

Salvation: Assurance, Apostasy

Perseverance means Christians continuing in faith, love, and holiness. Faith means continuing to believe the Gospel. Christians do not believe it once and forget about it. They continue to believe the Gospel. They can have doubts, sincere doubts. They can even wonder whether the Gospel is true or whether they believe it. But they do continue to believe it. They continue to love God and fellow believers and unsaved people. They continue to live not a perfect life, but a basically holy life by the grace of God for the glory of God. God keeps us and consequently we persevere. God grants us assurance; He assures us of salvation. We can define assurance as Christians' confidence of final salvation. Historically, there have been three foundations of assurance—three reasons why we know we are saved. At times there has been overemphasis on one or the other to the detriment of the Christian life. I will argue for a balance, giving primary basis to the Word.

The Word is, indeed, the primary way God assures us that we are saved—by His promises of saving and keeping or preserving us. James Hodges, a godly man, is right in saying the Word is the primary basis of assurance. He is wrong in saying it is the only basis. Again, he wants to sever that tie between God's grace in saving us once and for all, and the necessity of perseverance. You cannot look to a life as evidence of salvation, he says. I disagree, however. The Word is not the only basis. We look to the Scripture chiefly, but not solely. I say chiefly because it alone of these three is outside of us. On a bad day we may not be able to discern the witness of the Spirit or the evidence of change in our lives. Therefore when we are crushed, we come back to the Gospel. That is the key. But the Gospel is not alone. God does assure us by witnessing in our heart through the Holy Spirit. Romans 8 tells us the Spirit bears witness to our spirits that we are the children of God. John Wesley emphasized the witness of the Spirit. At times this has been overemphasized. It has an introspective dimension which can be subject if it is not properly anchored in the Word. It could even lead to mysticism, seeking God apart from the Word. The witness of the Spirit is part of the whole, but it is not the whole or even the most important part.

Perseverance, or a changed life, is also one of the ways God assures us. The book of 1 John is replete with references to this. First John 5 summarizes it this way: "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God,"—As we said earlier, faith is an evidence of the new birth—"and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well."—Believers loving God shows perseverance of love.—"This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands." The way we know we love the Son of God is by keeping God's commandment. John intertwines perseverance in faith, love, and holiness in those verses. Could you overemphasize perseverance? Yes. If you lose sight of the fact that it is the grace of God in the Gospel that keeps you saved every day of your life, if you put too much emphasis on examining your life, you could err. In some churches so much emphasis is put on examining yourself and determining that you are worthy that more people abstain from the Lord's Supper than partake. This is a mistake. There is a legalism there. This can lead to legalism or merit theology. Our perseverance in faith as the only basis for assurance of salvation could lead to false assurance because it can point toward once professed, always saved. This is not true. The healthiest understanding of assurance of salvation is to seek all three with an emphasis on the Word. God does kindly and graciously assure us in print, in His Word, that we are His children. In the Bible He promises to save and keep us. That is the most important basis of assurance and always will be. When you are devastated in life and have nothing to hold on to, hold on to the Word of God.

But God does not assure us only through His word. He assures those who sincerely believe the Gospel. He is the ever-present one who assures us by His presence. One of the major works of the Holy Spirit is to testify to our spirits that we are the children of God and that God's grace is real. He never justifies

anyone without also sanctifying them—He does change our lives. To use Hoekema's terminology, we are not totally new, but we are genuinely new. There is no one, according to Scripture, who has been justified and not sanctified. Of course, there are people who profess Christ and then leave the faith. How do we evaluate this? Would the evaluations of a godly Calvinist pastor and a godly Armenian pastor be totally different? Not necessarily. They both could conclude the person was never saved. Or that it is a Christian who is not living like a Christian. The Armenian pastor could also say it is a person who has forfeited or lost their salvation, because they put more emphasis on our responsibility.

One example of this is a man who was attracted to another woman besides his wife and moved in with her. He was a member of a good church. The pastor faithfully went to confront this man, but he was smart and ready. He would say, “Thank you for coming, Pastor. Yes, you are right; I am wrong. But you and I both know I know the Lord. Thanks for coming.” The pastor would not be put off that quickly. As he persevered, the man said he was happy and God wants him to be happy. When asked about the happiness of his wife and children, he did not have good answers. He promised to visit his children. The pastor was baffled because he believed Bob was a Christian. I met with the pastor and the elders to fortify them. They were faithful men and they did not give up on this man. In speaking to them I said this: “The Lord knows those who are His. I think this man belongs to the Lord, but he is not living like it, and assurance is tied to the way we live. I am not talking about perfectionism, but a major moral cleansing of that which is inconsistent of Christian profession. So I say, go back and tell Bob he can say whatever he wants but he will not fool the Lord. If you are honest with yourself in your heart of hearts, you do not know you are saved if you live this way.”

Ephesians 5:5 says, “For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.” Hodges distinguishes between being accepted into the kingdom of God and having an inheritance in the kingdom. Therefore he says that you can be immoral, impure, or greedy and still be saved. This is not what Paul is saying. He is saying immoral, impure or greedy persons are not saved. The next verse says, “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient.” I told the pastor to go back and tell Bob this verse. They shared with him the truth, and it pierced him to the heart. We can damage our assurance. I would liken this to a good marriage where there is interpersonal communication. In a good marriage, love covers a multitude of sins—otherwise you would not have a good marriage. If your spouse took offense at every possible thing, you would be constantly frustrated. But would a faithful wife let her husband commit major sins and not confront him about it? No. It is the same way with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit loves us. We grieve him by our sin, and He will discipline us. This man was disciplined; he was broken. He went to counseling and his wife took him back. The Lord walked with the family and they have been together for 10 years. Truth can be abuse by distorting another part of the truth.

Fellow believers can help and witness with the Holy Spirit in my life with me. It is a wise Christian who gives the hurting person what they need. The one who is beaten down may not be beaten down anymore. The one who is happy in his sin may need to be wounded. We need great wisdom from God. Doing this for many years drives me to utter dependence on the Holy Spirit. We have perimeters with guidelines and within that we need the wisdom of Solomon. We might pray like this in some situations: “Lord, I do not know if she knows the Lord. If she does not, save her and let me know. If she does, please revive her.” Some Christians would call that judging, but judging is condemning someone to hell. God saves and God sends to hell. It is not judging to cry out for someone about whose salvation you are not sure.

Departure from the faith by professed believers is a definition for apostasy that all Christians can agree with. By definition, non-professing unbelievers cannot commit apostasy. You have to profess to be a

Christian before you can apostatize. In 1 John 2:19 John says, “They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us.” This looks like a correlation on John's part between preservation and perseverance when he says, “For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But their going showed that none of them belonged to us.” There are some people we can be more sure of, because of fruit evidenced in their lives, but we do not have God's vision. Even when we think we know, every pastor has some in his church who profess to believe but about whom he is not sure. The end of 2 Corinthians says, “Examine yourselves to be sure that you are in the faith.” In 2 Peter 1 Peter says, “Make your calling and election sure by your perseverance...” Good people disagree concerning the possibility of apostasy for believers. Here, again, you have a Calvinist and Armenian argument. For Calvinists, believers are unable to apostatize. This is Calvinist dogma. This is also discernible in some of the apostasy passages, such as 1 John 2:19. The inner three warning passages in Hebrews 3, 6, and 10 give hints that the core of the people to whom he writes are believers and he is confident of it. There are others in whom he is not confident, thereby indicating they come short of salvation. In 6 he says, “There are those who do not really believe and shrink back.” Hebrews 3:14 says, “They were not really joined to Christ.”

Apostasy is a biblical category, so I am not just working from hypothesis. In Matthew 7 Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to me “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” That is true profession born out of persevering in obedience. Confessing Jesus as Lord is a Christian confession. They are making the right confession but not everyone who says those words will get into heaven. Many of them who claim it will be told plainly by Jesus, “I never knew you.” However, like the false prophets whom Jesus describes as wolves in sheep's clothing, those who are making false professions will sometimes be discernible.