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T H E

P R O T E S T A N T

F A I T H

WE MAY KNOW THAT WE ARE SAVED

by  
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I have been asked to comment on a pamphlet published in Sydney under the Roman Catholic imprimatur entitled "So You Think You are Saved?" The writer criticises the doctrine common to all protestants that a Christian may be sure that all his sins are forgiven and that he is saved. It is perhaps surprising that the Roman Catholic Church which insists so strongly that one may be certain without a shadow of doubt that it is the only true church should teach that the Christian can have no certainty or assurance about his own relationship to God so as to know whether he is saved or not and whether or not he is going to heaven. However its teaching on the matter is clear; thus the Council of Trent in Session 6 chapter 12 states "Except by special revelation it cannot be known whom God has chosen unto Himself" and in Canon 16 the Council anathematizes any who without special revelation are certain of their salvation. In doing this the Council was simply following the teaching of Thomas Aquinas who in the Summa Theologica (2/1/112/5) states "No-one can know he has sanctifying grace". This firm conclusion is surprising in view of the many passages of the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments which speak of the believer's assurance of his salvation. For example, Psalm 23, so well-known a psalm, which begins "The Lord is my Shepherd" concludes with the calm assurance "I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever"; and Psalm 73 verse 24 we read "Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel and afterward receive me to glory ... My flesh and my heart faileth but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever". Job in chapter 19 knows that his Redeemer lives and that in his flesh he shall see God, while the New Testament is full of similar joyous assurance. St. Paul



writing to the Romans in chapter 8 asks "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" and in 2 Timothy 1:12 he states "I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day", while the first epistle of John was written in order, as St. John puts it in 5:13, that the readers might know that they had eternal life, because they had believed on the name of the Son of God. In saying this the apostles are simply following the teaching of our Lord who told His disciples in John 10 that none could pluck His sheep out of His Father's hands. These are clear words of strong assurance and there are innumerable verses of a similar strain in the Bible.

Consequently it may therefore seem extraordinary that Roman Catholic theology speaks so strongly against the Christian's personal assurance of his own salvation, while at the same time it teaches that he should have full assurance in other areas of belief, such as the authority of the Church. The pamphlet I have mentioned, on page 25 calls the Christian's personal assurance of salvation "a form of presumption", stating, "Never at any stage in this life are we allowed to make it a certainty that we shall be saved". On the other hand it is not hard to understand why it is necessary for Roman Catholic theologians to be so antagonistic to the doctrine of assurance, because they teach that our salvation depends on our own works as a co-relative ground to the work of Christ. It is said that we have to co-operate with God, so that our salvation depends vitally on our own efforts. On this view it is plain that doubt, fear and a degree of uncertainty must be integral parts of our Christian experience, because who can know that his own efforts are sufficient for salvation?

Those who oppose the protestant doctrine of personal assurance of salvation have failed to note that this assurance springs from an entire reliance on divine mercy and forgiveness, a reliance based on God's clear promises in Scripture. It is a complete



misunderstanding to consider our assurance as a glorying in our own life and achievements, as though it were an over estimation of our own future constancy. The reason why we may be sure of our salvation is because we are sure of God's character and because His promises and His goodness are the only ground of our hope for salvation. Since God's mercy in Jesus Christ is the only ground of our salvation, then it is not presumption to trust in it. Such assurance only becomes presumption if we add our own merits as an essential ground of our salvation and then, of course, it would be presumptuous to pre-judge our own achievements in so great a matter. But the Bible makes clear that our good works and Christian character are the result of our salvation, and not its ground. Christ alone is the ground of our salvation, and because of this the Bible is full of words of assurance. God intends that our hearts should be at rest in Him, and not be in constant turmoil through struggles prompted by fear and uncertainty.

The cause of the error about assurance is seen clearly in the passage I have quoted from Thomas Aquinas. He stated that no man can know whether or not he has sanctifying grace, that is whether or not his sins are forgiven and he is going to Heaven. The reason he gives is that "No-one can know he has the knowledge of a conclusion if he does not know its principle. But the principle of grace and its object is God, who by reason of His very excellence is unknown to us ... and hence His presence in us and His absence cannot be known with certainty, and hence man cannot judge with certainty that he has grace." Thus Aquinas concludes that as we do not know God, we cannot know how we stand with regard to Him. But in this Aquinas is greatly at fault because he overlooks and ignores God's promises in the Bible. It is true we do not know God in His completeness but we do know very clearly His attitude towards those who put their trust in Christ, because He has made it abundantly clear in Scripture. He has declared in plain language that



He forgives them all their sins and accepts them fully as His children, solely for the merits of Jesus Christ. This is the reason why Christian believers, following the Scriptures, rejoice in the assurance of their salvation. God is faithful, as St. Paul puts it, and will complete the work He has begun in us.

Though Roman Catholics overlook God's promises, which are sure, they sometimes substitute other things as grounds of assurance. Thus the Roman Catholic Dictionary of Moral Theology on p.775 states approvingly "St. Therese of the child Jesus said a soul that is faithful in meditating for ten minutes a day is sure of his salvation", and on p.940 it quotes St. Alphonsus, "He who prays will certainly be saved; and he who does not pray will not be saved". The dictionary explains this as meaning persevering in the use of the sacraments. These two quotations are interesting, as they are examples of how perseverance in religious works are substituted for reliance on God's promises, as a way of satisfying the natural desire of the Christian's heart for assurance.

Turning again to the pamphlet I mentioned, the writer misunderstands the relationship of works to faith. The fact is that our good works are the result of our faith. That is why they may be taken as a test of faith. But it is not our works that save, nor indeed our faith, but rather it is Jesus Christ Who saves us. Our faith is the way by which we come into relationship with Him, and our works are the result of that relationship. On page 19 the writer also misunderstands the basis of the Christian's assurance of his salvation. He thinks this assurance is based on feelings, but as we have seen it is based on the knowledge of God's clear promises. Knowing and believing these promises, it is impossible for the Christian not to have assurance; his feelings are the result of his knowledge, and



not the other way round. The writer of the pamphlet also appears to ignore the fact that the Holy Spirit indwells the hearts of those who have come into fellowship with Christ through the forgiveness of sins. Thus good works must inevitably follow saving faith and so are the sign and test of faith, for if God through His Spirit is present in a man's heart, that man is not the same as he was before. His heart has been changed, so that he now loves the thing that God commands and endeavours by His help to walk in His commandments. But we are saved before these works show themselves, and so they are not the ground of our salvation, but are rather its fruit.

The incident of the penitent thief is a good example of a man who was saved without works, and to Him (because of his faith in Christ) Jesus gave the clear assurance "To-day thou shalt be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). The writer of the pamphlet has some difficulty with this incident. He first says that the willingness to do good works is sufficient. This is, of course, the protestant position; but a sentence or two later he says that our salvation depends upon our doing these good works, which if it were true would exclude the thief. In the next paragraph he feels obliged to exclude the incident altogether, by calling it an exception and a special dispensation which is not to be used to base the general doctrine on.

The writer has a similar difficulty in dealing with the Greek word meaning to justify. Throughout Greek literature this word always means "to account a person righteous", and so, St. Paul in Romans 3, speaks of God accounting the ungodly righteous", for Christ's sake, through faith. But Roman Catholic theology requires the word to mean "to make a person righteous", that is, to make him righteous through good works, and so on page 9 the writer of the pamphlet says "The Greek words took on a special sense when they were used by the New

Testament writers", which if it were true would mean that you cannot trust the Greek language when it is used in the Bible. This is a desperate expedient to get round the fact that the Greek word means the opposite to what Roman Catholic theology requires it to mean.

The Bible is written in unambiguous language. Its teaching is clear and that is why it does not need a special interpreter in the form of an authoritative church. Every reader can find its meaning clearly for himself. Of course it is wise to use a good modern translation if you do not know the original Greek. As we read the Bible it is clear that God's purpose for us is that we might have the joy of this knowledge and also the strength to persevere in times of difficulty, knowing that God has received us for Christ's sake and that there is laid up for us the crown of life. Roman Catholics teach that you cannot be sure of your eternal destiny though you may hope for it. This uncertainty follows naturally from the doctrine that our salvation depends both on Christ's work and on our own efforts, for of the sufficiency of the latter we can never be sure. This is a logical conclusion, but the fact that it is so abundantly contradicted by the testimony of Scripture is further proof that the doctrine which bases our salvation partly on our own works and not on Christ exclusively is contrary to the Bible. Christ is able to save completely all who come to God by Him (Hebrews 7:25).



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