows us that, any good that we desire or

accomplish is a gift from God. Faithful obedience—“the fruits of assurance” (WCF 18.3)—flows out of growing in our knowledge of God and his will for us. Knowing God, by grace, increasingly gives us joy in Christ as well as an ongoing desire for repentance of sin. As Christians continue to grow in our knowledge of God, by grace, we will increasingly experience the blessing of positive change in our lives from the inside out. Furthermore, as we see that the word of God is continually transforming our lives, by grace, this produces in us an ongoing desire to drink in life-giving water from the deep well of the Scriptures. Can you see, then, how the love of God produced in us by his Word and Spirit is life changing?

Fanny Crosby gave us a wonderful hymn that Christians have sung together for many years, “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! O what a foretaste of glory divine!” Our “blessed assurance” in Jesus Christ should make us want to continue to grow in the Word and live lives to the glory of God.

Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church PCA in Paxton, Illinois