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Reflections on Assurance

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Introduction

So far as I know, there has been no English-language, full-scale treatment of the biblical theology of Christian assurance for more than fifty years. There have been numerous dictionary articles and the like, along with occasional discussions in journals. There have also been sophisticated studies of assurance as found in the theology of some notable Christian thinker or period, such as the book by Arthur S. Yates that examines assurance with special reference to John Wesley,[1] or the discussion of assurance that pervades R. T. Kendall's treatment of the move from Calvin to English Calvinism,[2] or the dissertation by Joel R. Beeke that studies personal assurance from Westminster to Alexander Comrie.[3] There have been countless studies of related biblical themes: perseverance, apostasy, the nature of covenant, the nature of faith, justification, and much more—too many to itemize; and there have

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1. Arthur S. Yates, *The Doctrine of Assurance with Special Reference to John Wesley* (London: Epworth, 1952).

2. R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979). Similarly, there is more limited but still important discussion of the theme in Alan C. Clifford, *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology 1640–1790—An Evaluation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

3. Joel R. Beeke, "Personal Assurance of Faith: English Puritanism and the Dutch 'Nadere Reformatie': From Westminster to Alexander Comrie (1640–1760)" (Ph.D. dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1988).

been numerous popular treatments of Christian assurance. But although at one time assurance was not only a question of pressing pastoral importance but in certain respects a test of theological systems, in recent decades it has not received the attention it deserves.

This chapter makes no pretensions of redressing the balance. My aim is far more modest. First, I shall identify a number of tendencies in contemporary literature that bear on Christian assurance. Then I shall offer a number of biblical and theological reflections—really not much more than pump-priming—designed to set out the contours in which a biblical theology of Christian assurance might be constructed.

Some Contemporary Tendencies

By "Christian assurance," I refer to a Christian believer's confidence that he or she is already in a right standing with God, and that this will issue in ultimate salvation. This definition of assurance maintains the future orientation that has dominated much of the discussion in past centuries, but there are two entailments: (1) This is a far narrower definition than might have been deployed. For instance, the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks of the boldness Christians enjoy in coming before God, now that their high priest has entered into the heavenly tabernacle to intercede on their behalf. John writes of the confidence believers enjoy when they approach God in prayer. These, too, are dimensions of Christian assurance, important dimensions—but not the assurance that is the focal point of this study. (2) It should be immediately obvious that no single word gives us access to the theme. Some studies have begun by analyzing *pistis* or *parrēsia* or some other word, but questions about Christian assurance rise from the pages of the New Testament wherever believers are promised consummated salvation, or are warned of apostasy, or are assured of eternal life conditional on some factor; and so we must probe, however superficially, a representative number of such themes and passages. Ideally, we should begin with inductive study of each corpus; pragmatically, the limitations of this study dictate that we attempt no more than brief explorations.

Before embarking on such explorations, however, it is important to grasp the dominant parameters of the discussion today. What, then, are some of the more important tendencies in contemporary biblical and theological literature that bear on the subject? I begin with the most narrowly academic tendencies, and work down to the most popular.

Not only is there a tendency to stress the diverse emphases in many biblical texts, but there are even more diverse interpretations of them. Certainly the question of Christian assurance is raised by what appear to be tensions

within the biblical documents themselves. On the one hand, Paul insists that all those who are foreknown, predestined, called, and justified will one day be glorified (Rom. 8:30); on the other, he tells the Corinthians to examine themselves to see if they are in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5). Christians are given "very great and precious promises" (2 Pet. 1:4), but such promises properly function to enable them to make their calling and election sure (1:10). If the fourth Gospel repeatedly assures us that Jesus, and then the Father himself, preserve all those the Father has given to the Son (e.g., John 6:37–40; 17:6–17), Jesus' interlocutors nevertheless are told that only those who hold to his teaching are truly his disciples (8:31). On the face of it, passages such as Hebrews 6:4–6 envisage the possibility of apostasy from which there is no reprieve. If so, how can believers be finally certain that they will not fall into such abysmal loss? John writes his first epistle in order that those who believe in the name of the Son of God might know that they have eternal life: this certainly sounds as if it is possible to believe in the name of the Son of God without knowing that one has eternal life.

Many scholars attempt no synthesis; indeed, they judge any attempt at synthesis to be illegitimate. But even among less skeptical scholars, these and many more passages are variously interpreted. One need only read the published form of I. Howard Marshall's dissertation,[4] and the recent dissertation by Judith M. Gundry Volf,[5] to appreciate how differently many of the same texts can be read. Meanwhile, the voluminous writings of E. P. Sanders,[6] and the growing number of responses to them, have shifted the center of discussion on Paul from justification and freedom from law to "covenantal nomism," thereby giving rise to notions of "getting in" and "staying in" that are quite different from those historically assumed by much of Protestantism, especially Lutheran Protestantism. At the risk of simplification, "getting in" turns on God's grace; "staying in" turns on the believer's obedience. The texts that can be lined up to defend this reading of Paul are substantial. If they are accepted without qualification, the implications for Christian assurance are stunning: Christian assurance becomes entirely hostage to Christian obedience, and is not established as a constituent element of saving faith itself.

4. I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1975). See also his essay, "The Problem of Apostasy in New Testament Theology," now most accessible in his recently published book of essays, *Jesus the Saviour: Studies in New Testament Theology* (London: SPCK, 1990), 306–24.

5. Judith M. Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance: Staying In and Falling Away*, WUNT 37 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1990).

6. Especially *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); idem, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

Or again, one need only compare Protestant and Catholic commentaries on 1 John to observe a chasm between their approaches. With but rare exceptions, the former treat 1 John as a treatise that provides criteria or tests (understood and arranged rather differently from commentator to commentator) to foster assurance among believers; the latter largely bypass the theme of assurance and see in this book a depiction of proper Christian communal life.

A major reexamination of relevant Reformation arguments is currently underway. Although some pre-Reformation Christian thinkers had treated the possibility of Christian assurance (e.g., Augustine, Duns Scotus), the consensus in the period leading up to the Reformation treated such assurance as conjectural, since knowledge of God's saving grace depended on good works and penance that "tied forgiveness to ecclesiastical authority."[7] Not only did the Reformation, by emphasizing Scripture, reduce the intermediary authority of the church, and therefore its role in binding and loosing the Christian conscience—its virulent emphasis on *sola fide* led Luther to see assurance as an element of saving faith. If one truly trusts Christ for the forgiveness of sins and full justification, so far also is one assured of his forgiveness. The same connection can be found in Calvin (*Institutes* 3.2.7); ultimately, he grounds assurance on Christ himself (*Institutes* 3.24.5). It is disputed just what place Calvin allows for works in Christian assurance; certainly in his thought they do not enjoy more than a subsidiary role. By contrast, the English Puritans, greatly dependent on the transitional figure of William Perkins,[8] himself deeply indebted to Beza and others, placed much more emphasis on the role of a transformed life in lending assurance to the Christian mind and conscience.[9]

Most scholars would not demur from this potted history. Debate has become heated, however, owing to the work of Kendall and those who have rushed to support him or to detract from his argument that English Calvinism owes far less to Calvin and far more to Beza than is commonly recognized, and to the work of M. Charles Bell, who argues that

> whereas Calvin taught that faith is fundamentally passive in nature, is centred in the mind or understanding, is primarily to be viewed in terms of certain knowledge, such that assurance of salvation is of the essence of faith, and is grounded *extra nos*, that is, outside ourselves in the person and work of Jesus Christ, Scottish theology, on the other hand, gradually came to teach that faith is primarily active, centred within the will or heart, and that assurance is *not* of the essence of faith, but is a fruit of faith, and is to be gathered through self-examination and syllogistic deduction, thereby placing the grounds of assurance *intra nos*, within ourselves.[10]

For Kendall, the challenge is not merely one of naming the right heroes, but of returning to the pristine Calvinism of Calvin, over against what he judges to be the scholastic Calvinism of many of his successors. There are important (and disputed) entailments in Kendall's study for the doctrine of definite atonement—and for understanding Christian assurance. Positions are sufficiently entrenched, and the topic sufficiently current, that in the second volume of the biography of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Iain Murray devotes six pages to refuting Kendall.[11] Murray concludes that if Kendall is right and "full assurance" inheres in saving faith, there are "devastating practical consequences":

> If it were true then it would follow: (1) that anyone lacking "full assurance" has to be treated as not being a Christian at all; (2) that all converts can be told that their assurance is complete, contrary to the New Testament directions to converts to press on to fuller assurance (Hebrews 6:11; 2 Peter 1:5–10; 1 John 1:4); and (3) that if faith means full assurance then the many warnings of Scripture on the need to observe that true faith is always accompanied by holiness of life become needless.[12]

Of course, Kendall might well reply that Murray makes assurance dependent not on justification but on sanctification (understanding the latter term in its use in Reformed dogmatics, not in its more flexible use in the Pauline corpus), and ultimately fosters an unhealthy introspection that functions not unlike Arminianism or semi-Pelagianism. For his part, Beeke[13] argues that the differences between Calvin and the (later) Calvinists on the relations between faith and assurance are largely quantitative, not qualitative. Faced with changing pastoral contexts, Beeke argues, Calvinists allotted greater sensitivity to the degree of assurance that a Christian might experience, but nevertheless in their "meticulous argumentation" adhered to the fundamen-

7. R. W. A. Letham, "Assurance," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson et al. (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1988), 51.

8. Cf. especially Ian Breward, ed., *The Work of William Perkins* (Abingdon: Marcham, 1970).

9. Despite the best efforts of R. M. Hawkes ("The Logic of Assurance in English Puritan Theology," *WTJ* 52 [1990]: 247–61) to minimize the conceptual distance between the magisterial reformers and the English Puritans on the matter of assurance, his own evidence admits more of a distance than he acknowledges. For instance, he argues that for Thomas Brooks "assurance is, somehow, a necessary part of faith" (250). The authenticating citation from Brooks reads, "Faith, in time, will of its own accord raise and advance itself to assurance" (*Heaven on Earth* [1654; reprint, London: Banner of Truth, 1961], 21). But that is simply another way of saying that *mature* ("in time") faith brings with it assurance. The issue is whether saving faith entails assurance in all who at any time are exercising such faith.

10. M. Charles Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1985), 8.

11. Iain H. Murray, *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones*, vol. 2, *The Fight of Faith: 1939–1981* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990), 721–26.

12. Ibid., 726.

13. "Personal Assurance of Faith."

tal principles of the early Reformation. Within this framework they could argue that assurance of faith has more complex grounds than a simple resting on God's objective promises. On the whole, Beeke is correct for the notable figures he treats. Unfortunately, he writes history as if the "Annales" school of historiography had never developed, and makes no attempt either to limit his conclusions to those he studies or to probe how faith and assurance were handled in the lives of ordinary Christians in both English Puritanism and the Calvinist infiltration of the Dutch Reformation.

Certainly both sides of this essentially historical debate have full arsenals by which to take on the other's positions. For our purposes, however, it is worth observing that both sides recognize that the debate is not merely a historical one—What did Calvin (or Beza, or Perkins, or Comrie) actually teach?—but a doctrinal one with substantial theological and pastoral implications. We may range from the experience of many Scottish highlanders who habitually refuse to receive the communion elements on the ground that they lack personal assurance (and this lack stems from their own estimate of unsatisfactory evidences of grace in their lives), to the wretched "easy believism" of many in the western world who, having professed faith, feel no pull toward holiness and no shame when they take the elements. A thousand variations of experience dot the landscape between these two extremes.

In America, the basis of Christian assurance has erupted as the distinguishing banner of a small but vociferous segment of evangelicalism. The movement is strong enough to have formed its own organization, the Grace Evangelical Society, complete with its own journal.[14] All of the publications that have emerged so far are at the popular or semipopular level; but that ensures wider circulation, not less. Doubtless the most influential of these writings is a book by Zane Hodges, *The Gospel under Siege.*[15] The popular preacher John F. MacArthur Jr. has responded at about the same level,[16] but with so large a number of unguarded statements or overstatements that his work has spawned more controversy than healing.[17]

The concern of Hodges and his colleagues is to make Christian assurance absolutely certain. To accomplish this, they tie assurance exclusively to saving faith and divorce it from any support in a transformed life. The countless passages that tie genuine discipleship to obedience are handled by making a

14. *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society.*

15. Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel under Siege: A Study on Faith and Works* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1981). See also his *Grace in Eclipse* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1985), and his *Absolutely Free* (Dallas: Redencion Viva; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989).

16. John F. MacArthur Jr., *The Gospel according to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988).

17. One of the better reviews is by Darrell F. Bock, "A Review of *The Gospel according to Jesus,*" *BibSac* 141 (1989): 21–40.

disjunction between "discipleship" passages and those that promise eternal life. Eternal life turns on faith in the saving Son of God; discipleship turns on obedience; and Christian assurance is tied only to the former. To link assurance in any way to the latter, it is argued, is to corrupt a salvation of free grace and turn it into a salvation partly dependent on works. If my salvation depends only on free grace, then the basis of my assurance is as steadfast as the freedom of that grace. But if my assurance depends on observing certain changes in conduct in my life, themselves the fruit of obedience, then implicitly I am saying that, since I cannot be assured of salvation without seeing obedience, salvation itself depends on some mixture of faith plus obedience—and free grace is thereby destroyed. Hence the name of this new evangelical society. Its members are persuaded that the purity of the gospel of grace is at stake.

There are numerous entailments to this analysis. Those who disagree with them are dismissed as supporters of "lordship salvation," understood to mean that these opponents insist that part of the requirement for becoming a Christian, for receiving salvation, is the confession of Jesus as Lord. In the view of Hodges and his colleagues, trusting Jesus as Savior is all that is required for salvation. "Repentance," in their view, must be understood in a narrowly etymological sense: it is the mental "change of mind" that accepts Jesus as the Savior, but entails no necessary sorrow over sin or turning away from it. That is the fruit of confessing Jesus as Lord; it is the fruit of obedience, and properly emerges from the confidence of knowing that one's sins are already forgiven. In some of the writings of this camp, this analysis is justified by referring to 1 Corinthians 3 and Paul's division of the race into the natural man, the carnal man, and the spiritual man. The natural man is unredeemed; the carnal man enjoys salvation, but lives like the world, and is finally saved "only as one escaping through the flames" (3:15), while his works are burned up. The spiritual man knows Jesus as Lord and is walking in growing obedience.

Hodges would feel offended to have his view branded as "easy believism" or "cheap grace" or "greasy grace" or the like. He insists that Christians who do not constantly commit themselves to obedience pay high prices for their rebellion. But the price, he says, is never loss of salvation, nor (assuming the initial trust was genuine) a post facto discovery that the initial trust was not genuine, for that would tie assurance, and therefore salvation itself, to works.

Apart from these movements, there is a tendency to say very little about Christian assurance in most of our churches. Indeed, one might reasonably argue that a major reason why so many aberrant views are being so widely circulated is that there is a vacuum that cries out to be filled. I have not conducted a scientific poll to establish changing patterns over the last few decades. My impression, however, is that in many churches Christian assurance

is not a major topic for sermons or discussion groups, largely because popular eschatology has become so realized that there is very little futurist element left, except at the merely creedal level. If we do not long for the consummation of our salvation in the new heaven and the new earth, for the *visio Dei* that is the believer's inheritance, then there is little point in talking about our assurance of gaining it.

In what follows, I shall sometimes engage one or more of these tendencies directly; but my principal aim is to offer some biblical and theological observations that may help us to cut a swath through the debates and refocus them a little. For instance, whatever the rights and wrongs of the historical arguments over the influence of Calvin, it is arguable that some of the lines of the debate are seriously askew because they too quickly press toward atemporal *dogmatic* questions without pausing adequately to reflect on *redemptive-historical* matters lodged in Scripture itself. I shall also argue that one major biblical-theological motif has largely been overlooked in these debates, a motif that has the potential for orienting the discussions, both academic and popular, in fresh directions.

Biblical and Theological Reflections

The New Testament writers admit no qualitative, absolute disjunction between genuine believers who display obedience to Jesus in their lives, and genuine believers who do not. Limitations of time and space require that I restrict my comments to one passage and one theme.

1 Corinthians 3. All of 1 Corinthians 1:10–4:20 is devoted to Paul's handling of the divisiveness of the Corinthians (see esp. 1:10–11; 3:5–6, 21–23; 4:6ff.), itself tied to their conviction that they are preeminently wise and spiritual (see 1:18ff.; 2:6ff.; 3:18ff.). Meanwhile, their thinking and their conduct are so spiritually immature—they are "mere infants in Christ" (3:1)—that Paul could not address them as "spiritual" *(pneumatikos),* as they thought themselves to be, but as "worldly." This last word is perhaps better rendered more literally as "fleshly" *(sarkinos),* that is, made of flesh. The charge has extra bite, since the Corinthians think themselves so "spiritual" that they are not even sure there is a resurrection body still to be gained (1 Cor. 15). They were certainly "fleshly," "made of flesh," when Paul was among them (v. 1); the tragedy is that they are still "fleshly" (v. 3): here Paul changes to *(sarkikos)* (in the best reading), that is, having the characteristics of flesh, clearly with ethical overtones.[18] They are "acting like mere men" (*anthrōpoi,* v. 3). The evidence for this is found in their "jealousy and quarreling," in their determination to lionize this or that human leader.

18. So, rightly, Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians,* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 123–24.

The crucial question, then, is whether Paul is introducing a new ontological level of Christian existence. He does not place the Corinthians among all whom he dismisses as *psychikoi* (2:14), those who are "natural" and therefore without the Spirit. Not only has he already noted their spiritual endowments (1:4–9), but Paul elsewhere repeatedly insists that one cannot be utterly devoid of the Spirit and be a Christian (Rom. 8:9; Gal. 3:2–3; Tit. 3:5–7). Yet by saying that the Corinthians are acting and thinking not like "spiritual" but "fleshly" people, like "mere men," he is charging them with the thoughts and conduct of those who do not have the Spirit. The tension is palpable, and the result is centuries of debate and misunderstanding. But the most obvious way to take Paul's words is that he is using strong language to force his readers to face up to the inherent inconsistency of their position. They have the Spirit, but at this junction they are neither thinking nor acting as if they do.

This is a more believable approach than those that suppose Paul himself is introducing an ontological distinction in the congregation. That is surely intrinsically unlikely, given the concern of the first four chapters to establish unity. Others try to find a shift in meaning in *pneumatikos* (spiritual) from chapter 2 to chapter 3,[19] or base a massive tripartite division of humankind (natural/carnal [KJV]/spiritual) on these verses. But apart from the fact that the same division cannot be found clearly drawn out elsewhere in Paul, such a reading flies in the face of one of the principal emphases in Pauline ethics, namely, the appeal "to be what you are."

Thus, when Paul says that he could not address the Corinthians as "spiritual," there is a sense in which he is admitting that there are "unspiritual" believers. He does not mean the Corinthian believers do not have the Spirit—there are no "unspiritual" believers in that sense—but that they are displaying a great deal of "unspiritual" behavior, which must stop.

Three observations must be entered. (1) If this is a fair reading of the passage, nothing here introduces an absolute, qualitative disjunction between those who are "fleshly" ("carnal" if you prefer) and those who are spiritual. All apart from perfectionists will admit that at the level of behavior, all Christians, insofar as they too participate in jealousy and quarreling, are sometimes "carnal." There is no attempt to tie the distinctions here to a theoretical disjunction between those who accept Jesus as Savior and those who accept him as Lord. (2) The sins in view are not of the sort that make us think the Corinthians are distancing themselves from their baptismal vows. This is not the case of someone who made a profession of faith at an evangelistic rally, followed

19. E.g., P. J. Du Plessis, ΤΕΛΕΙΟΣ: *The Idea of Perfection in the New Testament* (Kampen: Kok, 1959), 183–85.

the way of Christ for a few months, and then lived in a manner indistinguishable from that of any pagan for the next fifteen years, despite conscientious pastoral interest. Nor is it the case of a person who indulges in gross sexual immorality and who will not repent, like the man described in 1 Corinthians 5, of whose spiritual state not even the apostle seems to be sure, let alone confident. This is not to minimize the sins of jealousy and quarreling; it is to place them within the context of Christians who at many levels do display the presence and power of the Spirit (1:3–8), even though in this regard they are thinking and acting in ways that are out of step with the Spirit. (3) Above all, there is nothing in this chapter to connect these "carnal" Christians to the person described in verses 14–15. To justify this point, we must press on to the contribution of the next two paragraphs in the text.

Because the Corinthians' carnality is displayed in their propensity to form parties attached to particular leaders, Paul finds it necessary to explain the limited contribution such leaders have made. He develops two extended metaphors. The first is agricultural (3:5–9): Paul planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God alone made it grow. Both the sower and the one who waters the seed have one purpose. Each "will be rewarded according to his own labor" (3:8). In this metaphor, the Corinthians do not figure as laborers. Paul and Apollos are "God's fellow workers"; the Corinthians are "God's field" (v. 9).

Then the metaphor changes, but with the same distinctions firmly in place. The Corinthians are "God's building" (v. 9); Paul is the contractor who has laid the foundation, Jesus Christ himself, with others building on the foundation that he laid. Within the constraints of this metaphor, it is the *builder* whose work will be shown up for what it is on the last day; the fire will test the quality of each *builder's* work.[20] "If what he has *built* survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames" (3:14–15). It is slightly misfocused to conclude, with Hans Conzelmann and many other commentators, that "unsatisfactory works performed by the Christian *as a Christian* do not cause his damnation."[21] Doubtless there is some sense in which that is true, but Paul's concern in this context is not to make application to the ordinary Christian, and certainly not to those whom he thinks are still "mere infants" (3:1), but to raise a standard that holds Christian leaders to account. In short, we are not here dealing with perennial backsliding or utter moral indifference, but shoddy workmanship among those who are accounted the leaders of the Christian church.

20. We need not decide here if this "work" is the Christian church, or professing Christians, or some abstraction of the builder's labor. That question is important in its own right, but irrelevant to our present concerns.

21. Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 77.

Only in verses 16–17 is there a hint of a broader application, and it is no more than a hint. Maintaining the metaphor drawn from the building industry, Paul specifies that the Corinthians are not merely a building, but God's temple, his dwelling. If "anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple." It is possible to read these verses as nothing more than a forceful reiteration of the lesson drawn in verses 10–15. Nevertheless, because Paul now speaks of "anyone" and not simply the builders, it suggests, in the context of the first four chapters, that those given to division, jealousy, and quarreling in the church are also in danger of doing damage to the church, God's temple. Since they are that temple, they are simultaneously doing damage to themselves and courting God's judgment.

It appears, then, that in this chapter Paul acknowledges that Christians do not always live up to what they are called to be, that every such failure is a serious breech, that those who do damage to the church are particularly threatened by God's judgment, and that some who are viewed as leaders in the church, although they will themselves be saved on the day of judgment, will have nothing to show for their labor. It does not encourage us to think that it is possible to accept Jesus as Savior, and thus be promoted from the "natural" to the "carnal" level, in transit, as it were, to the "spiritual" stage, at which point one has accepted Jesus as Lord. Still less does it encourage us to think of the "carnal" Christian as someone who once made a profession of faith and who now lives in every respect like the surrounding pagan world.

The new covenant. New covenant language is fairly pervasive in the New Testament, its themes far more so. Both Luke (Luke 22:20) and Paul (1 Cor. 11:25) report that Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took such language on his own lips and tied the theme to his impending death. If Matthew and Mark omit "new," the implication is present anyway, since it is difficult to discover any sense in which Jesus' impending death signaled or ratified the old covenant. Hebrews 8 and 10 specifically tie the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:31–34 to the substance of Christian faith; 2 Corinthians 3 and Galatians 4 are no less insistent on setting forth the significance of the (new) covenant. Beyond such explicit language lies a large array of New Testament themes that presuppose the Old Testament promises of the new covenant (e.g., Jer. 31:29ff.; 32:36–41; Ezek. 36:25–27; Mal. 3:1), not least the "new birth" language of John 3.[22]

The point to be observed is that these Old Testament promises foresee a time when God's law is written on the heart of his people. Teachers will no longer say, "Know the Lord," for they will all know him (Jer. 31): the outlook is not of a time when there will be no teachers, but no *mediating* teach-

22. See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 185–203.

ers, no *mediators*, whose very office ensures them that they have an endowment not enjoyed by others. The new covenant will not be like the tribal covenant associated with Moses' name, when the fathers ate sour grapes and their children's teeth were set on edge. Rather, it is characterized by the removal of the heart of stone among all of God's covenantal people.[23] To use the language of Ezekiel 36, the new covenant will be characterized by cleansing (sprinkling with water) and spiritual renewal (a new heart and a new spirit).

Add to this the many Old Testament passages that anticipate the time when God's Spirit is poured out on his people (e.g., Isa. 44:3–5; Ezek. 11:19–20; 36:25–27; Joel 2:28–32), along with the fulfillment of these passages in the New Testament, and another important part of what is characteristic of the new covenant age is dropped into place. The Spirit is bequeathed by the glorified Christ (John's Gospel), the Spirit is given as the *arrabōn* of the ultimate inheritance (Paul), the Spirit vivifies, empowers, and directs the church (Acts). The period between Pentecost and Christ's return is supremely the age of the Spirit, the powerful Spirit who renews, convicts, cleanses, empowers. Doubtless we "groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:23), but meanwhile God has sent his own Son in the likeness of sinful man, "in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit" (Rom. 8:4).

It appears that a great deal of the debate over assurance has been controlled by forensic categories associated with justification and faith, but has largely ignored the categories of power and transformation associated with the Spirit and new covenant. A fundamental component of such themes is that the people of the new covenant are *by definition* granted a new heart and empowered by the Spirit to walk in holiness, to love righteousness, to prove pleasing to the Lord. This means that, insofar as the writers of the New Testament thought of themselves as new covenant heirs, they could not think of themselves as other than Spirit-endowed, regenerate, transformed. The New Testament does not preserve the old covenant distinction between the locus of the covenant community and the locus of the remnant, or between the locus of the covenant community and the locus of the leaders on whom special endowment had fallen. It is of the essence of the new covenant that those who are in it have been given a new heart, have been cleansed, have received the Holy Spirit. Moreover, this theme cannot rightly be divorced from the entailments of justification and of salvation through faith. The gift of the Spirit is tied to justification (Rom. 5–8); salvation by grace through faith (Eph.

23. Thus the explicit eschatological focus of Jeremiah's use of the "sour grapes" proverb makes it function rather differently from the formal parallel in Ezekiel 18:2. Cf. Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 608–9.

2:8), "not by works so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:9), is tied to the fact that we are "God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph. 2:10).

One must not conclude from this line of reasoning that new covenant believers are anywhere promised moral and spiritual perfection this side of the new heaven and the new earth. Nevertheless, both the Old Testament prophecies regarding the new covenant and the age of the Spirit, and the New Testament claims regarding their fulfillment, lead us to expect transformed lives. Indeed, it is precisely this unequivocal expectation that authorizes Paul to set up the tension we have already noted: the exhortations to live up to what we are in Christ are predicated on the assumption that what we are in Christ *necessarily* brings transformation, so that moral failure is *theologically* shocking, however pragmatically realistic it may be. Indeed, it might be argued that this accounts for some of the tension in 1 John. The setting that calls forth that epistle I shall briefly discuss a little farther on. For the moment, it is worth recalling John's insistence that believers do sin, and people who claim they do not are liars, self-deluded, and guilty of charging God with falsehood (1 John 1:6–10). At the same time, he repeatedly insists that sinning is not done among Christians. Various explanations have been advanced, but the most obvious is still the best: although both our experience and our location between the "already" and the "not yet" teach us that we do sin and we will sin, yet every single instance of sin is shocking, inexcusable, forbidden, appalling, out of line with what we are as Christians.[24]

It would take too much space to treat all the passages that are adduced to justify the counterclaim, or to demonstrate the methodological flaws inherent in Hodges' treatment of repentance. But even on the basis of the brief probings here, especially into the nature of the new covenant, it appears justified to claim that the New Testament writers nowhere admit an absolute, qualitative disjunction between genuine believers who in their conduct display obedience to the Lord Jesus and genuine believers who do not. This at least raises the possibility that some forms of Christian assurance might be validly based on observably transformed conduct, without in any way suggesting that such conduct wins or earns or gains salvation. How that might be related to other themes—the grounding of Christian assurance in the object of faith, Jesus Christ himself—is still to be explored. But ignoring the covenantal aspects of Christianity in favor of narrowly forensic categories has been one of the chief reasons for confusion in this area.

24. On Paul's view of some of the tensions experienced by Christians living under the aegis of the kingdom while still living in the old creation, see David Wenham, "The Christian Life: A Life of Tension? A Consideration of the Nature of Christian Experience in Paul," in *Pauline Studies: Essays Presented to Professor F. F. Bruce on His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Donald A. Hagner and Murray J. Harris (Exeter: Paternoster, 1980), 80–94.

Several New Testament writers recognize the existence of spurious or transitory faith, and this recognition must be factored into any responsible doctrine of Christian assurance. This subject is exceedingly complex, for it is tied to the nature of apostasy and to protracted debates over the security of the believer in the New Testament. For the sake of clarity, I shall proceed in seven steps.

1. Discussion of a figure like Judas Iscariot is extremely problematic. Frequently comparisons and contrasts are drawn between his "defection" and that of Peter (I use "defection" in an attempt to find a word that can reasonably refer to the actions of both men). But quite apart from the intrinsic value of the exercise, it is doubtful if the apostasy of Judas is to be construed as apostasy from full-blown Christian faith. To put the matter another way, the experiences of "coming to faith" of men and women in the four Gospels is in certain respects unique, unrepeatable in any generation after the resurrection and Pentecost. Their coming to faith required the lapse of time until the One they came to confess as Messiah was crucified and rose again. Doubtless they struggled with doubts and sins and selfishness, and therefore in certain respects they may serve as paradigms for our own spiritual pilgrimages. Nevertheless, none of us today, in our own coming to faith, had to wait for the next major redemptive-historical appointment, the death and resurrection of God's Son, before our fledgling faith could become fully Christian. Nor did we have to tarry in Jerusalem until the day of Pentecost had come.[25] But if the first disciples' coming to faith was not exactly like ours, then Judas Iscariot's apostasy from whatever level he had attained before the crucifixion was not exactly like apostasy in Hebrews 6 or 10. This is not to minimize his sin in the slightest; it is to argue that no substantial view of what apostasy might mean under the new covenant can begin with Iscariot, still less with, say, Korah.

2. Little help on the nature of apostasy is to be gained by simple word studies. The word *apostasia*, for instance, occurs only twice in the New Testament, once to refer to turning away from Moses on the part of Jews (Acts 21:21), the other to refer to the great rebellion that takes place when the man of lawlessness is revealed (2 Thess. 2:3).

We may perhaps adopt a working definition of "apostasy," independent of any Greek word, along such lines as these: it is the decisive turning away from a religious position and stance once firmly held. It differs from ordinary unbelief in that it involves turning away from a position of belief; it differs from backsliding in that it is calculated, decisive, and irrevocable; it differs from merely changing one's mind over some relatively minor theological point in that it involves the rejection of an entire position and stance.

25. Incidentally, this is one of the reasons why studies that seek to use the Gospels as first and foremost guides to the nature of Christian discipleship, on the basis of the first followers' experiences and reactions, are deeply flawed.

3. It is disputed how many passages in the New Testament describe or refer to such apostasy. Was Demas an apostate (2 Tim. 4:10)? Did the immoral man of 1 Corinthians 5 die an apostate? But however many or few, some passages cannot easily be circumvented. It must be strenuously insisted that attempts to reduce the shock and power of severe warnings like those in Hebrews 6:4–6 and 2 Corinthians 13:5, by arguing that the warnings are merely hypothetical, or that the turning aside of those described in Hebrews 6:4–6 and 1 John 2:19 is from useful service but not from salvation, are desperate expedients that responsible exegesis will happily avoid.

4. The real question is whether, with Marshall[26] and others who follow him, we shall say that in these instances genuine believers have fallen away, or that although they were believers in some sense they were not genuine believers at all. There are genuine difficulties both ways.

One of the most competent treatments of some of the issues is the study by Volf, which examines the theme of perseverance in the seven Pauline Epistles over which there is least dispute as to their authenticity.[27] In the first section, she describes what it is like to "stay in." "A continuity in the divine work of salvation emerges in which a particular aspect of salvation is seen to imply the succeeding ones."[28] Paul repeatedly draws attention to the "eternal divine initiatives in salvation: divine election, foreknowledge and predestination"[29] (Rom. 8:23, 29–30; 2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Phil. 1:6; 1 Thess. 5:9; 2 Thess. 2:13–14). On the other hand, for Paul "the process of consummating the work of salvation is more like an obstacle course than a downhill ride to the finishline"[30] (Rom. 5:1–11; 8:28, 31–39; 1 Cor. 1:8–9; 10:13; 1 Thess. 5:23–24; 2 Thess. 3:3). God's faithfulness is manifested in strengthening and protecting and preserving his people.

> Paul gives clear and ample evidence of his view that Christians' salvation is certain to reach completion. This thought is integral to his understanding of individual salvation. Though threats to the consummation of Christians' salvation may and will appear, they cannot successfully challenge it. God's faithfulness and love make divine triumph the unquestionable outcome. For Paul, certainty of final salvation rests on God's continued intervention to that end.[31]

In the second section of her book, Volf examines an array of passages (Rom. 14:1–23; 1 Cor. 5:1–5; 6:9–11; 8:7–13; 10:12; 11:27–34; Gal. 5:9–11) to argue that for Paul "continuity in salvation does not make Christian

26. *Kept by the Power of God;* "The Problem of Apostasy."
27. *Paul and Perseverance.*
28. Ibid., 80.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., 81.
31. Ibid., 82.

conduct irrelevant."[32] Against Sanders, Volf argues that although morality and integrity and obedience matter enormously to Paul, and although Paul envisages punishment falling on some believers who disobey, "Paul does not make Christians' final salvation dependent on their repentance from post-conversion sins."[33] Then she makes one of the few false steps in her book: she argues that it is possible to lose one's membership in the "in-group" by "falsifying one's Christian profession by one's behavior. . . . But when this happens, continuity in actual salvation is not interrupted."[34] In other words, at this point she agrees with Sanders that staying in the "in-group" is conditional on good behavior, but she qualifies Sanders by arguing that this is not the same as remaining in salvation. Her exegesis is to be questioned at a number of points, and she has not adequately come to grips with the significance of what belonging to the new covenant community entails; for as we have seen, the nature of the new covenant drives us to the conclusion that there is a certain sense in which *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.

In part 3, Volf examines Romans 9–11, 2 Corinthians 13:5; and Galatians 5:1–4 in order to discover what unbelief signifies among those who profess to be Christians. In 2 Corinthians 13:5, for instance, she argues that Paul cannot be warning against loss of salvation, since the context "shows that ἀδόκιμος can only mean rejection as a nonconvert, and that the exhortation to self-testing has the main purpose of pointing out Paul's own provenness as an apostle and possibly the subordinate purpose of exposing some Corinthians to be falsely professing Christians."[35] She holds that the election of Israel does not entail automatic participation in salvation "*apart from faith in Christ.*"[36] She might have done a little more work on the diverse ways Paul thinks of "election"; but that is perhaps a picky point. In her final section, Volf examines Paul's reflections on the final outcome of his own apostolic mission (1 Cor. 9:23–27; 15:2; 2 Cor. 6:1; Gal. 2:2; 4:11; 1 Thess. 3:5; Phil. 2:16). If he fears that his labor might prove to be "in vain" (Phil. 2:16; 1 Thess. 3:5; Gal. 2:2; 4:11), it can only be because he fears that some of "his seeming converts would have no salvation. Whether failure in the eschatological test should be traced to his converts' false profession or their apostasy from salvation is a question not answered by Paul in these texts."[37] But Volf notes that Paul, while distrusting his own success, seems to give way to confidence "when he views the situation from the perspective of God's faithfulness to professing Christians in whom he sees the divine work of salvation taking place."[38] I shall argue that this is an extremely important observation.

32. Ibid., 155.
33. Ibid., 157.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 226.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., 282.

5. Apart from points of exegetical detail, the methodological difference between those who hold that genuine believers fall away and those who hold that those who fall away are not genuine believers seems to turn on two issues.

How strong are the passages that seem to affirm the ultimate preservation and perseverance of God's people? This is something that Marshall, for instance, does not directly address. He fairly expounds some of the passages that affirm that God's people continue in salvation to the end, but then diminishes their weight by setting over against them those passages that emphasize human responsibility to persevere, or those passages that refer to apostasy (however defined). The resulting formulation always makes the preservation of God's people unto consummated salvation absolutely contingent: God is the one who faithfully preserves his people, provided they do not defect. But what warrants such diminution of the apparent weight of the perseverance passages?

For example, John refers to the elect as all that the Father gives Jesus (John 6:37a), and by a litotes insists that Jesus will keep in or preserve all of these people (i.e., he will not drive them away, 6:37b),[39] on the ground that the Son came to do his Father's will, which is none other than that he should preserve all those whom the Father has given him (6:38–40). It is exceedingly difficult to diminish the finality of this statement without implying that Jesus proves unwilling to preserve or incapable of preserving all those the Father has given him. Most Christians would be aghast to use texts that affirm or assume Jesus' humanity to diminish those that affirm his deity, and vice versa. We have come to accept some mystery in our christological formulations; we seek interpretations that allow complementary texts to have their full vigor without permitting diminution of their most obvious meaning by some form of mutual annihilation. Can a case be mounted that in this area, too, there is a definable mystery that should not be allowed to be diminished by such mutual annihilation? I shall shortly argue that there is. But meanwhile, it seems that the strong New Testament emphases on the security of the believer should not be qualified by mere subtraction, unless there is the strongest exegetical warrant for doing so.

More positively, is there warrant for thinking the New Testament writers have categories for transitory faith, spurious faith—in short, for faith that seems like saving faith, but which proves to be spurious? If there is, then the

38. Ibid.
39. The litotes cannot possibly mean that Jesus will welcome in those who come to him. In context it must mean that he will keep in those who have been given to him. See Carson, *John*, 290.

passages that speak of falling away do not force us to conclude that the defection is from *genuine* faith.

In fact, in every major New Testament corpus, there are numerous warnings against or descriptions of spurious faith. For instance, in Matthew Jesus envisages that some who have addressed him as "Lord, Lord," and who have prophesied in his name and driven out demons in his name and performed many miracles in his name, will be excluded from the kingdom of heaven: "I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matt. 7:21–23). The one who enters the kingdom is "he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (7:21). John (2:23–25) testifies that when Jesus attended the first Passover feast of his ministry, "many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name,"[40] but Jesus would not entrust himself to them: he knew what was in their heart. A little later (John 8:31), to "the Jews who had believed him,"[41] Jesus gives a criterion that establishes who are genuine disciples: "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples." The same stance is reflected in 1 John 2:19. Those who have seceded from the church are described in telling terms: "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us." In other words, genuine faith, by definition, perseveres; where there is no perseverance, by definition the faith cannot be genuine. Again, "anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son" (2 John 9). Paul says as much: he informs the Colossians that God has reconciled them by Christ's physical body through death, to present them holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—"if," he writes, "you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel" (Col. 1:22-23). In short, genuine faith is tied to perseverance; transitory faith is spurious. We find similar emphases in 2 Peter 1:10–11. Before we come across the "apostasy" passages in the Epistle to the Hebrews, we read (in Heb. 3:14), "We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first" (see also 3:6; 4:14; 6:11; etc.).

40. It is important to recognize that the expression here is *pisteuō eis* plus the accusative, thereby providing a critical counterexample to those who think this expression always signals saving faith in the Fourth Gospel, while *pisteuō* plus the dative denotes unreliable faith. In reality, the small variation in form is typical of the Fourth Evangelist, who is well known for his slight variations without clear-cut semantic distinction.

41. Because the expression in 8:31 is *pisteuō* plus the dative, while in 8:30 *pisteuō eis* plus the accusative lies behind "those who put their faith in him," some have argued that the Jews in 8:31 constitute a separate group with distinguishably inferior faith. This is wholly unlikely; see note 40.

The range and diversity of these sorts of passages (I have cited only a small percentage of them) utterly preclude the possibility that they all refer to persevering in discipleship that goes beyond "mere" salvation. Whereas a few of these passages, taken alone, might suggest that continuing in salvation to the end depends absolutely on our own efforts at perseverance, responsible biblical theology must seek to integrate them with the promises of God's preserving initiative, not less rich in each major New Testament corpus, and with the passages in this list that make perseverance a criterion of genuine faith. For example, those who had seceded had once belonged to the church (1 John 2:19); otherwise John could not say that "they went out from us."[42] To all observers, for all practical purposes, the seceders were once baptized members of the church, fully accepted as Christians. Nevertheless, John insists, they were never really "of us," for if they had been "they would have remained with us." In other words, John presupposes that spurious faith is possible, but that genuine faith, by definition, perseveres.

In short, the methodological point of division between the two principal interpretations—the one that argues genuine believers can fall away, and the one that argues that those who fall away are necessarily spurious or transitory believers—turns on the two issues I have just defined.

6. If the tack I have taken is largely correct, the doctrinal area where we must become a little more sophisticated is in the theology of conversion. The question could be put several ways, but perhaps this will do: Is there New Testament warrant for thinking that there is some third alternative to being clearly "in" or "out"? To simplify the discussion, let us grant that God knows precisely who is "in" or "out." The question then becomes, Is there New Testament warrant for thinking that, as far as Christian observers are concerned, some people are not clearly either "in" or "out," that the step of conversion is not always luminously clear?

Implicitly, of course, we have already answered this question by listing a few of the New Testament passages where apparent conversions proved spurious (e.g., 1 John 2:19), or where the genuineness of the profession is irrefragably tied to perseverance (thereby implying that transitory faith is under a cloud). The parable of the sower—or, better, of the soils (Mark 4 par.)—illustrates the same point. In addition to the receptive soil that enables the seed to produce fruit in varying measure, there are three other kinds. The hard pathway stops the seed from embedding itself in dirt, and the birds of the air eat it: the picture is of people who hear the word of God, but from whom it is snatched away by Satan before it can germinate. The seed that falls "on rocky places" lodges in a thin layer of topsoil that covers limestone bedrock.

42. The attempt to avoid this by Hodges (*Gospel under Siege*, 54), who rather implausibly takes the "us" to refer to the apostolic communion, or perhaps the initial Palestinian church, does not solve the problem, but merely changes the location of the church.

Because it is so shallow, this topsoil heats up quickly, encourages the seed to germinate, and therefore initially produces what seems to be the most promising crop. Unfortunately, as the sun burns throughout the long, hot summer, these plants are scorched: their roots search for moisture, but come up against the bedrock, and the plant dies. The explanation tells us that this pictures those who receive the word with joy. Sadly, because they have no root, "they last only a short time." When trouble or persecution comes, they fall away. And finally, some seed falls on thorny ground. Here, too, the seed germinates and sends up tendrils, but the competition exerted by the more robust thorns chokes the young plants, so that they bear no grain. Here we are to think of those who hear the word, but whose hearing faces the competition of worries, the deceitfulness of wealth, and desires for other things. These distractions "choke the word, making it unfruitful."

The important thing to observe is that two of the three fruitless soils sprout life, but do not bear fruit This is not bleeding the parable for more than it is worth: recall that in the case of the seed that falls on rocky soil, the interpretation of the parable provided in the text itself describes the reality pictured by the parable as people who "hear the word and at once receive it with joy," but who "last only a short time." To all observers save God himself, this seed promises the best harvest, but this spiritual life proves transitory.

Several popular interpreters associated with the Grace Evangelical Society find this so uncomfortable that they reinterpret the parable. They say that instead of having three soils that are viewed negatively and one that is viewed positively, the alignment should go another way: there are two soils that are viewed negatively (the pathway and the thorns), and two that produce life (the rocky soil and the good soil), one of which also produces fruit. This will not do: the seed scattered on thorny soil also produces plants, but these plants never bear grain (Mark 4:7): the thorns choke the plants, not the ungerminated seeds. I suppose they could respond by suggesting that there is only one soil treated negatively (the pathway), and three treated positively, only one of which bears fruit. But the narrative parable does not read that way: such an interpretation is being imported from an alien theological structure; it would be strange in the context of a Gospel tradition that repeatedly insists people are known by their fruit, not by their life without fruit; and in its context the parable of the soils, especially in Mark and Matthew, joins other parables in elucidating the nature of the kingdom that has already dawned but is not yet consummated. Its purpose is to show that the kingdom is not now dawning with apocalyptic suddenness and clarity, but in the lives of those who hear the gospel of the kingdom and produce fruit. To argue that it is also introducing a category for spiritual life that is nevertheless fruitless is simply alien to the concerns of the chapter, and contrary to one of the driving motifs of all three synoptic Gospels.

Ideally, it would be helpful at this point to offer a detailed exegesis of Hebrews 6:4–6, and of similar passages in the New Testament, but we must limit ourselves to some focal observations. Too often the challenge raised by Hebrews 6 is cast in a simple alternative: Are those who are so warned Christians or not? If one argues for the "not," one is hard-pressed to explain the string of descriptions: "those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age." If one argues they are Christians, the dominant alternatives in the commentaries are that the warning is merely hypothetical—which is utterly at odds with the driving repetition of the theme in the book, and the seriousness with which it is presented; that the falling away is not from salvation—which simply will not square with 6:6 and especially with 10:26ff.; or that genuine believers may lose their salvation—which resurrects the problems of reconciling this view with the many passages that urge us to trust the certain, preserving work of the grace of God, not least in this epistle, where God offers comfort and incentive to his people by promising, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (13:5).

But there is a better alternative, once we have recognized that our theology of conversion is too simplistic. We have already seen that three chapters earlier Hebrews virtually defines true believers as those who hold firmly to the end the confidence they had at first (3:6, 14). In other words, like other New Testament books the Epistle to the Hebrews allows for a kind of transitory faith, a form of conversion which, like the seed sown on rocky soil, has all the signs of life, but which does not persevere. The Spirit brings initial enlightenment; the person enjoys the word of God (like the one in Mark 4 who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy), and tastes something of the power of the coming age: perhaps old habits fall away, and a new love for holiness and for God and his reign emerge. But according to the description of genuine Christianity already provided by the book, none of this is enough: there must also be perseverance.

Against the background of the theology of the epistle, the reasons for such warnings are clear enough. The incarnate Son of God is God's last word to humankind (1:1–4). Therefore those who neglect the great salvation that only he brings cannot escape (2:1ff.). The sacrifice the Son offered was "once for all." There is therefore no more offering for sin (10:18, 26), still less a repetition of this one sacrifice (9:25–28). This one sacrifice, offered once for all, is forever entirely sufficient for all of God's people (10:10–14). Therefore any who taste of its fruit, recognize its origin, ally themselves with its significance, and then deliberately reject this gospel, have no place left to turn: there is no more forgiveness of sins. This is apostasy: it is turning away from a religious position and stance once firmly held. But that is still shy of saying that the faith so exercised was necessarily saving faith in some ultimate sense, if part of the definition of saving faith includes the criterion of perseverance.

7. What is the essence of the difference, then, so far as assurance is concerned, between the person who holds that all genuine believers will be preserved to the end, and that those who fall away from apparent faith only enjoy spurious, transitory faith, and the person who holds that genuine believers may fall away? Marshall's analysis, using "Calvinist" and "non-Calvinist" to denote the two groups respectively, runs like this:

> If a person is in the former group, he has still to heed the warning: only by so doing can he show that he is one of the elect. In other words, the Calvinist 'believer' cannot fall away from 'true' faith, but he can 'fall away' from what proves in the end to be only seeming faith. The possibility of falling away remains. But in neither case does the person know for certain whether he is a true or a seeming disciple. All that he knows is that Christ alone can save and that he must trust in Christ, and that he sees signs in his life which may give him some assurance that he is a true disciple. But these signs may be misleading.
>
> It comes down to a question of assurance. Whoever said, 'The Calvinist knows that he cannot fall from salvation but does not know whether he has got it', had it summed up nicely. But this can be counterfeit and misleading. The non-Calvinist knows that he has salvation—because he trusts in the promises of God—but is aware that, left to himself, he could lose it. So he holds to Christ. It seems to me the practical effect is the same.[43]

At a merely mechanistic level, I think this analysis is largely correct. But three caveats must be added. Even if at certain levels the practical effect is the same, that does not mean the underlying structures are the same. One must still decide which approach is most faithful to most texts. In my view, Marshall does not adequately handle the numerous passages and themes that do promise the security of the believer. Psychologically, the focus is not the same. Historically, of course, it is a commonplace that some branches of Calvinism have developed their own forms of introversion, believers constantly examining themselves to see if they were displaying sufficient fruit to justify their conclusion that they were among the elect—thus strangely mirroring their Arminian counterparts who sometimes gave themselves to worrying if they were truly holding on to the promises of God. Thus at their worst, the two approaches meet in strange and sad ways. But at their best, the focus of the two systems is nonetheless quite different. Despite Marshall's salutary emphasis on the promises of God, at the end of the day the security of the believer finally rests with the believer. For those from the opposite camp, the security of the believer finally rests with God—and that, I suggest, rightly taught and applied, draws the believer back to God himself, to trust in God, to renewed faith that is of a piece with trusting him in the first place. In any case, this analysis entirely neglects to wrestle with the way we are to think of

43. Marshall, "The Problem of Apostasy," 313.

God's sovereign preservation of his people, and our responsibility to persevere; and so to that subject we now turn.

The biblical writers either presuppose or explicitly teach what might be called compatibilism, and this has an important, and neglected, bearing on the subject of Christian assurance. I have written on this subject at some length elsewhere,[44] and must restrict myself to a few potted explanations. Compatibilism is the view that the following two statements are, despite superficial evidence to the contrary, mutually compatible: God is absolutely sovereign but his sovereignty does not in any way mitigate human responsibility; human beings are responsible creatures (i.e., they choose, decide, obey, disobey, believe, rebel, and so forth), but their responsibility never serves to make God absolutely contingent.

The compatibilist, then, believes that both of these statements are true, that they are mutually compatible. That does not mean compatibilists claim they can show exactly how both of these statements can be simultaneously true. Rather, if they are rigorous thinkers, they think that there is enough reasonable evidence to demonstrate that nothing proves the pair of statements incompatible. Therefore other evidence that seems to justify the statements individually cannot be ruled out of court on the grounds that the two statements contradict each other.

My contention is that the biblical writers, insofar as they reveal themselves on this subject, are without exception compatibilists. When Joseph responds to his brothers' alarm by saying that when they sold him to the Midianites they meant it for evil, while God meant it for good (Gen. 50:19–20), the thinking is compatibilistic. Joseph does not say that God had initiated a lovely plan to send Joseph down to Egypt by first-class chariot, but the brothers corrupted the plan by their evil machinations. Nor does he say that the brothers hatched an evil plot, but God rushed in to the rescue by turning their evil into good (though some passages portray God in precisely such categories). Rather, in one and the same event, God and the brothers were working, the one with good intent, the others with evil intent. God's sovereign, unseen sway does not mitigate the brothers' evil; their malice does not catch God by surprise and make him utterly contingent.

In the same way, the Assyrians can be described as mere tools in Yahweh's hands as he disciplines his people (Isa. 10:5ff.). But that does not reduce their responsibility. In their foolish pride they think they are achieving these military victories on their own. Therefore God will hold them accountable for

44. D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Themes in Tension* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981); idem, *How Long, O Lord? Reflection on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), chaps. 11 and 12.

their arrogance, and, after using them the way a workman wields a saw or an axe, will turn again to rend them.

When the Philippians are told to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling,[45] on the ground that it is God who is working in them both to will and to act according to his good purpose, it is important to observe what is not said. The Philippians are not told to work out their salvation since God has done his bit and now it is their turn; nor are they told that they should simply "let go and let God," since after all salvation is all of grace. Rather, they are encouraged to work out their salvation precisely because it is God who is at work in them, both at the level of their wills and at the level of their actions. God's sovereignty functions as an incentive to work, not a disincentive. Similarly, when in a night vision the Lord encourages Paul to preach on in Corinth (Acts 18:9–10), the ground is that the Lord has many people in this place. In other words, election here functions as an incentive to evangelism, not a disincentive.

Nowhere, perhaps, are such compatibilistic tendencies more starkly presupposed than in Acts 4, when the church turns to prayer after the first whiff of persecution. The Christians invoke the "Sovereign Lord" who made the heaven and earth, and cite Psalm 2 as they remember that all the rage and plotting of the nations against the Lord and against his anointed One are futile: the Lord will have them in derision. Small wonder these believers saw the deepest fulfillment of Psalm 2 in the death of their Master: "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed" (4:27). Then they add, "They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen" (4:28).

A moment's reflection discloses that anything other than a compatibilist approach to these events destroys the gospel itself. Christians cannot possibly believe that the cross began as a nasty conspiracy by wicked politicians, with God riding in on a white charger at the last moment to turn their evil into good: that would mean that the plan of redemption was not a plan after all. Nor can they believe that God's sovereign control of the events excused all the human players: if Herod, Judas, Pontius Pilate, and other leaders were not involved in a conspiracy of which they were wretchedly culpable, it is hard to imagine how any human being in God's world could be thought culpable of anything—and in that case, why offer an atoning sacrifice for actions for which there could be no guilt?

45. I do not accept the interpretations of these verses advanced by O. Glombitza ("Mit Furcht und Zittern. Zum Verstandnis von Phil.2.12," *NovT* 3 [1959]: 100–106) and R. P. Martin (*Philippians*, NCB [London: Oliphants, 1976], 102–3) respectively, but detailed discussion would be out of place here. Cf. now Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

Before turning to the bearing of compatibilism on Christian assurance, it is necessary to take three steps.

1. If we accept, on the admittedly scanty evidence marshalled here, that biblical writers in every major corpus espouse compatibilism, we should perhaps pause to allay suspicions that compatibilism surreptitiously embraces sheer logical contradiction, and should forthwith be abandoned, regardless of what biblical writers think.[46] Modern compatibilists, I have said, do not try to show exactly how the two crucial propositions hold together. Rather, they elucidate the considerable unknowns that nullify most of the counterarguments. In particular: We do not know how an eternal God operates in time. We scarcely know what time is; it is not at all clear what eternity is (Does God know sequence?), still less how he relates to our time. The question is critical in debates over foreordination and predestination. Similarly, we do not know how a sovereign God operates through secondary agents who nevertheless are held accountable for their deeds. The definition of freedom that enters almost all discussions of human responsibility is far more problematic than people think. If freedom entails absolute power to contrary, then God is necessarily contingent, and compatibilism is destroyed. But if, for instance, freedom turns on voluntarism, that is, human beings are responsible and accountable because they do what they want to do, there is no necessary infringement on the sovereignty of God—as Jonathan Edwards demonstrated more than two centuries ago. Above all, we have almost no idea how God can be simultaneously sovereign and personal—yet the Scriptures insist on both. Virtually all of the elements that go into our thinking as to what personal relationships are about are based on our experience of relations with other human beings—and we are finite. We talk with one another, ask questions, hear answers, respond with love or wrath, cherish friendships, and so forth—and all of these elements demand the passage of time and presuppose finite actors. Similarly, in Scripture God can be portrayed asking questions, hearing answers, responding with love or wrath, cherishing friendships, and so forth; yet other texts insist he is also sovereign, the one "who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Eph. 1:11). I have no idea how to conceptualize a God who is both sovereign and personal, but I perceive that if both are not simultaneously true, the God of the Bible disappears, and Christianity, indeed theism itself, is destroyed. In short, the mystery of compatibilism is traceable to the mystery of God, to what we do not know about God.

2. Along with the Bible's insistence on compatibilism is its insistence on the goodness of God. Elsewhere I have argued at length[47] that the enormous biblical evidence for this duality leads to an unavoidable conclusion: al-

46. Many philosophers adopt exactly that stance. Nevertheless, compatibilism enjoys respectable support in some philosophical circles. See the bibliography in the works already cited.

47. *How Long, O Lord?*

though God, by virtue of the fact that he is sovereign, stands behind both good and evil (e.g., God can be portrayed as the one who incites David to number the people, the one who sends a strong delusion so that people will believe the lie, the one who sends nations to war, the one of whom Romans 8:28 is predicated), he stands behind good and evil asymmetrically. He stands behind evil in such a way that none of it takes place outside the limits of his sovereign sway, but so that no evil is chargeable to him; he stands behind good in such a way that all of it is credited to him. Do not ask me to explain *how* this can be so: these are components of the biblical "givens," perspectives that the biblical writers teach or assume.

3. This means that we are locked into mystery. That should not be surprising: we are thinking about God. If there were nothing mysterious about him, I suppose he would not be God: he would be too small, too easily tamed, too domesticated. But if we respect the mystery of compatibilism, precisely because it is tied to what we do not know about God himself, then the most important thing we can do to foster personal and corporate fidelity to the portrait of God disclosed in Scripture, is to observe how the complementary truths of compatibilism *function in Scripture, and insist that in our hands they will function in the same ways, and in no other.*

For example, election, an element in the biblical portrayal of God's sovereignty, never functions so as to destroy human responsibility, to limit the urgency of preaching the gospel, to foster fatalism, or the like. It frequently functions to tie salvation to grace and to engender humility (Rom. 9), to encourage evangelism (Acts 18:9–10), and much more. Invitations to believe or to obey the gospel never function to make God absolutely contingent; rather, they function to bring people to saving faith, increase human responsibility, magnify the forbearance of God, and so forth. If we allow the components of compatibilism to function in ways much removed from the biblical constraints, we will end up implicitly disowning the compatibilism that is everywhere assumed, and is, finally, nothing more than a corollary of the doctrine of God. We will end up tarnishing the biblical witness to who God is and what he is like.

Most Christians have become used to other facets of Christian doctrine that involve mystery, and if they are reasonably informed they will be fairly careful both to locate the mystery in the right place and not to destroy the mystery by drawing inferences that destroy some essential component elsewhere in the structure. Perhaps the best example is Christology. Most of us want to be careful enough about our affirmation of Jesus' deity that we do not unwittingly derogate his humanity, and vice versa. We acknowledge the mystery, and we take some pains, along with believers in every era, to try to incorporate all the biblical evidence on this subject into the formulations of our doctrinal affirmations. We may not be completely successful; but that is our commitment. In the area of compatibilism, however, too few have adequately recognized that there is a mystery at stake, and that laying profane

hands on the biblical evidence too quickly, without recognizing the nature and location of the mystery, ends up with tragic loss to the doctrine of God. For example, if human responsibility is made to depend on a definition of freedom that involves absolute power to contrary, then God becomes absolutely contingent. One of the poles of combatibilism is destroyed; we are left, not with mystery, but with logical contradiction.

Clearly, compatibilism touches many subjects: election, the problem of suffering, the nature of prayer, and much else. What is not often recognized is that it bears directly on the nature of Christian assurance. For, on the one hand, we are dealing with a plethora of texts that promise God's sovereign commitment to preserve his own elect; on the other, believers are enjoined to persevere in faithfulness to the new covenant and the Lord of the covenant, to the calling by which they were called. This is nothing other than God's sovereignty and human responsibility dressed up in another form.

So we will always have some mystery. The important thing will be to locate the mystery in the right place. It will not do to affirm God's sovereign protection of his elect, and then make such preservation absolutely contingent on human faithfulness: that is not mystery, but logical contradiction. But if our articulation of the doctrine of assurance leaves no loose ends, there is every reason to think that we have denied compatibilism somewhere—in exactly the same way that some treatments of election remove all difficulties but leave the texts behind. Moreover, the same safeguard that we apply in other areas where mystery intrudes into Christian doctrine must be applied here: let the various passages relevant to Christian assurance function in our lives and theological systems the way they do in Scripture. Do warnings against apostasy function to annul the promises of God? Of course not. They are designed to promote perseverance. Do the promises of God serve to engender lethargy? Of course not. They are designed to promote zeal, gratitude, and appreciation of God's fidelity.

But this discussion of function leads us to the final reflection.

The biblical writers do not deal with only one sort of doubt, and therefore they do not mete out only one kind of assurance. This rather obvious fact is sometimes overlooked. The magisterial Reformers rebelled against the sale of indulgences, the location of absolution within the hands of a priestly minority, the loss of confidence in the finished work of Christ, the lack of Christian assurance. By tying assurance to justification, they successfully met this challenge, prompting the Tridentine standards to pronounce the *anathema sit* on those who claimed such assurance.[48]

48. See the excellent discussion by Klaas Runia, "Justification and Roman Catholicism," in *Right with God: Justification in the Bible and the World*, ed. D. A. Carson (Exeter: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

But there are many different kinds of doubt. Even if we narrowly focus on those elements of doubt that can jeopardize the Christian's assurance that the salvation now begun will finally be brought to victorious consummation, the diversity is nevertheless remarkable. Doubtless the solution to much of it is to focus attention on the exclusive finality of Christ and his death and resurrection on our behalf, to magnify God's unfailing promises and his love (e.g., John 5:24; 6:37ff.; 10 passim; Rom. 8:15–17, 29–30, 38–39; Phil. 1:6; 2 Tim. 1:12). But lack of assurance may be prompted by secret sin. Worse, a Christian may stumble into prolonged sin and not feel any lack of assurance—just like the Israelites in Deuteronomy and elsewhere who are warned against relying on election and feel no fear or shame when they sin. In that case, James 2 may call into question the reality of the "faith" that is exercised, if it is not accompanied by works; for the assumption in the New Testament is that saving faith, tied as it is to the new covenant and the power of the Spirit, necessarily issues in good works. Although works cannot save and cannot be the primary ground of one's assurance (that, surely, is Christ and his work and promises), they may serve as corroborating evidence. More accurately, in James 2 and 2 Corinthians 13:10, the lack of corroborating evidence may call in question the reality of the putative faith; in 2 Peter 1:10 the desirability of persevering corroboration functions as an incentive to enduring fidelity and fruitfulness. Here, then, the English Puritans have some justification for their emphases, if not always for their overemphases.

Still more interesting is the argument of 1 John. Many Protestant commentators follow the classic treatment of Robert Law in detecting "tests of life" in this epistle. These are usually thought to be three, sometimes four: appropriate allegiance to certain truth, in this case the confession that the Christ, the Son of God, is Jesus; principial obedience; love for other believers; and, in some analyses, the witness of the Spirit (though some think this witness is not a private experience but a way of summarizing the other "tests").

But a more refined analysis is possible if we observe more carefully the likely background and observable function of these so-called tests. Despite many counterproposals, I remain persuaded that John is confronting a crisis precipitated by the secession of some members who have been powerfully influenced by some form of protognosticism. Their departure left behind believers who were, spiritually speaking, badly bruised. The raw triumphalism of most forms of gnosticism dented the confidence of those who refused to go along with the movement. In this light, the so-called tests are not primarily given to exclude certain people on the grounds that they failed to meet the challenges, but to reassure believers that their fidelity to the gospel, along the lines indicated, was itself reason enough to enable them to regain their quiet Christian assurance. The very places where the seceders failed or made outrageous counterclaims, thereby threatening the Christians and jolting their assurance, were the places where the Christians were proving faithful and reliable—in doctrine, obedience, and love. Such faithfulness and reliability

constituted evidence of God's work in their lives, and therefore could legitimately be taken by those who believed in the name of the Son of God as corroborating grounds that they truly enjoyed eternal life. Such restored confidence before God had other practical ramifications: in particular, it also issued in renewed confidence in prayer (3:21–22; 5:14–16).[49]

What we learn from these observations is that there is a pastoral dimension to the biblical witness on Christian assurance. We should have known it all along. No one can long serve as a pastor without coming across, say, a young woman who doubts that she is good enough to be forgiven by Christ, an aging man who wonders if he will be transported to glory when he dies, a church member who is having doubts about his salvation and who (it is discovered) is sleeping with his secretary, some nominal believers who display nothing of the promised fruit of the new covenant but who are convinced by the slogan "Once saved, always saved" that they are in no danger, and a gaggle of young people who are unsure of their spiritual status because they have been confronted by those who claim to have the "full gospel." Anyone who applies exactly the same spiritual remedy to these diverse ailments ought to have his license as a spiritual physician immediately rescinded.

Some Conclusions

If we appreciate the undergirding mystery that stands behind the Christian assurance, we will let the various complementary biblical statements stand in their naked power and function without endless reductionism.[50]

Close observation of the functions of the various biblical statements in their immediate and canonical contexts will do much to safeguard our theology against dangerous reductionism and pastoral malpractice. Zane Hodges is happy to speak of Christians ceasing to name the name of Christ and denying the faith completely, even though (he insists) God keeps such people "saved," that is, in the faith. From a pastoral point of view, what is one to say to these unbelieving believers, these Christ-denying Christians? If the way

49. Of course, virtually everything I have said about 1 John is disputed. I shall seek to offer detailed defense of these judgments in a forthcoming commentary (NIGTC).

50. I should point out that in many classic treatments on assurance there is a threefold focus: the objective work of Christ grounded in the plan of God, the demonstrable transformation of the believer that is the new birth's inevitable result, and the inner witness of the Spirit (so, for instance, Richard Sibbes: see the discussion in Mark E. Dever, "Richard Sibbes and the 'Truly Evangelicall Church of England': A Study in Reformed Divinity and Early Stuart Conformity" [Ph.D. dissertation, Cambridge University, 1992]). This third leg, tied to such passages as Romans 8:15–17, I have not discussed here, but it needs and deserves serious reflection. It is connected in important ways to the subject of revival. All three legs must be set out in biblical array and pastorally wise proportion in any comprehensive treatment of assurance.

the Scriptures function in such cases is borne in mind, both our theology and our counsel will grow in maturity and biblical balance.

The sort of approach that makes absolute, epistemologically tight, Christian assurance the sine qua non of theological systems and proceeds to engage in a massive rereading of the rest of Scripture, rereadings that are too clever by half, in order to justify this a priori, are ill-conceived. Indeed, granted the proper location of the underlying tension between God's sovereignty and human responsibility, they are as methodologically ill-conceived as, say, J. A. T. Robinson's attempt to develop a Christology grounded exclusively in Jesus' humanity, that humanity serving as a grid that filters out complementary evidence.[51]

Because every part of Christian doctrine is tied, one way or another, to every other part, doubtless a case can be made for beginning with the doctrine of assurance. It is odd, however, that a few contemporary studies have made personal assurance, or some peculiar understanding of it, the touchstone for the entire structure of Christian theology. The result has been truly astonishing distortions. On balance, this is a strange place to begin and end the study of theology. One might have begun with God, with Christ, with redemption, with revelation.

It is important to insist that the view of perseverance and assurance outlined in this chapter does not make perseverance the basis of assurance—as if to say that no one is entitled to any form of assurance until ultimate perseverance has been demonstrated. I have not argued that perseverance is the basis for assurance; rather, I have argued that failure to persevere serves to undermine assurance. The basis of assurance is Christ and his work and its entailments.

In short, the biblical writers offer believers all the assurance they could ever want, grounding such assurance in the character of God, the nature of the new covenant, the finality of election, the love of God, and much more beside. But they never allow such assurance to become a sop for spiritual indifference; indeed, the same vision is what drives them to insist that the God who has called them to his new covenant works powerfully in them to conform them to the likeness of his Son, to the fruitfulness the Spirit empowers us to produce. This becomes both an incentive to press on to the mark of the upward call in Christ Jesus, and an implicit challenge to those who cry "Lord, Lord" but do not do what he commands.

51. *The Human Face of God* (London: SCM, 1973).