

Faith Seeking
Assurance



SERIES EDITORS

Joel R. Beeke & Jay T. Collier

Interest in the Puritans continues to grow, but many people find the reading of these giants of the faith a bit unnerving. This series seeks to overcome that barrier by presenting Puritan books that are convenient in size and unimimidating in length. Each book is carefully edited with modern readers in mind, smoothing out difficult language of a bygone era while retaining the meaning of the original authors. Books for the series are thoughtfully selected to provide some of the best counsel on important subjects that people continue to wrestle with today.

Faith Seeking Assurance

Anthony Burgess

Edited by
Joel R. Beeke



Reformation Heritage Books
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Reformation Heritage Books

2965 Leonard St. NE

Grand Rapids, MI 49525

616-977-0889 / Fax 616-285-3246

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www.heritagebooks.org

Printed in the United States of America

15 16 17 18 19 20/10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015930233

For additional Reformed literature, request a free book list from Reformation Heritage Books at the above regular or e-mail address.

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Preface

Perhaps the most popular Scripture verse in contemporary culture is, “Judge not, that ye be not judged” (Matt. 7:1). We live in a time when tolerance reigns. Secular psychologists labor to relieve men, women, and children of their bad feelings about themselves. Churches proclaim God’s unconditional love and teach that our duty is to learn to love ourselves. Schools instill in their students an ethic of acceptance of all people regardless of who they are and what they do. One would think that in such an environment, we would live in an age of great joy and peace.

Why then are we so restless and troubled?

It’s not just secular or irreligious people. Many professing Christians suffer from a lack of joy and peace in their lives. Even if they denounce all forms of legalism and sing of the love of Christ, they still feel guilty and uneasy about themselves.

A major reason for this anxiety is a lack of spiritual assurance. The Holy Spirit alone can produce an

inward confidence that you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to you, resulting in spiritual joy, peace, humility, love, longing for His presence, and desire to do His will. Spiritual assurance is not just a belief that you will be in heaven; it is heaven already begun in you. It is relying on what Christ did for you two thousand years ago and realizing what Christ is doing in your life today. Such assurance is not common.

You may think this is a strange idea, given that assurance of salvation is often said to be as easy as asking Jesus into your heart. Millions of people who pray such a prayer have been assured that they are children of God, forgiven of all their sins, and on the high road to heaven. Yet large numbers of them lack a heartfelt assurance. They have little motivation to serve the Lord and may drift in and out of churches.

Other Christians, of course, are in the opposite situation. They are the core of the churches' volunteers, or perhaps the pastors and paid staff. They believe that Christ died for sinners, read their Bibles, say their prayers, give their tithes and offerings to the church, and work hard to keep the Ten Commandments. They hate sin, love Christ, pursue holiness, and long to please and glorify God. Yet they may sometimes fear that God is angry with them and never feel truly accepted by the Lord. They seem to think it is almost impossible to know if they are children of God—a privilege reserved for the most saintly of saints.

Is it possible to experience assurance in the heart? If so, then how?

I have found tremendous help in answering these questions in the biblical teachings of a man born four hundred years ago. Anthony Burgess was the son of a schoolteacher born in Watford, Hertfordshire, England. He was educated at St. John's College, Cambridge (BA 1627), and Emmanuel College (MA 1630). He served as a fellow (instructor) at Emmanuel before becoming the vicar at Sutton Coldfield, Warwickshire, in 1635. During the English Civil War, he took refuge in Coventry and then was summoned to serve in the Westminster Assembly. His reputation grew as a godly man, a gifted preacher, and a profound theologian. After the war, he returned in 1647 to Sutton Coldfield, where he served until being expelled from his ministry in 1662 by the Act of Uniformity. He chose to retire to Tamworth, Staffordshire, and attended the parish church of his godly friend Samuel Langley until his death in 1664.

Burgess wrote many books, including major treatises on original sin, justification by faith alone, Christ's prayer in John 17,¹ and the goodness and functions of

1. For a summary of his treatise on John 17, see Joel R. Beeke, "Anthony Burgess on Christ's Prayer for Us," in *Taking Hold of God: Reformed and Puritan Perspectives on Prayer*, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Brian G. Najapfour (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), 83–108.

the law of God.² Burgess's works were not reprinted in the nineteenth century, and, as a result, he is not as well known today as other Puritans like John Owen.

This book was adapted from Burgess's masterpiece on assurance, *Spiritual Refining*, first published in London in 1652. I have spent over forty years reading books written in the seventeenth century, and this is one of my favorites.³ The original book contained 120 sermons explaining, as the title page says, "the doctrine of assurance, the use of signs in self-examination, how true graces may be distinguished from counterfeit, several true signs of grace, and many false ones, the nature of grace under diverse Scripture notion or titles, as regeneration, the new creature, the heart of flesh, vocation, sanctification, etc."

The modern book that you hold in your hands takes the beginning (sermons 1–11) and an excerpt from the end (sermons 116–118) of the original volume. The resulting fourteen chapters give you the heart of Burgess's teaching in a manner that is short, simple, and sweet. You will find the pages full of the Holy Scriptures, for the Word of God is the only solid basis on

2. The last of these was recently reprinted as Anthony Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, Westminster Assembly Facsimile Series (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011).

3. For an analysis of Burgess's treatise on assurance, see Joel R. Beeke, "Anthony Burgess on Assurance," in *Puritan Reformed Spirituality* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2006), 170–95.

which we can build assurance. I encourage you to read it with an open Bible. Yet, since assurance is a gift of the Holy Spirit, I also encourage you to read this book with much prayer for the Father to work in you by the Spirit.

May the Lord be pleased to use this little book to do for you what the apostle John aimed to do in his first epistle: “These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life” (1 John 5:13).

—Joel R. Beeke

CHAPTER 1

The Necessity and Advantage of Assurance

*Examine yourselves, whether ye be in
the faith; prove your own selves.*

—2 Corinthians 13:5

The church of Corinth was a garden planted by apostles, yet it was quickly filled with harmful weeds. The apostle Paul thus threatened the congregation with severe discipline if it failed to repent, ecclesiastical discipline being to the church what the sword is to the Commonwealth. The Corinthians did not care for this strong reprimand and responded by questioning Paul's apostolic power and authority. Love for their lusts and for security in those lusts made the Corinthians question the divine right of Christ's institutions. The apostle proved his calling by citing the spiritual success and powerful effect that his words had had among the Corinthians. Instead of proving and examining him, Paul commanded them to try themselves. This very argument may still be used

today by God's faithful ministers against many people who condemn their calling.

The Duty to Examine Yourself

In Paul's words there is a duty demanded. If this duty is neglected, the consequences may be grave. The duty is explained by two emphatic words: *examine* and *prove* yourselves. The former word generally means to experientially know something that is uncertain, unknown, or hidden. Knowledge gained by general arguments and abstract reasons cannot be called experiential knowledge. Therefore, in addition to this knowledge, examination is needed to determine whether an end is good or bad.

In an ill sense the word applies to the devil and his instruments, while in a good sense it applies to God and, in the text, to ourselves. In addition, these words imply that men are strangers to themselves because much self-love blinds them to the truth. These words also imply that certain marks and signs indicate how a man may come to certainty about who he is, or this command would be in vain. The word *prove* also implies that severe and diligent self-examination is necessary to have a full experiential knowledge of what is within us (Rom. 5:4).

The word *examine* is used in regard to experiential knowledge. The object of examination is to see "whether ye be in the faith." The apostle does not speak here of

the doctrine of faith, but of the saving grace of faith that is evident in the question, "Know ye not that Christ is in you?" The apostle says "ye in the faith" rather than "faith in you" to show the great extent of faith which we as its subjects cannot fully embrace. Additionally, he uses contrary phrases such as "in sin" and "in the flesh" rather than saying that sin and flesh are in us. Some also note that Paul says, "Enter thou into thy Master's joy," rather than "Thy Master's joy enter into thee"; though that seems fanciful, for the true meaning is, "Enter into the place of thy Master's joy" as the term is used in Esther.

Roman Catholic commentators elude this issue when asked by the orthodox to prove that a man may be certain of true grace in himself. They say the apostle does not refer to the saving work of the Spirit here, but of miraculous works. They argue that they are apostles of the true Messiah because of the miracles wrought among them. They also cite Galatians 3:5, in which the apostle proves the true doctrine that Christ is among believers because of the miracles done in their midst. They sometimes also add Matthew 11:5, in which John's disciples ask Jesus whether he is the true Christ, and Jesus replies, "The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk," implying that these wonderful works demonstrate that He is the Messiah.

We grant this is part of what the apostle means in calling the Corinthians to examine themselves for an experiential proof of Paul's apostleship among them, yet

that cannot be the entire meaning because Christ is not said to dwell in us (according to the scriptural phrase) or to be in us merely by means of miraculous faith.

The consequential absurdity follows in the words “except ye be reprobates.” Johannes Piscator (1546–1625) views *reprobates* here as opposite to those who are predestinated to salvation. But I prefer Theodore Beza’s (1519–1605) view of this word as describing a corrupt and unsound mind. Thus the Corinthians could easily discover the work of Christ in and among themselves, unless their understanding was in part depraved. For Paul did not suggest total unsoundness in them, as is evident by his use of the Greek, which mitigates the speech and is therefore translated by some as, “Unless you are unsound in something.”

A reprobate mind is a corrupt mind, according to Titus 1:16. Second Timothy 3:8 also refers to “men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the faith.” Although we do not take reprobates here as the opposite of those predestinated to salvation, yet I do not see why we may not well translate it reprobates, not regarding them to have no hope of salvation, but instead as what the Scripture calls “reprobate silver” in Jeremiah 6:30, meaning something that has no worth or value in trade. Though the apostle is writing to the entire church at Corinth, each individual believer is called to observe the duty he asks of them. That is denied by Willem van Est (1542–1613), who avoided orthodox arguments

for assurance of faith by saying that it may be more easily known that Christ is in a certain church or congregation rather than in the heart of an individual believer. For the text speaks not of Christ being in His doctrine and ordinances among them, which indeed is easily discerned, but of His spiritually inhabiting them by sanctifying grace.

From this text, then, we may make two general observations:

- ✦ Observation 1: It is a duty of special concern for the people of God to be assured of the true and saving work of grace in themselves, for by means of this assurance they know they are not unsound hypocrites.
- ✦ Observation 2: There are certain marks and signs of grace by which a person may discern what he is.

True Knowledge of Grace

A practical, experimental knowledge of grace far transcends a mere notional or theoretical knowledge of it. It is like the difference between someone who has heard that honey is sweet, and someone who has tasted it. A rule among the Hebrews is that words of knowledge may sometimes signify affections in the heart as well as actions in life. How good it would be if words always distinguished true Christians from false.

In former times Christians labored much for experimental knowledge, while today they are satisfied with mere brain knowledge. In medicine we contemptuously call a person an empiric if he goes by experience alone and has no knowledge of the nature of things. To be an empiric in Christianity, however, may be understood in a good sense. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) rightly said that in reading books we should not look for science as much as for the savoriness of truth upon our hearts.

But the apostle goes on to command us to prove and try ourselves by actual outworkings of grace in our lives, which enable us to persuade ourselves that we are recipients of regeneration, thereby enabling us to conclude that we are believers.¹ We prove or try ourselves by applying the notes and marks of faith of which Scripture speaks, and thereby acquire an experimental feeling of the actual exercise of them. Philippians 1:9 speaks of experimental knowledge as the inward savory sense and feeling of divine things upon the heart.

The Necessity of Assurance

The necessity of having assurance about this practical, experimental work of grace, by which we are enabled to

1. Burgess calls the actual outworkings of grace *actu secunda*, that is, secondary acts, that flow out of the *actu primo*, that is, the habit of grace, which is inseparable from regeneration.

discern the true from the counterfeit, is evident on several grounds:

1. *Our Savior's strong emphasis on this point in His sermons.* The heathen say, "When a wise man speaks, he opens the rich treasures and wardrobe of his mind." If this is true of a wise man, it is even truer of Christ, in whom are all the treasures of wisdom. Of all the practical points in theology He makes, our Savior most frequently speaks about what is evident in His first parable, recorded in Matthew 13:3. This story shows the difference between true and counterfeit grace. Luke 8:8 says that after Jesus finished telling the parable, He cried, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear." Crying is not attributed to Christ's speech unless His affections are very earnest and the subject is of great importance. He is speaking to a multitude of people who have thronged Him and are now listening intently to His words. Yet Jesus declares that few have a good and honest heart to receive the word.

Our Savior says that in our use of the ordinances we may perceive such change in us that we think we have joy, faith, or some kind of reformation, yet we still might not be the good and right soil that truly receives the word. That is a challenge for us to stay attuned to the word until we are truly assured of our salvation.

Our Savior offers another parable to make this point. In Matthew 25:1, He speaks of ten virgins or

young women who have preserved themselves from the idolatries and gross vices of the world. They all have lamps and are confidently walking to meet the bridegroom. One virgin is no different from the other until the bridegroom comes, revealing those who have not brought sufficient oil to keep their lamps burning. This parable suggests that someone with much knowledge, such as a professor, may have a false, imperfect, or counterfeit work of grace. He lives in comfort and confidence, believing that his spiritual condition is right before God. He does not find out otherwise until it is too late.

Again, in Matthew 7:24–26, Jesus speaks of two builders, one who builds upon sand and the other upon rock. This parable represents two kinds of believers. One makes a profession of faith and follows the way of Christianity. He is truly rooted in Christ, the Rock. The other seems to be a believer, but he, like the majority of Christians, does not dig deep enough. His faith, repentance, and joy are set upon shifting sand. The consequence is that his “fall thereof was great.” The damnation of such people will be truly awful when all their religious duties and external professions crash to the ground. How woe-ful it will be when they are rent from God, despite all the duties they have trusted in for salvation. Our Savior warns in Matthew 7:22 that many will call to Him at that day, claiming they have prophesied in His name and eaten and drunk in His presence. These people offered many sacrifices and received many sacraments, but

Christ will say, "I never knew you" (v. 23). It is critical that we are not deceived about the work of saving grace within us. We must keep our eyes focused on God's true work of grace, lest we build our spiritual state with counterfeit coin.

2. *The tendency to make false assumptions about our faith.* The experiential knowledge of faith is of special concern because of our innate tendency to mistake true faith from false. Augustine said that error and dangerous tendencies are more easily made in expounding the doctrine of the Trinity than in other doctrines. That also applies, however, to the apostle's command to examine and prove our faith because of the deceitfulness of our hearts and our failure to distinguish between many false shapes and forms of faith. Scripture's admonitions to be searching our hearts and communing with our hearts argue the difficulty of being fully acquainted with what is in them.

Roman Catholics press this point too far, as if no one can tell if they truly love God or have a sincere heart. In due course this will be shown to be false. It is true, however, that we have so much self-love and carnal confidence in ourselves that we can easily assume that we are what we ought to be. Ask one person after another about their eternal state: who is not confident that he is regenerated, that he has a saving interest in Christ, and that his heart is good? And why is this so? Because he

does not faithfully compare himself to the marks and character of true grace, and does not diligently apply them to himself. The Jews and Pharisees could not be beaten out of their vain hopes and carnal confidences that they truly kept the law of God. Therefore, the apostle uses the emphatic word of a Jew in Romans 2:17 to say, "Thou...retest in the law." The Jews and Pharisees found security in the law as if it were an admirable privilege and testimony of God's love. Christ promises "rest unto your souls" in Matthew 11:29, but no load of sin could burden the Pharisees because they believed they were already at rest.

In much the same way, some Christians rest in knowing the doctrine of the gospel and in the outward use of ordinances without ever feeling the weight of sin. It would be better for those people to pray with fear and to eat their bread with trembling and astonishment rather than to be hypocrites who are carnally and falsely persuaded of their good condition. Many so-called Christians are like glowworms or rotten white trees made of base materials, shining only on the outside! Therefore what should be fastened upon the gates of the whole world, upon every door and every post is, "Examine, prove yourselves."

3. *The danger of miscarrying in this matter.* Oh, the confusion that fell upon the foolish virgins when their lack of oil was discovered! How careful we are to avoid taking

counterfeit coin. But it is even more dangerous to mistake counterfeit repentance for true repentance, counterfeit faith for true faith. If your praying and profession of faith is not good and true, you will be forever undone.

In Hebrews 6:4, the apostle speaks of some who experienced things many of us have not attained to. They had been “enlightened,” had “tasted of the heavenly gift” (the good word of God), and were “partakers of the Holy Ghost.” Yet the apostle also says in Hebrews 6:9, “We are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation.” What thunder and lightning accompanies this teaching, that better things than illumination, than participation in holy things, do accompany true salvation! We cry out with the disciples, “This is a hard saying; who then can be saved?”

Yet it is the truth. And as ministers of God’s Word we say that unless your righteousness exceeds that of outward profession, of repeating sermons, of family duties, and of the common works of God’s Spirit—all of which those who have temporary faith possess, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. We pray for better things of you, things that will surely accompany salvation.

4. *The difficulty of distinguishing between true and counterfeit grace.* It is difficult to distinguish between true grace and its counterfeit. It is so difficult that some divines view the work of grace in the temporary believer as different from that in the regenerated person only in

terms of degree rather than kind, though this is false. If it is so hard for theologians to set the doctrinal bounds, how much more difficult it is for ordinary Christians to mark out the right way!

A hypocrite feels joy, sorrow, and sweetness in the ordinances, and so does the godly. But to show how one is deceived and the other is not is difficult, even though they do indeed differ as much as one who dreams differs from one who is truly awake. Paul's admonition to "try and prove" supposes that a man must have knowledge of the rule and the characteristics that describe such a grace. He must also have skill in applying these notes to himself and to do this without the temptation to do otherwise, with much attention and perseverance.

In doctrinal controversies the great question is, What is the true church that does not err, and what are the essential marks that constitute a church? Similarly, in practical matters, these are the great questions: What is true grace? Do I possess true grace? What are the marks to decipher this? As for the former questions, we wish we had a visible, infallible judge to determine such a matter so there might no longer be dispute. Likewise, we desire a peculiar revelation from heaven that should by name say to us that we are among those Christians in whom is no guile.

5. *Assurance of faith has many advantages.* Manifold advantages will come to us when we have attained to

an experimental knowledge of ourselves. First, we will reckon all our former knowledge of divine things and its parts as a tinkling cymbal that is no longer admirable. Once we have the inward feeling of holy things upon our hearts, we will bewail all the duties, spiritual conversation, and religious performances formerly done by us, as if we had been a parrot with no understanding of these things. If a person reads a book or map to see various countries, he has some limited knowledge of them. But if he travels into those countries and sees their towns and buildings, he will admit that his former knowledge of them was lame compared to what he has now.

The queen of Sheba once heard rumors of Solomon's wisdom, but when she visited the king and came to have an experimental knowledge of his wisdom she was astonished and said, "All that I had heard was nothing to that which I saw." So it is in the matter of grace. If God works His savory inward experimental knowledge in you, you will be astonished to see the difference between what you were before that time and what you are now. All that you have heard, read, or preached is nothing to what you now feel.

It is fearful to note how many people have seen godliness, but only as on a map. They have never experienced it for themselves. Many people talk of their conversion or repentance as men talk of bringing forth a child, speaking of the matter without ever experiencing the throbs and pains of childbirth themselves (see Rom.

7:9). Paul traveled for a long time on the road of religious duties, but when he came to have an experimental knowledge of Christ, he died to his own righteousness in which he had previously lived; he became sensible of the damnable and dangerous estate he was in, whereas before his conversion he had great confidence of his good life and salvation. Thus it is with every man who has received experimental knowledge. He says, "Alas, I was alive once, and I thought I was somebody. I could pray, write sermons, and dispute with great understanding, but now I see that I did not know what true faith or godliness was. I argued much about it, but I knew nothing of God or His gracious works until now."

Second, a person with experimental knowledge has a heart that is like the Bible's counterpane. Scripture is the original, and his heart is the copy of it. The believer can read about the promises and threats of Scripture and say, "This is well proven; the case is closed." David in his Psalms and Paul in his epistles speak to a man's heart, feel his temptations, and anticipate his objections. As John 3:33 says, "He that hath received his testimony hath set to his seal that God is true." Scripture also speaks of God's sealing to us and our sealing to Him in a metaphor of civil contracts which were confirmed and declared good by their seals (see Jer. 32:10). Thus a true believer who receives the testimony of Scripture solemnly declares by his life and conversation that God is true. All who say they believe yet do

not practice the effects of conversion set not their seal that God is true.

Third, experimental knowledge also deadens the believer's heart to merely human excellencies. The philosophers say that a vegetative and sensitive life is swallowed up in a rational one. So a Christian's natural life in great measure is swallowed up in his supernatural life. Corn and thorns come up together in a farmer's soil. But where grace is practiced, all weeds will be cut off. Heart feelings, not head notions, will exclude immoderate affections to worldly things. A man who has long tasted the wine of brain knowledge, once he comes to taste experimental knowledge, will declare that the new knowledge is best.

In Galatians 2:20 Paul denies that he lives, "but Christ liveth in" him. In Christ, all life is for delight. Until you take delight and experimental sweetness in holy things, your tongue may prattle about good things but your heart will not be in them. Love of the world is part of the former kind of knowledge, but not in the latter. Aristotle observed that dogs cannot hunt where the scent of sweet flowers is because the scent diverts their sense of smell. Likewise, we may not run after Christ in the sweetness of His ointments when we are inhibited by the smell of worldly delights and refreshments.