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TRAINING DECISION COUNSELORS TO TEACH THE DOCTRINE
OF ASSURANCE OF SALVATION AT FIRST BAPTIST
CHURCH, OAK GROVE, KENTUCKY

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APPROVAL SHEET

TRAINING DECISION COUNSELORS TO TEACH THE DOCTRINE
OF ASSURANCE OF SALVATION AT FIRST BAPTIST
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Date _____

To Connie,

You are my wife, my best friend, and partner for life.

And to Khera and Anna,

no father could be more pleased with his children

than I am with each of you

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PREFACE

I received Christ as an adult in 1989 and instantly experienced the assurance of salvation so coveted by many believers. When others would speak of having doubted whether they were saved, or if they would go to heaven when they died, I could sympathize with them, but I could not relate to what they were feeling—that is, until one day in May a few years ago. It was as if someone turned off the switch to the assurance of my salvation. I immediately lost the inner sense of being saved and beginning a journey of seeking assurance from some place besides an inner feeling. I am thankful to God for this journey as it has led me to know and trust Him better, as well as have a greater tenderness for those who are dealing with doubt and, I believe, greater skill in ministering to their need.

I am also thankful for the writings on the subject of assurance by John MacArthur, John Piper, and Jonathan Edwards. Their insights helped me understand that assurance of salvation is not a feeling but a doctrine that must be believed.

This training-based project proved to be a long and challenging, yet fulfilling process. I am grateful for the faithful people who helped me along the way. I am especially thankful for godly professors such as Charles Lawless and Timothy Beougher, who set the right balance of academic scholarship and passion for Christian ministry. I truly appreciate the help and insights of Paul Chitwood, who in the midst of a busy transition and challenging calling in his own life, always made time to give excellent advice to guide me through the unknown waters of a D.Min. project.

I am most thankful for my wonderful wife, Connie, who with great resolve encouraged me to press on and would not allow me to quit, even though I was ready to

throw in the towel more than once. I so appreciate our children, Khera and Anna, for their understanding on the nights that Dad had to work on a D.Min. paper.

I am thankful for my fellow students in the D.Min. program, who provided needed encouragement as well as practical help throughout this project. I am particularly grateful to Reed Shepherd and Eddie Nation as we prodded each other along toward completion.

I am indebted to two individuals without whose financial support this project would not have been possible for me. My longtime friend Keith Tyner and my office assistant, Helen Stanfill, each gave sacrificially so I could learn more, to hopefully serve the kingdom of God better. Thank you, Keith and Helen.

As is true with any project of this nature, it could not have been completed without the superior insight, expertise, and skillfulness of Betsy Fredrick, who edited my project. I will be forever grateful to Betsy for her timely assistance.

Finally, I want to give thanks to God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I am thankful for His grace and mercy toward me. I pray that this project has brought glory to Him in an effort to train others to teach the doctrine of assurance.

Larry Todd Gray

Oak Grove, Kentucky

May 2012

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to train decision counselors at First Baptist Church of Oak Grove, Kentucky, to teach the doctrine of assurance of salvation.

Goals

This project accomplished the following four goals. The first goal was to grow in my understanding of the biblical doctrine of assurance of salvation. This goal was accomplished by studying New Testament texts pertinent to the subject of assurance and doubt about salvation.

The second goal was to develop my skills in order to better counsel others who are dealing with doubts about their salvation, which was accomplished by studying the approaches to assurance counseling used by various Christian leaders. This study involved reading books on the subjects of evangelism and assurance, as well as interviewing twenty-two pastors, evangelists, and chaplains in order to learn their own approach to assurance counseling.

The third goal was to equip the Decision Counselor Team of First Baptist Church of Oak Grove to help people who are dealing with doubts about their salvation. I accomplished this purpose by preparing three sessions on assurance counseling and gathering the team for training.

The fourth goal was to improve the congregation's understanding of assurance of salvation. To accomplish this objective, I prepared and preached a series of messages

on the subject of assurance and offered to set up counseling appointments with those who communicated doubts about their salvation.

Ministry Context

First Baptist Church of Oak Grove is located in Oak Grove, Kentucky, host town of the Fort Campbell Army Post for the 101st Air Assault Division of the United States Army, the third largest Army installation in America. Oak Grove is located in the western part of Kentucky in south Christian County and borders Clarksville, Tennessee. Due to the transient nature of Army families into and out of Oak Grove, First Baptist is one of the most evangelistically strategic churches in Kentucky.

First Baptist Church of Oak Grove began as a mission of Olivet Baptist Church in Howell, Kentucky, in 1954. In the early 1950s, the rural Olivet congregation neighbored the fast developing Fort Campbell Army Post. The pastor and some of the members began to feel that something should be done to evangelize and minister to soldiers at Fort Campbell as well as their families. According to our own church history, a small group of Olivet members started a Bible study in an Oak Grove mobile home park. Fifty years later, First Baptist Church of Oak Grove is a thriving congregation with a vision for evangelizing and equipping soldiers and their families. Olivet Baptist Church took a great step of faith that resulted in a strong church.

The facilities of First Baptist Church are located on Highway 911, also known as Thompsonville Lane, in Oak Grove, Kentucky. Thompsonville Lane is the third busiest street in Oak Grove, with a traffic count of 7001 vehicles passing by the property each day.¹ The majority of those autos are driven by Army soldiers going back and forth to work at the post located less than 3000 feet from our property.

¹Center for Missional Research, “Know Your Community 480 Thompsonville Lane Oak Grove, KY 42262” [on-line]; accessed 29 January 2009; available from www.missionalresearch.info; Internet, 5.

The 2000 U.S. Census shows Oak Grove, Kentucky, having a population of 7,796 people.² However, the surrounding area is much larger. Because we border Clarksville, Tennessee, a seven mile radius around the church includes a population nearly ten times the Oak Grove number with a projected population of 79,488 by 2013.³ The area around the church has grown by 15.8 percent since the 2000 census.⁴ According to the North American Mission Board Center for Missional Research,

A rapidly changing population may provide opportunities for evangelistic witness to persons experiencing transition in their lives. A rapidly growing congregation may outstrip the ability of the governmental and social infrastructure to meet its needs, creating ministry opportunities.⁵

The reality of a growing and transient population presents enormous opportunities for evangelism and ministry.

Not only is Oak Grove a growing community, its population is young and multi-racial. The median age of residents is 23.9 years.⁶ According to The Center for Missional Research,

Among younger adults, new congregations must be responsive to developmental needs such as selecting a mate, learning to live with a marriage partner, starting a family, rearing children, managing a household, and getting started in an occupation.⁷

The population is comprised of 58.3 percent White, 25.5 percent Black, 6.2 percent other, and 5.0 percent two or more races. While the Hispanic population does not even rate on the 2000 census, it was estimated to make up 13.3 percent of the population in 2008 and

²City-data.com, "42262 Zip Code Detailed Profile" [on-line]; accessed 26 February 2009; available from <http://www.city-data.com/zip/42262.html>; Internet.

³Center for Missional Research, "Know Your Community," 7.

⁴Ibid., 8.

⁵Ibid.

⁶City-data.com, "42262 Zip Code Detailed Profile."

⁷Center for Missional Research, "Know Your Community," 11.

28.0 percent by 2013.⁸ The membership of First Baptist of Oak Grove reflects its community—it is a young, multi-racial congregation.

The estimated median household income in Oak Grove ranks just below the Kentucky average of \$41,538 per year.⁹ While surrounding areas have experienced a struggling economy in recent months, the community has been insulated from the recession because of its proximity to the Army post.

The education levels in Oak Grove are similar to the rest of the country. The city has approximately 25 percent college graduates with an additional 37 percent who have completed some college level courses. Nearly 29 percent have only their high school diploma, with less than 10 percent having not completed high school.¹⁰

Oak Grove is also a religiously diverse community. The residents have a wide variety of religious backgrounds including Baptist, Catholic, Pentecostal, Assembly of God and Non-Denominational. Since the populace is transient, those who attend worship services may have been involved in several different denominations. This diversity of religious experience contributes to issues concerning evangelism and assurance. Because of differences in Bible instruction, there are divergent views on eternal security within the congregation.

The church has experienced significant growth in the past eight years. Sunday morning attendance averages around 375 with first-time visitors showing up each week. In the past eight years, more than 900 people have moved their membership to First Baptist Oak Grove, with approximately half of those coming by baptism. Between 2001 and 2008, the church baptized new members at a ratio of 15:1 resident members to baptisms. First Baptist has a strong reputation in the Christian County Baptist Association for being an

⁸Ibid., 12.

⁹Ibid., 18.

¹⁰Ibid., 23.

evangelistic congregation, often leading the association in baptisms. The primary reason that our current total worship attendance does not reflect the 900 additions over the past eight years is because we are a military congregation. Due to the fact that most of our members are active duty military personnel or dependents thereof, we will send out as much as 20 to 25 percent of our congregation each year through transfers to other military installations. The continual flow of new believers and young, often spiritually immature Christians in and out of the church contributes to the need for good counsel regarding assurance of salvation.

First Baptist Church has helped start three other congregations in the surrounding community. We have partnered with a Hispanic congregation, a Korean congregation, and most recently an English-speaking congregation led by retired Army Chaplain David Coram.

The staff of First Baptist Oak Grove includes both full-time and part-time personnel. The full-time staff is made up of a Senior Pastor, Associate Pastor, and Youth Minister. The part-time personnel include a worship leader, administrative assistant, secretary, and custodian. Volunteer receptionists supplement the office staff.

First Baptist Church of Oak Grove has a rich history that is both positive and negative. On the positive side, members of the community view the church as a strong, caring, evangelistic, and community-minded congregation. People in Oak Grove know it as a church that spreads the gospel and tries to help families in need. On the negative however, members sometimes view the church, due to its transient nature, as a poor congregation always on the verge of collapse because of financial and membership fluidity.

According to the types of congregations listed by Carl Dudley and Sally A. Johnson in *Energizing the Congregation*, First Baptist would be best classified as a “Survivor Church.”¹¹ The survivor church, according to the authors,

¹¹Carl Dudley and Sally A. Johnson, *Energizing the Congregation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 5.

Loves to tell stories of the storms it has weathered. Often, the congregation attracts and sustains people who take pride in their survival time and again. Survivor churches live on the edge, always on the verge of being overwhelmed by emergencies. They do not expect to conquer their problems, but they will not give in.¹²

First Baptist fits this description because of its transient membership. Every six months, there is a struggle to meet budget requirements and replace workers because a new group of members receive orders to their next duty station.

According to Dudley and Johnson, survivor churches are often overwhelmed by hardships but try to resolve existing problems. They are usually conservative, socially concerned, close knit, and overworked.¹³ Most of these traits are an accurate portrayal of First Baptist of Oak Grove. Being an active member of this type of congregation can be both fulfilling and exhausting at the same time.

Though it operates in survivor mode much of the time, members would say that progress is being made toward a mission of evangelism and discipleship. The church has experienced considerable sustained growth over the past eight years. We grew from an average attendance of around 120 people in Sunday morning worship in 2001 to around 375 today. Budget needs have increased yearly with our annual budget going from around \$100,000 in 2001 to over \$400,000 for the current year, with the budget requirements being met each year. Efforts to disciple our members toward greater devotion to Jesus have proven more fruitful each year. The staff has grown, and the need for volunteers has been supplied.

First Baptist Church could be described as a “walking on water” congregation, referencing the story of Peter stepping out of the boat and walking on water in Matthew 14:21-36. Peter could only walk on water as Christ enabled him and sustained him, and First Baptist can survive and make progress only as God holds us up and enables us.

A second congregational type that applies to First Baptist is a “pilgrim church.”

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., 50-53.

Dudley and Johnson describe the pilgrim church as one that “dwells with its own people wherever they are, sustaining them as a community in their pilgrimage.”¹⁴ The pilgrim church seems to attract a particular type of people and offers a setting that enables them to feel at home while away from home. Dudley and Johnson further note that “they live a theology of pilgrimage that reaches out to help others who travel a similar journey . . . The pilgrim church provides the focus of faith and culture for a particular people.”¹⁵

The pilgrim group attracted to First Baptist Church is made up of members of the U.S. Army and their dependents serving at Fort Campbell Army Post. Most of the members are in transition from one duty station to another and will be stationed at Fort Campbell for one to three years. Many of the Christian military families who join First Baptist do so in the first, second, or third visit to the church. Many of them become volunteers in one of our ministry programs within the first month or two after joining the church. They also recruit for us when they arrive at their next duty station and meet people who are scheduled to relocate to Fort Campbell. The pilgrim experience offered to them is a welcoming and accepting congregation of like-minded believers who are, or were, employed by the U.S. Army. The church also tries to stay in touch with former members to encourage them to find a new church at their next duty assignment.

The mission orientation of First Baptist could be described as an “evangelistic orientation.” The evangelistic orientation, according to Roozen, McKinney, and Carroll, is a church that is known to “stress personal witnessing to and sharing one’s faith with others, strong openness to the Holy Spirit, *and* conversion of everyone to the ‘one true faith.’”¹⁶ The authors further state that churches with an evangelistic orientation “believe that God

¹⁴Ibid., 4

¹⁵Ibid., 5.

¹⁶David A. Roozen, William McKinney, and Jackson W. Carroll, *Varieties of Religious Presence* (New York: Pilgrim, 1984), 87.

has given them a message that must be shared with their friends and neighbors, and the message itself—the need to respond to God’s saving action in Jesus Christ—is at the center of congregational life.”¹⁷ First Baptist does feel a strong responsibility to make sure that the local community hears the gospel. The congregation continually offers witness training courses, practices door-to-door evangelism, and seeks to create opportunities to share the good news with our neighbors. The issue of assurance counseling is a dovetail fit with this evangelistic fervor.

First Baptist is conservative in its theology. Some members come from other Baptist churches, while others come from a wide variety of denominational backgrounds. The Baptist name is not emphasized, but the church does insist that those who teach and take leadership positions operate within the boundaries of the 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message*.

While First Baptist is not a church steeped in tradition, the observance of patriotic days is important to the congregation. We have an annual Memorial Day picnic in May, a special patriotic celebration in July, and a Veteran’s Day observance in November. Some members would like an observance of Flag Day and the remembrance of D-day. On the days that are recognized, a color guard consisting of members of the congregation posts the flags at the beginning of our church services. The congregation recites the pledges to the U.S. and the Christian flags followed by a series of patriotic songs. In recent years, the church has tried to incorporate an evangelistic emphasis on these special days.

The worship style at First Baptist could be described as revivalist. Thom Rainer, in his book *Effective Evangelistic Churches*, describes revivalist worship style in the following way: “Mood: exuberant, celebrative, informal. Music: organ, piano, and taped music, gospel hymns, contemporary Christian songs, and anthems. Purpose: to save the

¹⁷Ibid., 217.

lost and encourage believers to witness.”¹⁸ The revivalist style seems to be more about the goal of the service than about the type of music. First Baptist conducts two Sunday morning worship services. The 8:30 a.m. service is more traditional in music style, more lightly attended, and attracts the senior adults and some of the young families. The 11:00 a.m. service uses a more contemporary approach to worship, is more heavily attended, and attracts young families. Both services are intentional about pointing the lost to Jesus and stirring up the saved to make noticeable progress in the faith.

My preaching style is expository in nature, using short series of messages dealing with various topics of importance to the Christian life. While every sermon is not about evangelism, every sermon is evangelistic and seeks to lead people to a saving knowledge of Christ.

As a leader, my goal is to make disciples. I believe the main work of Jesus’ Great Commission in Matthew 28:16-20 is to train disciples of Jesus who will reproduce other committed followers. Leighton Ford describes this approach to ministry as a “shepherd-maker.”¹⁹ In describing the shepherd-maker leader, Ford writes, “shepherd is a key biblical term for the leader who empowers others.”²⁰ Ford, taking his shepherd-maker leadership style from the life of Christ, writes “As I understand Jesus, his bottom line was not just getting the job done, but growing people and getting the job done. It has been said that transformational leaders work themselves out of a job as subordinates are converted into leaders.”²¹ My approach to leadership is seen at First Baptist in the fact that

¹⁸Thom Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 101.

¹⁹Leighton Ford, *Transforming Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 161.

²⁰Ibid. 163.

²¹Ibid. 164.

many of the leaders are people whom I have personally disciplined. Training future leaders for Christ's church is the joy of my life in ministry.

Rationale

I was motivated to complete a project on dealing with doubt because I wanted to grow in my own ability to help members of First Baptist Oak Grove who were struggling with issues of assurance and doubts regarding their salvation. I came to Christ at the age of 24 while attending Northside Baptist Church in Indianapolis, Indiana. My pastor, Bob Latham, immediately enrolled me in a witness training course. From that moment, I became a witness for Christ. When I was saved in 1989, I experienced a wonderful peace with God that lasted up until May 2006. At that time, it was as if someone turned off the "peace" switch in my soul and I began to experience doubts about my own salvation. The doubt came on suddenly, and I no longer felt certain that I was a saved person.

Since that time in 2006, I have read, studied, and prayed, seeking to regain my aforementioned sense of peace with God. While the feelings of being saved did not fully return, I have learned some valuable insights about dealing with doubt. I have also learned that doubt is not uncommon. It is, however, a malady of the soul that its victims often suffer alone. Some people, including Christian leaders, are reluctant to admit that they have experienced doubts about their salvation. Many who doubt feel isolated and struggle alone trying to regain a sense of assurance. I pursued a project helping people who are dealing with doubts about their salvation for this reason.

At First Baptist Church of Oak Grove, the need for counseling on issues of assurance was possibly more pressing than in some other congregations. As previously mentioned, members are from a wide variety of denominational Christian backgrounds, and some are completely un-churched. Some members were likely basing their hope of eternal security on something other than the finished work of Christ. They could have been trusting in an emotional experience, baptism, or religious upbringing. I wanted the

members who experienced issues with doubt to be able to clearly articulate why they believe they are saved.

This project was also relevant because of the proximity to danger in which many of our members lived daily. Because it is a military congregation, many members were deployed into war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan. Therefore, these soldiers and their families needed to have a clear understanding of assurance of salvation. I do not want these military church members to be worried about their standing with God and where they would go when they died.

The project brought several benefits. It allowed me the opportunity to deal with issues of doubt and assurance in a focused way through preaching and counseling. The decision counselors received additional equipping in the area of assurance. This project was helpful to me in that it allowed me to study more deeply a subject about which I cared passionately. I also grew in my own sense of assurance and skills in counseling others.

The relationship of assurance counseling and evangelism and church growth was also considered. What role does assurance counseling have in evangelism and church growth? It comes into consideration in at least two significant ways. First, if a church wishes to engage in conscientious evangelism, it must also be prepared to help congregants with the thorny issues of doubt and assurance. Leading troubled persons through the maze of assurance of salvation is not easy and may not happen quickly, but it is nevertheless part of a responsible shepherding ministry in a local church setting. Those members who have questions about their salvation who do not receive help from their leadership will either wither spiritually or drift quietly out the metaphorical back door of the church.

A second significant connection of assurance counseling to evangelism and church growth is the issue of productive discipleship. Believers who have assurance issues and do not get help with them will become spiritually stagnant and lack confidence in their spiritual life. These believers will not likely become bold witnesses for Christ or use their spiritual gifts in any measurable way if they do not feel assured of their own salvation.

Helping believers with assurance will help Christians grow and in turn should help the church grow as well.

Definitions, Limitations, and Delimitations

For the sake of clarity, a couple of terms needed to be defined. The phrase “doubts about salvation” was meant to suggest questions a person may have regarding their own conversion by Jesus and whether or not he or she is eternally secure with heaven as a future home. Those who experience these doubts may question whether they are in fact saved. They live with a nagging sense that when they die heaven will not be their home, and they will be eternally separated from God. A second term that needed to be defined was the word “assurance.” Assurance denotes a conviction that one does in fact belong to Jesus and will be in heaven when death comes. The intention of counseling will be to help the person move along the scale from doubt on one end toward assurance on the other end.

This project was completed in a fifteen-week time period. A limitation of the project was that the evaluation of its impact could not be fully understood in 15 weeks. Some congregants likely experienced help with doubt that may not prove lasting while others may have learned basic skills in dealing with their own doubt that could prove more helpful in time. Also, those who are trained to counsel will likely increase in skill as they have the benefit of practice and more life experience which cannot take place in fifteen weeks.

The project was delimited because I preached the sermons to those who attended Sunday morning services and used a public invitation to solicit a response from those seeking counsel. Responding publicly to seek prayer or counsel for assurance of salvation could have been a hindrance to some. A second delimitation was that I wanted to discover those in need of counsel through the process of preaching and public, as well as private, invitation. I used an anonymous survey before and after the series of messages to discover what the congregation understood about the doctrine of assurance. I wanted, however, to create an atmosphere where church members felt comfortable talking to their

pastor about issues regarding doubt and assurance. I believe this was best accomplished through preaching and then extending a public and private invitation for congregants to seek further counsel.

Research Methodology

My first goal was to grow in my understanding of the biblical doctrine of assurance of salvation. This goal was accomplished when I had a solid reproducible strategy for dealing with personal feelings of doubt. I liked to be able to easily bring to mind six or eight New Testament verses that point to objective evidence that one is in fact born again. Being able to respond quickly and easily to my personal battle with doubt enabled me to help others also.

The second goal was to develop my skills in order to better counsel those who are dealing with doubts about their salvation. I interviewed 15 pastors, 5 evangelists, and 2 chaplains to learn how they counsel persons who are dealing with doubt and seeking assurance of their salvation. While I interviewed mostly Southern Baptist leaders, I interviewed ministers from other denominations also. These interviews were conducted by phone and in person, and solicited answers to the questions from the Questionnaire for Interviewing Pastors (see Appendix 1).

These church leaders have a wealth of experience from which I gained valuable insights for helping others in dealing with doubts and assurance. These interviews helped me create a good and simple plan for helping others work through their issues with assurance.

The third goal was to equip the decision counselors of First Baptist Church of Oak Grove to help people who are dealing with doubts about their salvation. I developed three training sessions on assurance counseling to supplement the training the group has already received. The group was trained using lecture and role-play. The training included a final examination, which tested the knowledge base of those who went

through the training in order to determine if they are prepared to help others who were dealing with doubts about their faith.

The fourth goal was to improve the congregation's understanding of the doctrine of assurance of salvation. This goal was accomplished by preparing and preaching a series of messages on the subject of assurance and setting up counseling appointments with people who communicate that they are dealing with doubts about their salvation. I sought to create an environment where people were at ease asking for counsel. Then I attempted to make appointments with them to offer counsel. This goal was evaluated by a Pre-Series and Post-Series Questionnaire given to the congregation before and after the series of messages to determine their understanding of the doctrine of assurance (see Appendix 2).

The project and representative goals were selected due to an interest in the subject matter as well as a desire to grow in the selected field of study and develop skills to aid others in seeking assurance of salvation. I also wanted to assist the First Baptist congregation in training its members to help others gain assurance of salvation. The goals allowed me to fulfill my desire to grow personally as well as equip the congregation.

CHAPTER 2
A BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS
FOR DEALING WITH DOUBTS
ABOUT SALVATION

Chapter 2 focuses on a biblical and theological basis for dealing with doubts about salvation. This chapter also deals with four New Testament texts that cover a broad amount of material on the subject of assurance. The verses chosen will allow some study of the following assurance issues including: the command to seek assurance, the possibility and desirability of assurance, the trials one may go through while gaining biblical assurance, and one sure sign of assurance.

The New Testament on Assurance

A project dealing with the subject of assurance should determine early on whether there is a biblical basis for assurance. Does God care about assurance for his children? From a brief survey of several verses the answer is a resounding yes, God does in fact care about assurance and he seems to care deeply about it. God cares so much that an entire book of the Bible was written to deal with this one issue. First John 5:11-13 is written,

And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.¹

John Stott comments regarding the purpose of the book of 1 John,

Here he tells his readers the ostensible purpose of his Epistle, now drawing to a close—and it is natural to contrast it with the purpose of his Gospel in xx. 31 to

¹All Scripture texts throughout this project are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

which we have just referred. The Epistle was written . . . that ye may know that ye have eternal life.²

God clearly cares about assurance and the book of 1 John is excellent evidence of the Heavenly Father's concern.

There are other New Testament texts that highlight the importance of assurance of salvation. Jesus teaches that not everyone who thinks they have salvation actually do possess it. In Matthew 7:21-23 He says,

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

These are people who claim Jesus as their Savior and Lord, are involved in what appears to be Christian ministry, experience apparent ministry results, yet they are going to hear Jesus say that Heaven is not their eternal home. This text stresses in a negative way the importance of a biblical assurance rather than just an emotional sense of assurance.

Throughout the New Testament there are multiple passages that make implications about assurance while explaining the path to personal salvation from the penalty and power of sin. One of these texts is John 1:12. In this verse the following promise is made: "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." This promise brings comfort to those who are dealing with doubt in that it says becoming a child of God is promised to all who receive Jesus, who believe on his name. Also, Romans 10:13 is written, for "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." The one who struggles with assurance, yet knows they are trusting in Jesus only for salvation, can find hope in the promise of Romans 10:13 because it makes the path of salvation very clear. There are no hoops to jump through; simply repent and believe. John 5:24 is another hopeful verse. It says, "Truly, truly, I say

²John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1960), 184.

to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” Those who are only hearing voices of doubt about their salvation who come to John 5:24 can lay hold of the promise made by Jesus and cling tightly to it through the struggle of seeking assurance. These verses offer convincing evidence that assurance matters to God. This project is on good footing as it deals with a subject that is close to the heart of our Heavenly Father. God cares for his sheep and wants them to know that they belong to him.

Assurance of Salvation Is Commanded to Be Sought After

Any high school freshman who claims to have basketball skills worthy of the junior varsity team is going to be asked to prove the validity of his claim. The proof will come out in ball handling skills, jump shots, or speed up and down the court. In only a few minutes of play the coach and his potential teammates will know if his claim is accurate. In 2 Corinthians 13:5-10 those who profess faith in Christ are being told to examine the validity of their faith claim. The apostle Paul writes,

Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test! I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test. But we pray to God that you may not do wrong—not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed. For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. Your restoration is what we pray for. For this reason I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.

The Apostle Paul is calling the Corinthian believers to make a personal examination of their faith claim. According to Colin Kruse,

The positioning of the reflexive pronouns (*heautous*, ‘yourselves’) shows that Paul is emphasizing that it is themselves that the Corinthians should be examining rather than him. He wants them to see whether they are holding to the faith, *i.e.* the gospel, and conforming their lives to it.³

³Colin G. Kruse, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 219.

Up to this point the Corinthian Christians have been questioning the validity of Paul's apostleship (2 Cor 13:1-4) and the authority of his ministry. In 2 Corinthians 13:5 Paul reverses the argument, puts the Corinthians on the defense, and begins to challenge the validity of their faith. John MacArthur argues in regard to 2 Corinthians 13:5: "The Greek grammar places great emphasis on the pronouns *yourselves* and *you*. Paul turned the tables on his accusers: instead of presuming to evaluate his apostleship, they needed to test the genuineness of their faith."⁴

The verses that follow verse 5 deal with the issue of questioning Paul's authority. In verse 6 Paul lets them know that he hopes the Corinthians come to the conclusion that he and his ministry team are in fact of the Lord. In verse 7 Paul assures them that the bigger issue for him is not their opinion of him but that they are developing spiritually. In verse 8 Paul tells the believers that he and his team have a higher allegiance than their own approval ratings: they are servants of the truth. In verse 9 Paul reminds his readers that their spiritual "restoration" is his ultimate goal, not that they hold a high opinion of him. And in verse 10 Paul gives a summary statement of his letter, his plans for coming to them, and his hopes for building them up. Regarding the issue of assurance it is verse 5 of this section of Scripture that is most helpful.

Verse 5 commands the professing Christian to make an investigation of their faith claim to determine whether they belong to Christ. Paul writes, "Examine yourselves" (2 Cor 13:5a) and then, "Test yourselves" (2 Cor 13:5b). Ralph Martin, in his commentary on this text, includes other scholars' thoughts as he discovers Paul's point. He asserts, "The εαυτουξ is in the emphatic position. . . . Paul wants to make sure that the Corinthians get his point."⁵ According to Murray Harris in *The New International Greek Testament*

⁴John MacArthur, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 1652.

⁵Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 40 (Waco, TX: Word, 1986), 477.

Commentary, the examination Paul has in mind is one with a knowable outcome, as seen in Paul's word choice and its meaning: “δοκιμαζω (vs.5), ‘test with a view to approving,’ ‘approve after testing,’ ‘prove.’”⁶ The Corinthian believers are being commanded to see if they are in the faith.

Is the apostle Paul challenging their claim to be born-again? Paul Barnett is helpful as he explains,

The first imperative (‘Examine yourselves’) is followed by the conditional phrase, ‘if you are in the faith.’ Although the Corinthians’ behavior has raised serious questions, the conditional ‘if’ does not necessarily imply that Paul doubted their genuineness as believers. Otherwise he would not have addressed them as ‘the church of God’ or expressed ‘confidence’ about them (1:1; 7:4, 7:16).⁷

By following Paul's example, church leaders today can lead their congregations into personal faith self-examination without calling into question their faith claim. This approach will be a helpful exercise for any modern church.

Who should heed this biblical command issued by Paul to the Corinthians? According to Harris, “The challenge is issued to the whole congregation, not simply to a segment of it such as ‘those who have continued in their former sins’ (οι προηαρτηκοτεξ, 12:21; 13:2).”⁸ Who in the churches should examine themselves to see if they are in the faith? First, professional clergy should take the test. Certainly pastors, ministers of education, worship leaders, youth leaders, children's ministers and other ministerial staff should heed the command to test the validity of their faith claim. Those in positions of leading others through teaching Sunday school, serving as Deacons, helping in the child-care services of the church, driving the church van, working with the audio-video equipment of the church, greeters and ushers, church secretaries, pianists, choir

⁶Murray Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 917.

⁷Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 607-08.

⁸Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 919.

members and soloists all alike should examine the validity of their faith claim. Senior adults who profess faith in Christ should be encouraged to test themselves to see if they are in the faith as, naturally speaking, they are reaching the final season of life so there is a greater sense of urgency to be assured that they are in the faith. Teenagers who are involved in a church youth group also should be encouraged to examine the authenticity of their faith claim as it is possible to make an emotional decision for Christ that may not be a genuine commitment to Christ. People who would call themselves “backslidden Christians” certainly should be urged to test themselves to see if they are in the faith as it is possible they are not backslidden but instead unsaved. So this command is really for all who profess faith in Christ.

This faith self-examination demanded by Paul is meant to have an outcome. The professing Corinthians were told, “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith” (2 Cor 13:5a). Paul writes, “Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?-unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” (2 Cor 13:5c). What would be the outcome of the kind of test Paul is demanding? The answer is found in the verse: “to see whether you are in the faith” (2 Cor 13:5a). Exactly what does Paul mean by being “in the faith”? Several possibilities exist. Paul could be asking them to discover if they are still holding to the true gospel, the one he preached, and in which they first believed. Paul Barnett explains, “The article in the phrase ‘in *the* faith’ (see on 1:24; cf. 1 Cor 16:13) implies the propositional and theological content of that *message* about Jesus which is to be the object of ‘faith’”⁹ This answer makes sense due to the fact that the gospel was front and center in all of Paul’s ministry (Rom 1:16-18). Another possibility has to do with whether the Corinthians were living the faith they claimed as their own. Regarding this view Murray Harris says, “After *πειραζετε*, the interrogative particle *ει* could introduce

⁹Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 608. Emphasis original.

a direct question: ‘Examine yourselves: are you living the life of faith?’¹⁰ Harris raises the idea that the Corinthians challenge to Paul’s authority calls their own faithfulness to Christ into question. Ralph Martin speaks to the issue of faithfulness when he asserts, “What Paul is doing is expressing the hope that the Corinthians will examine themselves to deal with the issue of whether or not they are walking in the way of Christ by following his apostle (1 Cor 11:1).”¹¹ As one cannot separate faith and practice, Paul likely is speaking to each of the issues previously mentioned. Paul likely has gospel belief, faith lifestyle, and current situation all in view. David Garland explains,

‘To see whether you are in the faith’ may also be translated ‘to see whether you are holding the faith’ (RSV). ‘Faith’ here does not refer simply to trust in Christ, which is its primary meaning in Paul’s usage, but to the whole Christian way and truth (see Titus 1:13; 2:2). It is not a matter of examining their doctrines, however, but of bringing their conduct and thinking into conformity with their belief in Christ.¹²

Those who take a faith self-examination should be able to determine whether or not they belong to Jesus. Garland seems unconcerned about the outcome of the test. He believes that entering into the test itself nearly guarantees the result. He says regarding Paul’s possible thoughts about the Corinthians, “He does not think that they will fail themselves on the test. The jeopardy is real (see 1 Cor 10:12); their conduct has been unseemly for those who are in Christ. But they could not test themselves unless they were true Christians.”¹³

The invitation to take a test that determines whether one is in the faith is good news to people who struggle with doubt. Scott Hafemann says, “The goal of the test is to make it clear that Christ is indeed in them.”¹⁴ Those who doubt their salvation believe

¹⁰Ibid., 919.

¹¹Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 478.

¹²David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, The New American Commentary, vol. 29 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 546.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Scott J. Hafemann, *2 Corinthians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand

salvation is possible; they just don't know if they possess it. They also feel that if they were to determine that they were not saved then they would want to be saved and would turn to Jesus in faith and call on Him for salvation. So the possibility of knowing where one stands with the Lord holds out great hope to those who struggle over the issue of assurance.

How should one design a test that will consider such an important outcome as whether or not a person belongs to Christ, and then how could a church implement such a test? On the first question, Garland is helpful: "Paul does not give them a checklist of items to inspect to ascertain whether they are approved or in the faith. We might assume that such a list would involve theological, ethical, and social criteria."¹⁵ A test of this nature should be designed with the following guidelines in mind. First, it must be biblical. Any test that helps one determine if they are a saved person must be based on Scripture and allow the user to test themselves by Scripture. Second, this test should take into consideration the input of other thoughtful mature Christians. Paul told the Corinthians, "Examine yourselves," indicating a corporate endeavor. Those trapped in the mental and emotional loop of doubt about their faith need the objective input of the body of Christ. Receiving input from others is biblical as the Apostle Paul assured the Thessalonians of their salvation in 1 Thessalonians 1:4 and also assured Timothy of his salvation in 2 Timothy 1:5. Garland asserts, "Christian behavior is the touchstone for determining whether those who claim to be Christians really are."¹⁶ Other believers, especially those who are close to us, are in the best position to evaluate our behavior objectively in light of scriptural descriptions of a saved person. While caution must be exercised in the ministry of assurance counseling, there is a place for this kind of ministry and a biblical practice for it. Third, these tests should be encouraged periodically. There should be times in the

Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 493.

¹⁵Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 546.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 547.

life of the church family such as church revivals, or special meetings, where special teaching is given and those who profess faith in Christ are encouraged to enter into faith self-examination and then assurance counseling if needed.

How then should a faith examination test be implemented by a local congregation? One option would be to plan and promote special worship services with the approval and support of the key leaders of the church where instruction would be given, leadership provided, counseling made available, and congregants invited to enter into a time of solemn and thorough examination of their faith claim. Whatever method is chosen, some thought should be given to applying Paul's command to a congregation where many could be suffering with fear and doubt in issues regarding assurance.

A faith self-examination could also be a great tool for evangelism and church growth. If a test could be developed to help those who profess faith in Christ to examine themselves to see whether they are in the faith then it could possibly be used of God to bring a true revival of repentance and spiritual awakening in his churches. This kind of ministry offered periodically could be used of God to prevent large numbers of false professions in the church and help those who struggle silently with doubt to become more dynamic in their faith. If pastors are going to take seriously the work of shepherding God's people then they must lead them regarding issues of assurance. Pastors must develop tests so that those who profess faith in Christ can enter into self-examination to determine whether or not they belong to Jesus.

Assurance of Salvation Is Possible and Desired

First John 5:11-13 says that assurance of salvation is possible and should be desired by genuine believers. John writes to the believers,

. . . and this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.

A young soldier named Chris asked me recently why Catholics feel like they

have to confess their sins to a person. I told him that I did not really think most Catholics felt that way, but that many are probably comforted to hear a person with a voice like their own say to them, based on the authority of Scripture, “Your sins are forgiven.” While people can read the Bible for themselves and reach that same conclusion, they might also be encouraged to hear a trusted person vocalize those words. The same is true about assurance. Those who struggle with doubt would likely find great hope and comfort to hear a trusted person say to them based on the authority of Scripture, “You are a saved person, and you will go to heaven when you die.” That is similar to what is happening in 1 John 5:11-13. This text makes it clear that assurance of salvation is both possible and desirable.

The possibility of assurance of salvation is stated plainly in this text. When John writes, “And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son” (1 John 5:11), he is saying to his readers that eternal life is a free gift. It is also a gift given by God. John Stott explains, “Eternal life is emphatic in the sentence; i.e. the record is that it is eternal life which God gave us in giving His Son.”¹⁷ It is a gift that can be known to have been received by those who have received it. Stott further asserts, “But the witness is not only objective to Christ as the Life-giver but subjective in the gift of life itself.”¹⁸

John not only has assurance of his own salvation, but seems assured of the salvation of his readers as seen in the use of the word “us” in verse 11. Stephen Smalley writes, “‘Eternal life,’ John says, has been given to ‘us’ (ἡμῖν); by which he means all those, including members of his own community, who are orthodox believers and (as such) maintain the apostolic faith and gospel.”¹⁹ So at the very least John is stating the possibility of assurance of salvation. The possibility of assurance is a great encouragement to those who are seeking it.

¹⁷Stott, *The Epistles of John*, 183.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 51 (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), 287.

This assurance of salvation is directly connected to one's relationship with Jesus. Smalley comments,

John finishes this verse with a clear statement about God's gift of eternal life: 'that this life is in his Son.' The clause is governed by οτι ('that') earlier in the v. God's 'testimony' relates not only to his bestowal of life, but also to the fact that the sole medium of its bestowal is to be found in Jesus (cf. Law, *Tests*, 405).²⁰

John makes the case that only those who have Jesus have assurance of salvation. John writes, "Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:12). Colin Kruse answers what it means to have the Son of God:

What it means to 'have the Son' is closely related to believing in the Son, as the next verse (5:13) indicates. Believing in the Son is closely connected with accepting the proclamation. But the question remains: Is the expression 'having the Son' a synonym for 'believing in the Son?' Or does 'having' the Son involve something more than this? We get some help from the 'abiding' language of Fourth Gospel (John 6:56; 14:23; 15:4-7). As far as it relates to believers abiding in Christ, it denotes continuing loyalty and obedience to Christ, but it is not exhausted by this. There is an ontological dimension to it as well. As far as it relates to Christ abiding in believers, it clearly has ontological significance. Allowing ourselves to be guided by the relevant material in the Fourth Gospel, we may say that to 'have the Son' means to be indwelt by the Son, something which, when viewed from the human perspective, takes place when people believe in him.²¹

To 'have the Son' means to believe in, trust in, and rely upon Jesus for salvation. Daniel Akin argues, "To possess the Son is to possess life in all its fullness. Holding to the biblical faith means possessing Christ himself, as well as the life the Father grants to those who trust his Son as Lord and Savior."²²

John also states in clear terms there is no other way to salvation, and therefore no other way to assurance of salvation, apart from faith in Jesus. Stott comments, "Eternal life is a free gift which God gives to those who believe in His Son, and the gift of life, the

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 183.

²²Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, The New American Commentary, vol. 38 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 202.

experience of fellowship with God through Christ which is eternal life (cf. Jn. xvii. 3), is God's final testimony to His Son (cf. verse 20)."²³

In seeking to lead the people to enjoy assurance of salvation John does not take his readers back to a past experience with Christ. He instead takes them to a present reality. He says, "Whoever has the Son has life," not whoever claimed to have once believed in the Son at some point in the past but shows no living vital relation to Jesus today. The possibility of assurance is connected to Jesus in that those who can truly have it are those who truly have Jesus. Akin writes,

God's testimony is that his Son is the only means by which one can receive the gift of eternal life, which by implication means that God has given his divine approval on the earthly ministry of his Son. In the current theological context, John is clearly and convictionally a 'theological exclusivist' with respect to salvation.²⁴

How can one who is dealing with doubt, and therefore seeking assurance, know if he "has the Son" (1 John 5:12a)? The record of Jesus' testimony in John's writings answers that question by an almost overwhelming use of the word "believe." John 3:15 says, "that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life." Also John 3:36 shows the same path to eternal life by stating, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him." John also records these words of Jesus, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (John 5:24). The answer to the question how can a person know if he "has the son" (1 John 5:12a) is found in answering another question: Are you relying on Jesus and Him only to save you from your sins and furthermore to take you to heaven when you die, or are you trusting in something other than Jesus? Stott explains,

John has previously written: 'he that believeth on the Son of God has the witness in himself' (10). He now puts the same truth in these words: *He that hath the son* (cf.

²³Stott, *The Epistles of John*, 183.

²⁴Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 202.

ii. 23 for another use of the verb *echein* to describe our personal possession of the Father through confessing the Son) *hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life* (literally, both times, ‘the life’, RV).²⁵

According to 1 John 5:12 those who are trusting in Christ alone have every right to claim assurance of salvation. It is also true that those who reject Christ have no hope of eternal life. Akin writes,

Conversely, if we reject the Son, we do not have life. As was stated above, John uses a parallel phrase to balance out the first part of the verse; however, there are two small but significant changes. The first is the addition of *tu theou* (‘of God’) to ‘the Son.’ John reminds his readers that the Father and the Son are inseparable and that it is impossible to have God as one’s Father without also acknowledging Jesus as his Son. The second is that the words *ten zoen* (‘life’) are placed before the verb. The second half of the verse literally reads, ‘The one not having the Son of God life does not have.’ This shift stresses the fact that those who reject God’s Son also reject the life the Father gives.²⁶

The assurance of salvation John speaks of should lead to a settled conviction for the true believer. John writes in verse 13, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). John wants saved people to know they are saved. According to Kruse, “Those ‘who believe’ are those who, along with the author, continue in the teaching about Jesus Christ that they heard from the beginning.”²⁷ Those who have trusted in Christ for salvation from sins penalty and power, and continue to rely on him can rightfully enjoy assurance of salvation. Akin says, “John writes this epistle ‘so that’ (*hina*) his readers might know they have eternal life.”²⁸ Stott is in agreement: “*That ye may know (eidete)* means, both in word and tense, not that they may gradually grow in assurance, but that they may possess here and now a present certainty of the life they have received in Christ.”²⁹ Not only does

²⁵Stott, *The Epistles of John*, 183.

²⁶Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 202-03.

²⁷Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 188.

²⁸Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 204.

²⁹Stott, *The Epistles of John*, 184.

John desire this assurance to be the experience of genuinely saved people but more importantly God the Holy Spirit who inspired the writing of this text so desires it. Stott continues on, “Throughout the Epistle John has been giving them criteria (doctrinal, moral, social) by which to test themselves and others. His purpose is to establish their assurance.”³⁰ The Lord wants His people to enjoy a settled assurance of their own salvation. The assurance spoken of here is not a feeling of being saved but instead a great confidence in a trusted friend to keep his word. The trusted friend in this case just happens to be the Lord, Jesus Christ. He will keep His word and those who trust in Him will not be disappointed (Rom 10:11).

The knowledge of eternal life that God wants his people to have is a settled knowledge of assurance. Akin asserts,

It is apparent that many in the church were being led astray by false teachings and made to doubt whether they really possessed eternal life. John therefore assures his readers that they can and *should* have confidence that they possess eternal life even now (‘have,’ *echete*, present tense).³¹

The assurance we seek is not just for an eternal life to be enjoyed in the future, but also in the here and now. Gary Burge says, “This is not just life God has given, it is ‘life *eternal*.’ And it is a gift to be possessed *now*. His present tense implies the enduring, reassuring effects of knowing our eternal destiny.”³²

What good will come of believers experiencing assurance of their salvation? The answer depends on the believers experience with doubt. Smalley comments, “John’s ultimate aim is to strengthen the faith of orthodox believers who belonged to his community.”³³ If the person has never entered into the tunnel of darkness of real and

³⁰Ibid., 185.

³¹Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 205.

³²Gary M. Burge, *Letters of John*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 213-14.

³³Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 289.

lasting doubt then the joy of assurance may become a neglected friend taken for granted on the journey home and not called upon until life is nearly over. For those, however, who have labored long under the cloud of doubt, experiencing genuine assurance will do wonders for them. They should be able to find greater joy in prayer. They will no longer feel they are under condemnation each time they approach the throne of grace but instead feel like a welcome child of God. They will have greater confidence in witnessing. Sharing the gospel is difficult when one questions if they are a beneficiary of the gospel. They should find greater joy in daily living. Assurance of salvation takes the edge off the pressure of everyday trials and afflictions. They should also find greater joy in their service to God. They will be able to serve with the hope of a reward in heaven. Maybe the greatest benefit of all is they should be able to enjoy peace in approaching death. When the enemy of all mankind comes near to them they will have already fought the battle for assurance and can close their eyes for the final time with hope of opening them on the other side and seeing their great King Jesus who has gone to prepare a place for them and promised them a home in heaven (John 14:1-6). Regardless of the place of assurance in the life of the believer, the call for those who teach and preach God's word is clear: We must proclaim that assurance of salvation is both possible and desirable. Burge writes,

We need to be bold about those things we know with certainty. We need to speak with conviction and assurance about God and his commitment to us. We need to say from the lectern and pulpit, 'God desires for us to be confident! God desires for us to be bold! God desires to purge doubt from our souls so that we can live enjoying the assurance of one who is eternally loved.'³⁴

Howard Marshall writes an excellent concluding statement on this most loved biblical passage on assurance. He writes, "The question whether we accept God's testimony or not is not a merely an academic one. On our answer to it depends the question whether or not we participate in eternal life."³⁵ Marshall goes on to write,

³⁴Burge, *Letters of John*, 222.

³⁵Howard I. Marshall. *The Epistles of John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1978), 241.

“Those who believe in the name of Jesus can be sure of their possession of eternal life.”³⁶

Assurance of salvation is both possible and desirable for the true believer.

Assurance of Salvation May Come through Trials

Things of great importance are tested: bridges that cars will drive on, safety systems on airplanes, and airbags on automobiles. First Peter 1:6-9 teaches that the genuineness of one’s faith may also be put to the test resulting in a more solid assurance of salvation. Peter writes,

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

This text reveals that believers may experience a test of their faith. John Calvin believed that if these tests do come they come, as the text clearly says, only ‘if necessary.’ He says, “*If need be*; the condition is to be taken for a cause; for he purposed to shew, that God does not, without reason, thus try his people; for, if God afflicted us without a cause, to bear it would be grievous.”³⁷ So when God does allow the testing of our faith it is out of necessity. Wayne Grudem comments, “Peter says therefore that Christians will experience grief only as it is necessary in the light of God’s great and infinitely wise purposes for them.”³⁸

While Peter does not go into the nature of the trials, he does say they will be varied, and they will cause grief to the recipient. Alan Stibbs writes, “There is here full, frank recognition that earthly trials cause deeply felt mental distress.”³⁹ Grudem adds,

³⁶Ibid., 243.

³⁷John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Epistle of Peter*, Calvin’s *Commentaries*, ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 33, emphasis original.

³⁸Wayne Grudem. *The First Epistle of Peter: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 62.

³⁹Alan Stibbs. *The First Epistle General of Peter*, Tyndale New Testament

The phrase *various trials* should also caution us against looking for any specific kind of persecution or suffering as the historical background for this letter. Since no one kind of trial or testing is in view, Peter's words have their application to all the trials which Christians experience (*cf.* Jas. 1:2).⁴⁰

These trials are for a specific purpose. According to 1 Peter 1:7 they are experienced, "so that the genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." What is the purpose of these trials? Is it so that one's faith can be shown to be genuine or is it so that Christ can get glory? Grudem writes, "Peter says that his readers may have to experience grief in various trial so that the genuineness of their faith *may redound to praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*"⁴¹ Grudem's statement only appears to be a restating of the verse. Genuine faith will be revealed through trials and Jesus will get glory when genuine faith is revealed.

In getting at the purpose of trials or tests in 1 Peter 1:6-7, J. Ramsey Michaels is helpful. He explains, "The long clause introduced by $\tau\upsilon\alpha$ explains the divine purpose and the final outcome of the readers' experience of suffering: i.e., the perfecting of their faith."⁴² Michaels' believes that this text is about developing one's faith. He cites James 1:3 and makes a parallel to this text in 1 Peter. But what about the "genuineness" spoken of by Peter: what role does this word play in the search for assurance? Stibbs writes, "God allows the trials in order to find out by testing the genuine element in men's professed faith."⁴³ He later comments,

Commentaries (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1959), 78.

⁴⁰Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 62.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 64.

⁴²J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 49 (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), 30.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 77.

That translates *hina*, ‘in order that’: verse 7 indicates the purpose of thus being put to grief. *The trial* (RV ‘proof’; RSV ‘genuineness’) *of your faith*. The Greek phrase refers to the approved residue of faith, that faith whose genuineness has thus been proved by testing.⁴⁴

While no believer wishes to go through painful trials, every believer wants to enjoy assurance of Salvation. John MacArthur states,

By analogy, God tests the believer’s faith to reveal its genuineness (cf. Job 23:10). (He does this not because He needs to discover who is a true believer, but so that believers will gain joy and confidence in their proven faith [cf. Abraham in Gen. 22:1-19, and the example of the seeds in shallow and thorny soils in Matt. 13:5-7]).⁴⁵

Painful trials may be the means God uses to deliver the joy of assurance of salvation. How will trials reveal the genuineness of one’s faith? These trials will show whether one will continue trusting in Christ or turn back from following Him. Those professing believers who possess a real saving faith will continue on in the faith, and those who do not have a real saving faith will not continue on.

So what kinds of trials might be used to test the validity of one’s faith? Scot McKnight sounds a helpful warning when applying this text to a modern, and especially American, culture. He reasons,

While we recognize differences between our world and Peter’s, we are not to trivialize the suffering of that church by finding cheap analogies and then pretend that such things are suffering for faithfulness to the Lord. Peter was addressing the impact salvation had on one’s life and how that changed life (and status) ran counter to the culture in which these Christians lived.⁴⁶

Douglas Harink is even more to the point as he charges,

The suffering and trials of which Peter writes are those that come upon believers when our lives are being morally, socially, and politically conformed to the way of Jesus Christ, a conformity that may put us at odds with the prevailing moral, social, and political realities of the wider world.⁴⁷

⁴⁴Ibid., 78.

⁴⁵John MacArthur, Jr., *1 Peter, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 2004), 43.

⁴⁶Scot McKnight, *1 Peter, The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 76-77.

⁴⁷Douglas Harink, *1 & 2 Peter, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 48.

Taking into account, however, the types of trials Job experienced while the validity of his faith was in question (Job 1:1-2:8), one might be given a fair amount of biblical latitude in the types of trials that could be used to test faith's validity. One trial could be a tragic event such as the death of a loved one, or a sudden loss of income, or the unexpected end of a marriage. Another type of trial could be the enormous amount of world suffering. If God is both real and good then why is there so much pain and suffering in the world? Questions like that one have caused many professing Christians to ponder the validity of the faith they cling to for eternal life. Another type of test could be classified as intellectual challenges. This challenge could come in the form of the college classroom or from peers at work asking probing questions that have not been thought through by the professing believer causing them to wonder if they really do have a sound conviction. Some are tested through mental and emotional struggles. These struggles may take the form of depression or simply negative self-talk which the professing believer has not yet learned to control. Another form of trial may be from personal hurts experienced by the professing Christian. Any of these painful life experiences could serve as trials that could be used to prove the genuineness of one's faith. The most obvious form of trial would likely be outright persecution suffered because of one's loyalty to Christ. When the believer is called upon to suffer for following Jesus then the reality of that person's faith will soon be discovered.

Peter also speaks of several things that will happen when the faith of the genuine believer is put to the test. One is that Jesus Christ will receive praise and glory and honor (1 Peter 1:7b). A second is a faith that continues to love Jesus even though the believer cannot see Him visibly (1 Peter 1:8). A third result of a tested faith will be the salvation of one's soul (1 Peter 1:9). The salvation being spoken of here seems to have more of a present element than future. MacArthur asserts,

Peter is not looking at the future but at the here and now; one could literally render **obtaining** (*komizomenoi*), 'presently receiving for yourselves.' The root, *komizo*, means 'to receive what is deserved.' Flowing out of believers personal fellowship with Christ is the result due them, **the present outcome of their faith, namely the salvation of their souls. Salvation** refers to believers' constant, present deliverance from the penalty and power of sin – from its guilt (Rom. 6:18; Eph. 1:7; Col. 2:13-

14), condemnation (Rom. 8:1), wrath (Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10), ignorance (Rom. 10:3; Gal. 4:8; 1 Tim. 1:13), distress, confusion, hopelessness (1 Cor. 15:17; 1 Peter 1:3), and dominion (Rom. 6:10-12).⁴⁸

Those who teach and preach must make members of their churches aware that their faith claim may be tested. The possible reality of a coming faith test must be spoken from the pulpit, taught in Sunday school classes, and passed along in the congregation's approach to mentoring, or disciple-making. Professing Christians who are not prepared for the likelihood of a coming faith test will be devastated when the harsh reality comes if they have not been warned of its approach.

Assurance of Salvation Is Seen in One Sure Sign

First John 2:3 says the saved know they are saved if they keep God's commandments. John gives this message to his readers, "And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments." John could not be more clear in this verse that one of the signs of genuine conversion is that the believer keeps the commandments of God. Commenting on John's use of certain words in this verse, Burge writes,

John likewise uses grammar carefully. 'We know that *we have come to know him*' disguises a perfect tense verb, which in Greek means not simply that knowledge is a one-time enlightenment, but rather a past experience with ongoing present consequences. Knowledge for John is experiential, not speculative and abstract. It reveals itself in present activity, namely, the continuing reflex to obey God. Therefore, people who make some claim that they know God must have evidence in their daily lives that they are conforming their decision-making to his will.⁴⁹

Akin writes about this present activity which reveals faith in his comments on 1 John 2:3: "The initial phrase, *kai en touto*, 'now by this,' is transitional in the Greek text and thus indicates that John is addressing a different issue."⁵⁰ Akin further says, "The condition put forth by John is that we can have assurance that we know 'him' if we obey

⁴⁸Ibid. Emphasis original.

⁴⁹Burge, *Letters of John*, 97.

⁵⁰Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 89.

(keep) his commandments.”⁵¹ This verse teaches that the believer who enjoys a biblical assurance is not resting on a decision to accept Christ that was made some years ago but that brought with it no fruit of a changed life. True assurance is enjoyed by those who have faith in Christ and are seeing obedience to the commands of Christ becoming their normative life experience. Akin reasons,

Real knowledge of God contains an intellectual, moral, and spiritual component that cannot be separated. The ‘knowledge’ of God described throughout the text of Scripture is not only intellectual but also experiential and dynamic. This knowledge is not gained through abstract speculation but through living life in a spiritual relationship with the one true God.⁵²

When John says, “And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we *keep his commandments*” which commandments are being referenced? How obedient does a person have to be to have assurance of salvation? Is there a scale or a standard by which one can be judged? Stott says,

We may know that we have come to know Him (perfect tense, *egnokamen*) only if we *keep his commandments*. Only if we obey Him can we claim to *know* Him, not to have accurate information about Him merely, but to have become personally acquainted with Him. If it is objected that in this case no-one knows God because no-one is perfectly obedient, we may reply with Calvin: ‘he does not mean that those who wholly satisfy the Law keep His commandments (and no such instance can be found in the world), but those who strive, according to the capacity of human infirmity, to from their life in obedience to God.’ The word for *keep (terein)* ‘expresses the idea of watchful, observant obedience’ (Law).⁵³

Those who want assurance must then be those who are claiming faith in Christ as their only hope for salvation, and then reveal by a continual striving for obedience to His commands that they do in fact belong to Him. Smalley has a helpful insight on obedience as proof of salvation. He writes,

A simple test by which we may *all* measure our faith, our knowledge of God (and John is closely identifying himself with his readers at this point), is the extent of our moral obedience. Do we obey God’s orders? A related question is whether our

⁵¹Ibid., 90.

⁵²Ibid., 91.

⁵³Stott, *The Epistles of John*, 90.

obedience is continuous (note the use of the present tense, *πηρωμευ*, "we obey," in this phrase).⁵⁴

John is not asking how often we fail in our efforts to obey. He is saying that a mark of a saved person is that he or she is an order taker. They hear God's commands and act upon them. They seek to conform their lifestyle to His will as revealed in his word. Smalley continues, "Here is the test: and it is expressed conditionally: "we can be sure that we know him *if* we (habitually) obey his orders" (cf. Hos. 4:1-2)."⁵⁵ Which orders are in view? Again Smalley comments, "The moral law of God as a whole is represented by the "orders" (*εντολαζ*) to which John refers, and to which (he says) obedience is necessary."⁵⁶ As we see our love for Jesus resulting in obedience to God's commands then we can be sure, according to 1 John 2:3, that we have been born of God and that heaven will be our home.

Are there other signs of assurance in 1 John? Yes, there are several. MacArthur in his book *Saved Without a Doubt*, lists several signs of assurance from the book of 1 John. While his list does not appear in list form in the book with the referencing Scriptures for each item, it will be listed that way for the purpose of this chapter. MacArthur calls his list "Eleven Tests From An Apostolic Expert."⁵⁷ His list takes the form of eleven questions asked from the book of 1 John.⁵⁸ The questions are as follows: From 1 John 1:2-3 he asks, "Have You Enjoyed Fellowship With Christ and The Father?" In reference to 1 John 1:5 he asks, "Are You Sensitive To Sin?" He points to 1 John 2:3 and asks, "Do You Obey God's Word?" For MacArthur's fourth question he looks to 1 John 2:15 and

⁵⁴Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 45.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 45-46.

⁵⁷John MacArthur, *Saved without a Doubt: Being Sure of Your Salvation*, 2nd ed. (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2006), 81.

⁵⁸*Ibid.* 83-107.

asks, “Do You Reject This Evil World?” For question number 5 he brings up 1 John 3:2-3 and asks, “Do You Eagerly Await Christ’s Return?” Next he goes to 1 John 3:4-10 and asks, “Do You See A Decreasing Pattern Of Sin In Your Life?” Question 7 comes from a combination of 1 John 3:10 and 2:9-11 and asks, “Do You Love Other Christians?” Moving through the book of 1 John, MacArthur goes forward to 3:22 and asks, “Do You Experience Answered Prayer?” Next he looks at 1 John 4:13 and asks, “Do You Experience The Ministry Of The Holy Spirit?” The tenth question comes from 1 John 4:1-3 and asks, “Can You Discern Between Spiritual Truth and Error?” The eleventh and final question from MacArthur’s list goes back to 1 John 3:13 and he asks, “Have You Suffered Rejection Because Of Your Faith?” This approach seems to get at the heart of the book of 1 John. A professing Christian can look at these questions and their corresponding texts, along with the aid of others in the Christian community and very likely be led to some helpful conclusions regarding assurance of salvation.

Assurance of Salvation May Be Challenged by Other Texts

What about those texts that may leave people in doubt about whether one can really know for sure whether or not assurance is possible during their lifetime? Matthew 7:21-23 is one such example of people who think they are saved but who will discover after it is too late that they are not. The text reads,

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’

These professing believers give many outward signs of belonging to Christ and his church, but they are in fact false professors. This reality, however, is not a case against the possibility of assurance. A closer look at the text shows that even though their life contained some religious activity it was characterized by lawlessness (Matt 7:23). They

could have studied the Scriptures for themselves and discovered that they did not match the credentials of a true convert.

Another text that raises questions about the possibility of assurance is 1 John 2:18. In this text there are some who were at one time part of the Christians fellowship, but for some reason they have separated themselves. John writes,

Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.

Once again the reader can see there is a reason for the separation of these professing believers. They no longer walk with the disciples because they really never were part of the disciples. This text does not dispute the possibility of assurance, but instead proves it. First John 2:18-19 reveals that in time one's profession will likely prove to be true or false depending on his continued fellowship with the people of God. God is not ambiguous about the issue of assurance and certainly is that made clear in the book of 1 John. Stott comments regarding the emphasis of John in his epistle, and ultimately the emphasis of the Holy Spirit,

His emphasis is important because it is common today to decry any claim to assurance of salvation, to dismiss it as presumptuous, and to affirm that no certainty is possible on this side of death. But certainty and humility do not exclude one another. If God's revealed purpose is not only that we should hear, believe and live, but also that we should know, presumptuousness lies in doubting His word, not in trusting it.⁵⁹

Another text calling into question the possibility of assurance during this life time is Hebrews 3:14. The writer says, "For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end." This text could at the very least cause one to doubt that assurance is possible in this lifetime due to the fact that the author says "if we hold our original confidence firm to the end" (Heb 3:14). The argument would be that since

⁵⁹Stott, *The Epistles of John*, 185.

one does not know when the end will be then one cannot possibly have assurance until the end, therefore one cannot possibly have assurance in this lifetime. The author's point does not seem to be that he desires to challenge the possibility of assurance but instead to build on the doctrine of perseverance. Assurance is so widely taught in the Scripture, as has been seen in this paper, that the case for assurance in this lifetime far outweighs any case against its possibility.

Another text that could present a struggle for some who are grappling with assurance is Hebrews 6:4-6. The author writes,

For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then fall away, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

A surface reading of this text could cause one who is dealing with doubt to think that they once possessed salvation, have since fallen away, and now it is impossible for them to be brought again to repentance. A deeper study of the text, however, shows that this meaning is not the one intended by the author. MacArthur is helpful with his commentary on Hebrews as he asserts,

First of all, we should notice that this passage makes no reference at all to salvation. There is no mention of justification, sanctification, the new birth, or regeneration. Those who have once been enlightened are not spoken of as born again, made holy, or made righteous. None of the normal New Testament terminology for salvation is used. In fact, no term used here is ever used elsewhere in the New Testament for salvation, and none should be taken to refer to it in this passage.⁶⁰

If the author of Hebrews is not referencing salvation then what is he speaking of? Once again, MacArthur offers meaningful insight:

The enlightenment spoken of here has to do with intellectual perception of spiritual, biblical truth. In the Septuagint, the Greek word (*photizo*) several times is translated 'to give light by knowledge or teaching.' It means to be mentally aware of something,

⁶⁰John MacArthur, Jr. *Hebrews*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1983), 142.

to be instructed, informed. It carries no connotation of response—of acceptance or rejection, belief or disbelief.⁶¹

The author of Hebrews is not speaking to those who have been born again but instead to those who have understood the gospel and have not yet acted on it. The truths in this text do not challenge the biblical teaching on assurance of salvation.

The conclusion of this chapter is that assurance is possible for true believers in this lifetime. A further conclusion is that God expects his children to seek after assurance and that he has given us the means by which to examine ourselves to determine whether we are candidates for it. This assurance may come by way of great trial and tribulation. However, once it is gained, it is a great blessing that leads to an unspeakable love for our unseen Savior. Therefore any struggle to reach assurance that results in the fruit of a greater love for Christ and devotion to him will have seemed like no struggle at all.

⁶¹Ibid.

CHAPTER 3
THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ISSUES RELATED
TO DEALING WITH DOUBTS AND ASSURANCE
ABOUT SALVATION

Chapter 3 deals with theoretical and practical issues related to this project. This chapter will consider the views of three conservative theologians; Wayne Grudem, Charles Ryrie, and Millard Erickson, regarding why they think people doubt their salvation, and what they believe about the possibility of assurance. This information will be compiled into a list of possible reasons for doubts about one's salvation. The chapter will then research the assurance counseling practices of three biblically conservative practitioners: John MacArthur, Jay Adams, and John Piper. Their best practices will be considered as to how they can be duplicated by persons who will be involved in counseling others who are seeking assurance of salvation.

Wayne Grudem on Assurance and Doubt

Why do people doubt their salvation, and is it possible to enjoy lasting assurance? In answer to the second question, theologian Wayne Grudem believes assurance of salvation is possible, and offers questions to help guide those who may be in doubt about their salvation to discover if they are candidates for assurance. Grudem writes, "We can list three categories of questions that a person could ask of himself or herself."¹ Grudem's first question is, "Do I have a present trust in Christ for salvation?"²

¹Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 803.

²Ibid.

Grudem, in asking this question, attempts to weed out those whose faith in Christ goes back to an event that happened many years ago. Grudem cites a text from the book of Hebrews and writes, “The author of Hebrews says, ‘We share in Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end’ (Heb. 3:14) and encourages his readers to be imitators of those ‘who *through faith* and patience inherit the promises’” (Heb. 6:12).³

The reader will notice Grudem’s emphasis on the present reality of faith. He writes,

The emphasis on *present* faith in Christ stands in contrast to the practice of some church ‘testimonies’ where people repeatedly recite details of a conversion experience that may have happened 20 or 30 years ago. If a testimony of saving faith is genuine, it should be a testimony of faith that is active this very day.⁴

Grudem’s question could prove helpful to alert those who are in a spiritual slumber regarding the things of God. Those, however, who already doubt their salvation may have a hard time answering whether they have a present trust in Christ. Part of the problem for many who doubt their salvation is the subjective understanding of their faith and the inability to be objective regarding their own relationship with the Lord. In other words, they cannot confidently say if they have a present trust in Christ because they are likely looking to emotions to tell them they are saved. People who doubt need to turn elsewhere for assurance.

Grudem’s next question may prove even more difficult for the one struggling with doubt. He asks, “Is there evidence of a regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in my heart?”⁵ Grudem then list some of the ways the Holy Spirit may give evidence of his regenerating work. He writes, “First, there is a subjective testimony of the Holy Spirit within our hearts bearing witness that we are God’s children (Rom 8:15-16; 1 John 4:13).”⁶ The “subjective testimony”⁷ to which Grudem is referring is the inward sense

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., 804.

often experienced by new believers that they are children of God. However, those who are in doubt about salvation have lost this inward sense of the Spirit's testimony. Grudem lists other less subjective works of the Spirit as he writes, "In addition, if the Holy Spirit is genuinely at work in our lives, he will be producing the kind of character traits that Paul calls 'the fruit of the Spirit' (Gal. 5:22)."⁸ The traits mentioned in this verse should be visible to others and would allow those seeking assurance to invite the body of Christ into the process of helping one to gain confidence about their salvation. Grudem continues, "Another evidence of work of the Holy Spirit is continuing to believe and accept the sound teaching of the church."⁹ These works of the Holy Spirit are less subjective and easier for the struggling believer to enlist the opinion of others to discover if they see evidence of conversion in their life.

Grudem's third question asks, "Do I see a long-term pattern of growth in my Christian life?"¹⁰ With this question the candidate for assurance is looking for real character change that has occurred over time which can be traced directly to one's relationship with Christ. Grudem explains himself, citing the apostle Peter,

He tells us that there are some character traits which, if we keep on increasing in them, will guarantee that we 'never fall' (2 Pet 1:10). He tells his readers to add to their faith 'virtue . . . knowledge . . . self-control . . . steadfastness . . . godliness . . . brotherly affection . . . love' (2 Pet 1:5-7).¹¹

The man or woman who is trusting in Christ and sees long-term character change has legitimate reason to believe he or she is saved. Grudem offers a helpful summary statement regarding his positive views on assurance. He writes, "The result of these three questions

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., 805.

¹¹Ibid.

that we can ask ourselves should be to give strong assurance to those who are genuinely believers.”¹² While the first or second question posed by Grudem may not be sufficient to lead a struggling believer to assurance, the combination of the three could prove very helpful to those who are having a hard time knowing if they are children of God.

So then, for Grudem, what would cause a genuine believer to doubt their salvation? He seems to think that occasional doubt is a normal part of the Christian life.

He writes,

Sanctification is a lifelong process. If you are a believer in Jesus, at times it will seem as if the process is going at a faster rate than you ever thought possible. . . . At other times, you will wonder if there is any life inside you at all. It’s at these times that you may wonder if you are even truly a Christian.¹³

Grudem even offers a helpful suggestion for what to do when these times of doubt occur. He writes, “When the doubts begin to fill your thought, pray the prayer found in Mark 9:24: ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’”¹⁴ Another reason for doubt, which can be drawn from Grudem’s views, is that some people doubt their salvation, and maybe rightfully so, because they are backsliding. Grudem writes, “On the other hand, this doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, if rightly understood, should cause genuine worry, and even fear, in the hearts of any who are ‘backsliding’ or straying away from Christ.”¹⁵ Grudem suggests that those who are not living out their profession have no right to assurance of salvation. He writes,

Such persons must clearly be warned that only those who persevere to the end have been truly born again. If they fall away from their profession of faith in Christ and

¹²Ibid.

¹³Wayne Grudem, *Christian Beliefs: Twenty Basics Every Christian Should Know* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 106.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 346.

life of obedience to him, they may not really be saved—in fact, the evidence that they are then giving is that they are not saved, and they never really were saved.¹⁶

So Grudem clearly believes that assurance is possible and should be sought by genuine believers, and that doubt is part of the normal Christian life. He also believes that those who profess faith in Christ, but show no evidence of the life of Christ in them, should be warned of the dangers of a false profession.

Charles Ryrie on Assurance and Doubt

Theologian Charles Ryrie also has clear views on assurance of salvation and the reality of doubts in the life of believers. He gives the following definition, “Assurance is the realization that one possesses eternal life. Lack of assurance often brings unnecessary but terrible trauma to a person’s life.”¹⁷ Ryrie’s comment regarding the mental and emotional struggle associated with the battle for assurance indicates an awareness of what is at stake in the life of the believer. Those lacking assurance will struggle spiritually. His comment on what assurance is shows that what is not at stake is the eternal security of the believer. One can have eternal security without having assurance of that security.

In Ryrie’s view, what causes a Christian to doubt his or her salvation?

Four reasons may be suggested. . . . Some doubt the reality of their committal to Christ. Sometimes this may be connected with the inability to pinpoint a time when one received Christ. Regeneration occurs at a specific point in time. People are either saved or lost at any given moment. No one grows into conversion.¹⁸

Ryrie believes that some struggle with assurance because they do not recall the moment of their spiritual rebirth. This person could conceivably evidence other manifestations of spiritual life but because they cannot recall the time and date when they called on the Lord, or when the Holy Spirit brought conversion to their soul, they really question if

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 380.

¹⁸Ibid.

they have any legitimate claim to eternal life. Ryrie suggests a simple cure for this dilemma, “Such doubt may be dispelled by calling on the name of the Lord again (and again and again, if necessary). No one can be born again more than one time, but one may honestly tell the Lord his doubt and call on Him for salvation again.”¹⁹ While one may appreciate Ryrie’s compassion in suggesting a person call on the Lord multiple times for assurance, the practice he suggests could lead to an insecure faith.

A second reason for doubt listed by Ryrie is that “some lack assurance because they question the correctness of the procedure they went through when they expressed faith in Christ.”²⁰ While the Bible is very clear that people who wish to be saved must “Repent and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15b), there is unfortunately much confusion about what form repentance and faith must take. Ryrie writes about the thinking process of those who question the procedure they went through to trust Christ:

I did not go forward. Am I really saved? Did I pray the proper prayer? I received Christ privately. Is this sufficient, or do I need to make some kind of public demonstration? This problem, which is very real to more people than it should be, has been aggravated by elevating some method of invitation to the place where it almost becomes the means of salvation.²¹

This problem can probably be dealt with pastorally by stressing each week to a local congregation the difference between receiving Christ and responding to a public church invitation.

Ryrie’s third reason for doubt is based on a theological distinctive. He writes, “If one does not believe in the security of the believer, then he will undoubtedly lack assurance more than once in his lifetime.”²² Ryrie’s logic seems simple enough. If one

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 380. Emphasis added.

²²Ibid.

believes they can lose their salvation then it is highly likely that during one's lifetime they will feel themselves to have lost it.

Ryrie's fourth reason for doubt is based on lifestyle. He writes, "When sin, especially a serious sin, enters the believer's life, then doubt sometimes accompanies such an experience."²³ Again it is easy to follow Ryrie's logic. Any true follower of Christ hopes to overcome sin. So if he or she falls and commits a serious sinful act, he or she may begin to question their salvation. But Ryrie turns to the Bible for the defense of this believer. He writes,

Security does not grant a license to sin, but to have assurance we need to realize that Christians will sin, and that sin does not cause us to lose our salvation. The normal Christian experience never includes sinlessness, for 'we all stumble in many ways' (Js 3:2).²⁴

Ryrie's reasons for doubt are simple and would make sense to the average Christian. For some who are struggling with doubt, they might find their answer to their doubt in going through this list of reasons for doubt. Others will need more help.

In comparing the reasons for doubt listed by Ryrie with those listed by Grudem there are two observations that could be made. First, Grudem is helpful because he takes the initial edge off of the experience of doubt by stating that it is a normal part of the Christian life. Everyone likes to feel that their experience is normative. While it does not take away the pain of the experience of doubt, it may take away some of the fear. Grudem's comment is helpful in that sense. Ryrie's list, however, is helpful because it deals with very specific issues and examples that the one struggling with doubt may encounter. Reproducing and working through Ryrie's list of four reasons why Christians doubt their salvation, with a person struggling with doubt could be very helpful in leading that person to experience assurance of their salvation. The list also shows a pastoral sensitivity and

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

concern that anyone dealing with doubt would find helpful. Both theologians offer input that will be helpful in developing material for counseling others in dealing with doubt and assurance.

While Ryrie gives clear, common sense reasons for doubt, he also offers a simple path to assurance. Ryrie asks,

How can I have assurance? The Bible offers two grounds for assurance. The objective ground is that God's word declares that I am saved through faith. Therefore, I believe Him and His word and am assured that what He says is true (John 5:24; 1 John 5:1, 13).²⁵

The first type of assurance mentioned by Ryrie could be referred to as assurance by faith. The believer is taking God at his word. He or she is trusting in the immovable promises of Scripture rather than shifting sands of human emotions.

Ryrie also mentions a less objective basis for assurance of salvation. He writes,

The subjective ground relates to my experiences. Certain changes do accompany salvation, and when I see some of those changes, and then I can be assured that I have received the new life. Some of those changes are keeping His commandments (1 John 2:3); loving other believers (1 John 2:9-11; 3:14); and doing right things (1 John 2:29; 3:9).²⁶

In this second approach Ryrie gives the believer some evidences of salvation to look for on the outside rather than the inside. The believer may ask questions of himself or herself and soon discover if he or she deserves assurance of salvation. But what about those persons who lean toward becoming compulsive and will begin to wonder if they demonstrate enough evidence of a saved person? Ryrie addresses this question as he writes,

It goes without saying that I will never keep all His commandments, nor will I love all other believers, nor will I always do right things. But the fact that these experiences have come into my life, whereas they were absent before, gives assurance that the new life is present (2 Cor 5:17).²⁷

²⁵Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe in Jesus Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1989), 143.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

Ryrie believes there is another way in which assurance is possible for the true believer. In his teaching on the role of the Holy Spirit, Ryrie explains how the Spirit helps the believer with assurance:

The Spirit assures us that we are God's children (Rom 8:16). This position also makes us heirs of God with Jesus Christ. Undoubtedly assurance is given to the Christian through an increased understanding of some of the things God does when He saves a person. Thus the Spirit's work of assuring may involve His ministry of teaching. For instance, assurance will deepen when we understand what it means to be sealed with the Spirit and to have the Spirit as an earnest of the completion of our redemption. Understanding what it means to be joined to the risen, undying body of Christ will also nurture assurance.²⁸

Ryrie seems to believe that while a believer may suddenly lose a sense of being a child of God they can, aided by the Holy Spirit, grow in their appreciation of Bible truth, and in this way become convinced that they are God's child. This approach to experiencing assurance sounds like a sort of back door into the realm of assurance. But since doubt and assurance could be classified as spiritual warfare, a back door approach may be what is needed for some who struggle. At any rate the work of the Spirit in leading God's people into assurance reveals the love of God for his people and the relational nature of our Lord. God helps his people and is able to develop ways to convince them that they are his children.

In comparing Ryrie's views on assurance with those of Grudem, one could start by saying both are simple and straight forward. Both point to the areas of faith, external evidence, and the work of the Holy Spirit as the path to experiencing assurance. Grudem is helpful in putting these categories in a question format which make it easy for the believer to examine himself or herself in accordance with 2 Corinthians 13:5. While both approaches are helpful, Ryrie may come across as more pastoral in his writing, which would be encouraging to one struggling for assurance, while Grudem may be more evangelistic which would be helpful to the one seeking assurance who is not worthy of it. They each could prove very helpful to those who struggle. Their reasons for doubt are

²⁸Charles C. Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), 86-87.

biblical as are their grounds for assurance. The lists offered by both men could easily be developed into a counseling method that could be used to help those who are seeking assurance.

Millard Erickson on Assurance and Doubt

The third theologian to be considered is Millard Erickson. Erickson is helpful as he offers definitions of the terms in question. He defines assurance this way, “Assurance (of salvation). The divinely given confidence of the believer that he or she is truly saved.”²⁹ What is interesting about Erickson’s view on assurance, as compared to Grudem and Ryrie, is that he says assurance is “divinely given.” Assurance, in Erickson’s view, is not something one can just figure out, or come to over time through counseling and hard work on their own, without the aid of the Holy Spirit. He believes assurance is God given. If it is God given then it is also true that God can take it away for a season if God so chooses. There are many reasons God might choose to put a hold on the assurance of one of his children, without in any way threatening their eternal security. God might wish to lead a believer into a deeper fellowship, or prepare him or her to minister to others in the area of assurance, or to get the attention of a believer so that person may better hear God’s call on his or her life. Whatever the reason, an interrupted sense of assurance could be an effective way of getting the attention of a child of God.

Erickson also offers a definition for doubt. He defines doubt this way: “Doubt, Religious. Uncertainty about the truthfulness of certain propositions, or a lack of consistent commitment to the object of religious trust. It is not to be confused with unbelief.”³⁰ One may deduct from Erickson’s definition of doubt that he views it more as a struggle over the acceptance of truth rather than the rejection of truth, which he would

²⁹Millard J. Erickson, *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 16.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 46.

classify as unbelief. A doubter, by Erickson's definition, is someone who has some unanswered questions. They may just need to work through some issues.

What does Erickson believe, however, about assurance and doubt in the life of God's people? Erickson, like Grudem and Ryrie, believes that assurance is both possible, desirable, and the will of God:

God intends that each person should not only be saved, but also know that he or she is saved. John indicated that his reason for writing his Gospel was 'that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name' (John 20:31).³¹

Erickson is very clear in his conviction about the possibility of assurance for the true believer. He goes on to speak of the importance of assurance in the life of the believer:

It is possible to have salvation without being certain of it. This is not a desirable situation, because the Christian without assurance does not work effectively. Inner strength and resources are turned inward to cope with anxieties and doubts.³²

Erickson shows more insight here than both Grudem and Ryrie as he gets to the heart of the issue of doubt in the life of the true believer. Those who struggle with doubt spend their time in worship, quiet time, Sunday school, Bible reading, prayer, going over and over the nagging question of whether they belong to Christ and have a right to assurance of salvation and the promise of a home in heaven when they die. Having spent so much energy on the search and in many cases ending up without real assurance they have little ministry to offer others, either evangelistically or ministerially.

Erickson offers some reasons why a genuine believer may lack assurance:

Lack of assurance may result from several factors. It may come from our excessive preoccupation with a certain type of emotional experience, which we may think every believer must have. Our failure to have such an experience creates uncertainty. Or we may have an abnormal concern over our lack of spiritual perfection.³³

³¹Millard J. Erickson. *Does It Matter That I'm Saved? What the Bible Teaches about Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 115.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid., 116.

In the first instance, Erickson raises the same concern of Ryrie that one may be overly concerned about a form of response to Jesus' call to repent and believe (Mark 1:15) rather than the call to repent and believe. Erickson continues,

As we noted earlier, the experience of conversion varies greatly from one person to another. Furthermore, we should measure our progress in the Christian life by our distance from the beginning point, not our nearness to the ultimate destination. If we want certainty we can gain it only by giving our attention to what is certain. We can't concentrate on the unclear.³⁴

Erickson mentions three sources of assurance to help the believer discover if he or she is a candidate for it. He writes,

The first source of assurance is the Word of God. . . . And what do those Scriptures tell us? Wherever we find genuine trust in Jesus Christ, there we have new life. 'But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name' (John 1:12).³⁵

Erickson, like Ryrie, takes the believer to the unshakable promises of God's Word first. The use of the Bible seems to be the best starting place for assurance as it is the only reliable source. Since salvation comes by faith (Rom 10:13) then it seems reasonable that assurance will be gained by faith as well. Unless assurance is a feeling, it is going to be a matter of trusting God to keep his word. The believer will gain assurance as he or she decides that God is trustworthy and will save all those who trust in Christ and him only for salvation (Eph 2:8-9).

Erickson moves into the realm of lifestyle for his second source of assurance. He writes,

The second source of assurance is the works of Christian living. In his first letter John pointed to several works. One is keeping the Lord's commandments (2:3-5). Accepting Christ is taking him as Savior and Lord, and this leads to obedience. . . . Another work John mentioned is love for the brethren (2:7-11; 3:11-18). . . . An additional work of Christian living is keeping the doctrine of Christ.³⁶

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid., 116-17.

The three works Erickson mentions are keeping God's commands, loving God's people, and continuing to believe Christian doctrine. These works can be easily identifiable in the life of a Christian. Erickson is on the same track as Grudem in looking for a long-term pattern of growth in the life of the believer. If the one seeking assurance is willing to utilize the larger body of Christ and include the input of those who intimately know him or her, they may be much encouraged. Other people may be able to affirm the evidences of the life of Christ they see in the life of the assurance candidate.

Erickson offers one final source of assurance:

The final source of assurance is the witness of the Holy Spirit. . . . The Spirit works in several ways to bring about the conviction, the deep-settled certainty, that we are God's children. One means is through the sense of sonship. The Spirit, Paul said, moves us to cry out, 'Abba! Father!' (Rom 8:15; Gal. 4:6).³⁷

Like Ryrie and Grudem, Erickson emphasizes the role of the Spirit in granting assurance to God's people. The ability to, from the heart, call God our Father is undoubtedly a gift and work of the Holy Spirit. When this work is diminished, or clouded over for any reason, it is surely a great source of grief to the true child of God. So Erickson, like Grudem and Ryrie sees that assurance is possible and desirable for the child of God and offers reasons why a believer may experience doubt about their salvation.

Reasons for Assurance and Doubt

What can be learned from gathering the insights of these three theologians? Each offers reasons why true believers may doubt their salvation. If those reasons were compiled in one list they could be summed up in five reasons believers doubt. First, some Christians doubt because of unnoticeable progress. Unnoticeable progress is when the believer cannot detect any notable growth in their Christian life. A second reason is sinful lifestyle. A sinful lifestyle is when one who professes to be a Christian has fallen into a particular sin, or is continuing in a sinful pattern of living. In the latter case the professing

³⁷Ibid., 117-18.

person should be warned that he or she may not be a true believer. A third reason for doubt is a lack of recall of a conversion experience. The believer cannot state the date and time of their regeneration. A fourth reason for doubt could be related to the testimony of others. The believer in this case is overly concerned about the form of calling on Jesus rather than the command to repent and believe the gospel (Mark 1:15). A fifth reason for doubt could be due to theological distinctives. Those who do not hold to the doctrine of the security of the believer are likely to experience times of doubting their salvation. This list fairly well gathers the views of the three theologians under consideration and could be used in helping those who are struggling with doubts about their salvation.

The three theologians also hold views about the path to assurance that can be summarized into a list. According to Grudem, Ryrie, and Erickson, where should a believer look to experience assurance of salvation? The first consideration is the faith question: Do I trust in Christ as presented in the Word of God? Each theologian takes the doubter to the Word of God, and each one is looking for a present faith in Christ. The second consideration is evidence of regeneration: Do I see evidence in my life that I am a saved person? While the three men did not all look in the exact same areas, they were all looking for evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit. They wanted to see fruit of the Spirit, a love for the brethren, keeping God's commands, and the inward witness of the Holy Spirit telling the person that he or she is saved. The third consideration is long-term change: Do I see real character change that can be attributed to my relationship with God? The candidate here is being asked if there are good things in their life now that were not there before they claimed to believe in Jesus. Once again, these questions fairly accurately reflect a synthesis of the views of the three theologians being considered and would prove very helpful in dealing with those who are seeking assurance. Now to be considered are the views of three practitioners, John MacArthur, Jay Adams, and John Piper, on assurance and doubt as well as their assurance counseling practices.

John MacArthur's Views on Doubt and Assurance and His Assurance Counseling Practices

To understand John MacArthur's views on doubt and assurance and his approach to assurance counseling, one must first understand his view of the role of a pastor. MacArthur writes,

Of all the titles and metaphors used to describe spiritual leadership, the most fitting is that of a shepherd. As shepherds, pastors are to guide their flocks from going astray, lead them to the green pastures of God's Word, and defend them against the savage wolves (Acts 20:29) that would ravage them.³⁸

MacArthur then clarifies his understanding of the primary role of a shepherd of God's people. He writes, "A shepherd who fails to feed his flock will not have a flock for long. His sheep will wander off to other fields or die of starvation. Above all, God requires of His spiritual shepherds that they feed their flocks."³⁹ MacArthur views his spiritual leadership role as that of a shepherd of God's people and his primary shepherding function is that of feeding God's people the Word of God, or the teachings of the Bible. His view of the role of a shepherd is important, as it will speak to his approach to dealing with assurance.

For MacArthur any attempt to discover true assurance of salvation must start with the Word of God. That's the advice he gives in his booklet by the title, *Examine Yourself*:

Are you a Christian? Many people who claim to be point to some event in the past to substantiate their claim. But inviting Jesus to come into your life in the past is not proof that you are genuinely saved. In 2 Corinthians 13:5 Paul says to the Corinthian church, "*Examine yourselves, whether you are in the faith; prove yourselves*" (emphasis added). He wouldn't have said that if some event in the past were obviously the answer. The Bible never verifies anyone's salvation by the past but by the present. If there is no evidence of salvation in your life now, you need to face the fact that you may not be a Christian. You need to examine yourself to see whether you are in the faith. How does one do that? Jesus shows us in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7).⁴⁰

³⁸John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Pastoral Ministry: How to Shepherd Biblically* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 22.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 23.

⁴⁰John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Examine Yourself* (Panorama City, CA: Grace to

MacArthur then proceeds to lay out a series of distinguishing marks of a true Christian. While the marks themselves are important, for the point here it suffices to say that he takes each of these marks from the text of the word of God. MacArthur would begin with Scripture when helping a person who is seeking assurance. He would help them discover from the Word of God if they are a person who does or does not deserve to have assurance of salvation.

The next thing that needs to be said about MacArthur's view on assurance is that he believes assurance is possible and desirable. He writes in his book *Saved Without a Doubt*, "It's true that someone can be saved and doubt it. One may go to heaven in a mist, not knowing for sure he's going, but that's certainly not the way to enjoy the trip."⁴¹ One can see in MacArthur a pastor's heart who wants believers to experience the joy of assurance of their salvation and not live in the agony of doubt over the eternal destiny of their soul.

Why do believers doubt their salvation according to MacArthur? He provides an extensive list of reasons stretched out over the length of a chapter in his book, *Saved Without A Doubt*. MacArthur writes, "Why do so many *Christians* lack assurance? What about the thousands stuck in spiritual depression? There are eight basic reasons."⁴² MacArthur then begins his list, which while it covers a chapter in his book, will be condensed to a paragraph in this paper:

Some lack assurance because they are under strong preaching on God's holy standard. . . . Other Christians lack assurance because they have difficulty accepting the concept of forgiveness. . . . Many people lack assurance because they do not understand that salvation is an utterly divine, totally sovereign operation. Assurance is built on the historical reality of what Jesus Christ accomplished. It is not a feeling without reason, and you will never have the *subjective feeling* of assurance until you

You, 1988), 7. Emphasis original.

⁴¹John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Saved without a Doubt: Being Sure of Your Salvation* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2006), 16.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 111.

comprehend the *objective truth* of the gospel. . . . Some Christians lack assurance because they don't know the exact time of their salvation. . . . Another reason many Christians lack assurance is they feel the pull of their unredeemed flesh and wonder whether they really have a new nature. . . . Some Christians become spiritually unstable because they can't see the hand of God in all their trials. . . . One of the most important ways the Holy Spirit ministers to believers is by assuring them of their salvation. A believer who's not living by the Spirit's power gives up that important ministry. . . . Perhaps the most obvious reason for lacking assurance is disobedience, because assurance is the reward for obedience.⁴³

While this list is extensive it is also helpful in showing a wide variety of reasons why a true believer may experience doubt about their salvation.

MacArthur is also helpful on the subject of assurance in offering a list of benefits of assurance. He writes, "Let's make this very practical by considering the blessings of such assurance."⁴⁴ He then goes on to offer an extensive list along with an explanation of each. For the purpose of this paper only the list will be included. He lists as blessings of assurance,

It makes you love and praise God. . . . It adds joy to all your earthly duties and trials. . . . It makes you zealous in obedience and service. . . . It gives you victory over temptation. . . . It makes you content, even if you have little in this world. . . . It removes the fear of death.⁴⁵

This list is important as it should stimulate the desire in the true believer to seek for assurance and for those who are not believers it may be used to reveal to them that they do not really love the things of God. MacArthur is both pastoral and thorough in dealing with a subject that if handled incorrectly may do more harm than good.

Having given his views on assurance and also much helpful information on reasons for doubt and blessings of assurance, we need to see how MacArthur would try to help one who is seeking to know if they really belong to God. Clues have already been given that MacArthur would be Word-centered in his approach, and he would call for a personal self-examination based on 2 Corinthians 13:5. In fact these two realities do not

⁴³Ibid., 111-12, 115, 117-18, 120-23.

⁴⁴Ibid., 151.

⁴⁵Ibid., 151-52.

come out as mere clues. MacArthur says as much in his study of Romans 5:1-11:

The New Testament teaches us two ways we can experience assurance. 1. Pure Doctrine One of the internal evidences—one of the things that gives us a sense of knowing we're saved—is our abiding in doctrine that is correct. . . . 2. Pure Living Pure living is the key to experiencing assurance in your salvation.⁴⁶

Knowing MacArthur's emphasis on the Word of God is helpful information when it comes to developing a helpful approach to assurance counseling, but are there any clues to his own assurance counseling methodology? Thankfully the answer is yes. While no specific counseling plan was discovered, advice was given. In his book, *Saved Without A Doubt*, MacArthur suggests a personal exercise to those who are struggling with doubt. He writes,

If you're lacking assurance—if you're plagued with doubts, have lost your joy, become useless in Christians service, empty in worship, cold in praise, passionless in prayer, and vulnerable to false teachers—whatever the problem, know there is a cure: obeying God's Word in the power of the Spirit.⁴⁷

Any reader of MacArthur's works would expect that he would direct a sufferer to the Word of God. What a reader might not suspect is the method he suggests when he writes,

Take a practical step now by applying an ancient technique to help you think through what God's word teaches about assurance. It's a question-and-answer process known as a catechism—the Greek work *katacheo* means 'to echo back.'⁴⁸

MacArthur goes on to offer a list of twelve catechism questions and answers dealing with the subject of assurance. The questions are personal and get at the heart of the kind of questions a person would ask who is seeking assurance. The catechism questions in MacArthur's list come from William Guthrie's, *The Christian's Great Interest*. Those who wish to use a catechism could use this list or develop something of their own.

The strength of MacArthur's views on doubt and assurance is thorough and well thought out. His insights will prove helpful in developing counseling curriculum for

⁴⁶John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Eternal Security: Romans 5:1-11* (Chicago: Moody, 1989), 59-60.

⁴⁷MacArthur, *Saved without a Doubt*, 125.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

those who are struggling with assurance. The strength of the catechism method is that it can be given as homework to a candidate for assurance. In fact, one's response to homework will reveal something about how important the issue of assurance really is to the candidate, or if the reason for doubt is already known to them and they are reluctant to deal with it. At any rate MacArthur's views and method will be helpful.

Jay Adams' Views on Doubt and Assurance and His Assurance Counseling Practices

Jay Adams, who is well-known in the field of biblical counseling, offers relevant insights on the subjects of doubt and assurance. In his book, *The Practical Encyclopedia of Christian Counseling*, he offers helpful articles for both. Adams writes on the subject of assurance:

Some counselees do not have assurance of their salvation. This may be because they have been taught that they may be saved and then lost again, because of some particular sin in their lives that they are holding onto, or because they look at their lives rather than to Christ for assurance.⁴⁹

Adams starts immediately offering reasons for a lack of assurance in the life of a believer. He touches on theological reasons and lifestyle reasons. He also reveals a right and wrong way to seek assurance. A wrong way, according to Adams, is to focus inwardly on oneself. A right way to seek assurance, again according to Adams, is to look to Christ and his finished work on the cross.⁵⁰

Adams, in his article on assurance, begins to move into counseling recommendations:

Counselors must make it clear that the only ground for assurance is the unfailing work of Christ. If the counselee is taught that he may be saved and lost, the counselor must endeavor to dissuade him from the belief. Using I Peter 1:3-5 may help to teach him the biblical truth of the perseverance of the saints.⁵¹

⁴⁹Jay E. Adams, *The Practical Encyclopedia of Christian Counseling* (Stanley, NC: Timeless Texts, 2003), 11-12.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid., 12.

Here Adams reveals his assurance counseling methodology as one that is Word-centered and focuses on discipleship. He seems to train counselors to help counselees renew their minds in accordance with Romans 12:1-2. Adams does not stop with a renewed mind, but recommends changed behavior as well. He writes, “In the end, it may also be necessary to encourage him to change churches and join one where he is taught correctly. Of course, it is always possible that a would-be counselee is not saved.”⁵² Adams seems to believe that at least some assurance and doubt issues are sin related when he writes,

What is the solution to doubt? Unlike many today who laud doubt as philosophically sophisticated, James considers doubt a moral matter and calls for the repentance of those who are double-minded about God and His Word (James 4:7-10). Counselors must do the same.⁵³

Any counselee dealing with doubts about salvation who is counseled by Adams should receive firm and biblical guidance in getting to the root of the problem.

Adams offers more specific insights into assurance counseling ideas. One is suggested use of Scriptures for assurance counseling. The list Adams recommends includes “Hebrews 4:16; 6:11, I Peter 1:3-5; II Peter 1:10; I John 5:13, 18, 19.”⁵⁴ Adams writes about the use of Scripture in counseling,

Like his Lord—who was the wonderful Counselor predicted by Isaiah—the counselor will find that all that he needs for the work of counseling is in the Bible. Jesus Christ needed no other text to become the world’s only perfect Counselor. He was that because He used the Scriptures more fully than anyone else either before or since.⁵⁵

Regarding the attitude with which the Bible must be used, Adams writes, “The minister who engages in scriptural counseling, like Him, believes that because the Holy Spirit inspired the Book for that purpose, the Bible *must* be used in counseling.”⁵⁶ Adams offers a

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid., 57.

⁵⁴Jay E. Adams, *The Use of Scriptures in Counseling* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian And Reformed, 1975), 94.

⁵⁵Ibid., 5.

⁵⁶Ibid.

strong personal defense on the use of Scriptures when he admonishes those who counsel,

Let no one, therefore, tell you that the scriptural counselor is inadequate and that he must take a back seat while learning from his pagan counterpart. The opposite is true, and it is about time that Christian counselors began to make the fact known.⁵⁷

Adams is a staunch defender of the biblical counseling method and Scripture is at the foundation of this approach.

Adams also offers insight in the role of emotions in assurance counseling and how to help those who are struggling with not feeling like they are saved. Adams writes about feelings:

When a counselee complains, 'I feel inferior (or stupid, or inadequate),' it is important to point out to him that he is not speaking *altogether* accurately. No one *feels* inferior, stupid, or inadequate. What he is expressing is not a feeling but a judgment or attitude or conviction or belief about himself.⁵⁸

What the person is saying, according to Adams, is he or she believes himself or herself to be inferior, stupid, or inadequate. Applying this understanding of feelings to the subject of assurance, Adams writes,

Counselees may say, 'But I don't feel saved.' That is understandable since the conviction that one is saved is not an emotion; assurance is not a feeling. One may *feel* afraid, or sad, or angry, etc., over doubts about salvation or elated, or peaceful over assurance of salvation, but he may not *feel* saved or unsaved. The condition is not an emotional state, it is a relationship to God that affects the emotions, to be sure, but it is *not in itself* a feeling.⁵⁹

In order to help a person who says they do not feel saved, the counselor must get to the beliefs behind the feelings. Adams offers suggestions to help in that process. First, he points the counselee to the Word of God. He writes, "The basic way to break through this vicious circle is to help the counselee to understand the biblical criteria for assurance and to help him to make his judgments on the basis of these."⁶⁰ Adams suggests helping the

⁵⁷Ibid., 16.

⁵⁸Jay E. Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual: The Practice of Nouthetic Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 113.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid., 114.

believer understand from the Bible what a saved person believes and looks like and then determining if the counselee has grounds for assurance. Adams then moves to the possibility that the counselee is not a candidate for assurance:

We have been assuming up to this point, that the lack of assurance was not a result of a state of non-conversion, but rather originated in a true believer largely from his feeling orientation. It is possible, of course, that the counselee may not be converted.⁶¹

Adams gives clear suggestions on what to do specifically after the biblical criteria of salvation have been discussed. He writes, “In most instances, after this discussion, the counselor will be wise to move directly to a consideration of the counselee’s life. Usually, dealing with sinful living will—in itself—bring the answer that is desired.”⁶² The answer that is desired is that the counselee, having confessed his sins, will experience assurance of his salvation. Adams writes in conclusion of this discussion, “One thing is certain, the genuine feelings of salvation (i.e., those that arise out of the conviction that one is saved) will come only out of a judgment soundly based upon the scriptural basis of such assurance.”⁶³ Adams offers a wonderful picture of assurance counseling where the counselee announces their feelings of not being saved, receives biblical criteria for salvation and the lifestyle to follow, looks at their own life in the mirror of the Word of God, and then becomes convinced that they are either saved or unsaved. Those who are saved should have the feelings that accompany conviction return to their life.

Adams’ approach to assurance counseling has much about it that is attractive. First, it deals clearly with the thorny issue of feelings by isolating them and helping the counselee and the counselor understand that they stem from a belief or a conviction. Second, his approach to assurance counseling is thoroughly biblical, which could give confidence to those who love the Word of God but are, however, struggling with

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid., 115.

assurance. Third, it appears to be very reproducible. Lay-persons could be trained in Adams' methods. On the down side, his method could be accused of being overly simplistic, and it seems that a problem would occur if those trained did not experience the expected outcome. All in all much can be learned from Adams about counseling in general and assurance counseling in particular. His approach will be helpful when preparing to train others to conduct assurance counseling.

John Piper's Views on Doubt and Assurance and His Assurance Counseling Practices

John Piper has written extensively on the subject of assurance of salvation. In *Pierced By The Word* he writes, "Christians are called to help fight for their own assurance and to help others fight for theirs. God means for us to know we are saved and to enjoy that bold confidence in the face of opposition and threat."⁶⁴ The reader quickly discovers what Piper believes about assurance. He believes it is possible and desirable for a believer to possess it. He also believes it may be difficult to obtain, in that he calls us to fight for it. He further believes God's will is that we enjoy assurance, and that assurance may be at times under attack. He finally believes that we must help others fight for assurance. Piper comments on helping others fight for assurance as he writes, "What then shall we say to each other to help maintain the assurance of salvation? Here's what I would say. . . ." ⁶⁵ Piper then goes on to list twelve comments he would say to help someone who is fighting for assurance and he offers scripture to go along with each comment. His statements deserve a listing. He writes,

- 1) Full assurance is God's will for us. . . .
- 2) Assurance is partially sustained by objective evidences for Christian truth. . . .
- 3) Assurance cannot neglect the painful work of self-examination. . . .
- 4) Assurance will diminish in the presence of concealed sin. . . .
- 5) Assurance comes from hearing the Word of Christ. . . .
- 6) Repeated

⁶⁴John Piper, *Pierced By The Word: Thirty-One Meditations for Your Soul* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2003), 135.

⁶⁵Ibid.

focusing on the sufficiency of the cross of Christ is crucial for assurance. . . . 7) We must pray for eyes to see the truths that sustain assurance. . . . 8) Assurance is not easily maintained in personal isolation. . . . 9) Assurance is not destroyed by God's displeasure and discipline. . . . 10) We must often wait patiently for the return of assurance. . . . 11) Assurance is a fight to the day we die. . . . 12) Assurance is finally a gift of the Spirit.⁶⁶

These questions reveal a depth of understanding about the issue of assurance from one who has either struggled from a lack of it, or counseled many people who have, or read about many who have, or all of the above. Piper seems to understand the problems encountered by those who have experienced a loss of assurance of salvation.

What can we do, however, when a Christian thinks that he or she might not be a Christian at all? Piper addresses this question as he writes on the subject of depression and assurance:

Christians in the darkness of depression may ask desperately, how can I know that I am truly a child of God? They are not usually asking to be reminded that we are saved by grace through faith. They know that. They are asking how they can know that their faith is real.⁶⁷

Piper is stepping boldly into the arena where every doubter wishes him to go. People who doubt their salvation are hoping someone will come in and tell them what they think.

Piper writes wisely,

God must guide us in how we answer, and knowing the person will help us know what to say. The first and best thing to say may be, 'I love you. And I am not letting you go.' In those words a person may feel God's presence, which they may not feel in any other way.⁶⁸

Piper's starting point seems to be the ministry of presence recommended by Romans 12:15 where believers are admonished to rejoice with rejoicers and weep with weepers. This approach will likely prove helpful as a person could make the connection that if the counselor loves them then maybe God loves them also.

⁶⁶Ibid., 135-38.

⁶⁷John Piper, *When The Darkness Will Not Lift: Doing What We Can While We Wait for God-and Joy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 40.

⁶⁸Ibid., 40-41.

Piper offers another step in the assurance counseling process:

Or, second, we might say, ‘Stop looking at your faith, and rivet your attention on Christ. Faith is sustained by looking at Christ, crucified and risen, not by turning from Christ to analyze your faith. Let me help you look to Christ. Let’s read Luke 22 through 24 together.’⁶⁹

Piper is especially helpful here as he does not give a suggestion without meaning, “rivet your attention on Christ,” but he shows the counselee how to rivet their attention on Christ and enters into the exercise with them. Piper is modeling what an assurance counselor could do to help those who are struggling for assurance. He continues on in the counseling process:

Third, we might call attention to the evidences of grace in their life. We might recount our own sense of their authenticity when we were loved by them, and then remind them of their own strong affirmations of the lordship of Christ. Then say, ‘No one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit’ (1 Cor 12:3).⁷⁰

Piper, in this instance, is giving personal feedback. He is telling the person his own opinion about the reality of their spiritual life. He says about this approach,

This approach is not usually successful in the short run, because a depressed person is prone to discount all good assessments of his own conduct; but it can be valuable in the long run because it stands as an objective hope and act of love over against his own subjective darkness.⁷¹

Piper then offers a very helpful suggestion to those who are seeking assurance and those who are counseling others:

Fourth, we might remind the sufferer that his demand for a kind of absolute, mathematical certainty about his right standing with God is asking for too much. None of us live lives with that kind of certainty about any relationships in life, and this need not destroy our comfort.⁷²

These words could free a person from an obsessive compulsive search toward an unnecessarily high degree of certainty when all they really need is a child-like faith that

⁶⁹Ibid., 41.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ibid., 41-42.

God will come through in the end and save them from wrath and give them a home in heaven.

On Piper's third suggestion, pointing out evidence of grace that one can see in the life of the candidate for assurance, what kind of evidences should be pointed out? Piper answers this question in his book, *Finally Alive*. He writes in an overview of the book of 1 John, "John gives at least eleven evidences that a person is born again. We could probably boil them all down to faith and love. But for now we'll let them stand the way he says them."⁷³ Piper then offers a list of eleven evidences of spiritual rebirth:

- 1) Those who are born of God keep his commandments. . . .
- 2) Those who are born of God walk as Christ walked. . . .
- 3) Those who are born of God don't hate others but love them. . . .
- 4) Those who are born of God don't love the world. . . .
- 5) Those who are born of God confess the Son and receive (have) him. . . .
- 6) Those who are born of God practice righteousness. . . .
- 7) Those who are born of God don't make a practice of sinning. . . .
- 8) Those who are born of God possess the Spirit of God. . . .
- 9) Those who are born of God listen submissively to the apostolic Word. . . .
- 10) Those who are born of God believe that Jesus is the Christ. . . .
- 11) Those who are born of God overcome the world.⁷⁴

Piper's list is helpful in that those who use it for assurance counseling could likely discover whether there is evidence of salvation in the life of the counselee. The difficulty with his list is that it requires an understanding of the biblical text from which it was taken along with illustrations and explanations for the assurance candidate.

A Synthesis List of Assurance Counseling Principles

Having studied the assurance counseling views and approaches of three practitioners this chapter will now list some assurance counseling principles that will guide the counseling training curriculum. First, the assurance counseling training curriculum for this project must be Bible-centered. The practice of each of the three leaders studied involved getting the candidate into the Word of God. Romans 10:17

⁷³John Piper, *Finally Alive: What Happens When We Are Born Again* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2009), 125.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 126-28.

teaches that faith will come from hearing the word of God. So if faith is the issue, then it seems that those who doubt their salvation must be exposed to Scripture.

The second guiding principle for the training curriculum is that it must be people-sensitive. Some people who doubt their salvation doubt because they are in sin and simply need to be confronted and repent. Others doubt because they are held in the grips of depression and cannot hear the voice of God assuring them of God's favor on their life. Saved people who are struggling over where they will spend eternity deserve a counselor who will struggle with them. Those who will counsel for assurance must be taught the ministry of presence taught in Romans 12:15, to rejoice with rejoicers and weep with weepers.

The third guiding principle is that the counseling approach must be body-involved. Those who are truly caught up in the loop of doubt have lost the ability to be objective about their own salvation. They need brothers and sisters who know them and have a history with them who may speak honestly about the evidences of spiritual life, as seen in the book of 1 John, which may be present in the candidate's life. Of course caution must be taken here as one must not report what is not there, but gaining input from others can prove helpful.

The fourth guiding principle is that the curriculum must be discipleship-intensive. Those who receive counsel must be willing to do homework and commit to growing as a follower of Christ. A lack of spiritual growth could be the reason for their doubt in the first place. Also their willingness or unwillingness to do a reasonable amount of homework will reveal something about their spiritual life.

The fifth and final guiding principle is that the counseling approach should be outcome oriented. Those who counsel are looking for an outcome. They either hope to see a genuine believer gain or grow into full assurance of salvation, or they hope to see an unbeliever recognize their lost condition. Hopefully those who discover they have no real basis for assurance will repent and trust in Christ for salvation.

The insights from the three theologians in this project helped to provide an understanding of why people doubt their salvation and to discover that assurance of salvation is possible and desirable. The lessons learned from the three practitioners are beneficial in developing an approach to counseling people who are dealing with doubts about salvation. I believe the combination of the observations drawn from the research proved worthwhile in developing a training curriculum to help people who desire to enjoy full assurance of their salvation.

CHAPTER 4

TRAINING AND IMPLEMENTATION

Goals for the Training Project

As mentioned in chapter 1, this project sought to accomplish four goals. These goals were to grow in my own understanding of the biblical doctrine of assurance, to develop my skills in order to better counsel others who are dealing with doubts about their assurance of salvation, to equip the decision counselors at First Baptist Church of Oak Grove, Kentucky to help people who are dealing with doubts about their salvation, and to improve the congregation's understanding of assurance of salvation.

The first goal of growing in my own understanding of the biblical doctrine of assurance was selected due to my desire to have a greater grasp of the subject matter of assurance. In order to accomplish this goal, I studied New Testament texts pertinent to the subject of assurance and doubt about salvation. The Bible study equipped me to deal with my own questions about assurance and doubt, as well as enabled me to help others who are experiencing doubt.

The second goal of developing my skills in order to better counsel others who are dealing with doubts about their salvation, was met by studying the approaches of assurance counseling used by various Christian leaders. This study involved searching through books that deal with the subjects of doubt and assurance, as well as interviewing fifteen pastors, five evangelists, and two chaplains, to learn their own approach to assurance counseling.

The third goal was to equip the decision counselors of First Baptist Church of Oak Grove, Kentucky to help people who are dealing with doubts about their salvation. This goal was achieved by preparing three lessons focusing on the subjects of doubt and

assurance and gathering the team for training.

The fourth goal was to improve the congregation's understanding of assurance of salvation. In order to accomplish this goal a series of four sermons was prepared and delivered to the congregation dealing with the subjects of doubt and assurance. Those who felt they needed more help than was available through the decision counselors were invited to set up appointments to receive pastoral counsel on the subjects of doubt and assurance.

Questionnaire for Interviewing Pastors, Evangelists, and Chaplains

The purpose of the questionnaire for interviewing pastors, evangelists, and chaplains, was to learn the personal approach of these ministry professionals to counseling persons regarding assurance and doubt. A total of twenty-two Christian ministers were interviewed from three separate denominations. The mix of those interviewed was fifteen pastors, five evangelists, and two chaplains. The participants were asked two personal questions and five ministry related questions. The questions were as follows:

1. Have you ever experienced doubts about your own salvation, and if so when, and to what degree?
2. If you did experience doubts about your salvation, how long did the doubts last and what was helpful in dealing with the doubts and gaining assurance?
3. What do you think contributes to doubt in the lives of saved individuals?
4. In the past six months, approximately how many people have you counseled regarding doubts and assurance of salvation?
5. What is your approach to counseling persons who are dealing with doubt and seeking a greater sense of assurance?
6. Which book, article, quote, or Scripture has helped you in counseling others in the subject of doubt and assurance?
7. Is there anything else you would like to add about the subject of assurance counseling that could be helpful to those dealing with doubt?

The results of the questionnaire sharpened my own skills in assurance counseling and helped prepare the training lessons for the decision counselors of First Baptist.

The questionnaires were given by phone and in person on the dates of July 28, 2011 and August 5, 2011. The findings from the interviews were compiled according to answers given to each question along with helpful quotes and relevant Scriptures. The results revealed that 7 of the 22 respondents had never dealt with doubt while 15 had experienced doubt. Many of those who struggled with doubt did so when they were young in the faith. Most of those who did doubt described their doubt as minimal with 3 of the respondents indicating they doubted to a serious degree. The amount of time their doubt lasted ranged from just a few hours to over three years. Each member of the group had a personal plan for helping persons who were dealing with doubt and they each had strong convictions on why they believe Christians wrestle with doubt.

Decision Counselor Training Lessons

Lesson 1

The first Decision Counselor Training Lesson was prepared on August 11, 2011. Lesson 1 was prepared for the purpose of training decision counselors to help people dealing with doubt by helping those counselors to have a better understanding of the issues surrounding doubt about salvation. This lesson seeks to generate discussion from the decision counselors by asking them to discuss four questions at the beginning:

1. What does it mean to have doubts about one's salvation?
2. Why do you think Christians have doubts about their salvation?
3. How many people do you think deal with doubts regarding their salvation?
4. What do you think can be done to help people who are dealing with doubts about their salvation?

The lesson then sought to answer six questions:

1. What does it mean to have doubts about one's salvation?
2. Where do we see evidence of the existence of people dealing with doubt in the Bible?
3. Who are some people we may encounter who are dealing with doubts?
4. Why do Christians experience doubts about their salvation?

5. What can a Christian do to get help in dealing with his/her doubt?
6. How can we help people who are dealing with doubts about their salvation?

The answers to these questions were taken from the research in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 of this Doctor of Ministry Project as well as the Questionnaire for Interviewing Pastors, Evangelists, and Chaplains.

Lessons 2 and 3

The second and third Decision Counselor Training Lessons were prepared on August 25, 2011. While Lesson 1 dealt with issues surrounding doubt about salvation, lesson 2 trained the decision counselors to move Christians toward biblical assurance and Lesson 3 created a role-play opportunity for the decision counselors to practice their training. Lesson 3 sought to generate discussion from the decision counselors by asking them to discuss four questions at the beginning:

1. What does it mean to have assurance about one's salvation?
2. Why do you think Christians wish to have assurance of their salvation?
3. Why do you think Christians need to have assurance of their salvation?
4. What would you do to help a person experience assurance of their salvation?

The lesson then sought to answer four questions:

1. Is assurance of salvation something a believer should desire?
2. How should we guide those who are seeking assurance?
3. What kind of questions should be asked to one seeking assurance?
4. What can we do to help a person move toward greater assurance of salvation?

The answers to these questions were taken from the research in chapter 2 and chapter 3 of this Doctor of Ministry Project.

Pre-Series Questionnaire

The pre-series questionnaire was conducted on Sunday, August 28. The questionnaire was given to 79 people from three separate Sunday School classes, and one

small group at First Baptist Church. These classes represent a cross section of professing Christians who range in age from 13 years old to 75 years of age. Some of these individuals had been long time members of First Baptist Church and some were new to our congregation. The purpose of the survey was to gauge the congregation's experience in dealing with doubt and their understanding of the doctrine of assurance.

The following insights were drawn from the survey: 61 percent of the people surveyed have experienced doubts about their salvation; 15 percent of the respondents believe that those who doubt are unsaved while a significant number of those surveyed were neutral about the issue; 14 percent of the people surveyed link salvation with a feeling; 72 percent of the congregants believe that their personal assurance impacts their ability to witness to others about Christ; 65 percent of those surveyed said that they not only are assured of their salvation but are also equipped to counsel those who doubt; 20 percent of the respondents said that they have assurance but would not feel comfortable counseling those who doubt.

This survey was not only helpful as a point of comparison gauging the congregation's understanding of the doctrine of assurance before and after the sermon series, it was also helpful in preparing the sermons for the congregation. For example, I found it helpful to know that at least a few of our people believe that those who doubt their salvation are unsaved. I believe their view to be in error and sought to show through preaching that, since doubt is addressed in the Bible, it should be understood that doubt will be an issue for many Christians. The fact that some members of First Baptist Church link salvation with a feeling is a helpful insight as well. Those who make a connection with salvation and emotion are easy prey for an emotional struggle with doubt and need to be equipped for the possibility of a battle of that nature. The same survey was given to the same four groups of people after the assurance sermon series was completed.

Decision Counselor Training

The decision counselor training was conducted on August 30 with ten decision

counselors in attendance at First Baptist Church. The counselors were trained in one Tuesday evening setting with three separate sessions. Session 1 dealt with the issue of doubt. During this session the counselors were led in a discussion of the following four questions:

1. What does it mean to have doubts about one's salvation?
2. Why do you think Christians have doubts about their salvation?
3. How many people do you think deal with doubts regarding their salvation?
4. What do you think can be done to help people who are dealing with doubts about their salvation?

The group's response to these questions was both positive and insightful. They all generally understood that doubting one's salvation means to lack certainty about being saved. When it came to the question of why they think Christians doubt, most of them linked doubt with some specific sin, usually a back-slidden condition. When asked how many people they thought doubted their salvation they answered that they believed 100 percent of Christians battled doubt. On the question of what can be done to help a person who doubts they had lots of suggestions. The most interesting insight, however, came from an unplanned question. The group was asked how long they thought it should take for a person to settle their issue with doubt. They agreed that one should be able to get over their doubt problem in just a few minutes. When they heard stories of well-known Christians who wrestled with doubt for years they were shocked and also more open to being equipped to counsel others who truly struggled with doubt.

Session 2 dealt with the subject of counseling for assurance. In this session the group was trained in the following areas:

1. Assurance of salvation is something a believer should desire.
2. Guidance must be given to those who are seeking assurance.
3. Questions must be asked to get to the reason why one is dealing with doubt.
4. Specific help can be given to move people toward a greater biblical assurance.

Regarding the issue of assurance being something that a believer should desire,

the group was taken to Scripture to see evidence that assurance is the responsibility of the believer. On the question of giving guidance to those who are seeking assurance the group was taught to listen to the conversion story of the counselee, share the gospel message, ask them assurance questions, and agree to spend future time with the person as necessary while they are seeking assurance. On the subject of probing questions to discover reasons for doubt the counseling group was given a list of twelve questions that were designed to surface issues that may be causing a person to doubt.

Those questions were as follows:

1. Do I have a present trust of Christ for salvation?
2. Is there evidence of a regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in my heart?
3. Do I see a long term pattern of growth in my Christian life?
4. Have I experienced great assurance in the past but lately find myself struggling?
5. Is there a specific area of disobedience in my life that I have not dealt with?
6. Is there something I have done lately that causes me to doubt my salvation?
7. Am I looking for a feeling to give me assurance of salvation rather than trusting in Jesus to save me?
8. Am I worried because I do not remember the exact moment of my salvation?
9. Do I doubt my salvation because I am going through difficult trials?
10. If I ask those who know me well what they say about my salvation, what would they say?
11. Am I experiencing a depression or other emotional issue?
12. Am I exposing myself to other Christians for fellowship?

Finally on the question of what else can be done to help a person seeking assurance, the group was given a long-term strategy of helping their counselee get into a regular Bible reading practice, pray for them, recommend good books, say helpful things to them, be a friend to them, and over time tell them about the evidence of salvation that the counselor can see in the life of the counselee.

Session 3 of the training event was a role-play session where the counselors

were paired off to practice their training on one another. Men were paired with men and women were paired with women. Each person was asked to play the role of a person seeking assurance while the other played the role of a counselor. The group was asked to use some of the probing questions they learned in session 2. Halfway through the role-play the pairs were instructed to switch parts and reverse their roles.

The training event was well received. The ten counselors in attendance represent men and women who regularly assist in the invitation time at First Baptist Church. As a result of this training they are now better equipped with both skills and sensitivity in dealing with persons who are struggling with doubts about their salvation.

Assurance Sermon Series

The month of September was set aside to prepare and preach a series of sermons on the subject of assurance. Having spent a good deal of time considering the needs of the congregation and studying the subject of assurance, a decision was made that the best way to approach the series was to preach a four-week series from the book of 1 John. The structure of the sermons was modeled after the question and answer approach to 1 John used by John MacArthur in *Saved Without a Doubt*.¹ In this book MacArthur breaks down the assurance passages in John's epistle as questions pointing to the reality of salvation. MacArthur sees eleven questions, or evidences of salvation, in the book of 1 John. The series prepared for this project did not duplicate MacArthur's questions, only his example.

Week 1

The first sermon was preached on September 4, and taken from 1 John 1. This sermon asked three questions for those seeking assurance of salvation. The questions were as follows:

¹John MacArthur, *Saved without A Doubt* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2006).

1. Do you respond in faith to the gospel message? 1 John 1:1-4
2. Do you walk in step with God? 1 John 1:5-6
3. Do you deal honestly with sin? 1 John 1:7-10

The goal of this message was to help Christians have assurance of their salvation, and to help lost people know they are lost and hopefully to be saved. The approach of the preaching was not to set a standard that no person could live up to because John's purpose was not to set an impossible standard. John wanted believers to know they were saved (1 John 5:13). Piper in *Finally Alive* writes about the purpose of 1 John:

Summing up all these reasons for writing I John goes like this: I am writing because you are true believers, but there are deceivers in your midst, and I want you to be rock-solid confident in your present possession of eternal life as regenerate children of God, so that you are not drawn away after sin. And if this letter has that effect my joy will be complete. So at the heart of his reason for writing is the desire to help them know they are born again – that they now have new spiritual life. Eternal life.²

First John must be preached in a way that, assuming the outline used in the first sermon is appropriate, the preacher can say if you respond in faith to the gospel, if you walk in step with God, if you deal honestly with sin, then take heart you are obviously a child of God.

After the sermon was preached an invitation to respond was given and a song was sung by the congregation. There was a noticeable response during the invitation. One family joined the church, several people came to the front for prayer, and some came to our invitation helpers for prayer. Saved people should have been comforted by the first message on assurance. Lost people, however, should have been able to identify themselves as people who are not legitimate candidates for assurance of salvation.

Week 2

The second sermon in the series was preached on September 11 and was taken from 1 John 2. This message, following the same format as the first sermon in the series, offers three questions a candidate can use to evaluate the validity of their claim of being a

²John Piper, *Finally Alive* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2009), 125.

Christian and was introduced with the analogy of signs of being a Christian. The comparison was made to medical issues one may experience that cannot be uncovered without medical imaging but can be diagnosed because of outward signs. The questions offered in this message were as follows:

1. Do you keep Jesus' commandments? 1 John 2:3-6
2. Do you love other Christians? 1 John 2:9-11
3. Do you wage a personal spiritual battle against worldliness? 1 John 2:15-17

The goal of this message, as was the goal of the first sermon, was to help Christians develop a biblical assurance, and to help lost people understand their lost condition so they can be saved. While the content of 1 John is challenging, the goal of the writer seems to be to help saved people know they are saved (1 John 5:11-13). Therefore the tone of the preaching in this series has been pastoral without compromising the biblical text. For instance, on the subject of whether one keeps Jesus' commands the question comes up about how perfectly does one need to keep His commands. The answer is that no one can keep His commands perfectly, but is there a desire to keep all of them, to take each one seriously, not to ignore or try to escape obedience from any of them, and is there grief when even one of them is disobeyed. If the response to those questions is yes, then the professing Christian should be encouraged that he or she bears the fruit of a true believer. If, on the other hand, the listener discovers that he or she has little or no concern for the biblically revealed will of God, then this person should have concern that their profession may not be legitimate. Donald Whitney, in *How Can I Be Sure I'm A Christian*, offers helpful insight about keeping God's commands:

Do you seek out the Word of God, and do you find yourself compelled to obey it? Do you consciously and intentionally try to live out what you encounter in the Bible? Then in the words of 1 John, know that you have come to know God.³

³Donald S. Whitney, *How Can I Be Sure I'm a Christian? What the Bible Says about Assurance of Salvation* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1994), 55.

After the sermon, a song and public invitation was offered. People were invited to come for assurance counseling, to pray, to join the church, or to receive Christ. The public response to the message was that several people came to the front during the invitation for personal and private prayer. There has not yet been a request for private counsel regarding the subject of assurance even though the provision of counsel has been offered. The messages so far have been well received with positive feedback from the congregation following the services. Individuals have let it be known that while they have struggled personally with assurance and doubt that they have found this particular series helpful.

Week 3

The third sermon in the series was preached on September 18 and was taken from 1 John 3. This message, like the other two sermons in the series, sets forth three questions a person who professes faith in Christ can ask about themselves to examine themselves to see if they are in the faith (2 Cor 13:5a). The questions used in this message were as follows:

1. Does the return of Jesus cause you to strive for moral purity? 1 John 3:1-3
2. Do you practice a lifestyle of sinning? 1 John 3:4-10
3. Do you show love to Christian people? 1 John 3:14-18

The tone of the message was both pastoral for those who struggle with doubt and evangelistic for those who might be false professors. Question 3 was a repeat question from sermon 2, but since the text so strongly emphasized love for others as a proof that one was in the faith the decision was made to use a question regarding love for other Christians a second time. Donald Whitney, in *Ten Questions To Diagnose Your Spiritual Health*, writes regarding the importance of brotherly love as a sign of faith: “So one of the best tests of whether we belong to Christ is whether we delight in His delight,

namely, the people who comprise His church.”⁴

This particular message was very pointed, especially in the area of question 1, regarding making a practice of sin. John uses very simple language to distinguish saved people from lost people in 1 John 3:4-10. He teaches that those who practice sin are not saved and those who say they are saved and practice righteousness are (1 John 3:7-8). There is little room in the biblical writer’s argument for backslidden believers or Christians who are living in sin. John’s writing calls on true Christians to make a clean break with any and every sin and be identified as a follower of Christ who is daily pursuing righteousness. In his classic work, *The Religious Affections*, Jonathan Edwards concurs with the witness of John:

And although self-examination be a duty of great use and importance, and by no means to be neglected, yet it is not the principal means by which the saints do get satisfaction of their good estate. Assurance is not to be obtained so much by self-examination as by action.⁵

The best way to seek assurance according to Edwards is to put away sin. In fact, he writes, “It is not God’s design that men should obtain assurance in any other way than by mortifying corruption, and increasing in grace, and obtaining the lively exercises of it.”⁶ Those who are truly saved must prove their salvation by battling against sin in all its forms as long as life remains in their bodies.

The message was well received from the congregation. During the public invitation portion of the service several people responded for prayer in both morning services. One man made a personal profession of faith in the 8:30 service, and another in the 11:00 service. One lady asked to call the office for an appointment following the

⁴Donald S. Whitney, *Ten Questions to Diagnose Your Spiritual Health* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2001), 82.

⁵Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections* (Boston: S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1746; reprint, Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2001), 123.

⁶Ibid.

11:00 service but as of yet she has not called. The series appeared to have forced those present to think more intentionally about the basis of their assurance. Hopefully some will move from a feeling or experience based assurance and arrive at a more biblically based certainty that they are the children of God.

Week 4

The fourth and final sermon in the series was preached on September 25 and was taken from 1 John 2, 3 and 4. Like the three previous sermons in the series, this message presented a series of questions a congregant could ask for a spiritual self-examination. The questions used in this message were as follows:

1. Are you persevering in the faith? 1 John 2:18-19
2. Do you suffer personally for being a Christian? 1 John 3:11-13
3. Do you discern spiritual truth from spiritual error? 1 John 4:1-6
4. Do you experience the ministry of the Holy Spirit? 1 John 4:13

While the messages were challenging they were also pastoral in spirit. John's intention was to assure true believers of their salvation in 1 John, not cause them to struggle with mental and emotional doubt (1 John 5:13). If assurance was John's point in writing the epistle of 1 John then assurance to true believers must be the goal of messages from 1 John. The sermons were strongly worded so that none of the listeners who carefully examined themselves could continue in a false assurance. The messages were also carefully presented so that true believers could recognize signs of genuine conversion in their lives. John MacArthur highlights the value of assurance in the life of the believer when he writes, "It's true that someone can be saved and doubt it. One may go to heaven in a mist, not knowing for sure he's going, but that's certainly not the way to enjoy the trip."⁷ Believers need to be able to enjoy the trip to heaven and one goal of these sermons has been to help the saved gain biblical assurance to make the trip more enjoyable.

⁷MacArthur, *Saved without A Doubt*, 16.

Post-Series Counseling Appointments

The time period of September 26 through November 3 was reserved in the project for setting up counseling appointments and providing spiritual counsel for those who presented themselves as dealing with doubts about their salvation. The intention was that a series of messages would cause people to consider their own salvation and wish to have further conversation regarding their salvation. The plan was to provide up to four counseling sessions, beyond what is offered by our decision counselors, to persons who were dealing with a more thorny issue of assurance. An invitation was presented both verbally and in print that those who wished to talk further about assurance could meet with the pastor, but to date there have been no responses to the offer. While there was gratitude for the messages and people seemed to understand the differences between a true believer and a false professor, people have not been willing to seek out further counsel. While there may be a response in weeks to come, there was no response during the time period of the project.

Post-Series Questionnaire

The post-series questionnaire was conducted on October 16 and 23. The questionnaire was given to the same four small groups who had filled out the pre-series questionnaire. The post-series questionnaire was the same as the pre-series questionnaire. The reason for using the same questionnaire was to gauge the respondents' views on assurance and doubt questions before and after the four sermon series on assurance.

The group that responded to the post-series questionnaire was smaller than the pre-series group, 56 people compared to 79 people. The results, however, were surprisingly similar. In the pre-series survey 61 percent of the respondents had experienced doubt about their salvation compared to an equal 61 percent in the post-series group. What is notable about this number is that while the classes surveyed were the same groups, several of the people present for the pre-series questionnaire were not present in the post-series questionnaire, and there were new people present for the post-series questionnaire. Our

church is a military congregation so a sizable number of the respondents, as many as 25 percent, were different from those included in the first group.

Another question in the survey asked if the respondents believed that those who doubt their salvation are probably not saved. The response was 15 percent in the pre-series group and 14 percent in the post-series group. Regarding those who view assurance of salvation as a feeling, and therefore a loss of the feeling of being saved translates to a loss of assurance, the response was 14 percent in both pre-series and post-series groups. There was a slight increase in those who connected the importance of assurance of salvation with their own witnessing effectiveness. In the pre-series group 72 percent believed they need assurance to be able to witness to others, while the number increased to 75 percent in the post-series group. There was also a slight increase in those who said they were sure of their salvation and believed they were adequately equipped to counsel others who were dealing with doubt. The pre-series group assured and equipped was 72 percent with the post-series group being 75 percent. Those who were sure of their salvation but who did not feel equipped to counsel others dealing with doubt also saw a slight increase. Respondents who were sure but unable to counsel numbered 20 percent in the pre-series survey and 23 percent in the post-series survey.

The questionnaire yielded at least three clear results. First, most people in the congregation, having heard messages on biblical assurance, enjoy assurance of salvation. While nearly two thirds of them have experienced some degree of doubt they are now enjoying assurance. Second, over two thirds of the congregation feels adequately equipped to help others who are struggling with doubt. In questions 8, 9, and 10 of the questionnaire they were asked to list verses and write their plan on how they would counsel people who were dealing with doubt. Many of the members were able to offer a very clear and concise approach to assurance counseling. Third, there continues to be a small minority who link assurance with a feeling and, when they do not feel saved, they question the reality of their salvation. This discovery is a concern that will need to be addressed in future sermons.

Conclusion

Over the fifteen weeks, decision counselors were trained and the doctrine of assurance was taught to the congregation of First Baptist Church, Oak Grove, Kentucky. A series of sermons was preached on the subject of assurance for the purpose of helping congregants examine their faith claim as to its validity in light of biblical revelation. Training was conducted for ten decision counselors who assist during the invitations in the morning services at First Baptist Church. A pre-series and post-series survey was conducted yielding insights into the thinking of a select group of the membership of First Baptist Church. Extensive counseling was offered for those who felt they had further need in the area of assurance. Chapter 5 will focus on an evaluation of this project in light of its original goals.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

Introduction

Evaluation is a vital part of any project because it breeds future learning and better performance. The authors of *7 Practices of Effective Ministry* write regarding the importance of evaluation to the ministry of North Point Community Church in Atlanta, Georgia: “At North Point, we have made evaluation a part of our weekly routine. Every Monday morning, the seven members of our leadership team get together to ‘work on it.’ The value of this meeting is difficult to overstate.”¹ This project is evaluated in light of its stated purpose and goals. The perceived strengths and weaknesses of the project are also considered, as well as theological and personal reflection. I also include a section stating what I would do differently having completed the project. In the following pages I have made an effort to accurately present the outcomes of training decision counselors to teach the doctrine of assurance as well as include lessons learned through the process that should prove helpful for future ministry projects at First Baptist Church.

Evaluation of the Project’s Purpose

The purpose of this project was to train decision counselors at First Baptist Church of Oak Grove, Kentucky, to teach the doctrine of assurance of salvation. In order to pursue this purpose a number of preparatory tasks were decided upon to be accomplished before the training could begin. First, an understanding was reached regarding the biblical importance of the doctrine of assurance. Second, a position was

¹Reggie Joiner, Lane Jones, and Andy Stanley, *7 Practices Of Effective Ministry* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2004), 176.

formed regarding reasons why born again people doubt their salvation. Third, a study was made among well-known Christian practitioners regarding their own best practices of counseling those who doubt their salvation. Fourth, a survey was conducted among pastors, evangelists, and chaplains to learn their history and practices in dealing with assurance counseling. Fifth, the training curriculum was prepared. Finally, the training was carried out. Following is a more detailed account of each of the steps involved in preparing the decision counselors to teach the doctrine of assurance and the implementation of the assurance counseling training.

Step 1: Determine the Biblical Importance of Assurance

The first step in preparing to train the counselors was to determine the importance of the doctrine of assurance of salvation. A study was made of several New Testament texts in order to gain a sense of the importance placed on assurance by the Bible. The first text selected for study was 2 Corinthians 13:5-10, with an emphasis on verse 5: “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not know this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” The surface reading of this verse states that assurance of salvation is commanded to be sought after. While the context of the larger passage is that the Corinthian believers are questioning the apostle Paul’s apostolic authority and is Paul challenging them to instead investigate their own faith claim, the broad application is that all believers should examine themselves to see if they are in the faith.

The second text considered was 1 John 5:11-13. While each of the three verses were deemed significant for an understanding of the doctrine of assurance, verse 3 seemed to be the weightiest for this project’s purpose: “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). From studying these verses, and verse 13 in particular, four conclusions were reached regarding assurance of salvation. First, assurance of salvation is possible for a

true believer. Those who are saved can know they are saved according to 1 John 5:13. Second, assurance of salvation is desired. John, the author of 1 John, wants his readers to know they are saved. Third, some believers will doubt their salvation. If there were no Christians experiencing doubts about their salvation then there would be no need for a book with its main purpose being to convince saved people that they are saved. Fourth, assurance is a very important doctrine for followers of Christ. If one entire New Testament book was set aside to deal primarily with the subject of assurance of salvation then one could argue that assurance is a very important doctrine.

The third text chosen for study was 1 Peter 1:6-9. The outcome of researching 1 Peter 1:6-9 was the discovery that the faith of a believer may be tested and that assurance of salvation may come through trials. The trial, or testing of one's faith, does not prove to God whether one is saved or not saved. The Lord knows who belongs to him and who does not. The trial shows the believer that he or she does in fact belong to God and can rest in genuine assurance.

The fourth and final text selected for study was 1 John 2:3. This text was chosen as a sample of one of the signs of genuine conversion found in 1 John. First John 2:3 shows that assurance of salvation is seen in one definite sign, that is that the true believer knows he or she is saved, "if we keep his commandments" (1 John 2:3b). This verse was helpful in that it gives the assurance seeker a way to examine himself or herself. The one seeking assurance can evaluate their attitude toward the commands of God and decide if they are, or if they are not, a candidate for assurance.

The study of the selected passages solidified my conviction that assurance of salvation is an important biblical doctrine. The subject of assurance is not treated lightly in Scripture, but is instead given a significant place. The project of training decision counselors to teach the doctrine of assurance was on solid biblical footing due to the position given to assurance in the Word of God.

Step 2: Reasons People Doubt

The second step toward preparing to train the decision counselors to teach the doctrine of assurance was to determine reasons why born again people doubt their salvation. To better understand why Christians doubt their salvation, a study was made of three conservative theologians: Wayne Grudem, Charles Ryrie, and Millard Erickson. After reviewing the writings of each author a list of five reasons was compiled synthesizing why these scholars believe saved people doubt their salvation. First, they believe some Christians doubt their salvation because of unnoticeable progress in the Christian life. Unnoticeable progress occurs when a believer cannot see any spiritual growth in their life. While a lack of noticeable growth can happen for any number of reasons, not seeing growth can cause doubt for a sensitive believer.

Another reason given for why Christians doubt was they may be living a sinful lifestyle. A sinful lifestyle is the case when a believer has continued in a pattern of sinful living and has not dealt with their sin. Since one of the signs of true conversion is that the believer keeps God's commands (1 John 2:3) living in unconfessed and unforsaken sin can, and probably should, cause a person to doubt their salvation.

A third reason Christians doubt is because they do not recall their conversion experience. They may have been saved as a child and cannot remember the date or the time of their salvation. The result is they begin to question the validity of their salvation experience by reasoning if they cannot remember it, then it may not have really happened.

A fourth reason believers doubt has to do with the testimony of other Christians. The believer in this case may place too much emphasis on the form of calling on Christ, the type of prayer they prayed for conversion, or how many sins they confessed, rather than on repenting and believing the gospel (Mark 1:15). Those who are given to comparing themselves with others can easily fall prey to hearing the salvation story of other Christians and begin to question the validity of their own salvation because their experience lacked one or two of the details of the story they heard of someone else's conversion.

The fifth reason given for doubts about salvation experienced by a Christian

had to do with theological distinctives. Theological distinctives become an issue for assurance when the believer is in a church that does not teach the security of the believer and therefore the saved person may question whether he or she has lost his or her salvation. This list of five reasons for believers' doubt seems to represent the writings of the three theologians considered.

A study was also made of what Grudem, Ryrie, and Erickson believe is the best path for a believer to gain assurance of salvation. The path to seeking assurance, summarized from the views of the three theologians, can best be presented in the form of three questions offered to a candidate seeking assurance. The first question gets at the issue of saving faith and asks, "Do I trust in Christ as presented in the Word of God?" Each theologian insists that Scripture and Jesus are the answers to assurance, not feeling or experience. The question of trusting in Jesus, and more specifically the Jesus of the Bible, moves the candidate for assurance away from peripheral issues such as feelings, past experiences, or the statements of others, and gets at the heart of whether there is a trust in Jesus and his work for salvation on behalf of the believer. The second question looks for evidence of regeneration and asks, "Do I see evidence in my life that I am a saved person?" This second question requires some further instruction such as the offering of examples of the type of evidence expected to accompany salvation along with the Bible verses where the evidence could be seen. The question regarding evidence allows believers to have a tangible test by which they can examine the validity of their faith claim. The third question moves into the subject of long-term change and asks, "Do I see real character change that can be attributed to my relationship with God?" The character change question forces the assurance candidate to look long term at their Christian life and determine if change has occurred. This question could be helpful in the work of sanctification for true believers who gain assurance but also realize they have neglected their spiritual growth. The further benefit to the third question is that this question can invite the input of other mature believers who may be able to comment

honestly on the character of the person seeking assurance. Overall, the reasons for doubt and the path for assurance offered by the three theologians were helpful in preparing the decision counselors. The insight of these learned scholars allows trained counselors to have greater confidence in working with people seeking assurance.

Step 3: Best Practices for Counseling

The third step in preparing to train the decision counselors to teach the doctrine of assurance was to discover a helpful approach for assurance counseling. While a partial discovery of assurance counseling practices was made from the study of the three theologians, a further investigation was made into the assurance counseling practices of three Christian practitioners to learn their best practices for counseling those who doubt. The three leaders studied were John MacArthur, John Piper, and Jay Adams. From the insights gained from these three Christian leaders, five guiding principles were discovered to help prepare the decision counselor training curriculum. First, the training curriculum must be Bible-centered. Each of the men studied made it a personal practice to help those dealing with doubt be exposed to the Bible. When a saved person is lacking assurance then the ultimate challenge is a faith issue. Romans 10:17 teaches that the path to faith is through personal exposure to the Word of God. So those who counsel others must learn to get the counselee reading and listening to the words of God in Scripture.

Second, the training curriculum must be people sensitive. Not all people who doubt do so for the same reason. Some doubt because of personal entanglement with sin while others doubt because of spiritual oppression, or a personal battle with depression. The training curriculum must help the decision counselors learn to be sensitive to the people who come to them rather than just leading each person through a series of steps and a prayer. The counselors must be willing to put aside their own preconceived ideas about people who doubt and enter into the ministry of presence as taught in Romans 12:15.

Third, the training curriculum must be body-involved. One of the greatest struggles for those who are wrapped up in doubts about their own salvation is that they

have lost the ability to be objective and are in the grips of subjective feelings. They could benefit greatly from the ministry of mature Christians who can and will report honestly on what they see in the person's life. They do not need a mutual admiration partner to make them feel better, but instead someone who knows them well enough to say they have seen Christian fruit and spiritual progress in the life of the assurance candidate. Paul the apostle took this position with the Thessalonian Christians when he assured them of their salvation in 1 Thessalonians 1:4. While believers must exercise caution and discernment in the ministry of assurance counseling and encouragement, we can certainly bear witness to what we have seen and heard about the person in question.

Fourth, the training curriculum must be discipleship-intensive. Those who come seeking assurance are excellent candidates to be led into a deeper walk with God through personal discipleship. Through the assignment of quiet times, memory verses, and good books, much progress can be made in the whole of their spiritual life as well as the issue of assurance. Also, those who are unwilling to do discipleship assignments may reveal something about the nature of their Christian experience. They may want the feelings of doubt to go away without seeking the God who saves and gives assurance.

Fifth, the training curriculum must be outcome oriented. Those who counsel will do so with a goal in mind. They will hope to see the saved gain a greater sense of assurance and the lost discover their lost condition, and hopefully become saved. Reviewing the assurance counseling practices of the three practitioners was helpful in preparing the curriculum for the decision counselors. With the input of these three experienced leaders the decision counselors will be better prepared to help those who are dealing with the thorny issue of assurance of salvation.

Step 4: Survey for Pastors, Evangelists, and Chaplains

The fourth step in preparing to train the decision counselors was to survey pastors, evangelists, and chaplains to learn their history and practices in dealing with

assurance counseling. The surveyed group was comprised of 22 ministry professionals, both full-time and bi-vocational, representing three separate Christian traditions. Fifteen of those surveyed were pastors, 5 were evangelists, and 2 were chaplains. The interviewees each responded to seven questions by phone or in person. Question 1 asked if they had ever doubted their salvation and if so then to what degree. Seven of the 22 respondents had doubted their salvation. Most of the doubt occurred while they were young in their faith; however, 3 of the men interviewed had experienced, what they considered, serious doubt.

The second question had to do with how long the doubt lasted for those who had experienced doubts about their salvation. The time period ranged from just a few minutes to over 3 years. Question 3 asked the group to give their opinion regarding what they felt contributed to doubt for believers. Their list was broad and included the following: unreasonable expectations, trials and temptations, satanic oppression, strong preaching, neglecting spiritual disciplines, depression, fatigue, relying on feelings, continuing in sin, false teachings, and other reasons. The fourth question sought to discover the number of times these leaders had counseled people about the subject of assurance of salvation in the past six months. Most of the 22 respondents were in 0 to 3 people range. One respondent, however, was far above the rest having counseled at least 60 people in the past six months who were dealing with doubts about their salvation. Question 5 asked the group to describe their plan for assurance counseling. Most of the respondents wanted to hear the salvation testimony of the person seeking assurance. They then wanted to use the Bible to explain the gospel. Some of the respondents wanted to find the reason the person was experiencing doubt at this time in their life. One respondent used an article he had written on eternal security as a homework assignment for the counselee.

The sixth question asked the interviewee to recommend a book, article, quote, or Scripture that that they had found helpful in assurance counseling. Some of the

commonly referred to Bible verses were John 10:28, 1 John 5:13, John 3:16. Some of the books recommended were books by Charles Stanley, Erwin Lutzer, and Neil Anderson. The seventh question gave the respondents a chance to add anything else they did not get a chance to mention earlier that could be helpful to people who were dealing with doubt. They said things like, “you can go to heaven without assurance,” “never tell anyone that they are saved,” and when it comes to doubting your salvation, “get over it, that’s what God says.” Interviewing pastors, evangelists, and chaplains was helpful in that it allowed me to talk to people who have both experienced doubt and are counseling people who have experienced doubt. Their insights and experience proved helpful in preparing the decision counselors to teach the doctrine of assurance.

Step 5: Prepare the Training Curriculum

The fifth step in preparing to train the decision counselors was to prepare the curriculum to be used in the training. The curriculum was made up of three lessons. Lesson 1 was titled, “Dealing with Doubt.” The purpose of lesson 1 was to train decision counselors to help persons who are dealing with doubt by training those counselors to have a better understanding of the issues surrounding doubt. The lesson offered an explanation of the difference between doubt and unbelief as well as the reality that doubt can co-exist with salvation. The lesson then presented examples of the reality of doubt in the Bible. The lesson talked about four types of people who may experience doubt and offered an extensive list of reasons why saved people can doubt their salvation. Lesson 1 concluded by addressing what a Christian can do when doubt arises and also what can others do to help those who are dealing with doubt.

Lesson 2 in the decision counselor training curriculum was titled “Counseling for Assurance.” The purpose of the second lesson was to train the decision counselors to help saved people to understand biblical assurance and experience a greater degree of assurance of their salvation. Lesson 2 began by establishing the biblical desirability and possibility of assurance of salvation for a believer. The lesson then moved quickly into a

counseling method where the counselors were trained to hear the conversion story of the counselee, share the gospel of Jesus, ask specific questions that were supplied to the counselors, listen to feedback from the counselee and agree to continue the counseling process as the counselee is seeking assurance. The second lesson concluded with further instruction regarding a long term plan to help a person with a more difficult assurance issue. Lesson 3 in the training curriculum was a role play lesson where the counselors were asked to break off into pairs, men with men, and women with women, and practice the training they had received. The material for the curriculum was taken from a combination of the studies from chapters 1 and 2 of this project as well as the insights discovered from the interviews of pastors, evangelists, and chaplains.

Step 6: Conduct the Training

The sixth step of this project was to train the decision counselors. A group of 10 decision counselors was assembled for training on Tuesday evening, August 30. The training was completed in one evening with a break in between lesson 1 and 2. The group trained was made up of men and women who regularly assist during the public invitation period of our morning church services. I had previously trained them as decision counselors so this exercise was conducted as a more in depth training to further their experience. The atmosphere was positive and the training was well received. The group left the training more sensitive to the issues surrounding doubt and assurance and more equipped to help those who will come to them for counsel in the future.

Evaluation of the Project's Goals

The first goal of this project was to grow in my understanding of the biblical doctrine of assurance of salvation. To accomplish this goal I studied New Testament texts pertinent to the subject of assurance and doubt about salvation. Studying the biblical texts allowed me to gain several insights into the subject of doubt and assurance. First, I came to understand that doubt can be a normal, albeit unwanted, reality in the Christian life.

Doubt as normal, albeit unwanted, was seen most clearly in the book of 1 John where John spends a great deal of time helping his readers experience assurance of salvation. The implicit teaching is that if an entire New Testament book is written to help believers with assurance then it is to be understood that some believers will encounter doubt.

Another insight was that assurance of salvation is possible and desirable. Again from 1 John, and especially 1 John 5:13, the discovery was made that God wants his people to experience assurance of salvation. He does not want saved people to continue to live in doubt. A final important insight for me was that 1 John offers a path to assurance. The book of 1 John was not written to discourage the true believer by giving an impossible standard, but instead to give the believer evidences that can be objectively identified in one's life as signs of conversion. While I have been taught, and even taught others, that assurance of salvation is not based on a subjective feeling but instead on the Word of God, this study helped to solidify my convictions of that same truth.

The second goal was to develop my skills in order to better counsel others who are dealing with doubts about their salvation. This goal was accomplished by studying the approaches to assurance counseling used by various Christian leaders. The writings of three theologians were studied along with the assurance counseling practices of three Christian leaders. Personal interviews were also conducted from 22 pastors, evangelists, and chaplains in order to learn their own approach to assurance counseling. From this effort of research through interviews I was able to listen as good counseling practices were being repeated. The result was a personal assurance counseling strategy that involves five steps. Step 1 is to hear the conversion story of the person coming for counsel. Step 2 is to present the biblical gospel to the assurance candidate and see if there is an agreement with the gospel. Step 3 is to ask a number of assurance probing questions to seek for a reason, or reasons, that a true Christian may doubt their salvation. Step 4 is to listen and evaluate the counselee. Step 5 is to establish a discipleship relationship with the candidate, men with men and women with women, until doubt becomes less of an issue in their life.

The third goal was to equip the Decision Counselor Team of First Baptist Church of Oak Grove to help people who are dealing with doubts about their salvation. This goal was accomplished by developing a training curriculum that would prepare the members of this team to better respond to persons who present themselves during a public invitation seeking assurance of salvation. The curriculum was prepared and the team was trained.

The fourth goal was to improve the congregation's understanding of assurance of salvation. To accomplish this objective, I prepared and preached a series of messages on the subject of assurance. The congregation's understanding of the subjects of doubt and assurance was measured by the use of a survey given to a sample of the church through four of our small groups. The survey was given before and after the series was preached to determine if there was notable change in the groups' level of understanding. While some change was detected, the change was minimal. Three possibilities were offered for the lack of change. One possibility is that the messages themselves were ineffective. While the messages could have been ineffective, they were well received with more positive feedback than usual. People were saved during this series, some joined the church, and many responded during the invitation for prayer. A second possibility for the minimal change is that our people have a pretty good understanding of doubt and assurance. This possibility has some merit, but also some problems. Some in our congregation before and after the series viewed assurance as a feeling and continue to view it that way. A third possibility for the minimal change is the change in the group being surveyed. There were four problems with the sample group. First, the number of the first group was 79 people and the post series group was 56. Second, one of the small groups surveyed was a military Sunday school class that may have had as many as 50 percent different people from the first survey. Third, one of the groups was a youth class who wrote their names on the pre-series survey and did not write their names on the post-series survey leading to an anonymity issue. Fourth, the one class that is the most theologically sound was about half its size for the

post-series survey as it was for the pre-series survey. So while the results of the survey were helpful for insight into the thinking of the congregation on the subjects of doubt and assurance, the results were not that helpful to determine the impact of the preaching series on the thinking of the people.

The fourth goal was also to be accomplished by setting up counseling appointments with those people who communicate more difficult doubts about their salvation than could be covered by the decision counselors. These appointments were encouraged by submitting a note from the church bulletin, and inviting people publicly at the end of the morning services to see me after the service or contact me through the church office if they continued to experience problems with doubt and wished to talk about those problems. While I have had multiple conversations with our church members about doubt and assurance during the weeks of the series, no one has come for the stated purpose of counsel.

Strengths of the Project

This project had several strengths that helped the decision counselors and the congregation of First Baptist Church. Decision counselors were helped in at least three ways. First, they became more sensitive to the struggles of those who experience doubts about their salvation. When the counselors were told that well-known Christians such as William Cowper, Charles Spurgeon, and Martin Luther had experienced serious battles with doubt they looked at the ministry of assurance counseling not as a necessary kindness shown to backslidden Christians, but as a great act of mercy offered to broken and possibly oppressed followers of Christ who might even be more committed to Jesus than themselves. Second, the counselors were given a specific strategy for dealing with doubt and assurance. They were taught an approach to counseling which instructed them to hear one's conversion story, share the gospel, seek out the reason for the doubt, and agree to continue with the counselee long term, if necessary, until the issue of assurance is more settled. Third, the decision counselors' understanding of assurance will

strengthen their personal evangelism in that they will be more careful in sharing the gospel, helping to ensure the person with whom they are sharing has a definite conversion experience with Christ.

The ways in which the project helped the congregation are also three. First, the project helped the congregation in that they were able to hear extensive teaching on the doctrine of assurance, distinguishing the marks of a true believer compared to false conversion. For four consecutive Sundays the congregation, and multiple first-time visitors, heard challenging messages laying out the evidences of conversion and asking the people if they saw these signs of salvation in their own lives. Those who did not see signs of conversion were urged to repent and believe the gospel while those who saw signs of conversion were urged to take heart and rest in the assurance of their salvation.

A second way in which the congregation was helped was in the overall practice of equipping its members for ministry. Ten members were equipped for a significant work of counseling that is often reserved for pastors and staff. The congregation is able to see more of their fellow members doing more of the work of ministry, raising the bar of Christian growth for the entire congregation. A third way in which the project helped the congregation was in the introduction of surveys as a way of gauging the church's thinking on a particular issue. While this particular survey experience had some flaws, the overall experience was helpful in that it will be a good tool to use in the future to prepare for equipping the church for evangelism, giving, outreach, or other areas of discipling.

Weaknesses of the Project

The project itself was found to have at least four noticeable weaknesses. The first weakness had to do with the sampling group used in the survey. While the same four classes were used for the pre-series survey as were used for the post-series survey, no thought was given to using the same people for the survey. The failure to use the same people skewed the results of the survey and prevented the survey from revealing whether

the preaching series had any notable impact on the thinking of those who heard the sermons.

The second weakness of the project was in the failure to set even one counseling appointment for those who continue to struggle with doubt. More attention could have been given to a strategy for ease of contact for those who wished to talk further about assurance. The third weakness of the project was its failure to conquer the issue of assurance as a feeling and rid our congregation of feeling-based assurance. Even after the findings of the pre-series survey showed that 14 percent of our congregation viewed assurance as a feeling, no plan was made to eradicate feeling-based assurance.

The fourth weakness of the project was its lack of use of multi-media in both the training phase and the preaching phase of the project. Our congregation responds well to videos shown during sermons and power point presentations, but little attention was given to these extra details that could have made a good presentation even better, especially for those whose learning style is different.

What I Would Do Differently

Given the experience of completing this project and the opportunity to do it over, there are several things I would do differently. First I would survey the same people in the pre-series survey as the post-series survey. The only way to accurately gauge a change in learning is with the same group of people. The failure to take into account that all the same people would not be completing the post-series survey as had completed the pre-series survey was an oversight. Using the same individuals would have been a greater challenge requiring two additional meetings with the targeted survey group, but the target group would have likely yielded more trustworthy results concerning the impact of the series of messages on the thinking of the congregants.

The second thing I would do differently is I would have used a dramatic skit during one or two of the sermons. I would have used a skit to demonstrate a person talking to God about their doubt, and possibly a skit showing a counseling situation

between a counselor and a counselee. These skits could have dramatically demonstrated some of the emotional issues faced by those who encounter doubts as well as lessened barriers to respond to the invitation for further counseling.

The third thing I would do differently is that I would have given a card to each congregant showing them how to request further counsel if they so desired. The card would have advertised who would benefit from further assurance counsel, told the location where the counsel would occur, let it be known that the counseling service would be without financial fee, and listed a contact phone number for easy response. The fourth thing I would do differently is to provide a personal counseling plan in chart form printed on card stock to each congregant who attended the services. The personal counseling plan would be in the form of “What to do if you doubt your salvation.” The plan would include reasons for doubt, the kind of people who doubt, examples of doubt in the Bible, and the path to biblical assurance. The printed self-counsel plan would be for those who doubt their salvation but are too embarrassed to talk to anyone about their lack of assurance.

The fifth and final change I would make is to use testimonies in the services, including my own testimony. Our church has a history of using personal testimonies before sermons to connect people with the theme of the message. I have talked to many people in our congregation who could have given a clear testimony of their experience with doubt and their journey into assurance. I also would have told my own story of dealing with doubt for three years before moving into a settled biblical assurance.

Theological Reflections

At the conclusion of this project there are three theological reflections that come to mind, each having to do with evangelism and church growth. The first reflection is that assurance is connected to personal and pulpit evangelism. Those who want believers to enjoy assurance of salvation must be careful in the way they present the gospel to unbelievers and deal with people at the point of receiving Christ. Many who

struggle with doubt do so because of issues surrounding their conversion experience. They have questions about whether they knew enough to be saved, did they understand repentance, did they pray rightly, and so on. Those who share the gospel with the lost must take into consideration that those with whom they share may one day struggle with doubt. Christians must do all they can to be clear and thorough on the evangelism end so that the convert can be armed to do battle with doubt when the need arises. Those who equip believers to share their faith must equip in such a way that they do not allow for shallow understandings of the gospel. If believers need to continue to use examples, analogies, and more verses with the one to whom they share, then so be it. The energy invested in evangelism may save much trouble with doubt in the future.

The second reflection is that doubt disappears and assurance increases through biblical discipleship. While those who come for assurance counsel are often looking for a quick fix, the Lord may be more interested in a deeper sanctification. They may present themselves with a desire to be sure they will go to heaven when they die, but the deeper issue could be that the candidate for assurance is slack in their walk with God and not serious in the spiritual disciplines. A request for assurance can be an open door for a one-to-one discipleship relationship that results in a person becoming a truly devoted follower of Christ. Those who wish to pursue biblical evangelism and church growth must be ready to help people grow however they come through the doors of a church, or a pastor's study. They may come for their own set of reasons, but God may be bringing them in for his desire to see them walk more closely with himself.

The third theological reflection is that assurance is vital for an effective personal evangelism ministry. A leadership principle exists that says one cannot lead where they have not been. When it comes to personal evangelism, if the evangelist is not sure of his or her own salvation then he or she will have a difficult time speaking with conviction about the Lord's willingness to save the person with whom the evangelist is speaking. I do believe the evangelist should continue to witness while he or she is

wrestling with doubt. Their witnessing, however, will be greatly enhanced when they become more convinced that Jesus has saved them.

Personal Reflections

Several lessons were learned from planning and implementing this project to train decision counselors to teach the doctrine of assurance. First, I was reminded of the value of equipping the saints for the work of ministry (Eph 4:11-12). While I have annually held training events in churches where I have pastored to train members for various aspects of ministry, this particular training seemed to strengthen my resolve to commit more of my time to equip more people for more ministry.

Second, I gained an understanding of how to complete a large, worthwhile, project from start to finish. While I have started many programs in ministry this project is the first time I have planned with as much detail and carried out the plan including the evaluation stage. The project has been a good experience for me personally and will serve as a template for many more to come in the life of our congregation.

Third, I gained a greater appreciation for the value of surveys as a tool for gauging the congregation's understanding of a subject or views on an issue. The survey was not difficult to develop and the congregation was glad to assist in its implementation. I can see us using more surveys on a limited basis in the future as we consider important subjects and issues as a church body.

Conclusion

Overall, I would rate this project a success with much room for improvement. The success comes in the stated purpose of the project and in the completion of its goals. The purpose was to train decision counselors to teach the doctrine of assurance. The people to whom they need to be able to teach are those who respond during the public invitations at our worship services. I feel they are adequately equipped with both the strategy and the sensitivity needed to help those who are seeking assurance. The four

goals were stated and achieved with the exception of persons coming for appointments for further counseling.

The project was a growth experience for me and a foundational benefit to First Baptist Church of Oak Grove. For me, I grew personally from a feeling-based understanding of assurance to a biblical assurance. I also grew in my sensitivity toward those who are saved but who struggle with doubt. Finally, I grew as a researcher and implementer of projects. Because of the format of the doctor of ministry project I now feel more equipped to discover and respond to big issues in the life of our congregation. The church will benefit foundationally in that answers to the problems that we face as a congregation will be responded to much more thoughtfully and prayerfully than ever before. While they will not experience the behind the scenes work that goes into the response, they should see the benefits. I believe First Baptist Church will be a better church because of this project and in the future we will make a greater evangelistic impact on our community.

APPENDIX 1

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR INTERVIEWING PASTORS

Agreement to Participate

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to gather information which will help to train decision counselors at First Baptist Church of Oak Grove, Kentucky, to teach the doctrine of assurance of salvation. This research is being conducted by Larry Todd Gray as part of a Doctor of Ministry project. In this research, you will be asked to give answers to seven questions from your personal ministry experience. Any information you provide will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.*

1. Have you ever experienced doubts about your own salvation, and if so when and to what degree?
2. If you did experience doubts about your salvation, how long did the doubts last and what was helpful in dealing with the doubt and gaining assurance?
3. What do you think contributes to doubt in the lives of saved individuals?
4. In the past six months, approximately how many people have you counseled regarding doubts and assurance of salvation?
5. What is your approach to counseling persons who are dealing with doubt and seeking a greater sense of assurance?
6. Which book, article, quote, or Scripture has helped you in counseling others in the subject of doubt and assurance?
7. Is there anything else you would like to add about the subject of assurance counseling that could be helpful to those dealing with doubt?

APPENDIX 2

PRE-SERIES AND POST-SERIES QUESTIONNAIRE

Agreement to Participate

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to gather information which will help to train decision counselors at First Baptist Church of Oak Grove, Kentucky, to teach the doctrine of assurance of salvation. This research is being conducted by Larry Todd Gray as part of a Doctor of Ministry project. In this research, you will be asked to give answers to ten questions from your personal experience regarding the issue of assurance of salvation. Any information you provide will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.*

1. I can honestly say that I have never really experienced doubts about my salvation.
Agree Strongly Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree
2. I believe anyone who has doubts about being saved is probably not really saved.
Agree Strongly Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree
3. I have experienced times/or a time of doubt about my salvation.
Agree Strongly Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree
4. I believe that assurance of salvation is more of a feeling than anything else, and when I don't feel saved, then I question whether I am saved.
Agree Strongly Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree
5. I need to be convinced of my own salvation if I am to witness to others about faith in Christ.
Agree Strongly Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree
6. I am sure of my salvation, and I am equipped to counsel others who are dealing with doubt.
Agree Strongly Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree
7. I am sure of my salvation, but I am not equipped to counsel others who are dealing with doubt.
Agree Strongly Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

PLEASE ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS IN THE SPACE PROVIDED:

1. Please list one Bible verse that helps you to have assurance of your salvation:
2. Please list three or more reasons you believe assurance is important for Christians:
3. Please list how you would counsel a person who came to you for help in dealing with doubts about their salvation:

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ABSTRACT

TRAINING DECISION COUNSELORS TO TEACH THE DOCTRINE OF ASSURANCE OF SALVATION AT FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, OAK GROVE, KENTUCKY

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This project sought to develop a training program to equip decision counselors of First Baptist Church in Oak Grove, Kentucky, to teach the doctrine of assurance of salvation. Chapter 1 describes a proposal for recruiting and training the counselors including goals, church and community context, and the rationale for the project.

Chapter 2 focuses on a biblical and theological basis for dealing with doubts about salvation. This chapter also deals with four New Testament texts that cover a broad amount of material on the subject of assurance.

Chapter 3 deals with theoretical and practical issues related to this project. This chapter considers the views of three conservative theologians regarding why they think people doubt their salvation and what they believe about the possibility of assurance. This information is compiled into a list of possible reasons for doubts about one's salvation. Research is then conducted regarding the assurance counseling practices of three biblically conservative practitioners. Their best practices are considered as to how they can be duplicated by persons who are involved in counseling others who are seeking assurance of salvation.

Chapter 4 gives details of the actual implementation of the training project. Research instruments were utilized and a training program was conducted. Chapter 5 reviews the effectiveness of the project. The data is analyzed and the goals and process is evaluated.

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