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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

ASSURANCE

I

IN certain quarters it has recently been alleged that assurance of salvation is a doctrine which first saw light in Reformed quarters at the time of the Protestant Reformation, and not till then. Most theological allegations, seriously uttered, contain a germ of truth, whether they be orthodox or heretical. Polemical theology would be unworthy of its office, if it were not substantially founded upon decent presuppositions in the way of revelation, were it not recognisably Christian at least in intention. It should not be difficult to show that there are practical reasons for the Roman view that there is no assurance until the very end of life, when God settles all accounts. Yet such practical views do not clear the position of theological heresy. The truth is that the Roman attitude was based upon the undoubted fact of Christian assurance, and was meant to neutralise such a fighting dose of it as might lead members of the Church to sit lightly to her ordinances as well as to the autocracy of her ministers, and to rest content with the unaided *testimonium internum Spiritus sancti*.

The fact is that assurance goes hand in hand doctrinally with predestination as well as with the more obvious promises of the Gospel. This is why it is suspect in the eyes of those who would support James and ignore Paul (though certainly not with the consent of James), because predestination is not fair. It is of course anything but fair to those who are not what we call soundly converted; you can only show the difference between determinism and particular election to a converted man. Only a reconciled sinner can humbly and thankfully receive grace from heaven; the reason being that God's condescension is inconceivable until bestowed. But to deny assurance is to deny that there is such a thing as conversion; and in that case what use or advantage or distinction, we ask, is there in becoming and so being and stedfastly remaining a Christian? Calling is then not calling, justification is an empty vocable. Now ours

is a faith that turns the world upside down, reputedly at least. If the unregeneration of your world has not been thus revolutionised, are you a Christian? If not, you cannot speak about assurance at all, and neither can the Church of which you *as such* are a member. Are we then to think that Paul thanked God for his converts, for no reason at all but policy? for the promotion of a religious stunt? It must be wrong to accept our Lord's statement that there is joy among the angels in heaven over one sinner converted! Yet "blessed art thou, Bar Jonas; for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven". Nay, we are strong in the Lord and in the power of His might, because something has happened definitely. We could not be so emphatically recommended to rejoice in the Lord alway—"and again I say, Rejoice"—if nothing revolutionary had happened and continued to happen to us. And such rejoicing extends to the grim but genuine joy amid tribulation. We can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth us. The kingdom of God—to which the Christian belongs by his rights in Christ—is joy in the Holy Ghost. And we have no personal assurance!! God forbid.

II

In all soberness, the allegation that assurance of salvation is a Reformed fiction simply cannot stand up to the plain evidence of Scripture and history. Our joy in the Lord God of our salvation is the outcome of Christ's suffering on our behalf. The hymnology of the Church at all stages is redolent of praise and thankfulness for the unspeakable gift of Christ and His redemption. Think, to take the first example to hand, of St. Bernard of Clairvaux; not to mention writers after the Reformation, both Roman Catholic and not. Think of a congregation which is an instrument of evangelisation, which does not merely live on its falling birthrate but brings in the Gentiles. Shall we tell it that conversion by the Holy Spirit, when it takes place, is of uncertain value? They would not for one moment believe you. On the other hand we may assert without fear of contradiction, that where there is no conviction of a martyr or witness, it is highly doubtful if Christ is really present at all, constituting new life. Is conversion with resulting assurance denied only in quarters where it is not known? Every

prophet and apostle knows what assurance means; so do those, surely, who acknowledge their office? Perhaps the coldness which denies its existence is the still coma of unbelief, however devout and coldly (or even warmly) moral. A Church which makes converts is a living Church: does this mean that conversion is therefore a sham and not a new beginning, not the birth of a life hid with Christ in God, not fullness of life straight from heaven?

“Behold, I make all things new!” What is a Church for, if it does not preach and promise the new life that is in Christ Jesus? The N.T. is full of vitality, because it is a record of how newness of life was confirmed for all the elect. The Church has been vital, as often and as long as she was dead sure of that. The sect, I venture to say, does not matter very much, if it is in a real sense a fold of the Good Shepherd. Where this thing called conversion is going on, there we see a live Catholic Church. History repeats the tale, whether in the Roman or in the Reformed Catholic Church. The Church is never dead because *Christ* liveth for evermore: surely not *vice versa*. Even such a hide-bound Calvinist as the writer would insist that the Church, inevitably and in all ages and in many sects, has preached and under God has spread assurance of salvation. I should tremble to think that the martyrs of the Epistle to the Hebrews died in vain for a hope *not* assured. We tend to forget that *from eternity* Christ is the Saviour of His own. The beam of the Incarnation, that shines from Zion’s hill like a lighthouse, radiates the one and same light of salvation backwards as well as forwards in time. We assuredly maintain that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, to-day and for ever. Possibly the presence or absence of assurance is the sign of Church or no Church.

The token of vitality in the Church is her missionary activity. If she be a diffident missionary, her assurance is small and accordingly she does not infect her pagan environment with the heavenly leaven, she does not win souls for Christ. The Church of Christ has been missionary always, so far as she has been the Church of Christ. Strange to say, she has never been so vital as under persecution. Persecution reveals the Church and reveals her as assured, as knowing whom she has believed, as persuaded that He is able to redeem His pledge, and that nothing in heaven, on earth or in hell can separate

her from her Lord and Head. Her weakness is her trust in organisations well run. Her strength is her reliance upon Christ for everything. Complete surrender to Christ is inevitably the full assurance of faith, the confidence of a hope that not only rests on justification but is quickened unto sanctification.

III

Now apart from her Head the Church becomes sadly human. Historically, many a thing has starved or choked or destroyed the good seed of the Word within her visible bounds. Sin has become second nature to the unregenerate man. Even in the Church there are reasons for his backsliding. Oppression, poverty, ambition of the Erastian type, the hunger to be temporal as well as spiritual lord in the world, sloth, wealth, indifference to the message—all or any of these things spells decadence. Often the healthiest thing for the good estate of the Catholic Church is persecution: that never destroys life hid with Christ in God. But these other things do. History relates how the humanised edifice, driven to assert her own authority instead of Christ's, has become a persecuting society—in order, forsooth, to retain her membership. Sometimes the Church has regarded herself as the temporal power, aping Caesar as well as Christ. From her first defections to the most recent she has been tempted to use her own authority instead of that of her Lord and Master. *Nulla extra ecclesiam salus*. Yes, emphatically. But sometimes the *ecclesia* has been the visible Church usurping the civil power, reminiscent not of Christ's kingship but of worldly power. And yet how fundamentally true of the real Church, that there is no salvation outside her. Here is the dilemma. On the one hand those who have received true assurance abundantly are apt to resent a moribund Church: on the other, being only moribund and not dead yet, the institution fights to keep her members. There lies the seed of fission. The institution insists that real Christian life must acknowledge her moribund suzerainty or be excommunicate, not only from the outward body but also and therefore from God. Yet a sincere ministry in an age of obscuratation wishes to restrain the unbridled enthusiasms of dissent and to keep the errant of all sorts under its hand. It knows the fallibility even of the converted and it would by means of every kind

of sacrament, ordinance and control keep its hand upon the living pulse of its membership and hold it to direct worship of God. For while there is no special fear for the truly repentant, the truly assured, sanctification is yet never complete in this life, and men must, in spite of the spasmodic in their assurance, work out their own salvation in fear and trembling, the very best of them, just *because* it is God that worketh in them, causing the obedient to will and to do not their own but His good pleasure. And so, in order to draw and bend the careless to the means of grace, the visible Church may be tempted to insinuate that assurance is all very well, but that there are dark days that come, and the sheep must learn to depend, not on themselves who are sorely human and dependent, but on the Church which continues from age to age. And so, from a slightly worldly view of her own indispensability, the Church rather belittles the fullness of assurance, and tries to do what is very good for every Christian pilgrim, attach them to the visible means of grace, keep them in close association with holy things at all junctures in life; which is indeed for them profitable and for the Church an inspiration—for we *must all* continue to worship God and under Him to search our hearts. Let us not attempt to minimise the importance of keeping the members thus in touch with the Head. In Him resideth life and in Him alone.

Our Lord and Saviour was tempted repeatedly of the devil to display and use His deity to bolster up the tasks of His true humanity. The Church, if outwardly powerful, cannot always like her Master overcome the same temptations. By meticulous coercion of her members she gives them an assurance which it is scarcely hers to supply—she may only bear witness to its existence or rather possibility. Yet no man can safely face life or death outwith the Church. How very true evangelically! How utterly wrong upon a basis of worldly ecclesiasticism! Under God, the Church must under God sow the seeds of full assurance. But she must not deny even her growing babes direct individual approach to Christ their Saviour. The Church, as well as the individual member, is completely dependent upon the one and only Mediator for the one and only grace. The right of direct appeal to Christ on the part of the elect individually is as indisputable and inalienable as Christ's undoubted right to deal separately with

each of His own: the first of course depending on the second. The Church cannot take the place of God to a single member. The Church is a servant and never God. Could any reason be more cogent for ministry as against a tyranny, however beneficial in intention ?

IV

It remains to add that assurance in the individual depends for its strength upon growth of Grace. Reformed theology is fond of insisting that, while full assurance is frequently experienced, it is never inevitable, never continuously sustained and certainly does not patently characterise every degree of Christian stature here below. We begin as babes. Justification is the same for all elect who have been called, i.e. for all real Christians, and it is bestowed once for all. But one must insist that sanctification is a very different thing. Justification is once and for all: sanctification never reaches its consummation in this life. Nevertheless assurance is something definitely to be sought by the believer as long as life lasts. Times of spiritual refreshment *are* assurance. It varies indeed. The Spirit bloweth where it listeth, and not at the will even of a Christian. Yet the duty to watch and pray implies that we may expect the promised benefit. The Spirit may have its own times and seasons, but it *does* work in believers and *is* sent by Christ to His own. God does speak: hence fear and trembling. God does work: and we can take it according as we are in Christ. "Scots Worthies" is full of discussions upon the martyrs' state of conscience before martyrdom. Many the wrestlings they had with the Lord ere they rendered their last account to Him. But the grace seemed always to abound, the hope never made even the weakest ashamed. Assurance of faith is seen most familiarly in the holy strife to do the appropriate works in Christ and never to cease so striving, with full recourse to the fountainhead for strength. A warfare while life lasts, but hearty sound fighting for a good purpose. So *solvitur ambulando*—in Christ. Cries the Psalmist: "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." And His Lord answers him from the right hand, "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world". Not to hope for such courage in our warfare, not in faith to find the perennial

spring of it in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus—would be to assert that Christianity from start to finish was an hallucination. Faith means a *new creature* in Christ the true image of God.

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