

The *SBJT* Forum: What Are the Biblical and Practical Implications of the Doctrine of Assurance?

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the Forum's format. Carl F. H. Henry, D. A. Carson, Scott Hafemann, Charles Tackett, and C. Ben Mitchell have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the Forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: What are the key theological issues in developing an understanding of the doctrine of assurance?

Carl F. H. Henry: The believer's eternal security has been doctrinally debated throughout many generations. The controversy has often been depicted in terms of "the perseverance of the saints." Yet the term perseverance occurs but once in Scripture, and there it is connected with prayer (Eph 6:18).

In any event, it would seem more appropriately connected with the perseverance of our Lord. For if we focus on ourselves we soon know better than to affirm the moral and/or spiritual perseverance of sinners—and such indeed we are.

To be sure, those of us who are "called to be saints" are on the way to sinless perfection. We shall be conformed to the image of Christ, an image that the Pauline epistles characterize in terms of truth and righteousness.

That need not mean, however, that we are day by day progressing in holiness at an always discernible pace. The believer

who grows in grace soon becomes aware that our thoughts and deeds are part of the fabric of a daily existence that may improperly be assumed to belong to normative spiritual experience, when in fact they actually compromise an ideal spiritual life.

The conscience of the unregenerate self easily accommodates what offends the Creator and Lord of Life. Even the believer's conscience is not infallible, but requires correction by the Scriptures. So it is that what at one stage of spiritual growth seemed to be compatible with Christian commitment is seen in fact to be quite objectionable.

Indeed, the reverse can also be the case: what seems objectionable may in fact not be so at all. For instance, the New Testament mirrors the conflict that emerged over the propriety of eating meat that had been offered to idols.

The Christian is to live with a good conscience enlivened by the Holy Spirit and attuned to the teaching of the Book. The Holy Spirit uses truth as a means both of persuasion and conviction. The profess-

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ing Christian who disregards what Scripture enjoins or what the Bible disallows and who appeals to the Holy Spirit to justify the pursuit of unbiblical behavior does violence to some of the Christian basics. We might well question the fidelity of his or her redemption by Christ.

Thus, the issue of eternal security is sometimes raised when what is really involved is salvific confusion. A nonsystematic approach to Scripture is being used to accommodate theological insecurity and moral instability.

Calvinists and Arminians have long debated the doctrine of perseverance of the saints. Some commentators have sought to trace this conflict to an unjustifiable imposition of strict logic on Scripture. But if Scripture is not to be correlated with logic, then no biblical doctrinal distinctions would seem to matter much.

Arminians insist that such passages as Luke 8:9-15, Galatians 5:4, and Hebrews 2:14, 3:7-4:13, and 6:4-6 imply that a believer can defect from faith. Emphasizing freedom of the will, they contend that one may lose salvation apart from continual trust in God.

Calvinists contend that one who is genuinely redeemed by the Saviour cannot forfeit salvation. They cite as evidence such passages John 6:37, 10:28, 17:6-11, and Romans 8:31-39 and 11:29. They correlate the perseverance of the saints with the perseverance of the Savior. Reformed tradition, moreover, stresses divine promises such as Phillipians 1:6, 2 Thessalonians 3:3, and 2 Timothy 1:12 and 4:18.

Strong statements in Scripture emphasize that human misbehavior after regeneration can destroy the achievements of a lifetime. But Scripture stresses also that God knows the thoughts and intentions of every life, and that the grace of God can

survive the infidelity of human life, though a rebellious professing believer dare not presume on that grace.

SBJT: What does the Gospel of John tell us about the doctrine of assurance?

D. A. Carson: At one level, the Gospel of John does not address the question of Christian assurance with anything like the immediacy displayed by 1 John. In the latter, John explicitly tells us that he has written “these things” to believers so that they may *know* that they have eternal life (1 Jn 5:13). Repeatedly we come across some such formula as “This is how we know we are in him” (1 Jn 2:5) or the like. By contrast, the Gospel of John makes no such statements. Whatever it contributes to the doctrine of assurance is more indirect.

Yet what it contributes is not for that reason insubstantial. *First*, John’s Gospel says a great deal about what might generically be called “salvation”—what it is, how it is provided, who has it, what it looks like. Inasmuch as Christian assurance is Christian assurance of *salvation* (as opposed, say, to the kind of “assurance” that is merely self-confidence, or overconfidence, or a reasonably mature “persona”), John’s Gospel contributes a fair bit indirectly. *Second*, this Gospel also explores something of the nature of spurious belief and false discipleship. It assumes no “easy believism”—and that in turn raises some questions in principle about anyone’s claims to have assurance if they are demonstrably falsified by a continuously perverse life. Although not cast in the language of assurance, such themes certainly prepare the way for the more explicit treatment found in the Epistles of John.

These twin themes are very strong. Here I can do no more than survey a few examples.

John’s Gospel aims so to bear witness

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that readers will believe “that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God,” and that by believing they might “have life in his name” (20:31). In one way or another, the entire book is devoted to this purpose. Sometimes the evangelist pursues this purpose in the context of intricate discourse or discussion. For instance, John 5:16-30 expounds the nature of Jesus’ sonship to the Father. The reason, of course, is that if John is going to talk about the importance of belief for securing eternal life (20:31), he must also talk about the object of that belief, Jesus Christ himself. That is why so much of the Fourth Gospel treats Christology. But as John unpacks Jesus’ sonship (a critical element in that Christology), the object of faith becomes clearer, and that in turn returns to the evangelist to his over-arching goal—bringing his readers to genuine salvation. So John reports Jesus’ words in the midst of this discourse on sonship: “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (5:24).

Other important elements are obviously surfacing here, e.g. the inaugurated eschatology for which John’s Gospel is famous. The believer in this verse *already enjoys* eternal life, eternal life that will be consummated at the resurrection on the last day (5:25). But clearly, if one *already has* eternal life, and knows it, then one properly enjoys Christian assurance. Many, many passages in John’s Gospel function this way.

Some passages contribute to the same end through signs or highly symbol-laden exposition. In John 6, Jesus declares himself to be the bread of God. The “bread of life discourse,” as it is called, simultaneously links Jesus’ claim to be the bread

of life with his own miracle of the feeding of the five thousand the previous day, and with the theme of “manna.” Jesus argues that he is the ultimate “manna” of God: the Old Testament manna, however wonderful a provision, points the way to the ultimate “manna,” the ultimate “bread from God.” As the Old Testament manna sustained the life of the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings, Jesus as the manna from God provides the sustenance for eternal life.

Indeed, the point is all the clearer when one recalls the first-century agrarian setting of this discourse. In our industrialized world, for most of us food is something that comes to us in cellophane or cardboard. We are not intuitively aware that almost everything we eat is something organic that has died. A hamburger is dead cow, dead barley, dead lettuce, dead tomatoes, and so on. The only ingredients of the hamburgers that have not died are the minerals—salt, for instance, and usually too much of it. Strictly speaking, then, all the organic ingredients that died gave their life that we might live. Either the cow and the lettuce die, or I do. My physical life can be sustained only if a great number of living organisms die. People living in an agrarian culture know these things intuitively.

Jesus says, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world” (6:51). He then tells his hearers that they must “eat” his flesh and “drink” his blood. The explanation lies neither in cannibalism nor, at least directly, in the Lord’s table. Jesus himself has already shown that he understands his self-references as the bread of life to be metaphorical: what it *means* to feed on him is to come

to him and believe in him, thereby securing eternal life (6:35). But the metaphor is powerful in the first-century agrarian culture: either Jesus dies, or we do. If we are to have eternal life, the “bread” that sustains us must give up his life.

By these and scores of other themes and passages, then, John’s Gospel directs us to Jesus, and assures us that eternal life is ours because it has been secured by him in his death. We appropriate it by faith. There is no other way to return to God himself than by him who is the way, the truth, and the life (14:6). Implicitly, then, this Gospel provides excellent assurance of faith, precisely by making the object of faith so clear, and the means of salvation, faith itself, transparent.

But on the other hand, John is not naive. He does not think that every profession of faith is genuine. He carefully reports that at an early Passover in Jesus’ ministry, even when “many people” saw what he was doing “and believed in his name,” Jesus was not taken in: he “would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man’s testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man” (2:23-25). Clearly, not all professions of believing, even believing in Jesus’ name, are genuine.

Again, after the “hard teaching” of John 6, “many” of Jesus’ *disciples* are offended. They resort to grumbling, and finally turn away from him: “Many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him” (6:66). These disciples, clearly, were among those who *had* been “following” him—that is what a disciple is. But although they were “disciples” in the sense that they had been following Jesus, they were clearly not disciples in the sense that they were prepared to follow him and his teachings regardless of what he said. Unlike the Twelve (6:67),

they were unprepared to conclude, “Lord, to whom [else] shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God” (6:68-69). In John 8:31-32, Jesus tells some of those who “put their faith in him” words that help distinguish genuine faith from spurious: “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.”

In these passages John is certainly not encouraging an unhealthy introspection. He does not want people to ask themselves, “Am I a good enough disciple to conclude that my faith in Jesus is genuine?” Too much of that sort of reasoning, and sooner or later a person’s real assurance (or lack of it!) is tied to their own performance—and that is never a helpful ground of Christian assurance. The ultimate *ground* of assurance is never more than Jesus himself, Jesus and his death and resurrection on our behalf. *The ground of Christian assurance is the object of Christian faith.* Nevertheless, because eternal life, regeneration, genuine conversion, *inevitably* transform life, an utter lack of transformation rightly calls in question the genuineness of one’s profession of faith. That is a constant and driving New Testament theme, and it is treated at length by John in his first letter.

There are many rich and subtle elements in the doctrine of assurance that have not received so much as a mention here. For instance, the role of the Holy Spirit in our assurance is worthy of careful study and reflection, and John certainly contributes to that theme. But his driving emphases are clear enough, and prepare us for his more focused treatment in 1 John.

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SBJT: How would you outline Paul's understanding of perseverance?

Scott Hafemann: This is a much needed topic in our day of nominal, American "Christianity" and the "decisionism" of much of American evangelicalism. Moreover, I realize that what I am about to say cuts across the grain of much of contemporary preaching, but this is the way I read Paul. So right up front let me emphasize that I believe that the apostle Paul is absolutely convinced that those who have been redeemed by Christ *will* continue to "fight the good fight" and "finish the race" by "keeping the faith" (2 Ti 4:7). But for Paul this statement of confidence concerning the believer is first and foremost a conviction about God's grace.

The doctrine of "perseverance" is a statement about the surety of God's merciful commitment to us, not a reflection of our commitment to God. On the one hand, believers persevere in their faith not because of their own decision, but because of *God's* self-generated eternal decree, which unleashes a chain of consequences that begins with God's foreknowledge and predestination and climaxes with our glorification (Ro 8:29-30). On the other hand, believers persevere not because of their own fortitude, but because of *God's* historical activity of working all things together toward this good end (note that Ro 8:29-30 functions to support 8:28 and 8:31-39).

Hence, God's commitment to sanctify and glorify those whom he has predestined and justified, and to orchestrate all things together to that end, means that *God's* glory is on the line and being displayed in the perseverance of those whom he "chose before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him in love" (Eph 1:3; cf. Col

1:21-22, 1 Th 5:9, 2 Th 2:13-14). Conversely, our "hope in sharing the glory of God" (Ro 5:2) honors not ourselves but *God*, since it reflects our confidence in the perfection of *his* character (i.e. his integrity to do what he says he will do) and in the strength of *his* might (i.e. his ability to do what he says he will do) (Ro 4:20). Those to whom God is committed will therefore remain committed to God because God's ultimate commitment is to display his glory, one means for which is ensuring the perseverance of his people in accordance with his promises (Ro 11:36, 16:25-7, 1 Co 15:28, 2 Co 1:20, Eph 1:6, 12, 14, Php 2:11, etc.). For this reason, Paul is convinced that "he who began a good work [in the Philippians] will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Php 1:6). This is why those who do not persevere show, by their very lack of perseverance, that they were never called and justified by God.

So, given his theocentric perspective, Paul's crucial question concerning perseverance is not whether we have made a "decision" for God, but whether God has called us to himself. Paul's first consideration as a pastor was whether there was genuine evidence that the grace of God had been poured out in a person's life. But Paul's desire was not to be a "spiritual cop." Rather, he wanted to comfort God's people in the midst of their personal and circumstantial adversities by pointing to that evidence in order to assure them that God was present and powerfully at work in their lives for their good (note, e.g., the evidence for Php 1:6 in 1:5, 7; for 1 Th 1:4 in 1:3, 5-10, for 2:13 in 2:14, for 3:7 in 3:6; for 1 Co 1:4 in 1:5-7, with the promise of 1:8, because of God's faithfulness as declared in 1:9; for Col 1:3 in 1:4-8; etc.). Paul is sure that where the Spirit is present, he will produce "fruit" (Gal 5:22-23). Where

the glory of God is encountered, it will produce transformation into the image of God (2 Co 3:18). Where God has called his people, they will follow with faith, hope, love, and suffering for the sake of the gospel (1 Th 1:3, 6, 3:3, 2 Th 1:34, Eph 3:14-19, Ro 8:37, 2 Ti 3:12). The sign that the Spirit poured out through the gospel has taken root in one's life is "obedience [that comes from faith]," which, in order to glorify God, was the purpose of Paul's entire ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles (Ro 1:5, 15:18, 16:26). For this reason, since the Corinthians had shown signs that God had indeed "washed," "sanctified," and "justified" them (1 Co 6:11), Paul expects them not to be classified any longer among the morally wicked who will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Co 6:9-10, cf. Gal 5:21, Eph 5:3-11). Paul asserts that perseverance is *visible* in a real change of life in real people in the midst of the real world (Tit 2:14). Perseverance is not a continuing mental assent to the truth of events in the past; it is a continuing and active obedience to God's will as the expression of a growing trust in his promises.

Of course, Paul recognizes that perseverance in sanctification is a matter of progress over a lifetime, not perfection overnight (cf. Php 1:25, Col 1:10, 1 Th 4:1, 2 Th 1:3). Thus, Paul gives those Corinthians involved in the strife of 1 Corinthians 1:11-12 the benefit of the doubt. They *may* be Christians. But if so, they are still "babes in Christ," inasmuch as they are acting as "men of the flesh," and not spiritually (1 Co 3:1, 3). But if they *are* "spiritual," then Paul fully expects them to grow up (1 Co 1:10, 3:18-22, 4:7, 16, 5:1-2, 6:4-8, 18, 11:17-22, 14:20)! And he expects those in Corinth who are already strong in the faith to get even stronger (1 Co 8:11, 10:24, 31, 11:1, 14:1, etc.; cf. Ro

14:13-21), just as he expected those who eventually did repent to demonstrate it by giving their money away (cf. 2 Co 8:7-8, 24, 9:3, 13).

Paul's imperatives are not options or good advice, but the necessary implications of the indicative reality upon which they are based (cf. Php 2:12-13, 2 Th 2:14-15). Perseverance in a growing spirituality is not the experience of the Christian elite, but the promise to all those who belong to God. Paul demands what he demands because he is convinced that God has granted what he has granted. Sanctification is consequently *inextricably* linked to justification as its manifestation in daily life! "How can we who have died to sin still live in it?" (Ro 6:2). Because we *are* saved we must therefore exhibit "endurance with regard to good work" in order *to be* saved (Ro 2:7; cf. 2:10-13, Gal 6:9, 2 Ti 4:7-8).

First Corinthians 3:1-3 is not a word of comfort ("relax, the issue is not your salvation, but your growth"), but of chastisement ("watch out, the issue of your growth is a matter of your salvation")! First Corinthians 3:15 is not the loophole in the doctrine of sanctification that denies the necessity of spiritual growth. Paul's concern there is with evaluating the work of his fellow ministers, not with their personal status in Christ (Cf. 1 Co 3:9-10). Nor does it turn obedience into the striving for rewards, as if there *are* some optional things that we do earn with our efforts. The "carnal Christian" of 1 Corinthians 3:1-4 is not a third class of humanity between being a non-Christian and being a "Spirit-filled Christian." Just as "Spirit-filled Christian" is a needless tautology (Ro 8:9, 14), "Carnal Christian" is an oxymoron that cannot endure for long, for in 1 Corinthians 3:3 Paul places the behavior of the "men of the flesh" who

are still “babes in Christ” in the category of those who do not have the Spirit at all! From Paul’s perspective, to claim to be a Christian, while at the same time willingly and gladly remaining in baby-like states of immature sin, is a contradiction in terms that must be resolved in one direction or the other (Ro 6:15-19).

The natural implication of Paul’s understanding of the divine foundation and human necessity of perseverance is the fact that whenever he encounters those who claim to be Christians, but show no interest in repenting from sin and becoming more like Christ, he *warns* them that they may be deluded about their salvation (1 Co 15:2, 2 Co 6:1, Gal 1:6). The fear of God is his gracious gift granted to those who believe in order to keep them persevering (2 Co 5:11). The warning of peril is thus God’s instrument of perseverance. Hence, Paul’s initial word to those Corinthians who were tearing the church apart with their boasting was that “if any one destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him” (1 Co 3:16). After doing everything in his power to win them back to Christ, Paul’s last word to those Corinthians still in rebellion against him and his gospel was to test themselves to see if they are “holding to [their] faith” (2 Co 13:5). If they do not finally repent, he will have to conclude that they were never part of God’s people. God’s commitment to perfect us is conditioned by our continuing in the faith, since that is what he enables us to do (Col 1:22-23).

In calling others to account for themselves, Paul is simply preaching what he practices. Like a boxer, Paul’s constant admonition to himself is “to pummel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (1 Co 9:27; cf. 1 Ti 4:7-10, 6:11-12). For Paul,

these warnings are real, since God’s work is effective. Those who will not believe them cannot be considered “believers.” Perseverance in repentance, not persistent nonchalance in the face of sin, is the sign that the Spirit is at work in our lives. For if the Spirit is at work within us, “*godly grief*” and the fear of *God’s* judgment, not comfort in our condition, will be our response when we recognize our sin (2 Co 5:9-10, 7:1, 9-12, Ro 14:10-12). Since God cannot go back on his word nor be thwarted in his purposes, perseverance in the obedience of faith is *the* evidence of a genuine conversion.

So can we ever be sure of our salvation? Paul’s answer is a resounding yes (cf. e.g. Ro 5:6-11)! But since the test of persevering faith is real, true assurance comes when we need it: in the present! The problem with the doctrine of “eternal security” (“once saved, always saved, no matter what you do!”) is that it is focused on our past decisions without regard for the present or the future. This leads to a false assurance. In stark contrast, Paul’s understanding of perseverance is focused squarely on trusting God in the present and the future, in confirmation of, but also in disregard for the past (Php 3:12-16). Though there may be many valleys, true faith and its good works will not die, since, by definition, they are an essential part of the gift of God (Eph 2:8). Moreover, genuine assurance is based on objective evidence: upon real repentance and a growing “obedience of faith” (Eph 2:10). “Once really saved, always saved, as seen precisely in what you do!” It is those who feel remorse for their sins, trust Christ for their forgiveness, and seek to live by the Spirit that can be assured that God is mightily at work in them.

As a pastor, Paul therefore comforts the

contrite and encourages the confident, but confronts the complacent and arrogant sinner with the judgment of God, no matter what his or her past track record in the church. Although Paul never points out any degree of holiness that must be reached at any time to be assured of our salvation (God is the author of sanctification!), he does paint a picture of what perseverance looks like in our lives: *increasing* conformity to the image of Christ as the image of God (Ro 8:29, 2 Co 3:18, 4:4, Eph 5:1).

Finally, and most importantly, since God is the author of our sanctification, the pathway to perseverance is prayer and the power of the Spirit. For this reason, our perseverance itself is an expression of our utter dependence on God (cf. 1 Th 3:11-13, 2 Th 1:11-12, Eph 1:15-23, 3:14-19, Col 1:9-14). Hence, the end of our perseverance is praise (Ro 11:36, Eph 1:6, 12, 14).

SBJT: Can the lack of assurance of one's salvation in Christ produce any detrimental psychological by-products? Conversely, can the assurance of one's salvation in Christ provide any beneficial psychological by-products?

Charles Tackett: In responding to these questions it is essential that I note two basic points about who God is in His Holy nature. First, God is a God who seeks a spiritual and personal relationship with His human creation. Second, God has created human beings to be relational beings. God has created a relational component into our very biological and psychosocial nature.

A crucial biological and psychosocial developmental marker in childhood called object constancy commonly comes into play when I counsel Christian people who believe that their salvation in Christ is not assured by God. Its precursor is object permanence. Object permanence is the ability

to know that an object continues to exist when it is no longer in your presence. Object constancy is the ability to know that the characteristics of an object are consistent over a long period of time.

If I were to apply this concept to myself it would mean that when I look at my friend Fred I would be able to see that Fred's good and bad characteristics are the same each new day. I would be able to understand that Fred's character is consistent. It is possible to fail to achieve object constancy either because of my own actual sin in life and/or because of someone else's actual sin. When this happens the person begins to look at people in a dichotomous manner. People are not a combination of good and bad, they are either all good or all bad. Functionally, these people are relating (as they experience it) to two different people.

This dichotomous view of thinking of human beings then slips over in their mind into how they view God. God becomes either the "all-good saving God" or the "all-bad God who takes away this gift of salvation." Their relationship with God is based on their personal emotions, thoughts, and behaviors and not on sound Biblical doctrine. When they *feel* relaxed, calm, happy, excited, and loved, they see God as the "all-good saving God." When they *feel* down, fearful, tense, hurt, and despondent, they see God as the "all-bad God who takes away this gift of salvation." When their *thoughts* about God focus on God's grace, mercy, salvation and sacrificialness, they think of God as the "all-good saving God." When their *thoughts* about God focus on God's wrath, vengeance, judgement and disciplining of His people, they think of God as the "all-bad God who takes away this gift of salvation." When their *behavior* is an act of

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obedience before God, they understand God as the “all-good saving God.” When their *behavior* is full of acts of disobedience before God, they experience God as the “all-bad God who takes away this gift of salvation.” In their minds they are serving a Holy God, but in reality they are serving a manmade god who is either an “all-good god” or an “all-bad god.” In summary, their core problem is that they look at God as if God were a human being and not a Holy God who is the only one who is all-good no matter how He relates to His creation.

In a clinical Christian counseling setting it is not uncommon to discover within these persons a certain type of depression that classically is called a character-based depression. This type of depression has seven core characteristics: poor appetite or overeating; insomnia or hypersomnia; low energy or fatigue; low self-esteem; poor concentration or difficulty making decisions; feelings of hopelessness;¹ and an unbiblical view of God. This type of depression is normally experienced by the person for years. It is like an emotional cold that a person experiences as a regular part of life. It drains away any spiritual sense meaning and purpose.

A second common by-product that is found in a clinical Christian counseling setting within these persons is an anxiety-based character. This type of anxiety has ten common characteristics: excessive worry; difficulty controlling worry; restlessness or feeling keyed up or on edge; being easily fatigued; difficulty concentrating or mind going blank; irritability; muscle tension; difficulty falling or staying asleep, or restless unsatisfying sleep;² withdrawing from fellow church members; and an inaccurate thought that God is in the process of abandoning them.

A third common by-product that is found in a clinical Christian counseling setting is that these persons abandon an obedient lifestyle before God because of their mistaken belief that God has abandoned them. This type of rebellion has five common characteristics: a pattern of unstable relationships; impulsivity that may be self-damaging; emotional instability; chronic feelings of emptiness and separation from God; and intense feelings of anger at God and others.

There are two basic beneficial by-products of adhering to the Biblical doctrine of the assurance of one’s salvation in Christ. First, the Christian is better able to fight off depression, anxiety, and any tendency toward rebellion because he knows that God is with him and that God will never leave him. Second, it has been my experience as a Christian counselor that a Christian who adheres to this doctrine in his beliefs about God is much more likely to experience and demonstrate the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). Also, he is better able to bear the burdens of his fellow brother and sister in Christ (Gal 6:2).

Sound Biblical doctrine produces sound psychological health if the Christian is willing to apply sound doctrine to his or her life.

SBJT: As a theologian/ethicist committed to pastoral issues, what would you say to a woman who has had an abortion and therefore believes she has lost her salvation?

C. Ben Mitchell: I would not begin by diminishing the seriousness of abortion. Both from the biblical perspective and, apparently, from her own perspective, abortion, except to save the physical life of the mother, is a form of homicide. She is experiencing the pangs of guilt result-

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ing from a sinful act. I would not want to gloss over what we hope is the work of the Holy Spirit in conviction of sin.

Having said that, it is crucial to be a good “diagnostician” when attempting to counsel a person who is struggling with their soul’s condition. There is a fine line sometimes between “blessed assurance” and what we might call “carnal presumption.” We should expect people to have lapses in assurance when they are aware of their own sin. While we are living with conscious sin for which we have not repented, we should feel guilty and doubt the credibility of our profession of faith. In this case, I would want to be as certain as humanly possible that this obviously hurting woman was a Christian. Then, I would be able to help her understand what the Bible says about assurance of salvation.

So, the first thing I would ask her is why she thought she *had been* a Christian. Since she says she fears having lost her salvation, she must have had some basis for believing herself to have been saved in the first place. I would want to find out as much as I could about her understanding of the gospel and saving faith. Did she understand the objective message of the gospel, *viz.*, that Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God and is the divinely appointed mediator; that the perfect Son of God took upon himself human flesh in order to offer sacrifice for our sins; that he suffered, bled, and died for our sins; that he was raised for our justification; and that salvation is a gift of free grace alone.

Sadly, many professing Christians misunderstand the basic message of the gospel of Christ. I am convinced from both scripture and experience that some persons who think they are Christians, in fact, have never experienced the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. Rather, they

walked an aisle at the end of a worship service or prayed a prayer at a preacher’s request, without ever have been converted. So, in the case before us (as with all others) it is entirely possible that this dear woman has never been saved.

Second, not only must a good physician of the soul be a competent diagnostician, he or she must also know the appropriate therapy for those who are suffering. If she had a credible testimony of saving faith, then I would be able to address what might be a theological misunderstanding. I would point her to the biblical revelation. Specifically, we would spend a great deal of time exegeting 1 John. John’s first letter was written to address problems with assurance. And it is, indeed, a wonderful treatise for just such a purpose.

Because this woman seems to view her sin as exceedingly sinful, I would probably focus on 1 John 1:8-2:2. I would remind her that the blood of Christ can cleanse us from *all kinds* of unrighteousness (v. 9). There is no sin beyond the pale of God’s forgiveness. We can say to the thief, “The blood of Christ can cleanse you.” We can say to the adulterer, “The blood of Christ can cleanse you.” We can say to the liar, “The blood of Christ can cleanse you.” And we can say to the murderer, “The blood of Christ can cleanse you.” I would point out the necessity of confession of sin—agreeing with God about it—and about God’s promise to forgive those who do so. Moreover, I would remind her that the basis for our ongoing relationship with God is the work of our Advocate, Jesus Christ the righteous one (2:1). She needs to know that on the cross, Jesus, as a propitiatory sacrifice, bore the punishment that belongs to her sin. His own righteousness applied to her account

provides the basis for her to appeal for forgiveness. His ongoing intercession opens the door of access to the heavenly Father.

Depending on her understanding and need, I might also point to some of those other “tests of life” found in John’s first letter. Again, I would not diminish or gloss over the enormity of her sin, but I would point out the “super-enormity” of God’s grace through Christ Jesus. We do no one a favor by glossing over sin. But we are not faithful to the gospel if we ignore the potency of Christ’s sacrifice for sinners.

This woman may have had a reason to believe she was saved at one time. She may at least partially understand the salvific work of Christ. Her problem may be a misunderstanding of the nature of the doctrine of perseverance and preservation of the saints. I find Peter’s discourse on this topic of tremendous help. As he writes to scattered pilgrims, persons who have lost nearly all their earthly possessions and who, no doubt, question God’s concern for them, Peter reminds his readers that they have been recipients of God’s mercy (1 Pe 1:3). God has granted them the new birth and the hope of the resurrection. Further, despite their poverty, God has established for them an inheritance that is incorruptible, undefiled, and that does not fade (v. 4). “But,” they might ask, “how do we know we are going to finally enjoy that inheritance?” Peter reminds them that they are being “kept by the power of God” (v. 5). The word translated “kept” is a word that means “to guard, to watch over.” These believers are being guarded by God’s power and *he* is the guarantor of their inheritance. Additionally, they are being guarded by the power of God, says Peter, “through faith” (v. 5). The take home message is that they

are being preserved by God’s power *and* we persevere through faith. The trial of their faith (v. 7) was meant to strengthen their hope, not destroy it.

So, I would encourage this lady to trust God afresh. If she is not, in fact, a Christian, I would plead with her to embrace Christ as he is offered in the gospel. If she has trusted him for salvation, I would encourage her to repent of the abortion and seek the forgiveness that is offered in Christ. If she misunderstands perseverance, I would continue to show her what the scriptures teach about that doctrine.

Finally, she might be struggling with a lack of closure on the death of her infant. Her experience of guilt might be a way of either punishing herself psychologically for what she has done or it might be the result of never having dealt with the abortion with some measure of finality. I would try to explore those issues with her. For her guilt, I can only offer Christ to her. But for her lack of closure, it might be helpful for her (and her family, if they are aware of the abortion) to have a memorial service for her child. Sometimes a private memorial service provides the necessary closure for women and families to go beyond abortion to emotional healing.

Counseling persons concerning assurance is a daunting responsibility. We must not salve consciences or be complicit in cheap grace. At the same time, we must offer the hope that there is genuine forgiveness through Christ and assurance of salvation is possible. Let us remember, however, that as blessed as assurance may be, it itself is not necessary for salvation. Someone might struggle with assurance all their lives and still inherit eternal life. *Soli Deo Gloria!*

ENDNOTES

¹American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th ed. (American Psychiatric Association: Washington, D.C., 1994).

²Ibid.