

Q. How can I know that I am saved?

A. This is a common question. Some other ways that it can be asked are, "How can I know that God has chosen me as one of His children?" and, "How can I be assured of God's love for me?" It is, in fact, a question of what theologians call assurance.

I know people who have come up with all sorts of elaborate ways to answer this question. They tell people to look at themselves and see how they have changed since the time they think they became a Christian. They tell them to look at their love for others, their Christian works, their growth in Scriptural knowledge, their better morality, how much they love the law, and so on. Others will also advise people to wait for a vision, a voice, or a feeling to know they are saved.

All of these approaches are particularly common among Puritan writers. Some go so far as to say that very few will ever attain assurance. Notice this from the seventeenth-century Puritan, Thomas Brooks:

Now though this full assurance is earnestly desired, and highly prized, and the want of it much lamented, and the enjoyment of it much endeavored after by all saints, yet it is only obtained by a few. Assurance is a mercy too good for most men's hearts, it is a crown too weighty for most men's heads. Assurance is *optimum maximum*, the best and the greatest mercy; and therefore God will only give it to his best and dearest friends.... It is one mercy for God to love the soul, and another mercy for God to assure the soul of his love.

Thomas Brooks, "Heaven on Earth: A Serious Discourse, Touching a Well-Founded Assurance," *The Works of Thomas Brooks*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, reprinted 1980) 335

Such misleading, and spiritually damaging statements as this are nothing but unscriptural hogwash. Yet, their proponents will point to 1 Corinthians 11:28 and 2 Corinthians 13:5 to "prove" their case: "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup," and, "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith;

Copyright © 2009 wordofthisgrace.org

Permission is granted to reproduce this article only if reproduced in full with no alterations and keeping the copyright statement and this permission statement intact.

prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?"

They say that 1 Corinthians 11:28 means that we are to examine our actions and thoughts to make sure we are worthy to take the Lord's Supper. But at what point are we good enough? If someone cut me off on the highway on the way to church and I had some nasty thoughts, must I quickly repent before I take the bread and wine? What about any other thoughts that may be lurking in the inner recesses of my mind? With this kind of reasoning, no one would ever take the Lord's Supper because we are never, of ourselves, worthy.

Interestingly, another Puritan theologian was highly critical of this approach that causes Christians to think of themselves as too unworthy to eat the Lord's Supper. "Thus," he writes, "as Saul kept the people from eating honey, so the devil by this temptation, scares many from this ordinance, which is sweeter than honey and the honey-comb" (Thomas Watson, *Body of Divinity* [Grand Rapids: Baker, reprinted 1979] 592).

Others went to far as to say that you cannot competently examine yourself. You must have others examine you: "Do not easily take for granted that you are converted, beg some faithful minister to search you quick, and remember a godly jealousy doth always become you, and that the most confident are seldom right" (James Janeway, *The Saint's Encouragement to Diligence in Christ's Service*, 102-3, as quoted here: <http://puritanismtoday.wordpress.com/quotes-on-assurance-hypocrisy-and-self-deception/>).

Rather than support the spiritual paranoia of the Puritans, 2 Corinthians 13:5 points us to the true and stable source of our assurance. Read it again in context with verses 4 and 6: "For though he was crucified through weakness, yet he liveth by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but we shall live with him by the power of God toward you. Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates? But I trust that ye shall know that we are not reprobates." Paul trusted that the Corinthians would know that they were not reprobates because Jesus Christ was in them.

How, then, can we be worthy? Let me give you one more wrong answer. This is found in an article that is critical of the same Puritan doctrine of assurance that I have been critical of. Yet, as if to illustrate

how easily we can take our eyes off what we should be continuously focused on and instead put them on fallible human works, the author of the article puts his foot into the same snare as the Puritans. This Reformed author writes:

Only in the way of a holy life can, and do, believers enjoy the assurance that they are the children of God. The Spirit witnesses with the spirit of the believer as the believer obeys God's commandments, and *only* as he obeys God's commandments. The believer has assurance as he walks in holiness of life, and *only* as he walks in holiness of life... Holiness is a confirming evidence of salvation to the believer, as good works are an evidence of justification.

David J. Engelsma, "The Gift of Assurance: The Spirit of Christ and Assurance of Salvation," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, April 2009, Vol. 42 No. 2 [Wyoming, MI: Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary] 43

Engelsma apparently seriously believes that these words are somehow better than those of Thomas Brooks, Thomas Watson, and other Puritans. But they are as much a broken reed as the mystical, pious, self-righteous experientialism those men preached! Which works are we supposed to look to for our assurance? Can our works ever be so perfect that we can base our assurance on them? If we break a commandment, must we lose our assurance? Just exactly how holy a life must we live before we can be assured?

Quite frankly, I believe that such unbiblical notions of assurance are a growing plague that often torments those who should have assurance and gives false hope to those who have no real basis for assurance because they have never been saved. Because of poor teaching and logical inconsistency, it can be found in both Baptist and infant-baptizing congregations. But it is really the logical outcome of infant baptism. Infant-baptizing groups are heavily populated by people who were baptized as infants. Their sprinkling is a ticket for them to remain members as adults even though they have no faith and have never been born again. They look for assurance in all the wrong places because their eyes have never been opened to look in the right place.

How, then, can we be assured of our election, our salvation, and God's love for us? If we are trusting in Jesus Christ, we can be fully assured. That's it. Nothing more.

Did Jesus come to save sinners? Are you a sinner? Do you believe that only Jesus can save you from your sins? Have you put your trust in Him to take care of your salvation? There. If you have answered yes to all of these questions, then you are chosen, saved, and loved by God because only those who are chosen, saved, and loved by God will answer yes to them. You have answered the question by centering on Jesus Christ and what He has done, not you and your works. And that's how it should be.