

ASSURANCE AND FRIENDSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

We take as our starting point for this paper and its topic the concluding clauses of paragraph 2 of Chapter 18 of the *Savoy Declaration*,¹ which is entitled of *the Assurance of Grace and Salvation*. The paragraph reads as follows:

This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion, grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith, founded on the blood and righteousness of Christ, revealed in the gospel, and also upon the inward evidence of those graces unto which promises are made, and on the immediate witness of the Spirit, testifying our adoption, and as a fruit thereof, leaving the heart more humble and holy.²

This paragraph states that there are objective and subjective aspects of the grace of assurance.³ Assurance of salvation is a part of the doctrine of sanctification, which we know is divinely dispensed in differing degrees by sovereign grace.⁴ All believers partake equally of the grace of justifying faith. All are heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ as beneficiaries of divine adoption. But all do not have nor do they demonstrate the same degree of assurance and its fruits, particularly those mentioned in this paragraph, humility and holiness. Few seem today to be troubled as John Bunyan was about assurance due to an overwhelming conviction of the sinfulness of one's own particular sins.⁵ The fruits of humility and holiness of which the SD speaks are seldom highly treasured and often lacking, as well as even a general concern about the state of one's soul.

Why is this?

May it not be at least in part because such assurance is resting so heavily on the objective reality of Christ's work outside the believer that faith has verged into a species of presumption? So that rather than a close walk with God and prizing communion with him whenever possible as our highest treasure, we are content with the beauty of our doctrines and to leave even extensive parts of our lives unexamined in the light of the very doctrines we profess. Where are those imitating

¹ Hereafter: SD.

² Emphasis added.

³ Arguably all are objective because all are taught in Scripture, but the one - *the blood and righteousness of Christ* - is based on a past historical occurrence outside the believer, while the others - *the inward evidence...and the immediate witness of the Spirit...and...fruit* - are based on something done after conversion in the heart of a believer.

⁴ E.g. Phil.3:15-16.

⁵ See, for example, Bunyan's work *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*.

the life of Enoch who walked with God and of whom it was said that he pleased God⁶ before God took him?

PURPOSE

The goal of this paper is not only to inform or remind us of certain things but to rouse us to see the great sin that it certainly is if we are not growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,⁷ such that we too can perceive in and demonstrate from the heart that we desire increasingly to be more humble and holy, and therefore will be happier, more assured of heaven and more useful to God on earth. To this end we will

1. survey the steps from man's unconverted state to that of friendship through the Spirit with God in Christ; then
2. explain and defend the resulting thesis that the existence and maintenance of this friendship with God provide the deepest level of subjective assurance for the Christian in this life and therefore the means, if properly used, to grow in all the graces that most resemble our Lord Jesus; and finally
3. reflect on some of the difficulties, hindrances and their causes that many true Christians experience and thus fail to enjoy or maintain this friendship, even though it has been purchased for and promised to every believer.

FROM GOD'S WRATH TO CHRIST'S FRIEND

Consider the transition from A)God's wrath and curse through B)the work of Christ to C)the Father's favor, love and intimacy through the work of the Holy Spirit.

A)The natural state by physical birth of those not regenerated by the Holy Spirit is that they are spiritually dead.⁸ They are wholly unable to do anything to please God⁹ and therefore they can never in that condition do anything good in God's sight.¹⁰ Such persons are uninterested in seeking God.¹¹ Their condition, therefore, includes living under God's wrath¹² and condemnation.¹³ This means that whether they perceive it or not, they are guilty before God as sinners, even before committing the first sin. Each one was conceived and born in sin.¹⁴ And when the unbeliever adds his own individual sins, he proves himself to be the slave of sin,¹⁵ under the

⁶ So the LXX of Genesis 5:24 translates the Hebrew "walked with." See Hebrews 11:5.

⁷ The *command* of Second Peter 3:18.

⁸ Eph.2:1.

⁹ Rom.8:8.

¹⁰ Rom.7:18; Mt.19:17, Mark 10:18 & Luke 18:19: *Why do you call me good? There is but one who is good, God.*

¹¹ Ps.14:2-3; 53:2-3; Rom.3:11.

¹² John 3:36.

¹³ John 3:18.

¹⁴ Ps.51:5.

¹⁵ John 8:34.

dominion of the devil and subject to all the miseries of this life, to physical death and to the pains of hell forever.¹⁶

Further, as to knowledge, the unregenerate mind is foolish.¹⁷ Though created in the image of God¹⁸ and therefore a worshiper, the natural man is an idolater, honoring himself and his own thoughts above all others. In following the dictates of his mind he expels the true God as far from his heart and life as possible. In this way, by word and by deed, he leads others to live or continue to live in the same way.¹⁹

All this is fruit from the seed of one sin.²⁰ And if left unchecked and unaltered, it would have meant the complete ruin of the earth and all its inhabitants because human sin brought God's just curse upon the earth and its creatures.²¹ The universal flood in Noah's day was the sole biblical, worldwide picture of what awaits unrepentant sinners after death.²² But the flood changed nothing in the heart and character of unregenerate humanity,²³ as all the rest of Holy Scripture and of secular history up to this moment demonstrates to tragic and horrific perfection.

For everyone without the new birth, the situation was and remains one of complete assurance: assurance of just judgment before God and a hopeless eternity.²⁴

Each person of the triune God was infinitely offended by human sin because God is an infinite being. If God, having already consigned to hell the angelic host which rebelled against him²⁵, had left all humanity in its estate of sin and misery after the fall,²⁶ this essay would not have been written, we would not be here and the indescribable horrors of what our sins deserve would have left us too without hope and without God in the world.²⁷

Two glorious words break into several key New Testament texts like unclouded sun after a deep snow: *But GOD!*²⁸ God reentered the world of our wretched first parents when he came seeking them in their flight, their shame and their excuses and accusations-- even against God himself. Enter God! Enter grace!

¹⁶ See the Westminster Shorter Catechism #19 (hereafter WSC).

¹⁷ Eph.4:17-18.

¹⁸ Gen.1:26-27.

¹⁹ Rom.1:22-23, 28-32.

²⁰ Rom.5:12-21.

²¹ Gen.3:17-18; 4:1; Gal.3:10.

²² Gen.6:5-7. This functioned as universal destruction by water in a similar manner as the Bible treats the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah by fire and brimstone as a picture of eternal damnation.

²³ Gen.8:21.

²⁴ Heb.10:27, 31; Rev.14:11.

²⁵ Jude 6; 2Pet.2:4.

²⁶ See WSC #17-20.

²⁷ Eph.2:12.

²⁸ Eph.2:4; Rom.5:8; 6:17, et al.

B) Sin against God was preliminary to the revelation of God's glorious plan of salvation, whereby a divine Savior – God the Son - would become man and thus in a corporal sense be Emanuel²⁹ in order to do the following:

1) earn a perfect righteousness³⁰ by living a sinless human life³¹ - something that no sinner has or ever could have done;

2) give his life as a propitiating sacrifice and a ransom for those he came to save³² by suffering the penalty for all of their sins in his own body when he received, endured and pacified the infinite wrath of God at the cross of Calvary;³³

3) reconcile to God all those for whom he died. Thus believers are not merely forgiven and brought to a theoretically 'zero' position,³⁴ that is, without sin but also without righteousness. Rather, this Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, not only procured an unconditional pardon, but also earned the complete and indefectible righteousness God requires for all who would enter his heaven.³⁵

Jesus Christ did all he did in his human nature by the favor of God upon him³⁶ and by the power of the Holy Spirit within him.³⁷

His burial proved he had died and his resurrection vindicated him before God, angels and men.³⁸

Before the eyes of his eleven apostles, he ascended to heaven whence he had come and there he intercedes for all those on earth who have put their trust in him.³⁹

All the above are objective realities; they are divine accomplishments wholly outside of and apart from sinners.

C) Thus in his life and death, our Lord procured saving and assuring benefits. Received back into glory, he took his seat at the Father's right hand.⁴⁰ The Father and the Son sent out the Holy Spirit⁴¹ in order to apply these benefits to all for whom the Son had died.⁴² Old Testament saints partook of them by faith in the

²⁹ Hebrew for *God with us*.

³⁰ 1Jn.2:1.

³¹ John 8:46; Heb.4:15.

³² Mark 10:45.

³³ Rom.3:25.

³⁴ Compare David with Absalom 2Sam.14:24.

³⁵ 2Cor.5:21.

³⁶ Luke 2:40, 52.

³⁷ John 3:34; Heb.9:14.

³⁸ E.g. Luke 23:44-24:49; 1Tim.3:16;

³⁹ Acts 1:1-9; Heb.7:25.

⁴⁰ Mat.22:44; Acts 2:33.

⁴¹ Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:1-4, 16-18.

⁴² See WSC #29. In the description that follows, unless otherwise noted, the adjective "saving" should be understood before "application" or its verbal forms.

prospect of their accomplishment - however they understood them and in whatever manner appropriate to the types and shadows of that administration of the covenant of grace. New Testament saints partake of these benefits by faith in retrospect.

This application occurs in a process known as the *ordo salutis*, or *the order of salvation*. Though perhaps familiar to us it bears summarizing here, especially since so many seem to come short of the kind of energizing, kingdom-building zeal and assurance that Christ has purchased for every Christian.

1)Regeneration or the new birth⁴³ occurs when the Holy Spirit so alters the effects of sin on an individual's mind, affections and will, that the person is thereby enabled to repent and believe the Gospel when it is read, taught or preached. Regeneration is life from the dead⁴⁴ and is therefore essential to the receiving of any other benefits from the work of Christ.

2)Effectual calling⁴⁵ is the name often used to describe the Spirit's work on the mind and heart of a sinner whereby he convicts of sin and begins to teach the fear of the Lord.

3)This genuine fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge⁴⁶ and of wisdom,⁴⁷ the latter being the right understanding, application and implementation of the former.

There can be no true conversion from sin to righteousness nor solid and lasting growth in grace without this holy and healthy fear.⁴⁸ This is also due to the fact that the fear of the Lord includes hating evil.⁴⁹ In a converted soul the fear of the Lord is far from terror of punishment or hell;⁵⁰ rather, it is clean, edifies, is to be enjoyed all the day and endures forever.⁵¹

(We interject here the strong suspicion that because much evangelism begins with the love of God instead of where the Bible begins, which is with the sinner's need of a perfect righteousness,⁵² the more difficult reality of how to be right with God is smothered underneath the emotions associated with what is often presented as the universal, unconditional love of God for all people. Falsely comforted by this, a

⁴³ Tit.3:5; John 3:3.

⁴⁴ Eph.2:1-5.

⁴⁵ Rom.8:28-30; 9:24; 1Cor.1:1-2, 9.

⁴⁶ Pro.1:7.

⁴⁷ Ps.111:10; Pro.9:10.

⁴⁸ Pro.14:27; 19:23; 22:17; Acts 9:31. See, for example, John Bunyan's *Treatise on the Fear of God*.

⁴⁹ Pro.8:13; 16:6.

⁵⁰ 1Jn.4:18.

⁵¹ Ps.19:9; Acts 9:31; Pro.23:17 & 28:14.

⁵² The biblical beginning point for those who have or know it is the moral Law of God; for those without it, the starting point is God as the righteous Creator of and Sovereign over heaven and earth. See the sermons in Acts and Romans 1 & 2 as examples. Though implied in many places, "love," "beloved" or the verb "love" in any form is found only once in the entire book of Acts (15:25).

specious assurance is born that is very difficult to dislodge because based on only one partially and prematurely presented divine attribute.)

4) Thus the righteousness which God requires is of primary importance for a sinner. This righteousness is not a mere pardon from sin. God is perfectly righteous⁵³ and has revealed his righteousness in his law. This law, as a reflection of his own character, is “good and just and holy.”⁵⁴ And it is only a person with a perfect, permanent righteousness who can and will love God with all the heart, soul, strength and mind and one’s neighbor as oneself.⁵⁵ Whatever other divine or human laws a sinner may think he has kept, even a weak understanding of this divine requirement and standard of righteousness will, when understood, assuredly break the back of human confidence in self and expose false assurance.

5) Through the law comes the knowledge of sin,⁵⁶ and in this way the Holy Spirit works conviction and repentance in the heart of a sinner.⁵⁷ Repentance means that the sinner sees himself as utterly unable to compensate God for past sins, unable to stop sinning in the present or future, and that even one sin deprives him of the perfection God’s law requires. Such knowledge, pressed upon the conscience by the Spirit, can *convict* but never *enable* an unconverted sinner to be righteous or to do what is acceptable to God. Grieved at his state before God, the way is then opened to point to a solution: to Christ and his perfect righteousness.

6) When Christ is seen to be the *goal* or *end* of the law⁵⁸ for righteousness for all who believe, the regenerated sinner is enabled by the Spirit to understand that it is only by faith that he gains access to Christ’s righteousness. There is no other way to have it. This is the great doctrine of *justification by faith alone*,⁵⁹ which is the cliff, the objective fortress of a Christian’s assurance of salvation. In justification the sinner’s guilt and penalty for sin are imputed to Jesus Christ and God’s own perfect righteousness is imputed to the sinner. This is *the grand exchange*, beauty for ashes, the oil of gladness for mourning, a garment of praise for the spirit of despair.⁶⁰

7) Upon being justified, the believer simultaneously receives the status of an adopted child of God with all the rights to be an heir of God and joint heir of Jesus Christ,⁶¹ to whom God has promised indescribable glory. Adoption should be closely associated in the believer’s mind with his access to the Father and thus with the privilege of

⁵³ Ex.9:7; 2Ch.12:6; Ps.11:7; 129:4; 145:17; Lam.1:18.

⁵⁴ Rom.7:12.

⁵⁵ Matt.22:37-40.

⁵⁶ Rom.7:7.

⁵⁷ Acts 11:18.

⁵⁸ Rom.10:4. The Greek noun is *telos* and may be translated by either word.

⁵⁹ Rom.4:5; 5:1; Acts 13:39; 15:7-9.

⁶⁰ Isa.61:3.

⁶¹ Rom.8:14-17, 19, 21; Gal.3:26.

prayer and the glad duties of praise and thanksgiving.⁶² We will return to this doctrine of adoption below.

8) From the moment he is justified by faith and received into God's family, the believer has at his disposal all the means of grace and the gifts that Christ lived and died to purchase for him. Chief among them is the gift and seal of the Holy Spirit, who resides within each believer in an entirely new *degree* from his work in the saints during Old Testament history. These gifts include the finished revelation of God in the Old and New Testaments; continual access through Christ to God in prayer; the initiating and continuing sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper; the fellowship and love of other believers in the body of Christ, along with the care, nurture and discipline of membership in a local congregation; and the privilege of suffering for the sake of Christ in bearing witness in the world by life and word to the gospel as the only hope for the human race.⁶³

9) The Spirit takes the things of Christ, to whom the believer is now organically united, and through divine providence and all the means cited in the paragraph above, begins to teach and reshape the mind, heart and will into what Scripture promises will eventuate as the restored image of God in man, as it exists to perfection in our Lord Jesus Christ.⁶⁴

10) By *position* the justified believer is holy because he is in Christ⁶⁵ and possessed by the Holy Spirit. In Christ he is a new creature, now an heir instead of a slave.⁶⁶ The old has gone and the new has come.⁶⁷ What this means is that Christ has ended sin's *dominion* over the believer.

11) However, the believer is far from being holy as God is holy, which he is commanded to be.⁶⁸ In this life he will never be utterly rid of sin. In fact, all that Christ has done, even with the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit to apply Christ's work to the soul, commences a fierce and life-long war of the Spirit-indwelt believer against his and God's enemies: sin in all its forms; the world which lies in the arms of the evil one;⁶⁹ the evil one himself; and worst all the flesh,⁷⁰ which the apostle calls *the law of indwelling sin*.⁷¹ This latter is the worst enemy because, regardless of the degree of sanctifying grace poured out upon him, sin resides within every believer, whereas the world and the devil are outside him.

⁶² Rom.8:26 in context. In Galatians 3, the law as a slave-attendant leads us to Christ, who is our sole access to the Father (Jn.14:6).

⁶³ Phil.1:29; 2Tim.3:12.

⁶⁴ Col.1:15; Rom.8:28-30; 1Jn.3:2.

⁶⁵ Rom.6:11; 8:1-2; 12:5; 16:7; 1Cor.1:2, 30; 3:1 and many, many more references.

⁶⁶ Matt.17:24-27; John 8:34; Rom.6:16-18.

⁶⁷ 2Cor.5:17.

⁶⁸ Lev.11:44-45; 1Pet.1:16.

⁶⁹ 1Jn.5:19.

⁷⁰ Gal.5:17.

⁷¹ Rom.7:17, 21.

12) It is precisely this war that can so wound the true believer's conscience that at times he will think he cannot be a Christian. He may be cast down into a pit of depression and fears, as the Psalms bear witness.⁷² He finds prayer almost impossible and the thought of God, rather than being a comfort, is terrifying and grievous. On the other hand, it may so happen that none of these aspects of falling into sin bother the conscience, and yet spiritual exercises cease, are diminished or become rote and without benefit to the soul until conviction of sin returns with grief and hatred of it as primarily against the Lord Jesus Christ and his work. At last the soul, broken and sad, returns to the only one who can help, the very Savior and Lord who was sinned against.

13) Mortification of sin⁷³ is to be the believer's chief negative practice in his warfare against indwelling sin. Mortification is enabled by the Holy Spirit, even though the believer is vigorously active in the process. He is far from being passive or simply trusting that mortification will occur if he rests sufficiently well in Christ.⁷⁴ Here is one true test of a faith that works, as the apostle James emphasizes that a living faith must do.⁷⁵

14) As in all vigorous, profitable and progressive sanctification, the exercise of love for God and neighbor is of paramount importance. Love will be wounded and languish before other effects are felt when the Christian's enemies are in the least successful against him.

15) But the crowning position of strength and assurance for a justified believer, the fortress of utmost protection, is not only the firm foundational truth that the Holy Spirit resides within him or that he is now a son with full rights of jointly inheriting all that the Father has promised Christ, or even that all the means of grace and necessary gifts are his. Rather it is the moment when he begins to realize, understand and enjoy the fact that he is no longer considered a bondservant in the eyes of his Master Jesus Christ, but is now his *friend*. And this comfort comes with mighty confirmation when the believer learns that it is the Lord himself who calls him *friend*.

FRIENDSHIP WITH GOD

We have arrived at the heart of our subject. This friendship with Christ, of the sort that Jesus intended and purchased for every believer,⁷⁶ is, like all Christ's other

⁷² E.g. Psalms 42 & 88.

⁷³ Rom.8:13; Col.4:5.

⁷⁴ Such as is held by the Keswick idea of sanctification, of which here is one definition: "From the beginning until the very present (the Keswick Movement) has taught that a life of faith and victory, of peace and rest, are the rightful heritage of every child of God, and that he may step into it ... 'not by long prayers and laborious effort, but by a deliberate and decisive act of faith.' It teaches that 'the normal experience of the child of God should be one of victory instead of constant defeat, one of liberty instead of grinding bondage, one of 'perfect peace' instead of restless worry.' *Five Views on Sanctification*, Melvin E. Dieter, Anthony A. Hoekema, Stanley M. Horton, J. Robertson McQuilkin, John F. Walvoord, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1987), p. 153-154.

⁷⁵ Jam.2:14-26.

⁷⁶ John 15:15-16.

benefits, apprehended by faith in God's word. It is maintained by the heart's certainty of the love of the Father that was bought for the elect and demonstrated through the life and work of Jesus and conveyed to the soul by the Holy Spirit. The totality of the godhead with all God's infinite glory is indeed the believer's most intimate companion. This friendship with God is man's highest good and greatest motive to obedience. It is common to understand and even *know* from his word that God loves his own, but to be convinced that the God of the universe, the Creator and Sustainer of all galaxies and microorganisms, angels and demons, is my Friend is another level of experiencing the power of the gospel. For now abide faith, hope and love⁷⁷ – each a vital work of the Spirit within the soul; but when at death or at the return of Christ faith has been made sight and hope's goal has been reached, only love – this friendship with God - will persevere into and throughout eternity. Then will the first and great commandment and the second which is like it be flawlessly kept by every believer.⁷⁸

At this point an objection could be raised: as an adopted and dear child⁷⁹ who has the right to inherit all, is not this a higher station than that of friend? In reply we remember that sons may not always act like sons nor get along with their fathers. They can take for granted being a son with all its privileges. Upon occasion and sometimes for a lamentably long time, there may seem to exist no love at all between father and child. A father may give his son a gift but the son may think more highly of the gift than the giver or value the giver only because of the gift. This is precisely the case with all unconverted persons in regard to God and his daily provision for them, whereas a true friendship is not based on nor maintained by gifts. The fires of genuine friendship must be – will wish and strive to be – continually guarded and stoked lest they grow cold.⁸⁰

Another query of such a high view of friendship might be: is not the church called the bride of Christ?⁸¹ And is this not a much higher status and privilege than being a "friend?" True indeed, but at the present time this designation of the church as bride is an espousal, an engagement to be consummated at our great heavenly Groom's return when the bride will no longer have spot or wrinkle or any such thing⁸² remaining to mar the perfection that must characterize the church if she is to be accepted by the Son and spend eternity with him.⁸³

The enjoyable sense of this great privilege of being the friend of God is maintained and kept fresh only by continual communion with the triune God. And the vitality of this communion and friendship will determine the level of protection against the

⁷⁷ 1Cor.13:13.

⁷⁸ See note #55 above.

⁷⁹ Eph.5:1 "*...as God's dear children.*"

⁸⁰ Matt.24:12 "*Because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold.*"

⁸¹ Isa.62:5; John 3:22; Rev.21:2, 9.

⁸² Eph.5:27.

⁸³ For this reason the translation "friend" in the Song of Song (occurring nine times) for the shepherdess when addressed by her beloved is accurate and appropriate. See footnotes #93 & 94 below.

onslaughts of all our enemies, particularly indwelling sin, and therefore provide the greatest subjective assurance to us of whose we are and whom we serve.⁸⁴

But we still might ask, is this friendship of which we speak really this important? And why should it have such a high value in our understanding of what it means to be an assured Christian?

1)An examination of the biblical record reveals that the term “friend” in relation to God is a rare expression, especially when connected with an individual’s name. Only one person in all Old Testament history is called the friend of God. Undoubtedly others were his friend; so God, we surely believe, thought of them and perhaps they of him; but Abraham alone is given that description of honor and given it three times, though never during his lifetime.⁸⁵

Why Abraham? James implies that this title was the fruit of Abraham’s demonstration of justifying faith in offering up Isaac. We recall that incident began with God’s poignant words, “Take now your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love...”⁸⁶ Ishmael had been painfully expelled with his mother, and now the patriarch would be tested⁸⁷ as to whether his Isaac was an idol or, much more importantly, the son through whose seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed according to God’s promise.⁸⁸ It was at the climactic moment, with the knife about to be plunged into the lad’s heart, that Abraham heard the double utterance of his name – something rare and urgent in Scripture.⁸⁹ The test was ended. By faith Abraham had triumphed and demonstrated more than Job who said, “Though he slay me, yet will I trust him.”⁹⁰ Abraham’s actions declared in effect, “Though I slay my beloved, only son, yet I trust God to raise him from the dead in order to fulfill his promise.”⁹¹

2)We observe further about the importance of this term that the Hebrew word usually translated “friend” primarily means “neighbor,” or someone in close proximity. A person living close by may or may not be a friend and might even be an enemy; but true friends, whether geographically close or not, are always near one another at heart.⁹² The context determines how it should be translated.

⁸⁴ Acts 27:23.

⁸⁵ 2Chr.20:7; Isa.41:8 and Jam.2:23.

⁸⁶ Gen.22:2.

⁸⁷ Gen.22:1.

⁸⁸ Gen.12:3 & 21:12.

⁸⁹ In *blessing*: Gen.22:11 Abraham; Gen.46:2 Jacob; Ex.3:4 Moses; 1Sam.3:10 Samuel; Luke10:41 Martha; Luke 22:31 Simon; Acts 9:4; 22:7 & 26:14 Saul. In *anguish*: 2Sam.19:4 Absalom; Ps.22:1 quoted at Mt.27:46 and Mark15:34 My God; Mt.7:22 & 25:11 Lord; and Mat.23:37 & Luke 13:34 Jerusalem.

⁹⁰ Job 13:15.

⁹¹ Compare Gen.22:5 (particularly clear in the NKJV & NIV) with Hebrews 11:17-19.

⁹² Pro.27:10 offers a relevant comment: *Do not forsake your friend and your father's friend, and do not go to your brother's house in the day of your calamity. Better is a neighbor who is near than a brother who is far away.* (ESV)

It is striking that the more literal (and preferable) translation of this word in the Song of Songs, where it occurs nine times,⁹³ is “friend”.⁹⁴ This is no doubt picking up the same theme where the word occurs in the plural at Psalm 45:14,⁹⁵ a great messianic Psalm that provides the outline of what is fleshed out in the Song. This term is only used in the Song by the lover, the husband, who also calls his love “sister” and “spouse” to further fill out the picture of his great filial and marital affection for this one whom he loves. The older understanding of the Song sees these rustic scenes as intended to go beyond the love of a man and woman, husband and wife, to that of God’s love for and intimate communion with his people, the love of Christ for the church. And how well this fits the movement of the Song (and Psalm 45 before it) between the singular one of his affection and other “friends,” who also share in his all-consuming love.⁹⁶

3) We pause to ask the important question: who is God’s closest friend? Unless he were to become what he can never be, an idolater, he himself must be his own best friend. The members of the godhead are united in their infinite, eternal and unchangeable love for one another. Theirs is an ineffable intimacy into which every believer is going to be brought by God’s grace.⁹⁷ Without doubt Christ’s best friend while on earth was his heavenly Father, who alone fully understood him, as the Gospels clearly record, and with whom he maintained continual communion until the three dread hours of darkness at Calvary.

4) The importance of this word is heightened when we note that *friend* is a not a frequent term in Scripture.⁹⁸ What a wonderful designation, then, for Hushai to be called the king’s friend!⁹⁹ What a contrast in the words: “If you let this man go you are not Caesar’s friend.”¹⁰⁰ And we recall what it took for Pilate and Herod, former enemies, to become friends – a new common enemy!¹⁰¹

5) The movement from alienated sinner to friend of God is a process of grace and comprehension, as we have noted above at length in describing the work of God in saving sinners – a redemption accomplished and applied.¹⁰² The commencement of that process was a significant transition for even the closest of Jesus’ earthly

⁹³ Song 1:9, 15; 2:2, 10, 13; 4:1,7; 5:2; and 6:4.

⁹⁴ So rendered in the widely used Spanish translation: Reina-Valera, 1960.

⁹⁵ There is a different word used in 45:7 but also translated “companions” or “fellows” by most English versions. The LXX, both in the Song and Ps. 45:14, translates the Hebrew with “πλησιον” or “neighbor”, “one who is close”.

⁹⁶ Indeed, how fitting that there be one whole book devoted to displaying the love of God and of the response of the one (church) and the many (Jews and Gentiles) to his love as it should be, in its ups and downs in this life and perfection in the next.

⁹⁷ The theme of our Lord’s prayer in John 17 – to know God and Jesus Christ in the fullest sense of the word “know”. Indeed, *this* is eternal life (v.3)!

⁹⁸ Confusing is the almost universal translation of εταυρε as “friend” in the three places it occurs in the NT (Mt.20:13; 22:12 & 26:50). The word means “comrade” or a “companion” in arms or other related activity. Its use in each case in Matthew is ironic.

⁹⁹ 2Sam.15:37; 16:16-17; & 1Ch.27:33.

¹⁰⁰ John 18:12.

¹⁰¹ Luke 23:12.

¹⁰² See John Murray’s outstanding little volume with this title.

companions and followers. None of the eleven understood Jesus' mission until after his resurrection, and yet it was to them that our Lord spoke those wonderful words that give us the clearest and most compelling basis for seeing this name of "friend" as describing the highest point of our subjective grounds for assurance.

Having washed his disciples' feet, including those of the one who would betray him, the Lord Jesus resumed his place at the Passover table and asked them if they understood what he had done. They, of course, had *seen* what he did. Peter had protested at first, because it was so beneath his Master to be doing slave labor. But our Lord knew that this lesson was so significant that words could not fully convey it. A radical demonstration was needed for them to take to heart Christ's injunction for them to care for one another as he had done for them. After all, the way he said that everyone would know they were his disciples would be by the demonstration of their love for one another.¹⁰³

But in furthering John's opening words in this upper room gathering and as part of showing them the full extent of his love for his own,¹⁰⁴ Jesus gave the eleven the final parable of a vine in Scripture.¹⁰⁵ The apostles' spiritual existence and prosperity would be tied entirely to their being the branches of the vine that was Christ himself; without their organic connection to him, they could do nothing.¹⁰⁶ Abiding in the vine was to abide in his love, just as he had done by abiding in the Father's love throughout his entire human life.

Then Jesus repeated from the end of John thirteen his new commandment – not new in kind but in degree: that they were to love one another *as he had loved them*.¹⁰⁷ His sacrificial love for them was the new degree. It was soon to bring the arresting thong, then spears, nails, darkness, divine desertion to infinite wrath, eternal and then physical death. In this way Christ would illustrate the highest degree of love possible for anyone to perform: laying down one's life for another.¹⁰⁸ And it was precisely then that he told them they were his *friends* if they kept his commandments. There was the word – "friends"-- Abraham's unique title put upon each of the eleven by their Lord and, as they represented future saints, on every blood-bought believer.

Jesus went on to explain: he was no longer calling them *bondservants*.¹⁰⁹ Earlier he had told them that a bondservant was not better than his master.¹¹⁰ This was a vast understatement, particularly in the Roman world. A bondservant was entirely under and subject to the life and death decisions of his master. He had only the existence his master permitted him. But it was Jesus, the Savior, who told his

¹⁰³ John 13:35.

¹⁰⁴ John 13:1.

¹⁰⁵ For others outside the NT see Ps.80:8f.; Is.5:2f.; Eze.15; 17:6f.

¹⁰⁶ John 15:5.

¹⁰⁷ John 13:34 & 15:12.

¹⁰⁸ John 15:13.

¹⁰⁹ From δούλος, which means "bondslave", not from διακονος which means "minister" or "servant".

¹¹⁰ John 13:16.

disciples that he had been among them as one who serves!¹¹¹ And now, he, their master, was about to show them the full extent of his love at Calvary. And he chose *this* moment to tell them that he no longer would call them bondservants but friends.

Why?

Because, he explained, the bondservant does not know what his master is doing. Slaves don't know their master's purpose. The slave does only what he is told for that moment; he is not privy to the bigger picture. But Christ had told his disciples "all that I have heard from my Father."¹¹² Thus informed they would be fully equipped to carry out Christ's continuing mission, after his humiliation was over, in discipling the world. How enormously should this disclosure of Christ's heart have added to their assurance of his love and care for them!

So not only were they the adopted sons of God by faith in Christ¹¹³ and thereby entitled to all the benefits of that exalted position; but, unlike the position in which we first see either of the sons in the parable of the prodigal, the disciples were the Father's friends and friends of his Son and would soon be filled with the Spirit as a token of their full acceptance into the fellowship of the godhead. What manner of love is this, that such a God should treat guilty, vile and helpless sinners like them, like us! as his friends!

FRIENDSHIP AND ASSURANCE

Being the friend of God in Christ and by the Spirit is not something that the believer adds to his sanctification but is part and parcel of his being a new creature in Christ. However, living in the reality of this day-by-day and hour-by-hour requires work on our part. It is precisely here that we find the close connection between communion with our Friend and the *degree* of assurance that this subjective perception of our relationship with Christ is intended to provide.

Friendships have rules, either stated or implied. As those are kept and nurtured, the friendship flourishes; when they are violated or omitted, it will suffer. The Lord told the eleven, "You are my friends if you do what I command you."¹¹⁴ The mere possession of the knowledge of the revelation of the Father to the Son about the purpose and future of his mission was insufficient to secure this friendship or to maintain it. They then and we now must keep his commandments. Otherwise whatever assurance we think we have is on unstable ground – including the objective grounds in the work of Christ. The objective is never without the subjective *in some form or degree*. Clearly, the objective grounds are more important than the subjective, but Jesus in this discourse also promised his peace,¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Luke 22:27.

¹¹² John 15:15.

¹¹³ John 1:12.

¹¹⁴ John 15:14.

¹¹⁵ John 14:27.

which was not meant to be a cessation of hostilities against the believer for his faith, but rather the assurance that when things might seem to be at their worst, the love and protection driving faith's engine could actually be functioning optimally. Faith takes hold of objective truth and trusts God for an unseen sanctifying purpose when nothing else may be clear. This was Job's position when he spoke the words quoted earlier;¹¹⁶ and it was certainly Abraham's position when he was poised to slay Isaac.

No, there must be not only a profession of love for the law of God as finally and fully performed by Jesus Christ, but a striving to obey it out of the sheer desire to gratefully do what God in his infinite kindness has given us to know of his will. We are not left to imagine what it means to be a son with all rights of inheritance nor what it means to be in the closest possible relation with the Father and his Son as their friend. This biblical truth must be kept in the forefront of our minds and revived at the time of each morning and evening sacrifice.¹¹⁷ The fire upon this altar must never be extinguished.¹¹⁸ This is the path to an assurance that brings holiness and humility.

OBSTACLES TO FRIENDSHIP WITH THE FATHER AND THE SON BY THE SPIRIT

Anything and everything can be an obstacle to this friendship. All sinful thoughts, words, deeds and things clearly are obstacles, but so may be a host of good things, even religious and devotional duties.¹¹⁹ How is this so? Formalists and hypocrites¹²⁰ are masters of "religious duties," but they are not God's friends. For the believer whose life is hid with Christ in God and for whom to live is Christ and to die is gain,¹²¹ doing anything, let alone worship or ministry, half-heartedly or without a strong desire to please to God, is something that will inevitably grieve the Holy Spirit by whom the believer is sealed to the day of glorification,¹²² and by definition dull and damage this friendship or even seem to break it off. As noted above, we may feel deserted and wholly without grace. Since all the benefits of Christ come to us by means of the Holy Spirit, if he is grieved, there is certain to be cloud covering our pleasure in the company of the Father and the Son.

First John 1:1-2:11 describes to perfection the walk of a believer and his heavenly Friend and what can and does affect this walk. Here is a full new covenant prescription for meditation and for continual communion with the Father and the Son. John tells us that it requires a repentance that is exercised as we walk. It comes from a deep and well-established understanding of how sinful sin is because first and foremost against God himself. Sin therefore is an attack on the believer's relationship with God and the sense of friendship and comfort in God's presence.

¹¹⁶ See footnote #90.

¹¹⁷ See Ex.29:38-46 on the morning and evening sacrifices and their attendant promised blessings.

¹¹⁸ Lev.6:13.

¹¹⁹ See item C), 11) & 12) above.

¹²⁰ *Formalists* go through the motions of religious duties and activities, believing the mere performance is meritorious with God, whereas *hypocrites* know their acts are hollow but pretend they are genuine, or they imagine what they do is acceptable with God just because by doing it they are better than others.

¹²¹ Col.3:3 and Phil.1:21.

¹²² Eph.4:30.

James pointedly tells us that anyone who even *wishes* to be a friend of the world *is* the enemy of God. And, O, how earthbound, how earthly minded we naturally are! Such a condition puts out of the mind the privileges and duties of our adoption and the inheritance that our God and best Friend has won for us and at what cost! It is spiritual adultery and therefore James describes it as such.¹²³

Even Bible reading and prayer, public worship or other ministry can be so routine and lifeless that we are left at the end the same or worse than when we started. The very means designed to revive intimacy with God can drive us farther from him and we turn, unfilled, from the oracles and presence of God himself to something else, something always inferior and inevitably idolatrous.¹²⁴

The very worst fruit of such times may be that our “assurance” is unaffected. We have no doubt that we are Christians, and perhaps made all the more smug as we chalk up another passage read, prayers sent up for others or any number of “good” deeds done. Without uttering the words or letting the thought formulate in our minds, we may turn back, dreadfully unfilled, to perishing pursuits but with the sense that God is in our debt because we have “done our duty.” Truly at such times we are like a beast before God¹²⁵ - which is an insult to the lower creation because it follows God-appointed instincts, whereas we have trafficked with the pearls of heaven and may be treading on them with our own feet.

O how precious is a conscience so stirred by the holy law of God, as exhibited to perfection in our spotless Lord Jesus Christ, that the exceeding sinfulness of our every sin¹²⁶ grieves and gives us such hatred of our sin that we mourn over it and are enabled to flee to the cross where repentance and faith are renewed by the Spirit. He urges us to come because it was precisely for sinners such as us that Christ, the mighty Maker, became man and died. Infinite grace reestablishes a broken and contrite heart that God never despises,¹²⁷ and, reversing directions, we move again back down to the heavenly comfort of poverty of spirit and mourning over our sins¹²⁸ for what they did to our Friend and to our friendship with him. It is then that we may be severely shaken in our assurance of salvation, because inevitably we see ourselves as so utterly undeserving of his love as to be cast off but for the reality that God’s promises would thereby be broken; and this, we know and by grace are convinced, is impossible.

And how important prayer is in all this! Since Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us,¹²⁹ all the Mosaic administration involving blood and fire has been

¹²³ Jam. 4:4.

¹²⁴ This may even be perilously close to that for which God calls Jerusalem to account, for example, in Isaiah 58 or for related unconfessed or even unacknowledged sins.

¹²⁵ Ps.73:22.

¹²⁶ Rom.7:13.

¹²⁷ Ps.34:18; 51:17.

¹²⁸ Mat.5:3-4.

¹²⁹ 1Cor.5:7.

fulfilled in the antitype. Our prayers may and should continually arise as incense¹³⁰ from a fire of zeal for God's holy pleasure and presence within us. And the evidence that this is a genuine assurance is a greater love of holiness and humility before God and man.

AN ILLUSTRATION

Three familiar moments from the Gospels show us something indeed wonderful about this friendship of which we speak.

Bethany was a place of great comfort to Christ because of Martha's house and her physical ministry to him and his disciples. But when we first meet her and her sister, we read that Martha was distracting herself¹³¹ with her serving – good and even necessary as it was. After all, even the greatest servants of God need to eat! But her sister Mary sat at Jesus' feet, immobile, listening. Martha interrupted his words to the group around him to remind our Lord of a woman's responsibilities in the home. Was it no concern to him that while she was serving, her sister merely sat and listened? Jesus called her name twice in utmost kindness and gentleness, "Martha, Martha."¹³² She must slow down; now she too must listen. He analyzes her distress about so many things. In one of his words, he uses a form that appears only here in all Greek literature; we might translate it "highly disturbed" – and surely disproportionately so. "One thing is needed," he told her. "Mary has chosen the good portion that will not be taken from her." And with those words of gentle rebuke and a full exoneration of Mary, the scene ends.¹³³

When we meet these two women a second time they are in great distress and anguish,¹³⁴ mourning the absence of their friend Jesus, who loved them,¹³⁵ and who, if present, could have prevented their brother's death. But their faith in him is unshaken as they reveal in what they both say to him when he arrives. Neither they nor the disciples, and certainly not the many assembled Jews who had come to mourn Lazarus' death with them, had any awareness of the glory of God that was to be shown through this death – a glory that could not have been made so starkly clear otherwise. Both women confessed their faith in Jesus. He and Mary wept. Martha feared for the smell when he ordered the stone to be removed from the tomb. Through it all their friendship was tested severely but strengthened.

The last time we see these friends together was at the meal Martha prepared in celebration of Lazarus' return to life and Jesus' raising him from the tomb.¹³⁶ Martha is still serving – hospitality was clearly her gift, but in testimony of the quiet that had no doubt come to her understanding, we read of no protest from her when

¹³⁰ Ps.141:2 "Let my prayer be set before you as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice." On this subject see the magnificent book by the American puritan Thomas Cobbett, *Gospel Incense*.

¹³¹ The verb occurs only here in the NT but is thirteen times used in the LXX of Ecclesiastes.

¹³² See footnote #89 above.

¹³³ Luke 10:38-42.

¹³⁴ See John 11.

¹³⁵ Note particularly John 11:3, 5 & 11.

¹³⁶ John 12:1-11.

her sister entered the banquet room that was by then filled with joyous guests and the aroma of no doubt hours of preparation and cooking for this festive occasion.

Mary did not speak but opened her jar of enormously expensive, imported and perfumed ointment and began to pour it out on Jesus' feet. And in unabashed immodesty, she let down her hair to wipe those blessed feet, taking his dirt upon her head. What of the meal, Mary? What of the guests? What of the conversations with Jesus and enormous happiness? What of your clothes? Why are you humiliating yourself?

Of all those living at that time Mary alone, sister of Lazarus and Martha, seems to have understood that Jesus indeed *did* have to die as he had repeatedly told his incredulous and fearful disciples. And so she would, at that moment, unhesitatingly overwhelm the ambiance of the room, the anticipation of food, the atmosphere of joy, with the odor of death as she anointed the body of her Friend in preparation for his burial. How inexpressibly magnificent! And within a week, at Calvary, Jesus, upon his head, would take the dirt of all Mary's sins and wipe them clean with his own blood-soaked body. Theirs was an indissoluble bond, a holy and assured friendship, a picture of the Song realized, the privilege of every Christian.

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As a final observation we note the striking fact that, though friends in the closest relationship to their God and Lord, the apostles Paul, James, Peter and Jude all voluntarily called themselves *bondservants of Jesus Christ* in their self-identification to the individuals and churches to whom they wrote.¹³⁷

With what wisdom, then, does our confession link holiness and humility as chief fruits of the subjective awareness of the Spirit's witness to our adoption and the assurance this gives the believer.

The attribute of God farthest from our natural state is undoubtedly his resplendent holiness. And though as we grow in grace our sins must appear to us worse and worse in the light of God's kindness and love, nevertheless our longing and striving by the Spirit to mortify sin and to live the life of a friend of the Lord Jesus in all our places and relations will prove to be marks of the most assuring and reassuring truth that we are our beloved's and he is ours.¹³⁸

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¹³⁷ Rom.1:1; Jam.1:1; 1Pe.1:1; Jude 1.

¹³⁸ In the Song of Songs, the "friend" first says, "*My beloved is mine and I am his*" (2:16), but as she grows in her understanding, twice more similar clauses appear (6:3 & 7:10) but with the order reversed.