

ASSURANCE AND WORKS: AN EVANGELICAL TRAIN WRECK¹

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The controversy over Lordship Salvation reached high visibility in 1988 with the publication of John MacArthur's book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*. Since then the discussion has taken a significant turn. Increasingly the issue of assurance has come to the forefront of the debate.

MacArthur himself published a book on assurance (*Saved Without a Doubt*, 1992) and returned to the subject again in the volume *Faith Works* (1993; see pp. 157-73). His view of assurance can hardly be distinguished from the one that has been so prominent in the Puritan and Reformed traditions. In this view, the evidence of good works is *an indispensable verification of saving faith*. Without works there can be no certainty at all that one is saved.

For instance, MacArthur writes in *Faith Works*:

The evidence we seek through self-examination is nothing other than the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23), the proof that He resides within. It is on this testimony that our assurance is confirmed.²

This way of stating the issue, however, is disingenuous. What would “unconfirmed assurance” be for MacArthur? The answer is that it would be *false* assurance (see *Faith Works*, pp. 172-73). The bottom line then is this: Any assurance *we think we have* could be *fallacious* unless it is verified by works. But false assurance can be more candidly described as a spiritual *delusion*. If at the moment of faith I cannot discriminate between true assurance and a spiritual delusion, then clearly works become the true basis for genuine assurance.

The logic of this is inescapable. Under this Puritan view, the man who “thinks” he has believed cannot be sure that he really has done so until he performs works.

¹ Originally published in the GES newsletter, then called *The GES News*, March-April 1994.

² John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993), 171-72.

From this perspective, the biblical promises that the believer in Christ *has* eternal life are stripped of their value. Verses like John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; etc. (or even Acts 16:31 or Rom 4:5) contain no adequate basis for assurance at all, for I cannot know if they apply to me unless I do good works. The transparent fallacy in this ought to be evident to all. Instead, by a devious piece of sophistry, we are told that we cannot know that we have truly believed these promises until we produce the fruit of good works.

What results from such a theology is a psychological absurdity. It amounts to this:

- A. I think I believe John 3:16, but
- B. I won't know for sure that I do until I obey God's commands!

If anyone supposes that such ideas are really taught in Scripture, they need to think again. *Of course*, a person knows whether he believes something or not! When Jesus asked the former blind man, "Do you believe in the Son of God?" he replied quite positively, "Lord, I believe" (John 9:35, 37). And he had not yet done a single good work!

This problem has been glossed over by many evangelicals who ought to think about it more carefully.

In 1986, before I left Dallas Seminary where I had taught for 27 years, I conferred with the new president, Dr. Donald Campbell, in his office. When I was invited by him to express my theological concerns with the Seminary, I referred to Article XI on assurance in the Seminary's doctrinal statement, which reads as follows:

We believe it is the privilege, not only of some, but of all who are born again by the Spirit through faith in Christ as revealed in the Scriptures, to be assured of their salvation from the very day they take Him to be their Savior and that this assurance is not founded upon any fancied discovery of their own worthiness or fitness, but wholly upon the testimony of God in His written Word, exciting within His children filial love, gratitude, and obedience (Luke 10:20; 22:32; 2 Cor 5:1, 6-8; 2 Tim 1:12; Heb 10:22; 1 John 5:13).

In speaking to Dr. Campbell, I emphasized that if good works are *an indispensable verification of saving faith*, then the Seminary's doctrinal statement could not possibly be true. No one

could possibly have real assurance on the very day they trusted Christ since their faith has not yet been “verified” by works. I also indicated to him that I was aware that things were being taught in the classroom that implicitly contradicted Article XI.

I do not recall Dr. Campbell expressing his own convictions on the points I raised on that occasion. However, in a conversation over breakfast the other day, he made clear to me that he holds that good works are *not* an indispensable verification of saving faith. I am confident that Dr. Campbell’s position on assurance, and that of GES, are the same.

Regrettably, some published materials written by DTS faculty members confirm my earlier concern. First there was Dr. Darrell Bock’s review of MacArthur’s *The Gospel According to Jesus* which showed significant confusion on the subject of assurance (see *Bib Sac*, Jan-Mar, 1989, pp. 21-40; see my review in the *GES Journal*, Spring 1989, pp. 79-83 and especially pp. 81-83). Darrell has told me both in person and in writing that his position is “soft lordship” salvation—a view that would have been rejected by the founder and first president of Dallas Seminary, Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer.

Second there was Dr. Robert Pyne’s recent review of MacArthur’s book *Faith Works*. In the review, Pyne explicitly agrees with MacArthur’s call for both “subjective” (or, “moral”!) and “objective” (or, “doctrinal”!) grounds for assurance, the former being intended, in Pyne’s words, “to answer the question, ‘Is your faith real?’” Pyne then goes on to say that “MacArthur seems correct in arguing that assurance is *not really complete* without both elements.”³

In our recent conversation, Dr. Campbell and I discussed Pyne’s review of MacArthur’s *Faith Works*. Dr. Robert Wilkin had previously critiqued Pyne’s stated agreement with MacArthur on assurance in *The GES News* (Nov-Dec 1993) as being inconsistent with Article XI of the Seminary’s doctrinal statement. Dr. Campbell passed on to me several pages from Pyne’s notes in his class on soteriology (the theology of salvation). He felt those notes showed agreement with Article XI.

Despite my high personal regard for Dr. Campbell, I cannot agree with him on this. Instead, the notes seem to me to justify Bob Wilkin’s criticism. One paragraph from the notes follows:

³ *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (October-December 1993), 497-99.

Ideally, assurance that is grounded in one's belief in the biblical promises is then strengthened by the legitimacy of one's Christian experience. If this is the case, it would not be possible to see either area of testimony as *truly complete in the absence of the other*. Those who claim to know God might invalidate that claim by their behavior (Titus 1:16), and those who hope for salvation on the basis of their behavior alone have no reason to be confident. The profession of faith is certainly primary (1 John 5:13), but *it does not stand alone* (James 2:17). [Italics added.]

This is far from clear. It is semantically illicit to call something "assurance" if it is not "truly complete" in the absence of good works and if it "does not stand alone." That would amount to only a tentative conclusion. A *tentative conclusion* that I am saved, based on God's promises alone, is not the same as assurance.

Further, if people possessing this so-called "assurance" can later "invalidate" it "by their behavior," we are back to square one. The original "assurance" was a delusion which could not be recognized as such apart from subsequent "behavior." Thus *any* presumed "assurance" at conversion *might be* delusional and works *must* become the true basis for knowing whether one's faith is real or not. This is MacArthur's position exactly.

Strictly speaking, Pyne only states that one can "invalidate" his "*claim*" to know God by subsequent behavior. But presumably Pyne must mean that this "claim" is based on the person's "assurance." If Pyne does *not* mean that, the confusion is compounded. A reference to a *mere* "claim" is totally out of place in a discussion on personal assurance.

How then does Pyne differ from MacArthur, with whom he says he agrees on assurance? As far as I can tell, hardly at all. The disclaimer in Pyne's review that "the apparent lack of fruit cannot provide conclusive evidence of an unregenerate position, as MacArthur seems to imply," does not really touch the issue of assurance at all. Could a person without "apparent fruit" possess *real* assurance on the basis of God's promises alone? If not, neither could he possess it on the day he trusts Christ.

Finally, it is not enough to call "good works" a "secondary" grounds for assurance. Under the pressure of the debate with the Free Grace movement, some Reformed writers are now doing exactly that. But the question at issue remains whether these "secondary" evidences are *indispensable* to genuine assurance.

If someone insists that they are, biblical assurance is still subverted.

My point is this. The evangelical church is both confused and inconsistent in its discussion of the relationship between works and assurance. If such confusion can exist at Dallas Seminary with its crisp and perceptive doctrinal affirmation on assurance, it is no wonder that this confusion is pervasive in the modern church.

With regard to assurance and works, the evangelical community has experienced a theological train wreck!