

It was said long ago that "*threatened folks live long.*"¹ This was written in reference to the fact that potential martyrs often don't ever die in martyrdom. What about those who are threatened in spirit? What about those who, professing Christ, still wonder if Jesus is for them or against them? Will they be welcomed to the right or banished on the left (Matt. 25)? There is a kind of threatening that people experience that is spiritual. I have called it "dark nights of the soul" and I have in mind that plaguing question that asks things like: Has God really forgiven me? Does God really love me? Am I really a child of God? How can I be forgiven when I have sinned so gravely? Have I really trusted Christ in faith, or is my trust in my faith and not in Christ? Am I going to heaven or hell?² This list could go on and on. It is the question of Assurance of Faith, or as the Savoy and Westminster Confession title it, both in Chapter 18 of their respective confessions, "Of the Assurance of Grace and Salvation."

The issue in view here is one that is peculiar to the Reformed Faith. Those who possess assurance have a conviction that they are saved by God's grace through the active and passive obedience of Christ applied unto them by the Holy Spirit. It is distinctly those in the Reformed or Calvinistic traditions of Protestantism who claim to have assurance. This may be for several reasons, one of which being the doctrine of Perseverance of the Saints which is part of the historically Reformed creedal position, but there is another reason. Simply put, other faith traditions that fall under the over-arching umbrella of Protestantism or "Christianity" do not believe that assurance is possible.

Most Protestant groups who do not embrace the Calvinistic tradition believe that it is possible for a believer to "fall from grace," and cease to be a believer. How can they speak of assurance of faith

¹ *Anglorum Speculum, or the Worthies of England, in Church and State.*, By G. S. (London: Printed for Thomas Passinger at the three Bibles on London-Bridge, William Thakary at the Angel in Duck-lane, and John Wright at the Crown on Ludgate-Hill, 1684), p. 4.

² "Assurance is not of the essence of a Christian. It is required to the *bene esse*, to the well-being, to the comfortable and joyful being of a Christian; but it is not required to the *esse*, to the being of a Christian. A man may be a true believer, and yet would give all the world, were it in his power, to know that he is a believer. To have grace, and to be sure that we have grace, is glory upon the throne, it is heaven on this side of heaven." *Heaven on Earth. Or A Serious Discourse touching a Well-grounded Assurance*, Thomas Brooks. In *The Works of Thomas Brooks*, Vol. 2:317. (Carlisle, PA, Banner of Truth Trust, 1980).

when faith is something that might be lost next week? It is true that there is such a thing as historical or temporary faith and the Reformed tradition has consistently distinguished this from saving faith. We see this in the Savoy in several places, but certainly, in our context (chapter 18), we find it in the opening words of the first paragraph, "Although temporary believers, and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes, and carnal presumptions of being in the favour of God, and state of salvation, which hope of theirs shall perish; yet..."³ There is a distinction made between temporary and saving faith early on in the Savoy, but it is not the purpose of this paper to unpack that. What is in view here is that this question of possessing assurance of faith, and the truth that some true believers wait long and genuinely struggle to obtain this assurance is a discussion that is essentially limited to the Calvinistic/Reformed tradition.

We need to begin then by asserting that assurance of faith is possible.⁴ Many within Protestantism deny this and the entire Roman Catholic tradition has consistently taught that assurance of faith is outside of the normal experience of a Christian. In Roman Catholicism, assurance of faith is only possible for those who are granted a special revelation from God. We need to maintain that there is a false assurance of salvation that the unregenerate sometimes have. In the end they will be disappointed: Prov. 8:13, 14; Micah 3:11 (8-12). There is also a true assurance that those savingly believing into Christ may have and they will not be disappointed. We might say that, in an accurate way, that they have a personal interest in Christ. However, we need to also say that not all those who have savingly believed into Christ have assurance. The Savoy speaks of "an infallible assurance of faith founded on the blood and righteousness of Christ..." John Owen

³ *A Declaration of the Faith and Order Owned and practiced in the Congregational Churches in England; Agreed upon and consented unto By their Elders and Messengers in Their Meeting at the Savoy, Octob. 12. 1658.* (London: Printed for D. L. and are to be sold in Paul's Church-yard, Fleet Street and Westminster-Hall, 1659), XVIII.1.

⁴ "The proper and natural fruits of Assurance:

1. An undervaluing of all things here below, Psal. 16.6,7. It is spoken of Christ who lived on the alms of his servants.
2. This will comfort us under all afflictions, Psal. 46.4.
3. Our love will be the more abundant to God, Cant.6.3.
4. It will make a man to prepare for glory, 1 John 3. 3.
5. One will desire daily to be dissolved that he may be with Christ.

A Systeme or Body of Divinity: Consisting of Ten Books...., Edward Leigh. (London: Printed by A. M. for William Lee at the Sign of the Turks-head in Fleet-street over against Fetter-lane, 1654, p.526

speaks of the same faith saying, "The sum hereof is, that what they cannot do themselves, what is wanting that they may be saved, be it more or less, shall one way or other be made up by Christ..."⁵ It is faith that is grounded in the work of Christ, on our behalf, by which He has saved a people unto Himself. Christ is the ground of all assurance. There is no assurance outside of Christ that is true assurance of faith.

The Savoy differs somewhat from the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) especially in the second paragraph of chapter 18. However, the third and fourth paragraphs are essentially word for word with the WCF. It is here where both the Savoy and WCF shift from Calvin, Knox and the early Reformers in saying that "infallible assurance does not so belong to the essence of saving faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be a partaker of it." The early Reformers, probably in reaction to Roman Catholicism, generally maintained that assurance was of the essence of saving faith. The leaders of the Reformed movement (Who are often called the Second Generation Reformers) 75-100 years after the early leaders did not see as close a link between assurance and saving faith.

Calvin on Assurance

This distinction between the early Reformers and later Reformers is mixed. Edward Leigh, just noted above in footnote 4, was a later Reformer, but had a position very similar to Calvin on assurance.⁶ It was not uniform, but the majority of the Puritans sided with the WCF and Savoy by not necessarily linking assurance and saving faith.

Calvin says, "Briefly, he alone is truly a believer who, convinced by a firm conviction that God is a kindly and well-disposed Father toward him, promises himself all things on the basis of his generosity; who, relying upon the promises of divine benevolence toward him, lays hold on an undoubted expectation of salvation. As the apostle points out in these words: "If we hold our confidence and glorying in hope, firm even to the end" [Heb. 3: 7]. Thus, he considers that no one

⁵ *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith through the Imputation of the Righteousness of Christ, Explained, Confirmed, & Vindicated*, by John Owen. (London: Printed for R. Boulter, at the Turks-head over against the Royal-Exchange in Corn-hill, 1677), p. 10.

⁶ "The Remonstrants hold, 1. That none truly regenerate can in this life be certain of his salvation without a special revelation. 2. That doubting of our salvation is laudable and profitable. The Scripture teacheth: 1. That all the faithful may and ought to be certain of their salvation, and without a peculiar Revelation, 1 John 2.5 Rom. 8.16, 17. 2. That doubting is contrary to faith, and pernicious to man, Luke 24.18, Jam. 1.6,7,8. *Body of Divinity*, Leigh, p. 525.

hopes well in the Lord except him who confidently glories in the inheritance of the Heavenly Kingdom. No man is a believer, I say, except him who, leaning upon the assurance of his salvation, confidently triumphs over the devil and death; as we are taught from that masterly summation of Paul: I have confessed that "neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come...can separate us from the love of God which embraces us in Christ Jesus" [Rom 8:39-39]. Thus, in the same manner, the apostle does not consider the eyes of our minds well illumined, except as we discern what the hope of eternal inheritance is to which we have been called [Eph. 1:18]⁷. And everywhere he so teaches as to intimate that we cannot otherwise well comprehend the goodness of God unless we gather from it the fruit of great assurance."⁸

⁷ Consider Puritan Paul Bayne, who we will quote on assurance shortly, on Ephesians 1:18, "This must make us still follow God, and use all meanes to be further inlightened: Were our eyes sore, and the sight of them not perished, but deparaved onely or dimished, what would we not doe to get helpe: yea, we would abide strong smarting waters, but we would mend this defect in them; how much more should we seeke to amend all defects in the eyes of our understandings. Observe secondly from hence, that he doth pray that they might know their hope, the matter of their inheritance; that even true beleevers know not at first, in any measure, those hopes which are kept in heaven for them: Naturally we know nothing of the hope to come; When God doth now regenerate to these hopes, we doe know them in some measure, but nothing as we ought, and may come to know them, if we be not wanting to our selves: Even as earthly heires in their minority, through want of earthly wisdome, that know in generall that they have inheritances, & where they ly, but they do not particularly and exactly know the severall Lordships which belong to them, the worth of them, &c. yet the nearer they come to age, the more they winde out such particulars; so it is with us: We doe at first know things very confusedly, and the nearer we grow to our salvation, the more we come into the understanding of these things." *An Entire Commentary Vpon the VVhole Epistle of the Apostle Pavl to the Ephesians*, Paul Bayne. (London: Printed by M. F. for R. Milbourne, and I. Bartlet, 1643, p. 164.

The distinction is clear here. Calvin is speaking about the necessity of which Paul is speaking about (Eph. 1:18) "that ye may know what is the hope of his calling," and Bayne, a later Puritan is speaking about the hope that we will know this calling and the progressive nature in which it is obtained through our living faithfully, over time, unto Christ. Calvin seems to put the emphasis on Knowing and Bayne on hope in respect to our calling.

⁸ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), Vol. 1:562. Edited by John T. McNeill. Calvin goes on to say on the same page, "Yet, once again, we deny that, in whatever way they are afflicted, they fall away and depart from the certain assurance received from God's mercy." On page

Puritan Paul Bayne on Assurance: Ephesians 1:18

The distinction here is that Bayne is pointing to some ways that we may “know” ourselves called. Calvin puts forward that this knowing is of the essence of faith. Bayne says, “We may know ourselves called. First, if our hearts answer God; Thus *Paul, Acts 9. Lord what wilt thou I should doe. Acts 26. I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.* When God speaketh within us his grace, or calleth us to this or that, according to his effectuall purposes, our hearts echo-wise resound, *Thou art our God, Hosea 2. Speak Lord, thy Servant heareth.*

Secondly, it is seene by this, that it maketh us separate and stand out from the world. If a governour call out a servant to doe this or that, he is separated from all his fellow servants, and set apart for a businesse wherein they intermeddle not; so it is here; From what time God doth call us unto salvation, he doth set us apart from all others, to be as it were *the first fruits of his creatures, Iam. 1.18.* even from prophane persons, civill men, without religion, religious men in show, without power, Heretickes, Schismatickes, his calling doth make us come out from these, so that we cannot be of one heart with them, nor they with us.

Thirdly, by the spirit received; When God called *Saul*, he did not put into him another spirit, agreeing to the condition whereto he was called: and men called to places of dignitie, presently there is a spring of spirits in them, answering that estate; so God also, when he calleth to his Kingdome and glory, he doth give them a spirit which doth aspire and make them endeavour to that prise of this their high calling in Christ.

Lastly, by thankfulness to God in regard of this favour, that hee hath called us out of our naturall estate of misery, to such a hope in Christ.”⁹

Bayne here puts forward two of the three grounds which we traditionally say are helps to assurance. 1. A changed life. Has your life changed? If so, it is a help to assurance. 2. The testimony of the Holy Spirit witnessing to our spirit that we are a child of God. Bayne bases his argument on what is traditionally the third help to assurance, namely, 3. The promises of God, Philippians 1:6, “Confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.”

The point in all this is to show that the Savoy reflects a development in the thinking on the question of assurance from 1st

560 Calvin says, “From this we conclude that the knowledge of faith consists in assurance rather than in comprehension.”

⁹ Bayne, *Ephesians*, p. 167.

generation Reformers to 2nd generation Reformers. The Savoy leaves a place for those who struggle with assurance. It leaves a place for those who struggle to obtain it (18: 3) and for those who have had their assurance shaken (18: 4) The Savoy represents the thinking of the 2nd generation Reformers and even the experience of many of those who were 2nd generation Reformers themselves.

For example, Thomas Brooks in his work, *Heaven on Earth*, relates the following, "The best believer that breathes may have his Summer-day turned into a winter-night, his rejoicing into sighing, his singing into weeping, his Wedding Robes into mourning Weeds, his Wine into water, his sweet into bitter; his Manna, his Angels food into husks; his pleasant Grapes into the Grapes of *Sodom*' his fruitful *Canaan*, his delightful Paradise into a barren and unlovely Wilderness. Look as faith is often attended with unbelief, and sincerity with hypocrisie, and humility with vain-glory, so is Assurance with fears and doubts.

Blessed Hooker lived near thirty years in close communion with God, without any considerable withdrawals of God all that while; and yet upon his dying bed, he went away without any sense of Assurance, or discoveries of the smiles of God, to the wonder and deceiving of the expectation of many precious souls, and without doubt in judgement to wicked men." A marginal note next to this statement, and most certainly referring to the Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs, on Thomas Hooker says, "So did Master Burroughs of blessed memory go to Heaven in a cloud."¹⁰ So it is and it has been recorded many times that even those we deem eminent saints often struggle with having assurance of faith.¹¹

¹⁰ *Heaven on Earth, or A Serious Discourse Touching A Well-grounded Assurance of Believers Everlasting Happinesse and Blessednesse*, Thomas Brooks. (London: Printed by R. J. for John Hancock; and are sold at the first shop in Popes Head Alley in Bornhill, 1654), p. 61-62.

¹¹ Brooks references Burroughs as one who went "to heaven in a cloud," but consider what Burroughs himself writes about the settled nature of our estate before God, "Further, This may be thy comfort, though for outward things thou art mightily unsettled, yet for the great things of the soul and eternal estate, there thou art settled, thou hast a settled way, a constant way of fetching supplie, *Of his fullness we receive grace for grace*; thou hast there abundance of treasure to go to, and fetch all that thou standest in need of; and observe it, that now thy condition is more settled in the Covenant of Grace than it was in the Covenant of Works; in the Covenant of Works there God gave man a stock to trade with, but he put it in his own hand, so that he might trade, and get or lose; but now in the Covenant of Grace, God makes sure, the stock is kept in the hand of Christ, and we must go to him for supply continually, for Christ keeps the stock; perhaps we may trifle away somewhat in our trading, but God takes that care still, we shall never spend the

I would like to suggest three reasons why some struggle with assurance of faith. This list is not exhaustive, but rather general. The reasons I would like to examine regarding why assurance is lacking in some are: 1. Genuine Struggle concerning faith in Christ. 2. Struggle because of indwelling or habitual sin. 3. Struggle because you are unregenerate. I would like to examine these in reverse order and then draw some applications.

1. The Struggle Due to being an Almost Christian

The classic work on this topic is Matthew Mead's *Almost Christian Discovered; or the False Professor Tried and Cast*. It has been reprinted twice that I am aware of recently both times by Soli Deo Gloria. If you can secure a copy I suggest not putting it upon the shelf until you have read it.

Mead speaks of various kinds of faith and we have mentioned this earlier. "There is a faith that lies only in generals not in particulars: as there is a general and particular object of faith, so there is a general and particular faith. The general object of faith is the whole Scripture; the particular object of faith is Christ in the promise. Now many have a general faith to believe all the Scripture, and yet have no faith to make particular application of Jesus Christ to the promise."¹² Mead emphasizes the need of, "closing with Christ."¹³ The individual must come to the point of Repentance and Faith personally. It is not enough to have knowledge of the truth. The demons possess a creed more orthodox than we have, but lack the application of truth in their conduct. We must apply the truths concerning Christ and our fallen state personally.

stock: As a man when his son breaks, having squandred away his stock that he gave him before, afterwards he puts his stock into a friends hand, and, saith he, you shall keep the stock, and it shall not be at his dispose; so are we in a more settled condition, in respect of our eternal estate, than *Adam* was in innocencie: therefore let that comfort us in all our unsettled condition in the matters of the world." *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, Jeremiah Burroughs. (London: Printed by W. Bentley, for L. Sadler and R. Beaumont. 1651), p. 123.

¹² *The Almost Christian Discovered; or the False Professor Tried and Cast*, Matthew Mead (Soli Deo Gloria Publications, Beaver Falls, PA, no date). P. 105. This copy is an early SDG publication and is a facsimile of a 19th century copy printed in Philadelphia, again, no date.

¹³ *Almost Christian*, p. 209.

It is possible that someone who is struggling with assurance of faith is struggling because they have yet to come to Christ.¹⁴ We cannot overlook this. As will be brought out in the application, our first and primary task when assurance is lacking is to point the person to Jesus Christ.¹⁵

2. Struggle with Assurance because of indwelling or habitual sin.¹⁶

¹⁴ Mead says on pages 123-124 of the *Almost Christian*, "And thus I have answered the first query; vis., How far a man may go in the way to heaven, and yet be but almost a Christian?"

1. He may have much knowledge
2. He may have great gifts.
3. He may have a high profession
4. He may do much against sin.
5. He may desire grace.
6. He may tremble at the word.
7. He may delight in the word.
8. He may be a member of the church of Christ.
9. He may have great hopes of heaven.
10. He may be under great and visible changes.
11. He may be very zealous in the matters of religion.
12. He may be much in prayer.
13. He may suffer for Christ.
14. He may be called of God.
15. He may, in some sense, have the Spirit of God.
16. He may have some kind of faith.
17. He may love the people of God.
18. He may go far in obeying the commands of God.
19. He may be, in some sense, sanctified.
20. He may do all, as to external duties, that a true Christian can, any yet be no better than almost a Christian.

¹⁵ *Almost Christian*, p. 211, "O then, as you love your own souls, as ever you hope to be saved at last, and enjoy God for ever, improve these convictions, and be sure you rest not in them till they rise up to a thorough close with the Lord Jesus Christ, and so end in a sound and perfect conversion! Thus shall you be, not only almost, but altogether a Christian."

¹⁶ "Of this *Spiritual life* there are *two acts*: *First*, that whereby we, that were dead in trespasses and sinnes, are quickned. *Ephes. 2.1.* being translated into a state of *spirituall and eternall life*; and indowed with a new lively *principle of grace*; inabling us to *spirituall motion*.

The *second act* of this *life* is, that, whereby we *walke*, and *worke* according to the direction of Gods word; and the good motions of the good spirit: so being made conformable to *God*, and walking with *God*, as new creatures, in the estate of *regeneration*." *Lifes Preservation Against Self-Killing or, an Vseful Treatise Concerning*

If hearts were laid open, this is the primary reason that people struggle with assurance of faith. Living in sin is the primary way to lose or fail to obtain assurance.¹⁷ The Puritans were the champions on this topic. Thomas Hooker, who we mentioned earlier as one, who in death, struggled respecting his faith, says, "For if there be any want of the assurance of God's love, and if the evidence of the work of grace come not roundly in, but there be some guilt of sin still remaining; conscience will make new stirs and breed new broils, and continually move and unquiet the heart."¹⁸

The Savoy speaks to this in 18:4. We can have our assurance "...in diverse ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as, by negligence in preserving of it, by falling into some special sin which wounds the conscience and grieves the Spirit; by some sudden or vehement temptation, by God's withdrawing the light of His countenance, suffering even such as fear Him to walk in darkness and to have no light..." It is here that the Savoy makes the case that sin can be the reason for lost or lack of assurance. "Lord, why castest thou off my soul? Why hidest thou thy face from me?" Psalm 88:14. Psalm 66:18 tells us, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me." It is clear from Scripture that the Lord withdraws from those who live in open, unrepentant sin. Certainly we know that we can

Life and Self-murder..., by John Sym (London: Printed by M. Flesher, for R. Dawlman, and L. Fawne, at the Brazen Serpent in Pauls Churchyard, 1637), p. 21-21.

I put this quote in here because it is a good transition from point one to point two. First we must come to Christ, but then we must walk in Him. Those who do not walk in His ways cannot expect that their Lord will give them peace and assurance. There are really two steps here; Come to Christ and then walk in Him if you desire to have assurance.

¹⁷ "Ah, no bitterness so bitter as sin; that keeps my soul from that sweet assurance, that is not only the top and crown of mercy, but also the sweetner of all mercy, misery, and glory. O what unspeakable evil do I now see in that evil that keeps me from the most desirable good? Oh what bitterness do I now find in that which Satan, the world, and my own deluded heart told me I should find sweetness in? Ah, now I find by experience, that to be true, which long since the faithful Messengers of the Lord have told me, *viz.* That sin debaseth the soul of man, that it defiles and pollutes the soul of man, that it renders the soul most unlike to God (who is Optimum maximum) the best and greatest, who is (Omnia super omnia) all, and above all, and renders it most like to Satan, who is a very Sea and sink of sin. That it hath robbed the soul of the Image of God, the holiness of God, the beauty of God, the glory of God, the righteousness of God, and that keeps the soul from wearing this golden Chain of assurance." Brooks, *Heaven on Earth*, 1654, p. 37.

¹⁸ *The Poor Doubting Christian Drawn to Christ...*, Thomas Hooker (Keyser, West Virginia, Odom Publications, no date), p. 84. This is a facsimile of an earlier book reprinted recently by Odom.

"grieve" the Spirit. We are told not to do so, Eph. 4:30. He knows everyone's thoughts, deeds, and temptations. We can be confident that when we sin the Spirit is grieved and our prayers are in some measure blocked. It is not a stretch then to expect that in some measure our sin also results in a loss of Assurance of Faith.

3. The Genuine Struggle for Assurance of Faith

We must not, however, make the assumption that everyone who struggles with assurance of faith is either non-regenerate or living in grievous sin. The Savoy recognizes this and gives hope to those who simply struggle to have assurance. Those who struggle are admonished to struggle on and seek to gain assurance and they are given this hope in 18:4, "...yet are they neither utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart, and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may, in due time, be revived, and by the which, in the mean time, they are supported from utter despair."¹⁹

There can be a genuine struggle to possess assurance.²⁰ This can be a life-long struggle and the person still be regenerate. It is as

¹⁹ . "That is the nature of Spirituall life, it desires to maintaine it selfe, and to expel all that is contrary to it, if the body have taken any noisome and hurtfull thing; it will vomit and cast it out, and will not let it rest there in quiet, if it be an enemy to our life it will strive against it, if there be any spirituall life in us, it cannot let sin rest in us; it will strive against it, and never rest till it be shut of it, any way, some way or other, cut it must, though he shame himselfe for it by an open confession; and though it many wayes trouble him, yet out it must, it is an enemy to his life, and out he must cast it and therefore if God give us hearts to be fearfull of sinne, and carefull to maintaine our peace, it is an evident signe of the truth of our Spirituall life; and this is a signe of life, for he feels not his peace because it is clouded in him; he discernes no life in him, and he feares what he had was but a delusion. Why, how stands thy care to preserve thy peace, and to avoyd the danger of the losse of it? If God give thee an heart desireous and carefull to maintaine thy peace, though it be not so lively as sometimes it was, yet it is certainly true and good." *Christ the Fountain of Life*, John Cotton (London: Printed by Robert Ibbitson, and are to be sold by George Calvert at the signe of the half Moone in Watling street, neer Pauls Stump, 1651). P. 105.

²⁰ "Yet in this case if we feel not sense of assurance, it is good we should praise God for what we have; we cannot deny but God offers himself in mercy to us, and that he intends our good thereby, for so we ought to construe his mercifull dealing towards us....," *The Soules Conflict with it selfe and Victory over it selfe by Faith*, R. Sibbs. (London: Printed for R. D. and are to be sold by John Williams, at the signe of the Crown in S. Pauls Church yard, 1651). P. 398.

was quoted in Brooks earlier, assurance is not of the essence of being a Christian. It is desirable and to be sought after earnestly, but it is not of the essence of saving faith. There can be a legitimate struggle to obtain assurance. This struggle is not to be minimized because, for many, it can be a stumbling block to growing in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. They are plagued by questions similar to the questions we started with. They are tempted to give up since they do not *know* for certain that they are in Union with Christ. Many of them might be likened to those Scripture speaks of in 1 Corinthians 3: 1, "And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ." The Savoy recognizes that there can be both a waiting to obtain assurance and even in those who have had assurance in the past, there may be a "shaking" of that former assurance. It is such who I would label those who experience "dark nights of the soul." They need our patience and wisdom in pointing them to Christ. They deserve our encouragement and prayers in laboring to both assist them in this mercy and appealing to the One who can ultimately grant it.

Application

What do we say pastorally to someone who struggles with assurance?²¹ It can be a consuming struggle for someone and it can

²¹ "God will not suffer his whole displeasure to arise upon his people, neither will he forsake them totally or finally; the Saints shall taste but some sips of the cup of Gods wrath, sinners shall drink the dregs: their storm shall end in a calm, & their winter night shall be turned into a summers day. There was a woman who was thirteen years under desertion, which was so vehement, that for the most part of her time, she was fain to keep her bed through weakness: A godly Minister, who was affected with her condition, went to comfort her, and to pray with her; but when he came and offered to do so, she shrieked out, utterly refusing and forbidding him to pray with her, for said she, I have too many abused mercies to answer for already: yet he would not be put off, but prayed by her, and so prevailed with God on her behalf, that the next morning she was delivered from all her fears, and had such exceeding joy, that the like hath rarely been heard of the Lord that had been long withdrawn from her, returned at length in a way of singular mercy to her. There was another precious woman, who was several years deserted, and hearing a precious godly Minister preach, she of a sudden fell down overwhelmed with joy, crying out, O! he is come whom my soul loveth! And for divers dayes after she was filled with such exceeding joyes, and had such gracious and singular ravishing expressions, so fluently coming from her, that many came to hear the rare manifestations of Gods grace in her; the lowest of her pious expressions did exceed the highest that ever the Minister had read in the book of Martyrs." *The Silent Soul, with Sovereign Antidotes Against the Most Miserable Exidents: or, A Christian with an Olive-Leaf in his mouth...*

cripple any ability to function usefully unto Christ in life and in His church. The Savoy does not even hint that such a struggle is sin, but rather encourages everyone to press on in the means of grace unto assurance. We should do this also, while at the same time pointing out that this struggle can in itself be a time of growth and an agency of sanctification in our lives.

Consider doubting Thomas who could not believe unless he saw with his eyes and placed his fingers in the holes where the nails had gone; our Lord does not chide him for his doubts, but rather tenderly ministers to him by meeting his needs (John 19:24-29). There is no rebuke, and only love unto Thomas and we ought to lovingly lead people forward unto assurance. There are several ways we can do this and the first is to point them to Christ. Directing the anxious follower to Christ is both the first and last thing we should do. In the end it is centrally what we need to do. We tell the individual that for every one look that he/she takes to himself/herself, they should look 1000 times to Christ.²² What do we gain by looking at ourselves (and I am heartily in favor of self-examination)²³, except a knowledge of how unlike Jesus Christ we are. The Puritans were very introspective but it was always in the context of looking to Christ. An unhealthy focus upon ourselves will hinder assurance. It is Christ who has fulfilled the Law of God perfectly and we look to His righteousness, not our own. If you are looking to yourself primarily, you can only be discouraged because of indwelling sin.

Secondly, remind them of the whosoever factor in the Gospel. In other words, remind them of the precious promises of God. Our Lord has promised in His Word that His mercy is for whosoever (Matt. 10:32, 33; John 4:13-15; 11:26; Acts 2:21; 10:43; Romans 10:13, 1

Thomas Brooks. (London, Printed for John Hancock, to be sold at the first shop in Popes-head-Alley, next to Cornhil, 1660), p. 288-290.

²² "In all miseries and distresses you may be sure to know where to have a friend to help and pity you even in heaven, CHRIST; one whose nature, office, interest, relation, all, doe engage him to your succour; you will finde men, even friends, to be oftentimes unto you unreasonable, and their bowels in many cases shut up towards you...Men love to see themselves pityed by friends, thought they cannot *help them*: Christ can and will doe both." *The Heart of Christ in Heaven, Towards Sinners on Earth...* Tho. Goodwin (London: Printed for R. Dawlman, 1642), p. 140.

²³ "Now let us see what this Certainty or Assurance is. And indeed, it is nothing else but the Knowledge of the forementioned Conclusions (that we are sanctified, Justified, shall be Glorified) as they arise from the premises in the work of Examination. *The Saints Everlasting Rest...*, Richard Baxter. (London: Printed for Thomas Underhill and Francis Tyton, and are to be sold at the Sign of the blew Anchor and Bible in Pauls..., 1658), p. 407

John 4:15) will come unto Him in faith. If you have come to faith into Christ and are resting in Him then He has promised in His Word that you are His child. If you look upon the promises of God and still lack assurance you are calling God a liar (This can be communicated in a more loving way.). He has promised in His Word that He will continue what He has started in us (Phil. 1:6). He has promised that he will never leave us or forsake us, "...for He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee," Hebrews 13:5. When we say otherwise through lack of assurance we say that what God has promised in His Word is not true.

This leads us to the third application to helping those who struggle in assurance and it must be part of the second: patience. We patiently encourage them in their continued walk with Christ, (1 John 3)²⁴. We encourage them to continue to strive to live unto Christ even when things don't feel right or there isn't a close communion with the Lord. We encourage them to pray for assurance, but to also use the other appointed means of grace (Preaching of the Word, sacraments). Meditation on the Word, prayer that the Spirit would deepen your communion with Christ, walking in the ways of the Lord (abiding by the Law of God), and striving against sin are all ways to strengthen and further establish assurance. These things generally don't function in full measure over-night. It is growth in communion with the Lord, and fellowship with the Spirit, that generate such things over time and thus we must encourage ourselves and others to be patient in the struggle toward full assurance.

Conclusion:

²⁴ "Now when this assurance is settled in our hearts, it will purifie not onely the affections, but also the first motions and thoughts of our mindes: *He that hath in himselfe this hope* (saith Saint (a) Iohn) *purgeth himselfe as God is pure*. For when a man shall be truly perswaded in his heart, that of a vile sinner, euen the child of wrath, he is made the childe of God, and a vessel of honour acceptable to God, enjoying his loue, and fauour in Christ, then will he reason thus with himselfe; hath God of his endlesse mercie vouchsafed to receiue me into his grace and fauour, that otherwaies should haue bin a firebrand of hell for euermore? Oh then, how should I suffer my mine, my will, my affections, to be any longer the instruments of sinne, whereby I shall displease so gracious a God, and cast my selfe out of his loue and fauour? Nay, but I will imploy my soule which hee hath redeemed with all the powers and faculties thereof, as weapons of righteousnesse for the aduancement of his glorie." *A Treatise of Mans Imaginations. Shewing: His naturall euill thoughts: His want of good thoughts: The way to reforme them.* William Perkins. (London: Printed by Iohn Legatt, Printer to the Vniuersitie of Cambridge, 1617.), p. 478.

Dark nights of the soul can greatly handicap the follower of Christ in his/her daily walk with Christ. We don't want to err on the side of giving false hope, but we also don't want to further discourage an already discouraged child of God. It is why the most significant thing we can do with the struggling child of God is to point them to Jesus who has done all, gives all, and is all that His followers need. We beg the Holy Spirit to make our calling and election sure in our own hearts and the hearts of those we love and minister unto. We do this patiently knowing the devastating effects of sin upon ourselves and others. We do this prayerfully knowing also that while the promises of God in His Word are never forsaken, so also it is only the Spirit applying those promises to the heart that can make them real and tangible in life.

I will end with one further thought that might provoke discussion, but really did not fit in this paper. It is from Joel Beeke and he says, "The lack of certainty felt by many professing Christians may be a prime cause for the question of certitude being thrown back one step onto the witness, inspiration, and inerrancy of Scripture."²⁵ It is an interesting thought.

²⁵ *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation*, Joel Beeke, (New York: American University Studies, Peter Lang, 1991) p. 367.