Box 80a

CERTAINTY OF SALVATION

by

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

You may have seen a recent T.V Programme which interviewed old people about dying but it was a little sad, I thought, that those interviewed though plainly believed in God did not seem sure that they would go to heaven, though they hoped to.

Every Christian should know that he is saved and that his eternal inheritance is secure. It is God's intention that we should know that we are saved, for this knowledge brings great joy. Thus St. John writes in I John 5:13 "I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life".

The way of salvation is clear and simple. St. Paul wrote(ROM. 10:9) "If you confess that Jesus is Lord and believe that God has raised Him from the dead you shall be saved", and in Acts 16 when the Apostle Paul and Silas were asked by the gaoler at Philippi "Sirs, what must I do to be saved" they replied"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved and your house". Our Lord told Nicodemus (Jn. 3:16) "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believed in him should not perish, but have eternal life".

Now it is a very simple matter to know whether or not we fulfil these conditions for salvation. Are we ready to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and believe that He died and rose again

for our sins? How do our hearts stand with regard to Jesus? Now everyone of us can answer this question ourselves though we are not in a position to answer it with absolute certainty for anyone else; but at least we may know whether we have taken Christ as our Lord and Saviour, and if we have we know God's attitude towards us as He has declared it very plainly and very frequently in the Bible.

If we are conscious that our sins have not been forgiven it is either because we do not know God's promises in Scripture or else we have not brought ourselves within the scope of these promises by acknowledging Christ as Lord. But if we can humbly and honestly say that Jesus is our Lord, and that we acknowledge Him as God and Saviour and are seeking to serve Him, there is no room for doubt as to God's attitude towards us as he has made it so clear, and to doubt His forgiveness of our sins is to dishonour Him and his Word.

The knowledge of God's gracious attitude towards us is the ground of Christian joy and confidence for the future. However, a well-known Sydney Roman Catholic writer in a pamphlet "So you thinks you are saved" of which I have been sent several copies by listeners says on p.26 "Never at any stage in this life are we allowed to make it a certainty that we shall be saved". In this sentiment the writer, Dr. Rumble, is fully in line with the

Roman Catholic traditional teaching which at this point is in sharp contrast to the Protestant doctrine which, basing itself on Bible promises, teaches that we should have a joyous assurance of salvation. The Roman Catholic Council of Trent, however, taught that a Christian can have no certainty of assurance about his own relationship to God as to know whether he is saved or not or whether he is going to heaven or not. Thus in Session 6, chapter 12, it stated "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) stated "Non-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 council and <u>afterward receive me to glory</u> .....my flesh and my heart faileth but God is the strength of my heart and my <u>portion for ever</u>".

Job (in chapter 19) knew that

his Redeemer lives and that in his flesh he should see God, while the New Testament is full of similar joyous assurance. Thus St. Paul writing to the Romans in chapter 8 asked "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" and in 2 Timothy 1:12 he stated "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, as we have seen, 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 live, 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." The writer shows that he misunderstands the basis of the Christian's assurance of sal-

vation, which is God's plain promise. It can never be a form of presumption to believe God's Word. In fact, it is everyone's duty to do so. A Christian who has not the calm joyous confidence that God has forgiven him and that He will take him to heaven is either ignorant of God's Word or lacks faith in it. On the other hand it is not hard to understand why it is necessary for Roman Catholic theologians to be antagonistic to the doctrine of assurance, because they teach that our salvation depends in part on our own works as well as on 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 feelings of confidence. 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 and His promises are clear. 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 gave 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 that he has grace!" Thus Aquinas con-

cluded that as we do not know God, we cannot know how we stand with regard to Him. But in this Aquinas is greatly mistaken 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 that He 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 edited by Cardinal Roberts on p.775 states approvingly "St. Therese of the child Jesus said a soul that is faithful inmmeditation 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 perserverance in religious works is

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). From that moment the thief knew that he was saved. The writer of the pamphlet has some difficlty 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 of the penitent thief altogether, by calling it an exception and a special dispensation which is not be 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 right-

eous", 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, if he reads it humbly, and with the assistance God has provided in the experience and knowledge of others. 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 know that we are saved, in order 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 (Heb. 7:25).

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