

The Assurance of the Believer

We recognize there are committed Christians who hold differing views concerning the assurance of the believer. Because of our commitment to the Great Commission and our Purpose Statement, we will not make the differing views of the assurance of the believer an issue of division or disunity. We will proclaim the holiness of God, the love of God for all persons, and the call to holy living, regardless of differing views on the assurance of the believer. Regional and district directors and credentialing committees are to use this position paper in the credentialing process.

The Scriptures teach that the Christian believer may have the blessed assurance of being saved. He need not live in uncertainty as to his relationship with God. He can know beyond doubt that his sins are forgiven and he is a child of God.

Assurance of Acceptance

First, the believer may be assured by the witness of the Spirit, that inward evidence of acceptance with God. "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (Rom 8:16). "Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us" (1 John 3:24). The Spirit bears witness after faith has been exercised in the promises of God (Cf. Heb. 11:5-6).

Other evidences are also given by which the believer may be certain about his saved relationship. The first Epistle of John, which centers on knowing, conditions that certainty on such evidences as conforming one's life to the Word of God (2:35); doing what is right (2:29; 3:7-10); loving fellow Christians (3:14-15); possessing an uncondemning heart (3:19-21); and living victoriously over sin and Satan (5:18).

Assurance of Security

There is another aspect to assurance, the certainty of being kept. We may enjoy assurance of present acceptance, but what about the future? Can we have the assurance of perseverance? Sometimes defeated people are discouraged from beginning the Christian life for fear they will not "hold out."

There is no question about the gracious purpose and the power of God to keep His own from falling, and to present them before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy (Jude 24). God's enabling power far exceeds even our asking. He "is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us," (Eph. 3:20). God is greater than every degree and kind of opposition. Paul therefore asks, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom 8:31). No outside enemy or force is strong enough to sever us from the love of God. "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that

neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:37,39).

Condition of Security

We need not worry, therefore, about God’s ability or loving purpose to make us final victors. But this outcome is not automatic or inevitable. Throughout the New Testament it is consistently taught that the keeping power of God becomes effective through the exercise of faith. The elect “through faith are shielded by God’s power” (1 Peter 1:5). The writer to the Hebrews, addressing them as “holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling,” calls for steadfast faith: “We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first” (Heb. 3:1, 14).

Let us observe that the scriptural condition for salvation is believing. “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him” (John 3:36). See also John 3:16, 18; 5:24; 6:40, 47. But the word “believes” used in all of these passages is in the present tense, and it means “to believe and to continue to believe.” It is the continuous or progressive present, and implies not only an initial act of faith but a maintained attitude. Assurance of security, therefore, is for the believing one. We are saved by faith and we are kept by faith.

False Security

Nowhere in the New Testament is it suggested that a Christian can presume on his saved relationship. Nowhere is the idea conveyed that he has “arrived” and all he needs to do is “coast in” because of an initial act of faith. Nowhere is encouragement given to the backslider that since he was once saved he will always be saved. Nowhere is there any support for the antinomian heresy that a Christian can indulge in sin with impunity. On the contrary, followers of Christ are exhorted to “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation” (Matt. 26:41); “be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the lawless men and fall from your secure position” (2 Peter 3:17); “be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure” (2 Pet. 1:10); hold “on to faith and a good conscience” in order to avoid shipwreck (1 Tim. 1:18); “be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good” (Titus 3:8); “hold unswervingly to the hope we profess ” (Heb. 10:23); “stand firm in the Lord” (Phil. 4:1).

The Christian is warned of mortal dangers through salt losing its saltiness (Lk. 14:34-35); through failing to remain in Christ (John 15:6); in being moved from the hope held out in the gospel (Col. 1:23); in wandering from the faith (1 Tim. 6:10); in escaping from the trap of the devil (2 Tim. 2:24, 26); in ignoring such a great salvation (Heb. 2:3); in turning away (apostatizing) from the living God (Heb. 3:12); in being hardened by sin’s deceitfulness (Heb. 3:13); in deliberately keeping on sinning (Heb. 10:26-31); in wandering from the truth (James 5:19-20); in being overcome by the world (2 Pet. 2:20,22); in forsaking one’s first love (Rev. 2:4, 5).

This is the clear teaching of the New Testament. God’s sovereign provision is coupled with human responsibility. The declarations of Scripture are always linked with

demands, the indicatives with imperatives. Security is for the one who is believing. We are kept by the power of God through faith. The classical passages on God's keeping power, John 10 and Romans 8, both condition security on human faith evidenced in obedience. The promise of eternal life and protection from enemies is for those who listen to the voice of Christ and follow Him (John 10:27-28). The promises in Romans 8:29,39 are for those who love God (vs. 28), a love which will be demonstrated by keeping the commandments of Christ (See John 14:15, 21, 23-24; 15:9-10; compare Matt. 28:19-20).

Truth in Balance

These complementary truths, divine sovereignty and human responsibility, have not always been kept in balance. In fact, men, seizing upon one to the exclusion of the other, have tried to erect entire theological systems on only one of them. For example, Calvin, who was preceded by Augustine, erected his system on the principle of the sovereignty of God with five main points: (1) unconditional election; (2) limited atonement; (3) total moral inability and depravity; (4) irresistible grace; and (5) the final perseverance of the saints. Calvin held that God predestinated some, including babies, to be saved; others to be damned. The difference in destinies was found not in any human response to or rejection of the gospel but in the inscrutable will of God. Some of his followers have carried these principles to fatalistic extremes. They have opposed any evangelistic or missionary effort as an affront to God's sovereignty. Many so-called Calvinists today hold greatly modified views of the system even though they still hold to the capstone of the structure "Once in grace, always in grace" or "Once saved, always saved."

Arminius, who belonged to the generation following Calvin, attempted to counter the Calvinistic system by insisting upon (1) election conditioned upon God's foreknowledge of individual response to the gospel; (2) atonement with the world in view; (3) moral good only through regeneration based on the faith of the individual; (4) possibility of resisting grace; (5) perseverance through the help of the Holy Spirit by the response of faith. Historically the Missionary Church has been in agreement on these five points. However, some of those who followed Arminius went much further. They built their system on the principle of human freedom to the exclusion of divine sovereignty and came out with a revised form of the heresy of Pelagianism. They denied human depravity, affirmed man's inherent goodness, stressed human effort and volition, and ended up with salvation by works.

Final Arbiter

The final arbiter of truth is the Word of God, to which the Missionary Church is committed. The Word sets forth both the truth of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. God in His sovereignty chose to create man a free being to exercise choice within His sovereign purpose.

Admittedly, the operation of both transcends human understanding, but the greatest theologian of all time, the Apostle Paul, holding to both could only bow in praise before the unsearchable wisdom of God. In the 9th chapter of Romans, he sets forth in

unrelieved clarity God's initiative, purpose, and work in saving man by sovereign grace. "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy." "Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?" But in the chapter which follows, man's responsibility is set forth with such emphasis that the initiative for his salvation seems to rest solely with him: "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Then the Apostle places still more responsibility on man: "And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?"

Then in the 11th chapter of Romans, these two great principles are repeatedly joined. The fact is stated, but the method transcends human understanding. The great theologian can only express wonder and praise as he marvels at the transcendent ways of God: "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgment, and his paths beyond tracing out!"

To sum up, the Scriptures teach both divine sovereignty and human responsibility. They teach, on the one hand, the adequacy of God's provision in grace to save us, and on the other hand, the need of exercising and maintaining faith to make the provision of salvation effective. Through faith the believer may enjoy the assurance of both present acceptance and God's keeping power. But a lapse of vital, operative, obedient faith can lead to tragedy. New Testament Christians are warned that there is no escape from the consequences of persistent backsliding and that the possibility of apostasy is a biblical reality. Throughout the New Testament, Christians are urged to maintain a steadfast faith in and fidelity to the Lord Jesus Christ.

—Revised by the 2011 General Conference