

Assurance

How Can I Know That I Am Saved?

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I. Introduction

In the preceding essay “Allegiance: A Closer Look at the Biblical Requirements for Salvation,” I surveyed the New Testament for those conditions we must meet in order to receive salvation. The results indicated that God accepts me and allows me to enter into a relationship with Him when I meet the following two primary conditions:

Allegiance to the Truth about Jesus

I believe that Jesus is God's unique Son, the Christ sent to bring salvation to the world on the basis of His death and resurrection--indeed the Lord God Himself in human form.

I express my allegiance to these truths by depending on Jesus alone as the sole agent of my salvation, not depending even in part on any merit from my own good works.

Allegiance to Jesus as One's Own Lord

I switch my fundamental loyalty away from myself, my needs, my sinful desires, or any other person or thing, and instead commit myself entirely to the Lord Jesus, to serve, honor, love, and please Him the rest of my life.

In this essay I want to explore some of the implications of the above for the process of gaining assurance of one's salvation. Many people struggle throughout their lives to have a firm assurance that they are indeed justified and accepted before God, often seeking one new “experience” with God after another on which they can hinge their assurance. Unfortunately, this experience-based approach produces very mixed results. For a few decisive individuals, one or two such experiences may more or less settle the question, so that assurance is no longer a front-burner issue. But for many others who are by nature more insecure, this experience-based approach produces a yo-yo effect, bouncing these individuals from spiritual high points of great assurance when their experiences with God are rich and convincing, to subsequent low points of lack of assurance when experience dries up.

Fortunately, there is a better way, which takes into account the straightforward truths summarized above from scripture.

II. The Foundations of Assurance

1. What Is Assurance?

First, we need to make clear what assurance is. Some of the common confusion about assurance of salvation arises from the fact that assurance, like salvation itself, is based on a *belief*. It is important to distinguish between salvation belief (i.e., belief that leads to salvation) and assurance belief (i.e., belief that leads to assurance).

Salvation results from *believing in Jesus*. (Salvation belief)

Assurance results from *believing that I believe in Jesus*. (Assurance belief)

It is quite possible to have the first sort of belief without the second sort. If you have allegiance to the truths about Jesus and to Jesus as your own Lord, then you are saved, according to God's authoritative word. However, if you are unable to definitely perceive your own allegiance to Jesus, then you may be unwilling at present to believe that you are saved, even if in actuality you are.

This is important to understand, for some Christians have been mistakenly led to believe that if you are truly saved, then you will necessarily *know* it. This, however, is false. It confuses assurance belief with salvation belief. It is also without biblical support, a point that I will discuss in more detail in the next section below. It is quite possible for a genuine believer to firmly believe in Jesus (i.e., yield allegiance to Jesus) and yet, due to various emotional insecurities, not yet firmly believe that he or she is saved.

Another distinction may be helpful here, the distinction between *the object of one's faith*, which may be either objective or subjective in nature, and *one's faith itself*, which is necessarily subjective in nature. Faith itself, like all of our mental processes, is a subjective experience. We all view reality through the lens of our own subjective consciousness. I can't get out of my own head, so to speak. This does not mean, however, that the *object* of one's faith need be subjective too. There is an objective reality outside of me, and what is in my head may correspond to truth about that objective reality.

This is precisely the case with salvation belief. The object of salvation belief is clearly objective in nature, focused entirely on the objective reality of Jesus, and not on anything of our own subjective experience. In order to be saved, we believe that Jesus is God's unique Son, the Christ sent to bring salvation to the world on the basis of His death and resurrection, the Lord God Himself in human form. We place our dependence and trust entirely on Jesus, not on ourselves or the merit of our own good works. We yield our loyalty entirely to Him as Lord. The focus of all this is objectively on Jesus, not on our own experience. I exercise my faith in Jesus in the confidence that my subjective beliefs about Him can indeed come to match what is objectively true about Him. Thus, in the case of salvation belief we find the following principle at work:

I *subjectively* believe that the claims about Jesus are *objectively* true.

But now we meet an important difference between salvation belief and assurance belief. Let me repeat the two kinds of belief here for ease of reference:

Salvation results from believing in Jesus. (Salvation belief)

Assurance results from believing that I believe in Jesus. (Assurance belief)

Notice that whereas the object of salvation belief is an *objective* truth (i.e., Jesus, or the truths about Jesus), the object of assurance belief is a *subjective* truth (i.e., that I believe in Jesus). This is why gaining assurance of salvation is such a difficult task for some people. When we exercise assurance belief, we are making a claim about the status of an inward subjective mental phenomenon. Especially for people who tend to be insecure about making judgments, such subjective phenomena can serve as slippery targets for faith. For such people, there may seem to always be room for self-doubt (e.g., “Do I *really* believe?” “Do I believe *strong enough*?”). In these cases, the person may well have a genuine salvation belief but lack a firm assurance belief.

It is, of course, also possible to have the second sort of belief without the first sort. You may believe that you are accepted by God (i.e., be assured of your salvation), and yet this belief may be scripturally unfounded. For example, you may have serious misunderstandings of what the Bible teaches about Jesus, or you may be willing to assent to the biblical truths about Jesus but be unwilling to submit your allegiance to Him as Lord, or you may be attempting to cling both to Jesus and to the merit of your own good works to earn God’s acceptance. In such cases you may mistakenly maintain assurance belief without realizing that you do not have genuine salvation belief.

To summarize, we are not saved by believing that we are saved. We are saved by believing in Jesus. But we are *assured* by believing that we are saved. It will be important to keep these distinctions in mind as we consider below specific obstacles to assurance of salvation. But first, we need to discuss in more detail a biblical approach to gaining assurance of salvation.

2. How Can We Gain Assurance?

The Bible presents a two-pronged approach to gaining assurance of one’s salvation. One prong is more deductive in nature while the other prong is more inductive.

A. GAINING ASSURANCE DEDUCTIVELY

The deductive basis for assurance is based on the trustworthiness of God to keep His promises. God has promised to forgive and accept all who yield allegiance to His Son through faith and repentance, as summarized earlier. If I meet those conditions of allegiance, then I can by faith deduce that I am forgiven and accepted by God. Consider the following syllogism:

1. According to the Bible, God accepts all who yield allegiance to Jesus.
2. I have yielded allegiance to Jesus.
3. Therefore, God accepts me.

This deduction is valid so long as the premises in (1) and (2) are true. The first of these premises is true so long as we have rightly interpreted allegiance to Christ as the essence of the scriptural conditions for salvation (see the separate essay on “Allegiance”), and so long as God can be counted on to be faithful to His promises (a point which we may take on faith). The second premise is valid so long as I have rightly interpreted my own commitment to Christ as a genuine yielding of allegiance to Him. This is the point at which those who lack assurance of salvation are most likely to stumble, and it is to this point that my later discussion of obstacles to assurance is aimed.

For some people, the deductive path seems to be sufficient for gaining assurance of salvation. In my observation this seems to be especially true for those who tend not to second-guess themselves or who are not overly analytical. Others, however, need more than a simple deduction on which to base their assurance. Fortunately, God has graciously provided an inductive path to assurance which complements the deductive path presented above.

B. GAINING ASSURANCE INDUCTIVELY

The inductive approach to assurance of salvation is based on observation of evidence of the Spirit’s presence in one’s life. The Bible presents three main varieties of inductive evidence:

1. The Spirit enables my spirit to *bear witness* that I am God’s child (Rom 8:14-16)
2. The Spirit enables me to bear a *proper confession* of Jesus (1 John 4:1-5, 13-15)
3. The Spirit bears *character “fruit”* in my life (Gal 5:22-23; 1 John)

I will treat these three inductive sources of assurance in turn.

(1) “Abba, Father” and the Witness of the Spirit

This is perhaps the most misunderstood of the three types of inductive evidence of salvation. The common conception of the “witness of the Spirit” is that it is a deep, inner mystical communication from the indwelling Holy Spirit to the spirit of the believer that he is indeed a child of God. This idea is drawn primarily from Roman 8:14-16.

“ . . . For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit Himself *bears witness with* our spirit that we are children of God”

Some interpreters have taken the logical next step and concluded from this that if a person continues to lack assurance over a period of time, this is itself an indication that the person must not have the Spirit dwelling within and thus must not be genuinely saved. As I discussed earlier,

this position tends to blur the distinction between salvation belief (i.e., believing *in Jesus*) and assurance belief (i.e., believing *that I believe* in Jesus).

It turns out, however, that the understanding of the “witness of the Spirit” outlined above is based on a faulty exegesis of Scripture. The key word in Rom 8:16 is the verb translated as “bear witness with,” the Greek word *sum-martureo* (‘with-witness’). Liddell & Scott (1996) note that in Greek astrology the word *summartureo* was used of planets with the meaning “to be in aspect with/to configure with,” where one planet lines up with another planet (p. 1677). More fundamentally and more generally, *summartureo* with the prepositional prefix *sun-* (the *n* assimilated here to the initial *m* of *martureo*) meant “to bear witness . . . in support of another” (p. 1677), or, as Strathmann puts it in Kittel (1967), “to attest or confirm something as one witness along with another or several others” (p. 508). Later the word came to mean more generally simply “to confirm” or “to agree” with what another person has said (p. 509). The same sense of dual witness is seen in the related noun *summartus*, which meant “a fellow-/joint-witness” (Liddell & Scott, p. 1677). Common to all of these meanings is the notion of agreement between more than one witness; this is of course the difference between *summartureo* (with the prepositional prefix *sun-*) and its counterpart *martureo*, the latter not carrying the sense of dual witness. This ‘dual’ meaning of the prefix *sun-* is seen with other verbs in Greek, as in the verb *sun-ergeo* ‘work together with’ (see comments on *sunergeo* below).

The question now is whether this meaning of dual witness is present in the two other New Testament usages of *summartureo*. I will argue that it is. The first other usage is found in Rom 2:15.

“. . . For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience *bearing witness* [with], and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them”

In this passage the Gentile’s conscience is said to bear witness [with] (i.e. to *summartureo*), while his thoughts serve alternately as the defense and prosecution of this witness.

The question arises why Paul used *summartureo* ‘bear witness with’ instead of simply *martureo* ‘bear witness’. Is there more than one witness present? Yes. In fact, there are several possible interpretations on which a dual witness is implied. I will consider just one of them here (though see my fuller treatment in “The Witness of the Spirit”). One possible interpretation is that the two witnesses are the *conscience* and the *written Law*, both of which testify to the moral demands of the Law. On this interpretation, Paul is saying that the Gentile’s conscience, *just like the Jew’s Torah*, serves to bring to our attention the moral Law of God. *Both* the conscience and the written Law witness to roughly the same moral standard, so that the witness is in fact a joint witness provided by both.

Regardless the interpretation of the two witnesses in this passage, only one of the witnesses--the conscience--is overtly represented in the predicate structure of the verb *summartureo*. The other witness (i.e., the written Law, on the above interpretation) is an implicit argument (object) of the

verb+preposition combination. Such implicit objects are common cross-linguistically: compare English “*Bill got on (the bus),*” where the object is optional. A similar construction with implicit object of the Greek prepositional prefix *sun-* is found in 2 Corinthians 6:1:

“. . . and working together with Him, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain . . .”

The phrase translated “*working together with Him*” is actually a single word in the Greek, the verbal participle *sun-ergontes*, literally ‘with-working.’ The base form *sun-ergeo* represents a dual sense of the verb *ergeo* ‘to work’ in which more than one worker is involved (just as more than one witness is involved with *summartureo* above). The object *Him* in 2 Cor 6:1 above is not present in the Greek, and has been supplied here by the translator so as to capture the implicit dual meaning of the verb. The context makes clear that *Him* is the implicit object--in 5:18-21 we read of God’s work of reconciliation, to which Paul and his companions function as ambassadors. In 6:1, then, Paul is God’s companion in this process, carrying out the work of reconciliation by urging the Corinthians to fully embrace God’s grace. The point to be made here is simply that just as the prepositional prefix *sun-* ‘with’ takes an implicit object in 2 Corinthians 6:1, the same prefix may take an implicit object in Rom 2:15.

The second other New Testament usage of *summartureo* is found in Rom 9:1, where Paul proclaims his truthfulness, calling on his conscience to *summartureo* himself in the Holy Spirit:

“I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience *bearing witness* [with] me in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart.”

Again, it makes the most sense to take *summartureo* here in the same sense of a joint witness as in Rom 2:15. The meaning then is that Paul himself bears witness to his truthfulness and the genuineness of his sorrow (*I am telling the truth . . . I am not lying*), and Paul’s *conscience* is brought alongside to corroborate this testimony, where his conscience is treated as a distinct witness from the *I* that begins the verse. Strathmann confirms this interpretation: “The judgment of Paul’s conscience as directed by the Holy Spirit accompanies and confirms the statement which he [Paul] has made or begun to make” (Kittel, p. 509). There are thus two witnesses, Paul (*I/me*) and Paul’s conscience. [SEE ENDNOTE]

In each of the above New Testament uses of *summartureo*, then, the preferred interpretation is of a joint witness, where the subject of *summartureo* is one of the witnesses, and the other witness is (one of) the object(s) of *summartureo* (perhaps implicit). The question now is what implications does this have for Romans 8:16?

I would argue that as in the other passages, there are two witnesses in Rom 8:16 who together bear a joint witness. Consider first the factual content of this witness: I am a child of God. Are there two distinct participants who bear witness of this fact? Yes. In Romans 8 it is “we” who cry out, “Abba! Father!”, yet this is achieved *by* the Spirit in us:

“. . . a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’”

In Galatians 4:4-7 the Spirit's role is made clearer: Paul seems to suggest that the Spirit Himself in our hearts cries out "Abba! Father!"

"... But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God"

The picture here, then, is that both I and the Spirit within me cry out my identity as God's child. Crucially, the use of *summartureo* here, as in its other three uses in the NT, means "bear (joint-) witness *with*." It does not mean "bear witness *to*" (i.e., to my spirit), a fact that has been recognized by numerous commentators, including Donald Barnhouse, Stuart Briscoe, William Hendriksen, Charles Hodge, Douglas Moo, and John Murray. That is, this verse does not say that the Spirit is communicating my sonship to *me*. Instead, I and the Spirit are jointly bearing witness of my sonship to someone else.

But if not to me, then to whom is the joint witness directed? The answer is so obvious that most of us miss it. In both Rom 8:15 and Gal 4:6 it is the cry "Abba! Father!" that constitutes the joint witness. "Abba! Father!" is a title of direct address, meaning that we are crying out *to the Father Himself*. I and the Spirit bear joint witness of my sonship *to God the Father*. As Bernard Ramm eloquently put it (1959. *The Witness of the Spirit: An Essay on the Contemporary Relevance of the Internal Witness of the Holy Spirit*. Eerdmanns: Grand Rapids, MI, p. 51-52):

The locus of the *testimonium* is the human spirit, and both the divine Spirit and the human spirit cry the same thing, *Father*. These are not two cries but one cry. They are like two forks of the same pitch which vibrate sympathetically and harmoniously together. We *both* cry; we *both* cry *Father*--it is the same cry, the same content, to the same God.

But why does there need to be any witness borne to the Father? Doesn't the Father already know whether or not I am His child? Of course He does. Paul's words here, just as his similar words in Rom 9:1, must be understood in light of Jewish legal tradition, in which two or more corroborating witnesses were required to establish the validity of legal testimony (cf. Deut 17:6; 19:15; Mark 14:56). Paul's characterization of the believer's heart-cry to the Father in terms of a joint witness with the Spirit is meant to emphasize the *assuredness* and *validity* of this testimony: it is a testimony from the heart that has legal validity, so much so that it will stand even in the divine Court of Heaven. It is not only I who claim to be God's child, but God's Spirit corroborates this claim. With such a corroborative witness as He, who can then speak to the contrary?

This leads us to one final practical consideration: In what way will the believer perceive this joint witness of sonship to the Father? Given that the witness is directed to the Father, not to me, it is clear that I should *not* be looking for a mystical communication from God addressed *to me* to the

effect that I am God's child. Instead, the perception of this inner witness will be less direct. It seems to me that Martin Luther was on the right track when he spoke of the witness of the Spirit as "the filial [childlike] trust of our heart in God" (Luther, Martin. 1954 translation. *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. Transl. by J. Theodore Mueller. Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI, p. 106). That it, the "Abba! Father!" cry will be manifested as a strong, wordless desire of the believer's heart to reach out to God in faith, trust, and obedience, as to a father. Importantly, this cry is aimed outward and upward from within my heart; it is *not* aimed back inward to my own spirit. What matters for the purpose of establishing my assurance of salvation is therefore not what God is saying to me as such, but rather what *I in my spirit am saying to Him*. Do I long to reach out in trust to God as a child to a father? Do I desire to obey Him? Do I love Him? Do I want to understand Him more intimately? If these sorts of desires are present, then my spirit (by the Holy Spirit) is crying out to Him as my "Daddy! Father!" The unbeliever does not experience this heart-longing for the Father, for the simple reason that this longing can only be initiated by the Holy Spirit residing within us (as Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6 make clear).

This, then, is the first of the three inductive bases for assurance of salvation. If there is within me a child's desire to reach out to God by faith and please and love Him as my Father, then the "[joint-] witness of the spirit" (the *Abba* heart-cry) is present, and this indicates that I am a child of God.

(2) Proper Confession

Someone might object that 1 John 3:24 points instead to a more mystical interpretation of the "witness of the Spirit":

"... And we know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us"

Note, however, that this verse says nothing about *how* the Spirit can be involved in bringing us this assurance. It certainly does not say that there is any mystical communication directed to the believer. How then is the Spirit involved in establishing our assurance? One answer, of course, is to point to the above exegesis of Romans 8 and Galatians 4 and say that the Spirit is involved by prompting the deep-down desires within us to look to God as Father, the One whom we most want to love and obey. However, the context of 1 John 3:24 suggests an additional (but closely related) answer that constitutes a second inductive basis for assurance. In the very next verse (1 John 4:1), John continues by exhorting us to be careful to distinguish between God's Spirit within someone and the spirit of the antichrist. How are we to distinguish? By the testimony that the spirit bears: God's Spirit enables the person to confess Jesus as the Christ who has come bodily, whereas the spirit of antichrist refuses to confess this.

"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; and this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.

You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.” (1 John 4:1-5)

In this passage it is by a *proper confession* that we can determine the nature of the spirit within. This emphasis on confession is echoed in the important parallel passages in 1 John 2:22-23 and 4:13-15:

“Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. 23 Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also.” (1 John 2:22-23)

“By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. And we have beheld and bear witness that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.” (1 John 4:13-15)

How then does the Spirit help us to come to an assurance of God’s presence in us? Here is how: The Spirit within us enables/prompts us to truly *confess* Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. This cannot be simply parroting words, of course, but must be a sincere confession of what we believe, that to which we can mentally assent and yield allegiance (compare the discussion of faith in the separate essay “Allegiance”).

I conclude that 1 John 3:24, then, refers not to a mystical communication of assurance to me from the Spirit, but instead to the confession that we are able to make once God’s Spirit lives in us. We not only cry out “Abba! Father!” with the enabling of the Spirit (i.e., the first inductive basis for assurance), but we also are able to genuinely confess Jesus as the Christ and Son of God. Claims that are considered foolishness by the world have become the genuine desire of our hearts.

(3) Character Fruit

The third and final inductive basis for assurance that I will discuss is what is often referred to as “fruit” borne by the Spirit in the believer’s life. The general principle is this: when one genuinely yields allegiance to Christ for salvation and has thereby received the Holy Spirit, then the Holy Spirit will be at work in one’s life to bring Christlikeness. One’s life will be “marked” by the Spirit’s sanctifying presence. For example, the apostle John speaks of two necessary marks of the Christian in 1 John 3:10:

“By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.”

Both *love* for the brethren (see also 1 John 2:9-11; 3:14-15; 3:18-20; 4:7-8) and the *practice of righteousness* (see also 1 John 1:6-7; 2:29; 3:6-9) can be considered “fruit,” or evidences of the Spirit’s work in the believer’s life. The practice of righteousness is detailed further in Galatians 5:22-23 as the “fruit of the Spirit,” in contrast to the fruit or deeds of the flesh (vss. 19-21):

19 Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, 21 envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. 24 Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

The Spirit's presence leads one's life to be marked by the practice of love, joy, peace, patience, etc., in contrast to the practice of the deeds of the flesh listed. But this leads to several difficult questions: *How much* "fruit" of the Spirit must be present in one's life to indicate that one genuinely belongs to God? Or, conversely, how much "fruit" of the flesh suffices to prove that one is not a genuine believer? To what extent does the fruit of the Spirit emerge naturally, without the believer's conscious intervention, or to what extent must the believer *choose and will* these traits to emerge? Let us address these questions in turn.

A. HOW MUCH FRUIT IS ENOUGH?

One logical possibility is that the fruit of the Spirit or of the flesh will always emerge categorically. That is, one will either exhibit only the sinful fruit of the flesh (if one is an unbeliever), or else one will exhibit only the righteous fruit of the Spirit (if one is a believer). Indeed, this appears to be the view presented in at least some passages of scripture:

"Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 "You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they? 17 "Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 "A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. 19 "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 "So then, you will know them by their fruits. 21 "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. 22 "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' 23 "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.' (Matthew 7:15-23)

Jesus' statement in the above passage that "A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit" is categorical. A person either produces one kind of fruit or the other, but according to Jesus cannot produce both. The kind of fruit Jesus has in mind is made clear in vss. 21-23; namely, the practice of the will of God (good fruit) or the practice of lawlessness (bad fruit). Rather than counting as good fruit, Jesus said that professions of Jesus' lordship, prophesying in His name, casting out demons, and performing miracles are all empty in the absence of obedience to the will of God.

Another categorical statement about the practice of sin is found in 1 John 3:4-10.

“4 Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness. 5 And you know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin. 6 No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him. 7 Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteousness; 8 the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil. 9 No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because He is born of God. 10 By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.”

It is doubtful that any Christian ever reads this passage who doesn't squirm. It certainly appears that John is characterizing the Christian as sinless (“No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him,” vs. 6; “he cannot sin, because He is born of God,” vs. 9). This passage is the basis, in fact, for those marginal fundamentalist groups who over the years have taught that once you become a Christian, you will never sin again. Indeed, as with Jesus' words above regarding good trees and bad trees, there seems to be no room in John's words here for the common middle ground experience, in which the believer sometimes sins and sometimes does not. As one commentator pointed out, John's statements contain

“a contradiction to the reality of the Christian community, which in practice is not without sin.”

This same commentator went on to point out, however, that John must have recognized this contradiction himself, for in two other parts of this same epistle John acknowledges that Christians do in fact sin. In 1 John 2:1-2 he writes:

“My little children, I am writing these things to you that you may not sin. And *if anyone sins*, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; 2 and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.”

Similarly, in 1 John 5:16:

“*If anyone sees his brother committing a sin* not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death [i.e., rejection of the faith], I do not say that he should make request for this.”

Has John contradicted himself, saying in one place that Christians cannot sin, but stating in other places that Christians do indeed sin? If we are going to maintain the principle that scripture is internally consistent and that John was not schizophrenic, then clearly we will need to take a second look at what John meant when he said that the Christian “cannot sin.”

When we look outside of John's epistle we find additional reasons to conclude that the Bible recognizes that genuine Christians do sin. Consider, for example, Galatians 6:1.

“Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted.”

It is clear here that Paul is referring to a Christian brother who has sinned, otherwise Paul would not have spoken of the man's “restoration” (implying a restatement to his former position of fellowship with the Lord). Notice too that Paul's warning to the “spiritual” ones in the second half of the verse implies that Paul considered it possible that they might sin as well if they did not remain on the alert.

Consider also 1 Corinthians 3:1-3.

“And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to babes in Christ. 2 I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, 3 for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?”

Notice that Paul speaks of his Corinthian readers as “brethren” and as “babes in Christ,” both terms indicating that he considered them to be genuine Christians. And yet they were “fleshly” and walked “like mere men,” engaging in “jealousy and strife.” Clearly Paul is not satisfied with this “fleshly” state, and neither should we be, but my point here is that it is equally clear that Paul did not automatically discount their claim to be Christians because of the presence of sin in their lives.

Indeed, the New Testament is full of exhortations aimed at Christians that make little sense unless we assume that there is room for genuine believers to *grow* in their level of obedience, and *grow* in the degree to which they are free from the entanglements of the flesh. Eph 4:17 is a typical example (see also Eph 5:3-7):

“This I say therefore, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk . . .” (Eph 4:17)

The fact that Paul needed to issue this command implies that there was a danger of these believers living, at least to some extent, like the Gentiles (i.e., those who do not believe).

Similarly, even though Paul taught that Christians are “dead to sin” and “crucified with Christ” by virtue of their faith in Christ (Romans 6:6), the reality is that Christians may often live *as though* they are alive to sin. This is precisely why Paul emphasizes that believers must “*consider*” themselves as dead to sin:

“Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. 12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts, 13 and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.” (Romans 6:11-13)

Obviously, Paul does not mean that it is impossible for us to sin because we are dead to sin; otherwise, why would he need to exhort us to “not let sin reign” in our bodies and “not go on presenting” ourselves as instruments of unrighteousness? Paul knows that there is a danger of our doing these things even though we are Christians (for a discussion of the potentially disastrous effects of such a commitment to willful sin, see the essay “Deliberate Sin Erodes Faith”). Instead, Paul’s point in the above passage is that we must begin thinking in terms of what is already true of us at some level (i.e., that we are dead to sin). If we do not adjust our thinking in this way, then we will tend to mistakenly think of ourselves as still alive to sin, and consequently we will sin.

Even though Paul clearly recognized that believers are capable of sin, it is also clear that Paul, like Jesus and John, taught that the lives of genuine believers will necessarily be marked by their relationship to God through Christ. Notice the tension between what Paul said above about the “fleshly” Corinthian believers and what Paul teaches in Rom 8:1-14.

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. 3 For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, 4 in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, *who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.* 5 For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. 6 *For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace,* 7 because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 However, *you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you.* But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. . . 12 So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— 13 *for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.* 14 For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.”

In this passage Paul seems to assume that believers will “walk/live according to the Spirit,” not according to the flesh. They will have their minds “set on the Spirit,” not on the flesh. Indeed, Paul gravely warns the Romans that if they are living according to the flesh rather than the Spirit, they will certainly die (vs. 13). These comments seem to be just as difficult to reconcile with Paul’s comments to the “fleshly” Corinthians as are Jesus’ and John’s statements considered earlier.

I believe these passages can be reconciled, however, once we understand the implications of the concept of *allegiance* as it relates to the conditions for salvation. As I argued in the separate essay “Allegiance,” the biblical conditions that we must meet in order to be saved can be summarized in terms of allegiance; namely, *allegiance to the truth about Jesus* (i.e., that He is the Christ, Lord, God the Son, only Savior, etc.) and *allegiance to Jesus as one’s own Lord* (i.e., repentance, following Jesus). The genuine believer (Christian) is one who has yielded and continues to yield his allegiance to Christ in these two senses.

There are other possible objects of allegiance, however. In fact, it might be argued that *everyone* yields allegiance to someone or something; if not to Christ, then to someone or something else (perhaps even to himself/herself). With this in mind, consider how nonchristians are characterized in the following passages:

“Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. 6 For it is on account of these things that the wrath of God will come, 7 and ***in them you also walked*** when you were ***living in them***. 8 But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth.” (Colossians 3:5-8)

“And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, 2 ***in which you formerly walked*** according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. 3 Among them we too all formerly ***lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind***, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.” (Ephesians 2:1-3)

“This I say therefore, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as ***the Gentiles also walk***, in the futility of their mind, 18 being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; 19 and they, having become callous, ***have given themselves over to sensuality, for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness***. 20 But you did not learn Christ in this way.” (Ephesians 4:17-20)

“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. 8 For the one who ***sows to his own flesh*** shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life.” (Galatians 6:7-8)

“Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, 21 envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who ***practice such things*** shall not inherit the kingdom of God.” (Galatians 5:19-21)

Notice that the nonchristian is repeatedly characterized in these passages not simply as one who sins, but as one who “walks in,” “lives in,” “indulges,” “has given himself over to,” “sows,” and “practices” the deeds of the flesh. This is the vocabulary of *allegiance*. That is, the unbeliever is

marked by a basic attitude toward the flesh, namely, the *willing pursuit of sin*, where *one's ultimate aim is to satisfy (indulge) the desires of the flesh*. I do not mean by this that every nonchristian is a licentious “party animal.” Allegiance to one’s own flesh can and usually does take subtle, culturally acceptable forms. But the fundamental truth is the same in every case: those who have not yielded allegiance to Christ will inexorably be drawn by the inherited sinful nature to yield ultimate allegiance to lower things (e.g., spouse, children, career, public recognition, leisure, financial security, physical health, works of charity, self-achieved spiritual salvation, religious idols) in an effort to establish identity and significance apart from Christ.

With this in mind, let us now return to the problematic passages found in John and in the teachings of Jesus. In the passage 1 John 3:4-10 considered earlier, the unadorned form of the verb *hamartano* “to sin” is used only in verses 6 and 9, whereas in verses 4, 7, 8, 9, and 10 an alternative construction is used involving the Greek verb *poiein* (translated “to practice”) with the noun form for “sin” or “righteousness.” This verb *poiein* often means simply to “make” or “do.” Crucially, however, *poiein* can also convey the sense of to “bear” or “produce” (as of fruit in Matt 3:10, Luke 13:9, Rev 22:2; as of capital interest in Luke 19:18; as of growth in Eph 4:16).

I propose that John’s repeated use of *poiein* in 1 John 3:4-10 is significant in the light of the passages from Colossians, Ephesians, and Galatians just considered. John is not saying that Christians cannot sin. Rather, he is saying that Christians will not “bear/produce” (*poiein*) sin as an outward fruit *reflecting an inward nature of allegiance to the flesh*. The question is not simply whether a person sins, or even what the frequency or duration of his sins is, but rather what is his *attitude* toward his sins. Sins flowing from a fundamental allegiance to the flesh (i.e., from a “mind set on the flesh,” as in Rom 8; or from a commitment to “walk in/live in/indulge/etc.” the flesh, as in Colossians, Ephesians, and Galatians) prove a person to be unregenerate. One who is born of God “cannot sin” (1 John 3:9) in this sense; that is, in the sense of sins produced out of allegiance to the flesh.

As the Corinthian example demonstrates, it is possible for genuine believers to commit some of the same “fleshly” deeds committed by unbelievers, but in the case of believers these sins are not committed as a fruit of allegiance to the flesh. Rather, when a believer sins it is *despite* his allegiance to *Christ*, and it is precisely his continuing allegiance to Christ that provokes godly sorrow and eventual repentance. For this reason, it is important to evaluate one’s “fruit” (as in Matthew 7) not simply in terms of whether sin has been committed, but rather in terms of the more basic perspective of allegiance. It cannot be concluded that a person is a “bad tree” in the sense of Matthew 7 simply because that person has sinned. One must consider the underlying nature of the sin as it relates to the person’s fundamental allegiance, whether to Christ or to someone or something else.

Let me close this section by referring to one final passage that illustrates how allegiance plays the determining role in distinguishing genuine believers from unbelievers.

“Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? 17 But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin,

you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, 18 and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. 19 I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification.” (Rom 6:16-19)

In this passage Paul makes clear that what characterizes the nonchristian (the one who is on the road to “death”) is not merely the act of sinning, but the fundamental heart-commitment by which one *presents oneself as a slave to the flesh*. Though Christians may at various times or even repeatedly commit fleshly deeds, a Christian (one who is persevering on the path of sanctification) does not transfer his fundamental loyalty from Christ to the flesh as its slave. The Christian will not allow the pursuit of the selfish flesh to become his driving motivation. The Christian instead has a fundamental desire to do what pleases the Spirit of God, a commitment of “allegiance” to God.

Of course, conceding the reality that Christians do sin does not mean that Christians *should* sin. The goal of allegiance to Christ is our sanctification (vs. 19 above). As Christians, we should constantly reaffirm our commitment of allegiance to Christ, daily presenting ourselves anew to the Spirit of God as slaves of righteousness, “considering ourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (vs. 11 above). Paul is clear in this chapter of Romans that the Christian should never rest content with past success, but must be diligent to reaffirm his commitment to Christ on an ongoing basis, lest his faith be eroded (see the essay “Deliberate Sin Erodes Faith”) and he be drawn back into the very thing Paul warned against: slavery to the flesh (Romans 6:16 above).

B. Can Fruit Be Willed?

Another important question in regard to the fruit of the Spirit as an inductive evidence of salvation is whether this fruit can be *consciously chosen and willed* by the believer. I will argue briefly here that believers can and should choose to exhibit the character-fruit of the Spirit. God does not want us to simply sit back and wait for the fruit to automatically emerge without any conscious participation on our part. The miracle (i.e., supernatural aspect) of fruit-bearing in the believer’s life is not that the fruit comes without our participation; instead, the miracle resides in the *ability* of the believer to *successfully* will the fruit of the Spirit. This is something that unbelievers, because they do not have the sanctifying Holy Spirit within, are incapable of consistently achieving on anything more than a superficial basis.

Consider now the following passages:

“Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge; 6 and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness; 7 and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love.” (2 Peter 1:5-7)

“I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, entreat you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love . . .” (Eph 4:1-2)

In the first of these passages Peter says that we are to *diligently* pursue the listed characteristics, a list that includes several traits specifically listed as fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23: **faith(fulness), self-control, kindness, and love**. Clearly, Peter believed that we should *actively and intentionally* attempt to develop these traits in our lives, and not simply leave it up to the Spirit to bring them out “naturally” without our participation.

Similarly, Paul pleads with his readers to choose to exhibit qualities specifically named in Galatians as fruit of the Spirit (i.e., **gentleness, patience, and love**). The only way that the Ephesians could have responded to Paul’s entreaty would have been by *intentional effort* to exhibit these qualities.

How can these commands to intentionally pursue the fruit of the Spirit be reconciled to the idea that the fruit is produced by the Spirit? The answer lies in recognizing one of the most basic principles of how God works in the world: Whenever God intervenes in the affairs of men, it is usually *on the basis of human invitation, or human choice*. God rarely acts on our behalf without there being some willing human agent involved. This is the case, for example, in the broader area of **prayer**. The amazing thing about prayer is that it is necessary at all. Why does God seemingly tie His own hands and so often not act unless someone prays? We can easily imagine a world in which God would just go ahead and do what He wishes, with or without the supplications of men. But it is a wonder of Scripture that God is constantly seeking a human agent, a person who will represent Him in the situation at hand and speak the prayers that will “release” God’s activity into that situation.

Similarly, God doesn’t just automatically produce the fruit of the Spirit in every Christian’s life. He requires our cooperation in the process, including our *intentional, active efforts* to choose to exhibit the godly qualities that make up the Spirit’s fruit. But still there is the question, “In what sense then is it the fruit of the *Spirit’s* action?” In just this sense: The Spirit performs an *enabling function* throughout the process. It is the Spirit who *puts that spark of desire* in the believer’s heart to seek righteousness in the first place. It is the Spirit who, when the believer chooses to yield to righteousness (and resist sin), responds to this invitation by *reinforcing and enabling the believer to follow through on his choice*. It is the Spirit who takes the result of the believer’s obedience and *builds that particular quality of righteousness more fully into his character*. As this process is repeated through time and the believer’s character is developed, the believer’s conscious role may indeed diminish somewhat as he begins to more spontaneously respond to situations and temptations in accordance with the godly quality in question. But this is generally a long-term result, and may require a multitude of small “victories” before the spontaneity emerges.

So then, the exhortations above by Peter and Paul for us to actively pursue the fruit of the Spirit are easier to understand once we recognize that God routinely intervenes on the basis of human invitation. There is no need to limit our discussion, however, to just those nine specific

characteristics listed in Galatians 5 as “fruit of the Spirit.” When Paul says in Gal 5:23 that there is no law “against *such things*,” he makes clear that not only the nine fruit specifically listed, but all “such things” (i.e., godly characteristics) are fruit of the Spirit. Indeed, the Bible is replete with commands to intentionally pursue the traits of godly character. Consider just one example:

“Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth, each one of you, with his neighbor, for we are members of one another. 26 Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27 and do not give the devil an opportunity. 28 Let him who steals steal no longer; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has need. 29 Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” (Eph 4:25-28)

Notice all the commands to *intentionally* choose righteousness:

“**lay aside** falsehood” (vs. 25),
“**do not sin**” (vs 26)
“**do not let** the sun go down on your anger. . .” (vs. 26),
“**do not give** the devil an opportunity . . .” (vs 27),
“**let no** unwholesome word proceed . . .” (vs. 29),
“**do not grieve** the Holy Spirit . . .” (vs. 30),
“**let all** bitterness . . . **be put away from you**” (vs 31),
“**be** kind . . . [**be**] tender-hearted . . . forgive each other” (vs 32).

It is in this context, in which Paul has emphasized the importance of our intentional choices, that he goes on later in chapter 5 to command us to “be filled with the Spirit.” This is itself a command that must be intentionally, purposefully obeyed. Paul did not view the filling and fruit of the Spirit as a passive, automatic experience for the Christian, but instead something that must be purposefully sought after.

C. SUMMARY OF HOW TO GAIN ASSURANCE

To summarize, we have looked at two main ways of gaining assurance of salvation as presented in the Bible. First, assurance may be gained deductively, on the basis of God’s promise to save anyone who yields genuine allegiance to Christ. Second, assurance may be gained inductively on the basis of at least three types of evidence of the Spirit’s indwelling.

The first inductive evidence of the Spirit’s indwelling is the inner Spirit-enabled heart-cry to God the Father, in which the believer’s spirit bears joint-witness with the Holy Spirit that the believer

is indeed related to God as child to Father. I argued that this heart-cry normally takes the form of sincere longings to love, serve, and obey God as a Father.

The second inductive evidence of salvation is a Spirit-enabled proper confession of Jesus as the Christ and Son of God. The claims of Jesus that are considered foolishness by the world become the believer's most cherished desire.

The third inductive basis for assurance is the Spirit's "fruit" produced in the moral character of the believer. When a person is indwelt by the Holy Spirit as a result of genuine allegiance to Christ, that person's life will be marked by the development of godly character as the Spirit undertakes the process of sanctification in the believer's life. This process is a cooperative venture between the believer, who yields continuing allegiance to Christ, and the Spirit, who enables the believer's obedience. Obedience that is motivated and energized by allegiance to Christ thus provides an inductive basis for assurance of salvation. Conversely, disobedience to Christ that is motivated by a fundamental allegiance to self or the flesh serves as evidence of an unregenerate spirit.

In the next section of this essay, I will look in detail at various obstacles to the assurance of one's salvation. I will focus in particular on the ways a person may lack assurance because he questions the genuineness of his faith in Christ.

III. Obstacles to Assurance of Salvation

1. Introduction: The Desire for "Perfect" Faith

In this section I will consider various obstacles that sometimes prevent people from gaining an assurance of salvation. I will focus particularly on obstacles having to do with concerns about the genuineness or sufficiency of one's *faith* (i.e., allegiance to the truth about Jesus).

By way of introduction, recall that the object of assurance-belief is a subjective experience, namely, faith itself (i.e., assurance is believing *that I believe* in Jesus). Nearly all obstacles to assurance having to do with faith are rooted in confusion of one sort or another that springs from this subjective nature of the object of assurance. Specifically, people often feel that their faith, though seemingly genuine, is in some sense less than "perfect" or complete. Of course, there are cases in which faith *is* insufficient for salvation, as when a person assents to the facts about Jesus but doesn't follow through with the implications of those facts and fails to yield allegiance to Christ. But in other cases, a person has genuine, sufficient faith for salvation but despairs of gaining assurance because he feels that his faith is not as steady or complete in some sense as it should be.

I will discuss below some of the ways in which a person might feel his faith is incomplete, but first let me make a general observation: If truly complete, mature, perfect faith is required for salvation, then the gospel is not "good news" at all, for the same reason that the Law was not good news (Galatians 3:21-22). We no more have the ability to have perfect *faith* than we have to give perfect *obedience* to the Law. Our view of God must recognize that God's grace allows

for imperfections in our attempts to come to him by faith in Christ, otherwise we are without hope.

I am not preaching an “anything goes” gospel, where you can believe anything and go to heaven, as long as you believe it sincerely. No, we clearly have “one Lord, one faith,” and we must have the same objective referent whom we trust for our salvation: Jesus the promised Messiah. You cannot get to the Father by sincerely believing in Buddha, or in your own goodness, for example. But if you are *sincerely* assenting to *Jesus* as the Messiah and trusting in *Him* (not someone or something else) to make you acceptable to God, then you have saving faith (see the essay on “Allegiance”), despite whatever room for growth there may be in that faith.

With this in mind, let us consider some of the common ways one might lack assurance of salvation because he feels his faith is less than perfect.

2. The Obstacles

A. The Risk of Faith

Some people question the validity of their faith because, though they sincerely believe in Christ, they cannot honestly say that they *know with full certainty* that the Bible’s claims about Jesus are true. However, one of the most important things to understand about mental assent and faith is that faith *does not imply absolute, verifiable certainty*. That is why faith is hard: Faith involves a *risk*. Consider the following verses:

Hebrews 11:1

Now faith is the assurance of things *hoped for*, the conviction of things *not seen*.

Romans 8:24-25

Hope that is *seen* is *not hope*; for why does one also hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we *do not see*, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.

Hebrews 11:1 above ties faith closely to *hope*, and both faith and hope are said to deal only with things that are *not seen*, or to put it in today’s terms, things that *cannot be independently verified* or proven. This does not mean that the objects of faith will never be verifiable, but only that they are not now verifiable--their verification awaits a future day when what is currently unseen will become seen. Until then, one must have faith and hope that it is true. Of course, your faith and hope can be very, very strong, so that you have great confidence that it is indeed true. But you cannot actually *verify* it as true and therefore *know* it with certainty. Faith, then, always involves a risk.

If you could first verify it, then you could know it for certain, and there would be *no need for faith at all*. For example, it wouldn’t take any faith for you to say “I am married” if you are indeed already married, assuming that you have memories of the wedding and have been living continuously with your spouse ever since. You *know* that you are married because you can verify

it (e.g., you can pull out your wedding pictures, or your wedding certificate, or better yet you can produce a living, tangible spouse as evidence). But you can only have *faith* (believe) and therefore *hope* that the promises of salvation are true, because you've never actually *seen* God “save” you, and you can't actually *see* forgiveness or justification or the new birth, and you can't see Jesus today, or go up and ask him if He is the Son of God. True, genuine salvation results in a changed life, and the various aspects of this transformation can serve as indicators of salvation. Yet, in many cases these effects of salvation can be given an alternative explanation (e.g., a psychological or emotional explanation) if one is truly intent on doubting their validity. Ultimately, in most cases we cannot absolutely *prove* the spiritual realities spoken of in the Bible, and we must affirm these things on faith, in the firm hope that they are true. The sincere believer is willing to take that risk.

It is precisely because faith involves hope and is a hard, risky step to take, that it is so highly praised in the Bible. Notice how men and women of faith are lauded in Hebrews 11. This makes no sense if faith is based on certain knowledge, for if someone already knows with certainty that the objects of his faith are true, then it is no big deal for him to express confidence that they are true. But as it is, our faith in God and Christ involves taking a risk for God's sake; it is a truly laudable act, and “therefore God is not ashamed to be called their [and our] God” (Hebrews 11:16).

What does this mean then? It means that I have biblical faith is when I *hope* or *trust* that Jesus is who He claimed to be, and my hope is so strong in this that I step forward in allegiance to Him. I do this with full knowledge that I cannot be certain about these beliefs, though I may also be aware that there is good historical and philosophical evidence to support them. I thus operate on a level of *reasonable confidence*, not certainty. This reasonable confidence is highlighted in Hebrews 6:18, which speaks of believers as those

“ . . . who have fled for refuge in laying hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast.”

In the context of Hebrews 6, the hope being spoken of is the hope that Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham to save the world. My hope in Christ can be described as “sure and steadfast” in the sense that I have sufficient reason to hold firmly to my belief without constantly fearing that it is all false. This is so because my *faith* is *informed*--it is not a blind leap in the dark, but is based on the objective historical evidence presented in Scripture.

B. Knowing Christ

On a related note, don't be frightened by the use of the word “know” in Scripture. When the Bible speaks of us “knowing” God or “knowing” Jesus, it does not mean that we can come to the point where we have logical certainty about God/Jesus. In these instances it is not the degree of certainty that is in focus, but rather it is our *relationship* to God/Jesus that is in focus.

Consider the apostle John's writings, in which the idea of "knowing" God and Jesus is most fully developed in Scripture. A close look at John's writings shows that to "know" God/Jesus is *to share in God's/Jesus's nature* by virtue of one's relationship to God/Jesus. For example:

Because "God is love," "everyone who loves . . . knows God," and "the one who does not love does not know God" (1 John 4:7-8).

Similarly, because the Father and the Son have life in themselves, to "know" them is to have eternal life as well (John 5:26; 17:3).

And again, because God is righteous, those who know God will reflect or partake of that same righteousness. As John says, "by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:3-4).

In all of these cases, to "know" God means that you share God's attributes (e.g., love, life, righteousness) in your own life. But you may say, "I'm not very righteous! So I must not know God." This may be true; indeed, a pattern of allegiance to sin is an indicator that one has not yet experienced the new birth that comes through genuine faith in Christ. On the other hand, one must guard against too quickly concluding that one doesn't know God because of the presence of systematic sin in one's life. I will address this issue in more detail below, but suffice it to say here that in his writings John generally presents only the extreme ends of the continuum, and does not deal directly with the possibility that righteousness and unrighteousness may be reflected in *degrees* rather than absolutely. Other portions of the New Testament, however, make it clear that genuine Christians may still have room for much growth in experiential righteousness. (One need only look at 1 Corinthians 2:14-3:3 to see that genuine Christians can, unfortunately, exhibit unrighteous attitudes and behavior.)

Thus, the emphasis in "knowing" God or Jesus is on sharing in God's or Jesus's character. It does *not* mean to have *certain* knowledge about God.

C. Faith Mixed With Doubts

Related to the above concerns over uncertainty in faith is concern over doubt. Some people question the sufficiency of their faith because they have lingering or occasional doubts about the truth of the gospel. They read of one of Jesus's miracles, for example, and the thought enters their minds "What if this didn't really happen?" Of they lie awake at night and think, "What if the whole thing about God and Christ is made up? What if it's all a man-made story?"

First it should be pointed out that nearly every Christian has such thoughts from time to time, and, generally speaking, they should be viewed merely as temptations from the enemy rather than indications of an insufficient faith. In one sense, faith has meaning only against the backdrop of doubt. Remember, if you knew *for certain* that the object of your faith were real/true, then it would no longer be faith that you exercise, it would be *certain knowledge*. Faith is a confidence

that something *you cannot verify for certain* is nonetheless true. For this reason, it is always possible for someone who has faith to step back and entertain the possibility that what he or she is believing might not really be true. The thing being believed has never been verified for certain (if it had been, then faith would not be called for), therefore it is quite possible to think, “perhaps it is not true.”

Think of it this way: *Faith is like a curtain* with which you cover the window of doubt. Just because you have covered the window does not mean it is not still there. At any time you can pull back the curtain and contemplate the gaping black hole of the window, even while the curtain still hangs. Yet, your faith is still intact while you peek through the curtain. To abandon your faith, you would have to yank down the curtain altogether--which is not something you are likely to do if you have made a genuine life-commitment of allegiance to Christ.

But what is God's attitude toward those who are troubled by doubts? Granted, serious doubt may in some cases lead to sustained unbelief, in which case the person may deny his original faith in Christ and reject his association with Him. However, consider the instructions given in Jude 22 as to what our attitude should be toward those who are troubled by unwanted doubts:

20 But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith; praying in the Holy Spirit; 21 keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life. 22 And *have mercy on some, who are doubting*;

If God asks us to have mercy on those who doubt, then surely He Himself must have even greater mercy on us when we doubt. He would not ask of us what He does not do Himself.

I am not saying that God extends salvation even to those who willingly choose sustained unbelief. (The question of the security of the believer is an important one, but I will not pursue it here. Suffice it to say that the Bible is clear that *believers* are secure in Christ. It seems equally clear to me, however, that a person who abandons his belief in or allegiance to Christ has no biblical authority for continuing to appeal to security.) I assume that the kind of doubt referred to in Jude 22 and which I have been discussing above is not a wholesale abandoning of faith (i.e., yanking down the curtain) but is instead the kind of unsought, nagging doubts that most Christians have experienced at one time or another (i.e., drawing back the curtain to peek out the window). The goal of God's mercy in such times is to draw us back to that place where we will once again be “building ourselves up on our most holy faith” (Jude 20). Episodes of doubt can stagnate our growth in faith. By his mercy God woos us back to an ongoing faith-growth, and calls all believers to lovingly do the same for fellow believers who doubt.

D. Absence of Mystical or Tangible Experiences

Sometimes people doubt that their faith is truly saving faith because they lack the mystical or tangible experiences that they hear other Christians claiming to have (e.g., “God spoke to me about this situation,” “I could really sense God’s presence,” “God has been working in my life lately”). While not discounting such claims, I believe it is imperative that we recognize that

neither our faith in God nor our relationship with Him is dependent on mystical communication or tangible experiences of His presence or working. A key principle in this regard is 2 Corinthians 5:7:

“ . . . for we walk by faith, *not by sight*”

The same idea was expressed by Jesus when Thomas had finally accepted the resurrection after tangibly seeing and touching Jesus:

“Jesus said to him, ‘Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who *did not see*, and yet believed”

The principle here is that our relationship to God is to be based on faith, not on tangible experiences. It seems to me that mystical experiences are simply a subtle form of “sight” experience involving an inner rather than outer perception. As such, they can function as a substitute for faith if one is not careful. I am not saying that mystical or tangible experiences are wrong in themselves. They can be gracious gifts of God. Indeed, mystical or tangible experiences may legitimately serve as independent evidences for faith, along with evidences from other sources such as apologetic reasoning, historical answers to prayer, etc. However, tangible/mystical experiences must never substitute for faith or become the foundation holding up my belief in Christ. If my faith is propped up on a foundation of personal tangible experiences, then I have not understood the true nature of faith, for faith is fundamentally a conviction of an *intangible* reality:

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things *not seen*”
(Hebrews 11:1)

What then is faith based on, if not on tangible experiences? True faith is a response to a *verbal testimony*. This is the point of Romans 4, which describes the faith of Abraham. All that Abraham had to cling to was the verbal promise of God. He saw no tangible evidence that the son God had promised was on the way. He had no tangible evidence on which to rely. All he had to hold onto was God’s word, His promise. Yet, Abraham was “fully assured that what He [God] had promised, He was able also to perform. Therefore it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Abraham’s faith was based on the promise of God, not on any subsequent tangible reassurances from God. And God responded to this faith by granting Abraham righteousness.

The same idea is picked up in Hebrews 6, where it is the promise to Abraham that is said to have been the basis of Abraham’s faith and of our hope. We are told to be “imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (6:12). Note the centrality of God’s promise in the passage that follows:

For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying “I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply you.” And thus, having patiently waited, he obtained the promise. . . In the same way God, desiring

even more to show the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, in order that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we may have strong encouragement, we who have fled for refuge in laying hold of the hope set before us. (Hebrews 6:13-18)

Faith is informed by the promise of God's own word. I can have faith in what God has promised. Now apply this to the notion of our relationship with God. 2 Corinthians 5:7 above says that faith is the foundation of our "walk," of our relationship with God. No evangelical would disagree with this. But many evangelicals do not go on to consider the implications of this statement, for it means that I must be willing to relate to God without any tangible or experiential feedback from Him. Without mystical communications, without spiritual "feelings," without the "walks-with-me-talks-with-me" type of relationship so often referred to by sincere, well-meaning Christians. God asks me to simply *believe the promises* that He has already made in Scripture, and to accept the reality of these promises for me in my 20th century setting, without tangible reassurances. I am to reach up in faith to the invisible God on the basis of what He said 2000 years ago through the testimony of prophets, and on this basis I am to believe that God is still listening and active today, intervening in my life in countless intangible, unprovable ways. This is not to say that God *cannot* reveal Himself to me tangibly, or that He never does so, but only that I am not to make my faith dependent on such tangible revelations, which may be infrequent when they come at all.

It is misleading, then, to speak of our relationship with God as a "two-way" experience without further qualifying what we mean by this, as though the way He reaches out to me is the same as the way I reach out to Him. Though it is true that God reaches out to me and is immanent in my life, this in most cases does not often come in the form of tangible experiences. Instead, God more often intervenes in not so obvious and in unverifiable ways--planting an idea in my mind on one occasion, or generating a sense of joy or boldness in my heart on another occasion. These are behind-the-scenes activities, not something that I may be consciously aware of at the time, or be able to prove that they came from God. An answered prayer may be a more visible manifestation of God's activity, but even then it is usually difficult to conclusively prove that the event was caused by God.

But that is the point. God is generally not concerned with "proving" His presence to me in tangible ways. He is simply interested in doing what needs to be done in my life, regardless whether it can be proven by an outside observer. My duty is to continue reaching out to him by bare faith, neither demanding that tangible experiences come nor denying them if they do come. So then, for example, I do not wait around in prayer, "listening" for God to speak to me. But conversely, if a surge of joy or boldness comes, I embrace it and thank God for it, without worrying whether I can "prove" it came from God.

This may be a difficult attitude to adopt if you are intent on gaining assurance of your salvation from the tangible or mystical experiences of your life. The solution is to stop walking "by sight" and rely on the promise of God: He is faithful to justify the one who has allegiance toward His Son, just as He promised in His word (see the separate essay on "Allegiance").

How then, in literal terms can we describe the faith relationship that the Christian bears to God? Let me attempt a summary statement drawing on our discussion so far:

Christian faith is the process by which the believer, drawing on information revealed in Scripture, constructs a mental worldview that includes the concept of an invisible, intangible God who has certain expectations of and desires for the believer (as outlined in Scripture). In accordance with this worldview, the believer responds to this invisible God in love and submission as genuinely as to any other person in the believer's awareness, all on the basis of a commitment to believe that this God is real. The primary and only necessary source of information informing the believer's worldview and thus his response to God is (or should be) the revelation of God in Scripture, not mystical or tangible personal experiences.

This faith-based perspective of our relationship to God may seem to put the Christian in the same position as an *insane person* who has an imaginary friend. Indeed, there are similarities. Just as the insane man believes his invisible friend is real, so the Christian believes that the intangible God is real. In either case, an independent observer might conclude that the belief involves a significant risk of being wrong. However, in the case of our Christian faith, there are numerous good philosophical and historical reasons to think that the intangible object of our faith is real, as will become manifest on that day when the invisible things are made known to sight.

E. Maintaining a Constant Mental State

Another obstacle to assurance of salvation for some people is the idea that one's faith is sufficient, persevering faith only if it can be maintained as a constant existential-mental experience. The thinking here is that if you do not constantly keep in mind the object of faith, or maintain the same intensity of existential "connection" to that object, then your faith has wavered and you have in some sense compromised your salvation. This obstacle to assurance most often occurs as a distortion of the Arminian perspective on salvation, though there is nothing inherent in the Arminian view that necessarily leads to it. At issue is a particular misguided definition of faith that neither genuine Arminianism nor Calvinism embraces.

The problem with this distorted definition of faith is that it reduces faith to the level of a mental state dependent on *attention*. However, attention by its very nature can only be directed at one idea (or perhaps one group of ideas) at a time. A person can give his attention to an object of faith for a period of time, but as soon as he directs attention to some other matter (say, the need to cook dinner, or to change the baby's diaper), then his attention is, to some extent at least, necessarily shifted off of the object of faith. We can only hold a very limited number of thoughts in our minds at any one time--this is part of our human finiteness. Even the most devoted mystic monk, who spends hours each day in meditation on spiritual matters, cannot hold *all* spiritual truths (or even just those spiritual truths directly related to salvation) at attention in his mind at once. And he cannot give his attention to spiritual truths over *all* moments in the day (or, of course, while asleep). Thus, if we define faith at the level of attention, we have made it impossible for anyone to be saved, for no one can maintain that kind of "faith."

Instead of defining faith as a continuous state of attention to the truths of Christ and salvation, we must define faith at a deeper, more foundational level. To see this, it may help to draw an analogy between faith and marital love. If my wife were to ask me, “Do you love me?”, I would say “yes” quite quickly. How would I know that the answer is “yes” so quickly? Would I first check to see if my mental state at that moment includes “loving” feelings or images? No, in all likelihood I would not have even thinking about my love for her when she asked me the question (i.e., my *attention* would probably not have been on my love for her). Probably I would not have enough time before I answered to conjure up any particular mental state of “love.” Instead, I would answer “yes” based on knowledge of my *commitment* to her. My commitment is a standing commitment, made years ago and reaffirmed at various points along the way, but not dependent on my moment-to-moment psychological state. Sometimes I think about it and sometimes I do not, but it can be truthfully said that I *always* love my wife, in the sense that my commitment remains in force until which time I consciously revoke it (which I am committed to never doing).

In the same way, my faith in Jesus is a standing commitment that is in force both when I am thinking about it and also when I am not. It does not depend on my particular mental states or my attention, unless I were to come to the point that I consciously revoked my faith-commitment (i.e., yanked the curtains off of the window, to return to the analogy used earlier).

So then, faith in Christ can be paralleled to marital love in the sense of being a standing commitment. To extend this metaphor further, when someone worries that his faith may fail because he cannot maintain a constant psychological or existential experience of Christ, he is seeking what would better parallel an *infatuation* experience rather than marital love. When a man is infatuated with a woman, he cannot get her off his mind, he is constantly distracted with thoughts of her, and he revels and delights in these thoughts. He is trying to maintain a constant psychological experience of the woman. But what happens when the woman disappoints him terribly, or hurts him? The infatuation may burst like a bubble, and the psychological experience of gushy thoughts is destroyed. If this infatuation was all that there was to the relationship to begin with, then the relationship becomes dead at that point. No more cards and phone calls, no more daydreaming about the person.

However, if the couple in question were newlyweds and the bursting of the infatuation bubble simply marked the end of the honeymoon period, the relationship may continue to be healthy indefinitely, as long as there is an underlying *standing commitment of love* between the two. It is much the same with our faith commitment to Christ. This faith is not dependent on the frequency or constancy of my psychological or existential “experiences” of Christ--to focus on these experiences corresponds to an infatuation. Instead, my faith in Christ depends on the standing *choice* that I have made to believe His claims as true, and yield my trust and allegiance to Him alone. Of course, this underlying choice is most visibly manifested in moments when my attention is on Christ, but it is not defined solely by or limited simply to those moments.

From yet another perspective, it is important to understand that our salvation in the most direct sense depends not on *our* moment-to-moment mental activity, but on *God's* mental activity. That

is, we are saved because *God in His mind* considers us justified, without blame. If God were to stop thinking of me as justified for even a moment, my salvation would be endangered, for it is God's attitude toward me that is the literal essence of salvation. Thankfully, however, God's mental state of justification toward me does not directly depend on my mental state toward Him in any mechanical, automatic sense. When I am not thinking about God, or even when I may be having nagging doubts about God, my mental state is not mechanically tied to His, so as to obligate Him to stop seeing me as justified. No, God is a free agent, and He sees the deeper intentions and commitments of my heart; He looks for a standing commitment of allegiance from me, not an infatuation based on an impossible-to-achieve continuous state of attention.

F. Must Every Believer Have the Same Specific Psychological Experience?

We just discussed why faith cannot be reduced to the requirement of a constant psychological state of attention. More broadly, some believers who struggle with assurance worry that their faith is not genuine because they fear that in some sense their faith may not be the *exact same psychological experience* of faith that other believers have.

Again, however, this is looking at faith from the wrong perspective, as a psychological or existential event. There is no direct discussion of the existential or psychological characteristics of faith in the Bible. This is an understandable omission, because our individual psychological experiences are heavily dependent on our unique personal histories and environments. Indeed, it is probably impossible for two people to have precisely the same psychological experience or understanding. Therefore, it cannot be a requirement for salvation that there be a single unique psychological experience or understanding that every believer must share. What believers share in their common faith is not a single psychological *experience*, but instead a common *objective target or referent* for our varying psychological experiences of faith. We all aim at trust in the same referent, *Jesus Christ*, for the salvation of our souls. The experiences may vary, but the referent of trust is the same. In this way, the Bible emphasizes the simplicity of saving faith, not its complexity.

By this I do not mean that our understandings of this referent, Jesus, will be exactly the same. Some of us know more about Him than others, and even what we know is colored by our unique experiences. Nonetheless, the real, objective referent to which our differing psychological experiences point (i.e., the *real* Jesus who exists *outside* of my own subjective experience, but to whom my subjective mental experiences are pointing) is the same, and in this sense we have “one Lord, one faith” (Eph 4:5).

At this point someone might object and argue that if our mental representations of Jesus are not exactly the same, then we cannot be referring to the same person, so some of us at least must not be believing in the “real” Jesus. However, this view of referring would never work in the real world, because it does not do justice to one's *intentions*. For example, even though you and your best friend do not have exactly the same mental representation and associations of your mother (it is impossible for two people to have *exactly* the same psychological experiences, as I observed earlier), it is still possible for your friend to tell you to “call your mother” without you fumbling

at the phone not knowing what number to dial. Even though your representations may differ, you know precisely who your friend *intends* when he or she speaks of “your mother.” You do not think, “Oh, I bet he's talking about some street vendor in Bangladesh, or some fish in a pet store somewhere.” You know that your friend is referring to a particular woman who lives in a particular city and who drives a particular car and has certain favorite foods and has a given historical relationship to you. You know this even though your friend may not have had these same facts about her in mind, and even though your friend may even have certain erroneous ideas about your mother (e.g., your friend may think she drives a Toyota when she actually owns a Honda).

Now, if anything, the omniscient God should have less difficulty knowing our intentions than we do each other's. When you confess *Jesus* as the Christ and yield your allegiance to Him, God has no trouble understanding that you intend to refer to the objective, historical Jesus of the Bible, even though your understanding of Jesus (like everyone else's understanding of Jesus) is imperfect and incomplete, even erroneous at points. God *must* take into account your intentions, just as we do with each other; otherwise, communication would be impossible between the human and divine realms, just as it would be impossible within the human realm if our intentions were disregarded.

G. Visualization and Imagination

Some people feel their faith is less than perfect because they *cannot readily visualize* the events of Jesus's life and the truths of the gospel, or if they can, their mental images seem rather like those of an artificial Hollywood production. Clearly such mental images do not match the reality of the historical events involved. Therefore, these people reason that faith based on such inadequate mental representations cannot be adequate for salvation.

We must, however, keep clear the distinction between *belief* and *imagination*. Belief is rooted in the will. Imagination, from which our ability to visualize derives, is rooted in our memories of sensory experiences. Let me explain what I mean.

Belief is essentially a choice of the will. This is easiest to recognize when we think about examples in which the thing being believed is something that *by its very nature* is difficult or impossible to visualize; for example, the Trinity, or the statement “God is loving,” or “God is spirit.” There are many nonreligious examples too, such as many of the details of quantum physics, or the statement that the universe is approximately 10-12 billion years old, or that there are trillions of stars in our galaxy (I cannot even begin to visualize what numbers that big are really like). However, even though I cannot visualize these things, I can (and do) believe them. How? By giving my *allegiance to the truth* of these statements and ideas. By faith I commit my loyalty to them. I choose to subjectively believe that these facts are objectively true.

Ideas like the Trinity or “God is love,” then, cannot be easily visualized, but can be believed by allegiance to the truth. But of course I can also give my allegiance to other truths that *can* be easily visualized. I have many memories of events that I have actually experienced: these

events, especially the more recent ones, are usually easy to visualize in my mind. I can readily visualize eating breakfast with my family this morning, for example. And I certainly *believe* that I ate breakfast with my family this morning. I can easily visualize the faces of my two children, and I do believe that I have two children. These things are easy to visualize because I have had *concrete sensory experiences of these things* (i.e., of eating breakfast, and of having two children). This is an important point: visualization is a product of the imagination, and the imagination draws from memories of sensory experiences that I have had in the past.

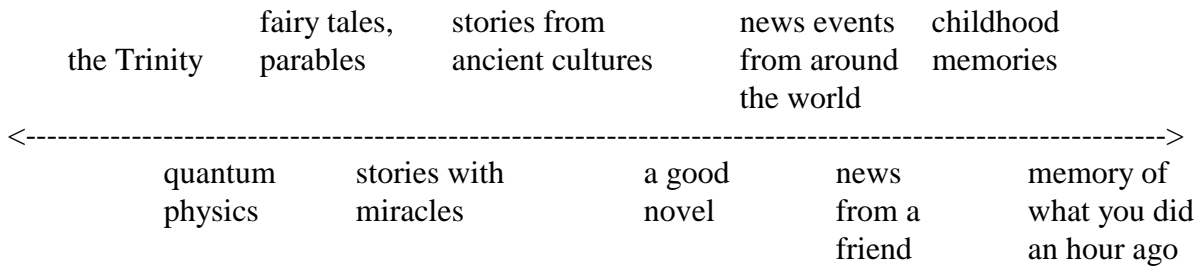
Visualization, therefore, is essentially a matter of *creativity*. How well I can visualize something depends on how well I can creatively reconstruct memories of past sensory experiences, sometimes in new combinations (I can visualize an elephant in a pink tutu by patching together memories of elephants and of tutus from my past experience). In contrast, faith or belief is essentially a matter of *allegiance*, allegiance to the truth of a statement or idea. Faith is *not* tied down to my imagination.

But why do some people have so much trouble visualizing Jesus as a historical man who lived on the earth? For one thing, some people have more skilled imaginations than others. Speaking more generally, though, visualizing remote historical events is not easy for any of us, precisely because none of us were around back then to have direct sensory experience of those events. Unless you been granted a special vision like the apostle Paul, you have never physically met Jesus in person or talked to Him, so you do not have the kind of memories of sensory experiences with Jesus needed by your imagination to create an adequate visualization. Probably the best you can do is to visualize a bearded man walking around in a crowd, perhaps based on images in paintings you have seen, or images from the *Jesus* film. This kind of visualization is inevitably mythic and movie-like, because you are drawing from artificial sensory sources (i.e., movies and paintings) that always to some degree fail to match what really happened in history.

So then, we see that imagination must be distinguished from belief. Imagination depends on past sensory experiences, while belief is rooted in the will. There is another difference between imagination and belief. Whereas belief is an either-or, *categorical* phenomenon (I have either committed my loyalty to a particular truth, or I have not), visualization is not categorical. Instead, my ability to visualize the elements of an idea or story will fall somewhere along a continuum, depending on how familiar the elements of that idea or story are to my personal sensory experience. If I have had experiences of the same sort as in the idea or story, then my ability to imagine that idea or story will be tend to be high (toward the right on the continuum sketched below). If not, then my ability to imagine it will be low (toward the left on the continuum sketched below). Some ideas or stories will be only moderately difficult to visualize, and thus fall somewhere in the middle of the continuum.

UNFAMILIAR,
EXOTIC, HARD
TO IMAGINE

FAMILIAR,
CONCRETE,
VIVID



Again, notice that I can take any of the ideas/stories listed on the above continuum and choose to believe that it is either true or false. My relative ability to visualize is totally distinct from my choice of whether to believe or not. For example, I can choose to believe in the truth of quantum physics and the Trinity, but reject fairy tales as false, even though the story line of most fairy tales is easier to imagine than either the Trinity or quantum physics. Or, I can believe that the news story I just heard on the radio is true, but that the good novel I just read is false, even though a vividly written novel may be nearly as easy to imagine as a news story (or in some cases, easier to imagine). Just because something is easy to imagine does not mean that I will decide it is true, and just because something is hard to imagine does not mean that I will decide it is false. In the same way, then, I can choose to have allegiance to the truth of a Bible story that includes miracles and other unfamiliar events, even though it may be hard for me to visualize those miracles as really happening. It is both possible to visualize things that we do not believe, and believe things that we cannot visualize.

H. Checklist of Facts to be Believed

Another reason that some people question the completeness of their faith (and therefore lack assurance of salvation) is that they fear there may be a precise checklist of facts that must be believed about Jesus in order for a person to be saved. What if they believe nine out of ten of the items, but are unaware of or are misinformed about the tenth?

Indeed, in my separate essay “Allegiance” I identified numerous verses that refer to one or more specific aspects of Jesus’s identity and redemptive work that are believed for salvation (e.g., that He is the Christ, the Lord, the Son of God, that He died for our sins, that He was resurrected, etc.). However, it is significant that the largest body of verses identified in my survey instructs us simply to believe “in Jesus,” without referring to any specific items to believe. This suggests that God has no precise “checklist” of facts about Jesus that we must mentally check off before God can save us.

Consider the thief on the cross. The thief knew from the context of the crucifixion that Jesus was being wrongly executed and that He claimed to be the Christ and the rightful “King of the Jews”

(Luke 23:35-43). And yet it is not at all clear that the thief understood the nature of Jesus's substitutionary death, and we can be quite certain that the thief knew nothing of Jesus's yet-to-occur resurrection (cf. Romans 10:9). Despite these limitations, because the thief assented to Jesus's kingly claim and reached out to Him in dependence ("remember me when you come in your kingdom"), Jesus seems to have accepted him into the kingdom ("today you will be with Me in Paradise") (Luke 23:42-43). It seems clear that though the thief's knowledge was limited, his heart attitude was right, and this was what Jesus was looking for: an attitude of openness to accept as true whatever Jesus revealed about His identity. The thief responded positively to what knowledge he had about Jesus, and displayed dependence/trust and allegiance/loyalty to his newly discovered King. And Jesus accepted him.

I am not saying that we are free to neglect the facts about Jesus. Instead, I am saying that the most important thing in God's eyes is that we realize that it is *Jesus* who is the unique answer for our sin problem; that we must come to God *through Jesus, and no one else*. When we yield allegiance to this basic fact, then we have exhibited to God the open heart of faith that He is looking for. It will not matter that we may have forgotten at that moment to hold in mind one of the many facts about Jesus, or that our perception of Him is in some way imperfect. If it were the case that God had an exhaustive checklist that we must be able to hold in mind and assent to point-by-point for salvation, then it would be grossly unfair of Him to have neglected to repeat this full checklist every time He told us in Scripture what to do to be saved. Consider the many different ways that the gospel message was presented in the book of Acts alone, and it is clear that God is not so much concerned with having an exhaustive list of facts for us to believe as He is that people will be pointed to the *right person*, Jesus, the Christ.

I. Metaphors For Salvation

A similar misunderstanding to that above is the idea that one must understand and somehow "connect" with each metaphor used in the Bible or used by preachers and authors to describe the salvation experience (e.g., "eating Jesus' flesh," "inviting Jesus into your heart," "being born again," "death and resurrection with Jesus," "personally accepting Christ," "becoming a child of God," "calling on the name of Jesus"). Some people have trouble understanding some of these metaphors, or otherwise find certain of the metaphors unilluminating. For this reason they doubt the completeness of their faith, and hence question their salvation.

This kind of thinking reveals a misunderstanding of the nature of metaphorical versus literal language, and how this relates to the Bible's teaching about salvation. A single literal concept can be expressed in an unlimited number of metaphorical ways, through numerous different figures of speech. This is what we see in the Bible's metaphorical treatment of salvation. Each of the various metaphors reflects a different perspective from which the single literal description of the salvation experience can be approached. It is the same literal experience being described in many different metaphorical ways. This is a common fact about human language.

To take a simplified example, a woman could refer to her husband as her "Better/Poorer Half" or "Mr. Bigshot" or her "Old Man" or her "Sweet Butterball." But in every case the literal real-

world referent is the same person. Each metaphor approaches her husband from a different perspective, and each metaphor may focus on slightly different facets of his character (or of his wife's impression of him). The important thing to keep in mind is that *the metaphor is not the reality*, and *no metaphor functions as a necessary substitute for the literal reality to which it points*. Metaphors are simply handles to help you get a grip on the literal truth. In fact, you can get to the literal reality without going through *any* metaphors, using literal rather than metaphorical language. Consequently, there is no single metaphor that *must* be understood or "connected with" in order to obtain salvation. All that is necessary is that you experience the literal reality to which the metaphors all point. That literal content for the biblical conditions of salvation I have summarized elsewhere in terms of *allegiance to the truths about Jesus* and *allegiance to Jesus as one's Lord*.

J. But Am I Really, Really Sure?

This final obstacle to assurance is one of Satan's favorite tricks, and can piggyback on any of the obstacles we have already considered above. When all else fails, our Adversary loves to keep a struggling believer off-balance by having him ask, "How do I really, *really* know that I've done what is needed?" The beauty of this question, from Satan's perspective, is that it *never has an answer*. Because it asks for absolute knowledge, we can *never* answer it in a simple "yes" or "no" fashion. As I discussed earlier, we are finite human beings, and thus we can never know *anything* with this kind of absolute certainty. So, this question has us chasing after the wind--we will never catch what we're running after. And this puts us in a state of perpetual doubt, just what Satan desires.

I said that this question puts us in perpetual doubt. Let me explain more precisely: Even if you feel compelled to ask this "Am I really, really sure" question, you know inside your heart that the question can never have an answer. Therefore, doubt will appear to you to be *inevitable*. And because it appears inevitable, you *will* doubt. After all, you have no real choice, or so it seems. The question actually fosters doubt because it makes doubt inevitable. It is a question right out of hell.

Instead, we should be looking for assurance "beyond a reasonable doubt," to borrow the legal phrase. This is the only way that we can function day-to-day. No one goes around demanding absolute certainty--we would never get anything done in our daily lives. Imagine for a minute if you had to make *absolutely sure* of all the risks involved before you did anything. If you did, you would never get into your car ("How do I know for sure that I won't have an accident?"), never cross a street ("What if there's a car coming and I somehow haven't seen it?"), never go to sleep ("What if there's a gas leak that I haven't noticed?"), never eat a meal ("What if this chicken carries a particularly hardy strain of salmonella--am I *sure* I cooked it long enough?"), etc. Instead, we all adopt a sufficient level of confidence in our decisions as long as there is *no reasonable doubt* standing in the way.

When it comes to salvation, I should be asking, "Would any reasonable person agree that I have done what God has asked?", or "Are there any *reasonable* reasons to think that I haven't done

what God has asked?” If I have “believed” according to what would be a common-sense, Scripturally-informed understanding of “believe,” then I can go ahead and conclude that I have believed, because God is a reasonable God who knows my limitations. To say “but I’m not absolutely certain” is *not* a *reasonable* doubt--it is *unreasonable* because it demands an impossible absolute knowledge not available to finite human beings.

3. Summary of Obstacles to Assurance of Salvation

All of the obstacles to assurance of salvation that we have considered have one thing in common: they all suggest that something more than simple, sincere allegiance to Christ is required for one’s faith to be complete. When I say “sincere allegiance to Christ” I mean that one’s faith is founded on a *commitment* to and *dependence on* Jesus alone for salvation, based on the truths about Him revealed in Scripture (see the separate essay on “Allegiance”).

The first obstacle to assurance surveyed above suggested that simple commitment/dependence itself is not enough; instead, for faith to be complete it must hold the truth of its object with absolute *certainty*. Contrary to this claim, I argued that genuine faith always involves a risk. Another obstacle to assurance was the idea that faith is never clouded by *doubts*. Against this I argued that the risk of faith makes sense only against the backdrop of doubt, hence occasional doubts are predictable. The third obstacle to assurance was the felt need for *mystical or tangible experiences* to buttress bare faith. I argued that while such experiences may be welcomed when they come, we should never make our faith dependent on them, precisely because mystical/tangible experiences are a subtle form of “sight” experience which can undercut faith if one is not careful.

The fourth obstacle to assurance discussed above was the notion that saving faith must be maintained as a *constant mental state* of awareness. I argued that this view mistakenly reduces faith to the level of attention, and that faith is rather a standing commitment which, once made, may underlie rather than be limited to our conscious moment-to-moment awareness. The fifth obstacle was the idea that saving faith is a *specific psychological experience* shared in exactly the same way by every true believer. I countered that believers share a common target/referent for faith, not a common psychological experience of faith. The sixth obstacle to assurance was the requirement that the object of faith must be satisfactorily *visualized*. I suggested that this view mistakes faith for imagination. The seventh obstacle that we considered was the claim that there is a *precise checklist of facts* about Jesus which must be believed for salvation. Again, however, I argued that the Bible emphasizes the *referent* of our faith (i.e., Jesus) more so than a rigidly defined set of truths about that referent. Next, I considered and rejected the notion that one must be able to understand and emotionally connect to every biblical *metaphor* for salvation. Finally, I argued that the question, “But am I really, really sure I’ve believed?” should be rejected because it is by its very nature unanswerable and fosters perpetual doubt.

When considering the above obstacles to assurance of salvation, again and again we have been driven back to the position that the essence of saving faith lies not so much in the nature of one’s subjective mental processes as in the *identity of the objective real-world referent to which faith*

assents and yields allegiance. Saving faith focuses on the recognition that *Jesus*, and Jesus alone, can rescue me from my plight. With this in mind I want to close this essay with what is perhaps the most important proposal of any I have included here for those struggling with salvation. Please keep on reading.

4. A Final Proposal for Assurance

Imagine that you are seated in a cozy living room on a wintry night (put a fireplace in the picture if you like). Seated comfortably on the sofa, you gaze out through the window at the deep, star-studded winter sky. As you count stars, you suddenly become aware of a nasty stain on the window screen (perhaps one of the kids squashed a bug on the screen). The stain on the screen both fascinates and concerns you. You are mesmerized.

Question: Can you focus both on the screen and the stars at the same time?

No.

Assurance of salvation is somewhat like that. As Cliff Bedell, one of my professors at Columbia Biblical Seminary once shared with me, people who struggle with assurance of their salvation are often fixated on the “screen” and for this reason are unable to see the “stars.” The screen is faith itself; the stars are the object of faith, the Lord Jesus. Though some analysis and evaluation of the sort I have attempted in this essay can be helpful, there is a danger that one can become so fixated on questions of the sufficiency of one’s faith that one loses sight of the sufficiency of Jesus Himself. It is easy to get mired in questions of the legitimacy of one’s faith, and in this very process prevent faith from really taking flight, for **faith soars best when all of one’s focus is on the object of faith, the sufficient Lord Jesus.**

So then, if you were struggling with doubts when you began reading this essay and are still clinging to those doubts at the end of this essay, my parting advice is that you now turn all your focus on the sufficiency of the Lord Jesus to save you, not on the adequacy of your response to God. If you have never before genuinely yielded your allegiance to Christ, I can think of no better way to bring this result about than by becoming enamored of the beauty and sufficiency of Jesus, the only One able to save. If, on the other hand, it turns out that you have had genuine allegiance to Christ all along, focusing on the sufficiency of Christ may be the only way that your faith will be able to soar. When faith soars, assurance of salvation will then be free to grow within.

Note:

If it seems odd that Paul would distinguish himself from his conscience as two distinct witnesses, this is no more odd than what Paul did two chapters earlier in Romans 7:

“But if I do the very thing that I do not wish to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that it is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwells me” (Rom 7:16-17).

In this passage Paul distinguishes ‘I’ from the principle of sin within, so that he on the one hand can say “I sin” but on the other can say “No, it is not me, but the sin in me that sins.” In the same way, then, that Paul projects his inner sin-principle as a distinct entity in the above verse, Paul also projects his conscience as a distinct entity from himself in Romans 9:1.

Note that in Romans 9:1 Paul may be appealing in a metaphorical way to the Old Testament idea that it takes two corroborating witnesses for legal testimony. Compare John 5:31ff for an example of this idea in Jesus’s ministry. Indeed, in John 5 Jesus distinguishes between the witness that He Himself bears to his identity and the witness borne by His works. This is yet another example of what the modern reader might consider a rather too fine distinction between witnesses (i.e., both one’s words and actions derive from oneself, so it may seem a bit odd to modern readers that Jesus presents these as separate witnesses).

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