

Why, if all our sins have been forgiven once and for all on the Cross, do we need to go on confessing our sins, and asking for forgiveness?

There is a big difference between a relationship being spoilt and a relationship being broken. When I misbehaved as a small boy – and subsequently – my relationship with my father was not broken. I was still his son. But the relationship was seriously strained until I had apologised and asked for his forgiveness. Once I have become a child of God, He cannot disown me, but I need to keep short accounts.

Thirdly, there is the continuing work and witness of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.

This is more subjective than the first two great objective truths, but it is the main thrust of the great New Testament letter on the subject of Christian assurance, namely the first letter of John. John points out that once we have become Christians, sin more and more leaves a bitter taste (which is why we often feel more sinful after becoming Christians than we did before – this is a very good sign!) and we begin to want to keep the commandments which were largely a matter of indifference to us beforehand. So there is indeed a moral test

‘We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands.’ (1 John 2:3).

Alongside a sharpened conscience and a growing desire to do His will, there will come a new love for fellow Christians. Those whom we used to think were rather odd and quaint – anoraks and sandals – we now see as brothers and sisters whose company we increasingly seek out, and we really miss it when we cannot join them at a church meeting or Bible Study

‘We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers.’ (1 John 3:14).

These more subjective tests are not meant to lead us to soul searching and massive introspection. In fact, the old adage stands ‘for one look within, take ten looks at Him’. Those ten looks at Him will remind us of His unbreakable Word in Scripture and His finished work on the Cross. Humbly and with great confidence we shall by His grace have complete assurance.

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Truth Matters is an occasional series of leaflets published by Reform addressing issues of importance for the understanding of the church today.

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How Can I Be Sure?

truth matters
Essential issues in Christian teaching and practice

How Can I Be Sure?

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God
so that you may know that you have eternal life (1 John 5:13)

It has been said that humble assurance and certainty about being a child of God, and one day being with Him in heaven throughout eternity, are hallmarks of Bible believing Christians. So far from being complacent and presumptuous, Christians meekly claim this as their birth right. It would be intolerable for a child to go to his or her parents with the question 'Am I really your child?' and for the parents to reply 'we are not telling you; wait and see; you may be, you may not be'. How much more would our loving heavenly Father want us to be sure that we are His children.

Traditionally this confidence rests on three great truths.

First there is the clear promise of God.

Jesus said

'whoever comes to me, I will never (no never) drive away'. (John 6:37)

Again

'My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my Father's hand'. (John 10:27-8)

As a Chinese student once put it: Jesus has said it; He is God; God cannot lie; I trust Him. Paul can speak with confidence to the Christians at Philippi (Phil. 1:6)

'he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus'.

And teaching a universal truth Paul writes to the Romans (Rom. 11:29)

'God's gifts and his call are irrevocable'.

That is to say God doesn't take away what He has given. Being a Christian means being born again - one cannot be unborn again!

'But I don't feel any different'.

If I became a naturalised Frenchman, in due course I might begin behaving as a Frenchman (wearing a beret? My heart might be stirred by the Marseillaise?). But initially it would be the naturalisation papers – the word of the French Government – which I would have to trust. So when feelings are absent I must cling to the clear Word of God.

Secondly, there is the completed work of Christ.

When Christ died on the Cross He paid the price for all the sins of all his people – sins we have committed and sins we will commit. So when someone becomes a Christian it is not as

if the sins that they have committed up to that point are cancelled, and then they have to claim further forgiveness for each sin committed thereafter. No! All our sins are forgiven, forgotten for ever. God says:

'Your sins I will remember no more'. (Jer. 31:34)

'I became a Christian several years ago, but I have sinned so badly since then, and I have often fallen into the same sin again and again, can God really go on forgiving me?'

When I became a Christian God did not have me 'on approval'. He accepted me unconditionally. The fact is that all those repeated sins have already been paid for at Calvary when Jesus died and cried out 'Finished', which could equally be translated 'Paid' (This means that it is actually presumptuous not to be sure. It is to imply that Jesus did not do enough when He died for our sins).

'But that means I can go on sinning as much as I like if they have all been paid for'.

The same point was put to Paul. 'By no means' he replied. Anybody who takes up that attitude has not begun to understand how incongruous it would be to accept the love and forgiveness that Jesus purchased through dying for us, and then to turn round and say 'thanks very much, but I intend to go on doing those very things that took You to the Cross'.