

**THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ROMANS**  
**Living Under Grace (Romans 5-8)**  
**vii. Children of God**  
**Romans 8:1-17**

Roman chapter eight has rightly been described as one of the greatest passages of Scripture, dealing with three foundational truths of the gospel viz. Assurance, Life in the Spirit and Adoption in Christ.

The birth right of the Christian is 'no condemnation'. The verdict of the final day has been brought forward and declared i.e. 'righteous' for those belonging to Christ. The verdict cannot be changed. We face judgement day with complete assurance. What lies ahead for the believer is not a life-or-death assessment of our lives, but the divine disclosure of acquittal.

The truth of assurance lay close to the heart for the Reformers. Indeed, for the Reformers and Martin Luther in particular, a major part of the protest against Medieval Catholicism was their claim that it was possible for persons to have complete assurance that i. the Father loved them ii. The Holy Spirit indwelt them iii. Christ truly died for them. They could know without hesitation that they were saved. The ground of assurance lies not in ourselves, or even in our experience but in the gospel, what Luther called 'alien' righteousness, i.e. righteousness outside ourselves.

Accordingly, we can be at rest rather than restless about our eternal wellbeing. It was this apparently outrageous and presumptuous claim to complete assurance, that Roman Catholic theologians at the time found objectionable. Cardinal Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621) was a key figure during the Reformation. He was Pope Clement VIII's personal theological advisor and one of the most capable leaders of the Counter Reformation within 16<sup>th</sup> C Roman Catholicism. According to Cardinal Bellarmine, "the greatest of all Protestant heresies is assurance". He feared that such a doctrine would grant licence to sin and promote lawlessness. Later, whilst the Council of Trent (1545–1563) recognised the rich nature of God's mercy and the efficiency of Christ's death, it still claimed in one of its sessions that, "no one can know with certainty of faith, which cannot be subject to error, that he has obtained the grace of God".

The retort of the Reformers was, "Yes we can!" This blessed assurance that Christ is mine and I am his for all eternity is the bedrock of our faith. However, like all precious truths it can be abused and misunderstood. Douglas Moo in his commentary cites two examples. One was an elder of the church. He proclaimed himself a strong Calvinist and delighted to discuss Reformed theology. However, it was eventually discovered that he was unfaithful to his wife and having sex outside of marriage. But he was not concerned about it. After all, he was eternally secure in Christ. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The other example was a young woman, extremely performance oriented. She brought this attitude into her faith. As a result, she was perpetually in despair because she felt she had not lived up to God's expectations. She could not grasp her security in Christ, that he had taken her sins upon himself, that her performance was no longer the basis of her acceptance by God. Her problem might not have been that of sinful arrogance, but it was equally wrong in that it placed trust in human ability rather than the free grace of God.

Martin Luther in his tract On the Freedom of the Christian written in 1520, begins with the paradox "A Christian is utterly free, lord of all subject to none. A Christian is utterly dutiful, servant of all, subject to all". The first sentence highlights the, freedom of conscience grounded in the gospel, the second, a reminder that the Christian is saved to serve. May this creative tension remind us that our assurance is grounded in the gospel which in turn liberates us in glad service and surrender.

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Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> October 2017