

THE BROAD ROAD IN CHRISTIAN CLOTHING

*False Assurance, Counterfeit Conversion, Normalized Sin,
and the Biblical Marks of Saving Faith*

CHAPTER 3

SAVED, RELIGIOUS, OR SIMPLY REASSURED? COUNTERFEIT CONVERSION AND FALSE ASSURANCE

“Truly I tell you, unless someone is born again, he cannot see
the kingdom of God.”

[John 3:3, CSB](#)

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Chapter 3: Saved, Religious, or Simply Reassured? Counterfeit Conversion and False Assurance

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RESEARCH AND THEOLOGICAL NOTE

Scripture governs the theological claims in this chapter, with Matthew 7:13-23 as the controlling warning against religious self-deception. The chapter develops the approved false-assurance architecture of *The Broad Road in Christian Clothing* and prioritizes the author's mature work on salvation, the church, ritual, institutional authority, and counterfeit Christianity. Sacramental positions are represented through primary confessional sources where possible, and contemporary survey and psychological literature are used descriptively rather than as measures of regeneration. The chapter rejects both sacramental or decisional automaticism and anti-ecclesial individualism: baptism, the Lord's Supper, public profession, church membership, theological learning, ministry, spiritual gifts, and good works are treated according to their biblical significance without allowing any of them to replace Christ as the ground of justification or new birth. No denomination or movement is condemned merely by association; claims are assessed through Scripture, context, primary sources, and evidence.

Abstract

This chapter examines counterfeit conversion and false assurance by asking a more searching question than whether a person can point to a Christian background, rite, decision, feeling, institution, ministry, or moral record: has the person actually been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ and born of the Spirit? Building on the biblical doctrine of salvation established in the preceding chapter, it argues that genuine assurance must never be grounded in inherited Christian identity, baptism or confirmation considered apart from living faith, church membership, a remembered sinner's prayer, an altar-call response, childhood emotion, theological literacy, ordination, spiritual manifestations, charitable works, private sincerity, or mere familiarity with Christian language. The chapter treats the strongest defenses of these practices fairly. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are commanded gifts to the church; public gospel invitations can be pastorally useful; children can genuinely believe; doctrine matters; local church membership is an ordinary expression of discipleship; spiritual gifts may be genuine; and good works are expected fruits of grace. The error arises when a sign, response, institution, experience, or fruit is made to carry the weight that belongs to Christ alone. Particular attention is given to sacramental confidence, decisionism, nominal Christianity, charismatic and New Age appeals to experience, and the modern tendency to treat sincerity as self-authenticating. Contemporary survey data are used only illustratively to show how religious identity can be inherited or culturally retained without proving regeneration. The chapter concludes by distinguishing biblical assurance from presumption: assurance rests first in the finished work and promises of Christ, is received through present faith, is confirmed by the Spirit's witness and the fruits of regeneration, and grows through persevering communion with Christ. The purpose is not to unsettle tender believers into despair but to awaken the presumptuous, comfort the repentant, and call every reader from substitute assurances to the Savior Himself.

Keywords: counterfeit conversion; false assurance; regeneration; baptism; church membership; sinner's prayer; decisionism; religious experience; nominal Christianity; spiritual gifts; saving faith; assurance

Introduction: When the Evidence of Christianity Replaces Christ

There is a kind of confidence that looks like faith because it is surrounded by Christian evidence. A person was born into a Christian family, baptized in infancy or youth, confirmed, received Communion, attended Christian schools, learned Bible stories, joined a church, walked an aisle, prayed a prayer, served in ministry, spoke in tongues, gave generously, defended Christian doctrine, and perhaps even became a pastor. None of these facts is trivial. Some are precious gifts. Some are commands of Christ. Some may be genuine fruits of grace. Yet not one of them, taken by itself, can bear the weight of the question that finally matters: does this person belong to Jesus Christ?

The warning is unavoidable because Jesus Himself addresses people whose religious evidence is impressive and whose assurance is strong, yet whose conclusion is wrong. They call Him "Lord," appeal to ministry done in His name, and discover at judgment that visible association with Christ was not the same as being known by Christ ([Matthew 7:21-23](#)). The terror of false assurance is therefore not simply that a person may be lost. It is that a person may be lost while possessing an internally coherent story explaining why he or she must be saved.

The preceding chapter defined salvation positively: the holy God saves guilty sinners by grace through faith in the incarnate, crucified, and risen Son; the Spirit regenerates, indwells, adopts, sanctifies, and preserves those who belong to Christ; and the works that follow salvation are fruit rather than payment (Sangwa, 2026f). The present chapter takes the next step. It asks how people come to trust substitutes for that saving reality. The problem is not always open denial of the gospel. Often it is displacement. Something that should point to Christ quietly becomes the ground of confidence instead of Christ.

This chapter therefore distinguishes signs from the reality they signify, responses from the grace to which they respond, institutions from the Lord who owns them, and evidences from the Savior who alone justifies. The distinction must be made without despising what God has actually given. Baptism is not meaningless because baptism cannot save by mechanical performance. Church membership is not optional because membership cannot regenerate. A public profession is not useless because raising a hand cannot justify. Emotion is not evil because tears cannot prove new birth. Theology is not disposable because demons can believe true propositions. Spiritual gifts are not fraudulent merely because gifts can coexist with immaturity or hypocrisy. Good works are not irrelevant because works cannot purchase righteousness.

The central error is category confusion. A sign is made into the substance. A means of discipleship is made into a mechanism of justification. A memory is made into a guarantee. A social identity is made into a new birth. An experience is made into a canon. A gift is made into a verdict. A moral record is made into an atonement. Once that confusion occurs, reassurance can become more dangerous than doubt because the sinner stops asking whether the confidence itself is biblical.

Modern data provide one useful illustration, though not a spiritual census. The 2023-2024 U.S. Religious Landscape Study found that 62 percent of American adults identified as Christian, while religious participation, institutional membership, and the importance attached to religion varied substantially within that population (Pew Research Center, 2025a, 2025b). The same research found that 80 percent of adults had been raised Christian, and that religious upbringing strongly influences later identity but does not guarantee continued religious commitment (Pew Research Center, 2025c). These findings cannot tell us who is regenerate, and they should never be used as if survey categories map onto the book of life. They do show something more modest: Christian identity can be inherited, retained, weakened,

intensified, or culturally expressed. Self-identification is a real sociological fact, but it is not a biblical doctrine of new birth.

The author's earlier work distinguished being religious from being Christian and warned that rituals, church structures, and moral performance cannot substitute for reconciliation with God (Sangwa, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c). Later books extended the same concern to denominational identity, sacramental confidence, restorationist claims, and institutional loyalty (Sangwa, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c, 2026d, 2026e). The present chapter advances that corpus by turning the analysis inward and broadening it across Christian traditions. The question is not which group has the easiest counterfeit to expose. The question is what each of us is using to reassure ourselves.

The thesis is simple but severe: every Christian sign becomes spiritually dangerous when it is asked to do what only Christ can do. The reader must therefore examine not only whether a particular event happened, but what that event means now. Am I trusting Christ, or am I trusting that I once prayed? Am I resting in His finished work, or in my baptismal certificate? Am I walking with Him, or leaning on my church's reputation? Am I known by Him, or only known as a Christian by other people?

The purpose is not to leave the reader in permanent uncertainty. Scripture warns because God loves truth more than our illusions. The same Christ who destroys false confidence gives stronger assurance than any counterfeit can offer. He does not invite sinners to trust their memory of themselves. He invites them to trust Him.

3.1 "I Was Born Christian"

The sentence sounds natural in many societies: "I was born Christian." It may mean that one's parents were Christian, that the family belonged to a particular denomination, that childhood was organized around church, or that Christian language shaped the surrounding culture. Sociologically, the statement can be perfectly intelligible. Theologically, it is dangerously ambiguous.

No human being is born regenerate because of family lineage. John states that those who become God's children are born "not of natural descent, or of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man, but of God" ([John 1:12-13](#)). Jesus tells Nicodemus, a religious teacher with covenant privilege, that unless someone is born again, or born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God ([John 3:3-8](#)). John the Baptist warns his hearers not to turn Abrahamic ancestry into a shield against repentance ([Matthew 3:7-10](#)). Paul later insists that external covenant privilege does not collapse automatically into inward saving reality ([Romans 2:28-29](#); [Romans 9:6-8](#)).

A Christian home is therefore a privilege, not a second womb of regeneration. Children of believers may receive extraordinary advantages: Scripture from infancy, prayer, moral instruction, the visible example of faith, participation in worship, and a community that names Christ early. Paul can remind Timothy that he knew the

sacred Scriptures "from infancy" and that those Scriptures are able to give wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus ([2 Timothy 3:14-15](#)). The family can carry the Word to the child. It cannot carry the child into the kingdom by bloodline.

The strongest defense of inherited Christian identity should be taken seriously. Faith is not practiced in a vacuum. Scripture itself gives families a formative role. Israel was commanded to teach God's words diligently to children ([Deuteronomy 6:4-9](#)). Christian parents are told to raise children in the training and instruction of the Lord ([Ephesians 6:4](#)). A child formed in a faithful home may never remember a season of conscious atheism or dramatic rebellion. Some genuine believers cannot identify the exact hour when saving faith began because their awareness of Christ grew with them. To insist that every true conversion must imitate Paul's Damascus-road drama is not biblical.

The error lies elsewhere. It is the assumption that environment equals new birth. The fact that faith was normal in the home can make the gospel feel so familiar that its personal claim is never faced. A child can learn to say "Jesus died for our sins" before understanding the moral seriousness of "our" or the personal necessity of trusting the One who died. A teenager can know the correct answers for youth group while learning privately to live as though Christ is irrelevant. An adult can preserve the family label because abandoning it would feel like betraying parents or culture, while never actually resting in Christ.

Pew's 2023-2024 U.S. data illustrate this distinction without defining it theologically. Eighty percent of adults reported being raised Christian, and many retained some connection to their childhood tradition, but religious identity and practice changed substantially across adulthood (Pew Research Center, 2025c). Another analysis found that cultural, ethnic, and family background can remain part of how people describe religious identity even when current religious affiliation differs (Pew Research Center, 2025d). Again, these data do not measure regeneration. They simply show why "Christian" can function as family memory, ethnicity, culture, moral vocabulary, or institutional inheritance.

Christian cultures and so-called Christian nations create the same danger at scale. A society may have churches, public holidays, Christian names, biblical phrases in civic rhetoric, chaplains, Christian schools, or historical confessions while large numbers of individuals remain unconverted. Nations can be influenced by Christianity. Nations are not born again. The New Testament does not present citizenship in a Christianized society as entrance into the body of Christ. The church is gathered from every tribe, language, people, and nation through the redeeming work of the Lamb ([Revelation 5:9-10](#)).

This is where denominational inheritance also requires examination. A person may say, "My family has always been Catholic," "We have always been Anglican," "We are Adventists," "We are Pentecostal," "We are Reformed," "We are Baptist," or "We have always belonged to this church." Those statements describe histories. They do not pronounce verdicts. The author's earlier comparative works repeatedly reached the

same pastoral conclusion across very different traditions: no institution can transfer saving union with Christ by ancestry or affiliation (Sangwa, 2026b, 2026c, 2026d, 2026e). That point must also be applied to evangelical and independent churches. The temptation to trust a denomination is not cured by joining a denomination that warns people not to trust denominations.

There is an opposite error, however. Some believers react against inherited religion by treating Christian upbringing as spiritually suspect, as though a testimony is more authentic when it contains obvious rebellion. Scripture does not romanticize prodigality. A person does not need to destroy a life in order to have a real conversion. Grace is no less grace when God preserves a child from many outward sins. The issue is not whether the biography is dramatic. It is whether the person now trusts the biblical Christ.

The diagnostic question is not, "Was Christianity around me when I was born?" It is, "Have I personally come to the Son?" Do I know the gospel only as family vocabulary, or as the truth on which my life and eternity depend? If every inherited label were removed, would my hope still have a name? It must. His name is Jesus Christ.

3.2 Baptism, Confirmation, Communion, and Religious Ceremonies

Rituals become dangerous in two opposite ways. One side despises what Christ instituted, treating baptism and the Lord's Supper as optional decorations. The other side loads ritual with a saving force Scripture does not permit us to detach from Christ, faith, and regeneration. The biblical path honors the sign without confusing it with the Savior.

Baptism must be treated with seriousness because Jesus commands it in the Great Commission ([Matthew 28:18-20](#)). Acts repeatedly joins gospel proclamation, faith, repentance, baptism, and incorporation into the visible Christian community ([Acts 2:37-42](#); [Acts 8:35-39](#); [Acts 16:30-34](#)). Paul speaks of baptism in profound union-with-Christ language ([Romans 6:3-4](#); [Galatians 3:27](#); [Colossians 2:12](#)). Peter can even write that "baptism ... now saves you," while immediately qualifying that he is not speaking of the removal of bodily dirt but of the appeal or pledge of a good conscience toward God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ ([1 Peter 3:21](#)). Any theology that treats baptism as trivial has not listened carefully enough to the New Testament.

Christian traditions have therefore developed different accounts of baptismal efficacy. Roman Catholic teaching describes the sacraments as efficacious because Christ acts through them, says that sacramental fruits depend on the recipient's disposition, and teaches that the sacraments are necessary for salvation in the economy of grace (Catholic Church, 1997, §§1127-1129). The Augsburg Confession

states that baptism is necessary to salvation and that grace is offered through baptism, including to children (Melancthon, 1530/2000, Art. IX). The Westminster Confession, by contrast, calls baptism a sign and seal of covenant grace while explicitly denying that all baptized persons are undoubtedly regenerated or that salvation is inseparably tied to the moment of baptism (Westminster Assembly, 1647, ch. 28.5-6). These differences are real and should not be blurred into a single caricature of "sacramentalism."

The central pastoral question of this chapter is narrower than the entire theology of baptism. Whatever one's tradition, can the mere fact that water was once applied become an automatic ground of assurance in a person who does not presently trust Christ? Scripture gives reasons to answer no.

Simon Magus believed in some sense and was baptized, yet Peter soon told him that his heart was not right before God and summoned him to repentance ([Acts 8:13, 20-24](#)). The outward rite did not make inward corruption irrelevant. In Cornelius's household, the Holy Spirit fell on hearers before water baptism, after which Peter commanded that they be baptized ([Acts 10:44-48](#)). The sequence does not diminish baptism; it shows that God is not imprisoned inside the rite. Paul reminds the Corinthians that Israel experienced covenantal signs analogous to baptism and sacred food, yet many fell under judgment because of unbelief and idolatry ([1 Corinthians 10:1-12](#)). Covenant signs can be received by people who later reveal unbelieving hearts.

Paul's statement in [1 Corinthians 1:14-17](#) also matters. He is grateful that he personally baptized only a few Corinthians and says Christ sent him "not to baptize, but to preach the gospel." Paul could not speak that way if the physical act of baptism, considered independently of the gospel received by faith, were the mechanical instrument without which no one could be reconciled to God. At the same time, Acts shows that converts were baptized as an ordinary and urgent act of obedience. The conclusion is not "baptism does not matter." The conclusion is "baptism must not be separated from the gospel reality it proclaims."

The Lord's Supper requires the same distinction. Jesus commands His disciples to remember Him in the meal ([Luke 22:19-20](#); [1 Corinthians 11:23-26](#)). Participation is a profound act of communion, proclamation, remembrance, thanksgiving, and covenant fellowship. Yet the Corinthian abuse of the Supper proves that consuming the elements is not a private guarantee of spiritual safety. Some participants were eating and drinking judgment on themselves because they approached the table without rightly discerning the body and while despising fellow believers ([1 Corinthians 11:27-32](#)). A person can be physically near the bread and cup while spiritually under discipline.

Confirmation presents a different question. The New Testament records laying on of hands in several contexts, including the reception of the Spirit in certain transitional scenes in Acts and the recognition of ministry ([Acts 8:14-17](#); [Acts 19:1-7](#); [1 Timothy 4:14](#); [2 Timothy 1:6](#)). But it does not establish a universal post-baptismal

ceremony called Confirmation as a necessary saving step for every believer. Christians may responsibly retain a confirmation practice as catechesis, public profession, prayer, or ecclesial recognition. The danger comes when the ceremony is treated as if participation itself proves regeneration.

The same rule applies to dedications, anointings, pilgrimages, membership vows, first Communion ceremonies, deliverance sessions, covenant renewals, and every other religious act. Some may be wise, some beautiful, some commanded, some merely traditional, and some theologically questionable. None can be converted into an alternative to saving faith.

This is also where formulaic spirituality can become surprisingly close to the logic of magic. Magic, in its religious sense, attempts to secure spiritual effects by the correct performance of an action, word, object, or technique. Biblical faith does not manipulate God through technique. The sacraments are not spells, and evangelical prayers are not spells either. Water does not force the new birth. Bread does not override unbelief. A bishop's hand cannot regenerate. Oil cannot substitute for repentance. The name of Jesus is not a verbal mechanism that guarantees spiritual power when pronounced correctly, as the sons of Sceva discovered ([Acts 19:13-17](#)).

The author's earlier writing on rituals rightly emphasized grace over ritual performance, though some older formulations compressed the complexity of sacramental traditions (Sangwa, 2024a). A more mature account should preserve the biblical warning while representing opposing positions accurately. Catholic theology, for example, does not teach that recipient disposition never matters; its own catechism says the fruits of sacraments depend on disposition (Catholic Church, 1997, §1128). The disagreement is therefore not served by a straw man. The decisive issue is whether the church should give a person eschatological assurance simply because the rite occurred, even when present faith and repentance are absent. Scripture will not let the sign cancel the warning.

If you have been baptized, thank God for the sign and live the reality it signifies. If you receive the Lord's Supper, do so in faith, repentance, gratitude, and love. If you were confirmed, let the promises you confessed press you toward the Christ you named. But do not point to water, hands, bread, wine, a certificate, a date, or a priestly record when Christ asks where your trust rests. The sign is precious because it points beyond itself.

3.3 Church Membership and Institutional Belonging

The New Testament knows nothing of a deliberately isolated Christianity in which a believer claims Christ while despising His people. Those who received the gospel in Jerusalem were baptized, added to the community, devoted themselves to apostolic teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer ([Acts 2:41-47](#)). Believers are

members of one body ([1 Corinthians 12:12-27](#)). They are commanded not to abandon gathering together ([Hebrews 10:24-25](#)). Elders shepherd identifiable flocks and will give account for their care ([Acts 20:28](#); [Hebrews 13:17](#)). Church belonging therefore matters.

Yet the visible church is not identical in every respect with the final company of the regenerate. The New Testament repeatedly addresses mixed communities. Jesus' parable of the wheat and weeds warns against simplistic attempts to identify the final state of every person before the judgment ([Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43](#)). Churches can contain hypocrites, false teachers, immature believers, disciplined offenders, and people who eventually depart ([Acts 20:29-30](#); [1 John 2:19](#)). Membership in a visible congregation is a serious ecclesial relationship. It is not the same thing as one's name being written in heaven ([Luke 10:20](#)).

Modern institutional belonging can provide powerful reassurance. A person is on the membership roll, pays dues or tithes, has a seat, serves on committees, attended the church school, belongs to the alumni network, knows the senior leaders, or has decades of attendance. In some communities, baptismal records and family lineage create a sense of permanent spiritual citizenship. In others, the assurance comes from being in the "biblical" church, the "remnant" church, the "restored" church, the "Spirit-filled" church, the "historic" church, or the "non-denominational" church. Different ecclesiologies produce different vocabulary; the human temptation is the same.

Institutional loyalty can be especially persuasive because it is socially reinforced. Other people know us as Christians. We are invited to Christian events. We occupy Christian offices. Our friends assume our faith. Leaving the identity would impose social costs. Over time, the community's recognition can become a substitute for God's verdict. We begin to infer, "If the church accepts me, Christ must accept me."

That inference is too strong. The church has real authority, but not omniscience. Churches receive professions they cannot infallibly verify. Pastors can be deceived. Councils can make mistakes. Membership interviews can assess doctrine and testimony, not regenerate the heart. Even apostolic churches had to confront false profession and serious sin. Jesus addressed churches in Revelation whose reputations before people differed sharply from His evaluation. Sardis had a reputation for being alive while Christ said it was dead ([Revelation 3:1-6](#)). Laodicea considered itself rich and secure while Christ exposed its spiritual poverty ([Revelation 3:14-22](#)).

This does not authorize contempt for church discipline or pastoral oversight. The opposite counterfeit says, "I do not need the church; God knows me." But a person who invokes private spirituality to avoid accountability should hear the New Testament's insistence on embodied fellowship, mutual exhortation, teaching, discipline, and service. The church does not save, but the Savior joins His people to His body. Healthy assurance normally grows in accountable communion rather than self-isolation.

Contemporary survey data again illustrate, without resolving, the distinction between identity and belonging. Pew found that 54 percent of U.S. adults who identified as Christian said they personally belonged to a congregation, and participation patterns varied widely (Pew Research Center, 2023b). The statistic cannot be spiritualized. Non-members may be genuine believers, members may be unregenerate, and American data cannot represent the global church. Its usefulness is simply to show that "Christian identity," "institutional membership," and "religious practice" are different sociological categories. Scripture adds a fourth and decisive category: union with Christ.

Christian schools and ministry networks require the same caution. A person can spend years in institutions where prayer begins meetings, Bible courses are required, chapel attendance is routine, and Christian language permeates professional life. Familiarity with a Christian institution may strengthen faith. It may also create occupational Christianity, in which one's income, status, friendships, and résumé depend on sounding Christian. The temptation is especially acute for pastors, theologians, chaplains, Christian educators, worship leaders, denominational officials, and employees of faith-based organizations. The institution can become a place to hide from the very gospel it exists to proclaim.

The author's mature ecclesiological work defines the church as the body of Christ and witness of the gospel, not a substitute savior (Sangwa, 2026g). That distinction should govern membership. The local church should be a community where the gospel is preached to members as well as visitors, where discipline is restorative rather than controlling, where leaders do not presume conversion merely because someone has been present for years, and where people are repeatedly directed to Christ rather than to the institution's pedigree.

Ask what your membership means. Is it the fruit of belonging to Christ, or the evidence you use instead of belonging to Christ? If your church name were removed from your biography, would you still know whom you trust? If your denomination were exposed as flawed, would your faith collapse because your faith had quietly become confidence in the denomination? If a pastor whom you admire fell publicly, would Christ remain enough?

A healthy church does not say, "Trust us and therefore you are safe." It says, "We will walk with you as together we trust Christ."

3.4 The Sinner's Prayer, Altar Calls, and Decisionism

Few evangelical practices illustrate the difference between a useful response and a false ground of assurance more clearly than the sinner's prayer and the altar call. Many genuine believers first articulated repentance and faith while praying a simple prayer after hearing the gospel. Many pastors have used public invitations responsibly

to identify people seeking counsel. It would be careless and pastorally cruel to tell every person who prayed such a prayer that the event was meaningless. The problem is not prayer. The problem is turning a prayer into a sacrament the New Testament never instituted.

The Bible certainly calls sinners to respond. Peter tells his hearers to repent ([Acts 2:38](#)). Paul and Silas tell the Philippian jailer to believe in the Lord Jesus ([Acts 16:30-31](#)). Paul says that the word is near, and joins heart-belief with confession that Jesus is Lord ([Romans 10:8-13](#)). Jesus' tax collector cries to God for mercy and goes home justified rather than the self-righteous Pharisee ([Luke 18:9-14](#)). The gospel is not a lecture whose hearers may admire its content without response. It summons repentance, faith, confession, baptism, and discipleship.

What Scripture does not provide is a standardized verbal formula that automatically constitutes conversion when correctly repeated. Conversion narratives are strikingly diverse. Some people believe while hearing preaching ([Acts 10:44-48](#)). Some are cut to the heart and ask what to do ([Acts 2:37](#)). The Ethiopian eunuch receives instruction and seeks baptism ([Acts 8:26-39](#)). Lydia's heart is opened by the Lord to respond to Paul's message ([Acts 16:14-15](#)). The jailer hears the word with his household and rejoices in faith ([Acts 16:25-34](#)). Paul himself is confronted by the risen Christ and later receives apostolic ministry ([Acts 9:1-19](#)). The saving constant is not a ritual sentence. It is the gospel received in repentant faith.

Historically, modern evangelical response methods developed over time. Charles Finney defended the "anxious seat" as a public measure intended to bring seekers out of concealment and test whether they were willing to identify openly with the cause of Christ (Finney, 1835). The historical irony is worth noticing: Finney argued that the measure could expose false hope, yet later forms of decision-oriented evangelism could themselves become sources of false hope when the outward response was treated as proof of inward conversion.

Research on the history of the sinner's prayer likewise shows that the now-familiar standardized form is relatively recent. Chitwood's historical and theological study traces its development through revivalist and evangelistic methods and argues that twentieth-century simplification helped popularize the practice (Chitwood, 2001). Bennett's study of the altar call similarly documents the gradual development of public invitation practices rather than finding the modern system fully formed in the New Testament (Bennett, 2000). Howard's study of the sinner's prayer as vernacular religious rhetoric also shows how the prayer functions not merely as private words but as a recognizable social performance within evangelical culture (Howard, 2005).

Historical recency alone does not make a practice wrong. Microphones are recent. Printed tracts are post-apostolic. Livestreaming is very recent. The moral question is whether the method serves the biblical gospel or silently redefines conversion.

The strongest defense of altar calls is therefore legitimate: preaching should press for response, and public action can help people seek counsel, confess faith, break social

fear, or mark a significant turning point. A pastor may say, "If you want to speak with someone about following Christ, come forward after the service," without implying that walking forward saves. A congregation may invite hearers to pray without implying that the wording of the prayer is an incantation. The method becomes spiritually hazardous when the invitation is framed as a transaction: "If you raised your hand, repeated these words, or walked this aisle, you are now saved no matter what follows. Never question it."

That is decisionism in its most dangerous form. Decisionism does not mean that human beings make no real response to the gospel. Scripture commands a response. It means that the identifiable human decision is treated as the decisive saving mechanism or as infallible evidence of regeneration. The distinction is crucial. Faith receives Christ. A remembered decision cannot replace present faith in Christ.

The phrase "ask Jesus into your heart" requires similar care. It can be used as informal shorthand for trusting Christ, but it is not the New Testament's standard formulation of the gospel. [Revelation 3:20](#), often invoked in support, addresses a compromised church that Christ is calling to repent, not an evangelistic audience being given a conversion formula ([Revelation 3:14-22](#)). The New Testament more often says repent, believe, receive Christ, call on the Lord, confess Him, and follow Him. Language matters because vague formulas can be filled with vague meanings.

A child may hear "ask Jesus into your heart" and imagine Jesus as a tiny invisible person entering the physical organ. An adult may interpret it as inviting a helpful spiritual companion into an otherwise autonomous life. A New Age-influenced hearer may even map it onto ideas of awakening an inner Christ-presence or divine consciousness, concepts that differ radically from biblical regeneration (Hanegraaff, 1996; Sangwa, 2026h). Clearer gospel language reduces unnecessary ambiguity: I am a sinner before God; Christ died for sins and rose; I turn from self-rule and trust Him as Savior and Lord.

Pastors should also resist manufacturing assurance immediately after a visible response. A counselor can say, "If you are truly trusting Christ, His promise is sure," rather than, "Because you walked forward, you are definitely saved." The first points to Christ. The second points to the event. Follow-up discipleship matters not because later works complete an insufficient justification, but because conversion is entrance into a life of following Jesus.

For the person who once prayed a sincere prayer and now fears, the answer is not to despise that memory. Thank God for every true turning. But assurance today should not be built on the proposition, "I said the words correctly years ago." The question is more living: "Am I trusting the Christ to whom those words pointed?" If yes, do not obsessively repeat the prayer as if repetition will make grace more certain. Rest in Christ. If no, do not let a memory protect you from His present call. Come to Him now.

3.5 Emotional Experiences and Childhood Professions

Some conversions are accompanied by tears, trembling, relief, joy, or an overwhelming sense of God's presence. Others are quiet. Some believers can name a date. Others describe a gradual awakening in which the gospel became personally decisive over time. Scripture contains enough variety to warn us against turning one psychological pattern into a doctrine of regeneration.

At Pentecost, hearers are "pierced to the heart" and urgently ask what they must do ([Acts 2:37](#)). The Philippian jailer trembles before Paul and Silas, then rejoices after believing with his household ([Acts 16:29-34](#)). Zacchaeus receives Jesus joyfully and expresses repentance concretely in his relation to money and restitution ([Luke 19:1-10](#)). The Ethiopian eunuch goes on his way rejoicing ([Acts 8:39](#)). Emotion is not absent from conversion. It is often appropriate when sinners grasp guilt, mercy, reconciliation, and hope.

Yet emotion is not unique to Christian conversion. Psychology and sociology of religion have long documented that conversion can involve multiple personal, social, cultural, cognitive, and affective processes across many religious traditions (Rambo, 1993; Paloutzian et al., 1999). Paloutzian, Richardson, and Rambo found that conversion can be associated with substantial changes in goals, attitudes, identity, feelings, and behavior, while also noting variation in suddenness, direction, and religious context (Paloutzian et al., 1999). Such research does not explain away the work of the Holy Spirit. It simply reminds us that the existence of intense emotion, by itself, cannot identify the theological source or truth of an experience.

Pew's recent survey makes the same limited point in a different way. Deep spiritual peace and well-being are reported not only by Christians but also by adherents of other religions and by some religiously unaffiliated adults (Pew Research Center, 2025e). A feeling of peace may accompany truth. It cannot serve as an independent test of truth.

This matters in revival settings, camps, conferences, worship nights, funerals, retreats, and deliverance meetings. Music, preaching, group expectation, exhaustion, fear, beauty, testimony, and social pressure can all intensify emotion. None of that proves the experience is false. Human beings are embodied and social; the Spirit does not need to bypass our psychology in order to work. The danger begins when the emotional peak is treated as the saving reality itself.

A person may say, "I know I am saved because I cried for three hours at camp." Another may say, "I fell to the floor, so I know God accepted me." Another may remember terror during a sermon about hell and a rushed prayer afterward. A different person may remember a wave of warmth, a vision, a voice, or what felt like

energy. The biblical question is not whether the experience felt powerful. It is what the person came to believe about Christ, sin, grace, repentance, and lordship, and what direction followed.

New Age spirituality intensifies the need for this distinction because it often treats altered consciousness, inner peace, energy sensations, visions, synchronicities, or experiences of oneness as evidence of spiritual awakening. Scholarly studies of New Age religion have shown how experiential validation and the sacralization of the self can become central sources of authority (Hanegraaff, 1996). The Christian does not deny that experiences occur. The Christian tests spirits and messages by the apostolic Christ and Word ([1 John 4:1-6](#); [Galatians 1:6-9](#)).

Childhood professions require special pastoral care. A child can genuinely trust Christ. Jesus receives children and warns adults not to hinder them ([Mark 10:13-16](#)). Timothy's early formation in Scripture shows that childhood faith should not be treated as inherently suspect ([2 Timothy 3:14-15](#)). There is no biblical minimum age at which the Spirit becomes capable of regenerating a person. Churches should therefore avoid the cynical mistake of treating all childhood professions as pretend.

At the same time, children are particularly responsive to adult approval, repetition, group cues, and fear. A child may pray because a parent asks, because friends are doing it, because the alternative sounds terrifying, or because the child wants to please a trusted adult. Wise ministry neither manipulates children into dramatic decisions nor withholds the gospel until an arbitrary age. It teaches Christ clearly, invites faith and repentance, observes growth patiently, and refuses to manufacture certainty beyond what Scripture gives.

Parents can create confusion by repeatedly asking a child, "Are you sure you are saved? Pray again just in case." The child may learn that salvation depends on remembering the right internal state during a past prayer. Sensitive adults sometimes carry that pattern for decades, compulsively repeating conversion prayers whenever doubt appears. The pastoral answer is not another formula. It is the objective sufficiency of Christ.

A person who cannot remember the exact date of conversion should not conclude that faith is unreal. Lydia's story does not preserve a long emotional testimony; it says the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message ([Acts 16:14](#)). The New Testament's emphasis is not on the precision of autobiographical memory but on present relation to Christ. Do you believe the gospel? Do you come to Him as your only righteousness? Do you confess rather than defend sin? Is there evidence of the Spirit's transforming work, however incomplete? These questions do not make memory irrelevant, but they prevent memory from becoming a second savior.

Conversely, a person who remembers an unforgettable emotional night should not use that night to silence present warnings. The issue is not, "Did I once feel changed?" It is, "What became of that profession?" The seed on rocky ground receives the word with joy and yet withers because it has no root ([Mark 4:16-17](#)). Jesus explicitly warns that initial joy can coexist with temporary faith.

Emotion is a servant, not a judge. Tears can accompany repentance. Joy can accompany faith. Fear can awaken attention. Peace can comfort. But none of them can pronounce the verdict "justified." God justifies the one who is in Christ.

3.6 Theological Knowledge Without New Life

False assurance is not confined to the biblically illiterate. It can mature in libraries, seminaries, pulpits, apologetics ministries, theological conferences, and comment sections where doctrinal precision is treated as evidence of personal regeneration.

Scripture honors truth. Jesus prays that His people will be sanctified by the truth of God's Word ([John 17:17](#)). The pastoral epistles repeatedly demand sound doctrine ([1 Timothy 4:16](#); [Titus 1:9](#); [Titus 2:1](#)). Jude urges believers to contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints ([Jude 3](#)). A gospel that treats doctrine as unimportant soon loses the identity of Christ, the meaning of the cross, and the content of faith. Anti-intellectualism is not spirituality.

But knowledge can be spiritually detached from love, obedience, and new life. Jesus tells religious leaders that they search the Scriptures because they think they have eternal life in them, yet refuse to come to Him to have life ([John 5:39-40](#)). James observes that demons believe the truth that God is one and shudder ([James 2:19](#)). Paul warns that knowledge can puff up while love builds up ([1 Corinthians 8:1](#)). Orthodoxy at the level of proposition is indispensable, but bare possession of true propositions is not regeneration.

Nicodemus is an instructive example. He is not an atheist or pagan outsider. He is a teacher of Israel who recognizes that Jesus is from God, yet Jesus immediately directs him to the necessity of new birth ([John 3:1-10](#)). Religious expertise cannot bypass the Spirit's work. Saul of Tarsus possessed formidable scriptural education and zeal before his encounter with Christ ([Philippians 3:4-9](#); [Galatians 1:13-16](#)). His learning was not useless, but it did not constitute saving union with Christ.

The modern theological specialist can therefore develop a sophisticated counterfeit. He can explain justification while trusting intellectual competence. She can defend biblical inerrancy while refusing Scripture's correction in private life. A seminary student can parse Greek verbs and remain enslaved to pornography. A pastor can preach humility and be unable to repent. An apologist can refute relativism while lying about opponents. A scholar can publish on grace and destroy colleagues through envy. None of these contradictions proves automatically that the person is unregenerate, because real believers can sin grievously and require discipline. They do prove that theological achievement cannot be the ground of assurance.

This warning belongs equally to conservative and progressive readers. Conservative Christians may trust doctrinal correctness as a badge of election. Progressive

Christians may trust intellectual sophistication, deconstruction of inherited doctrines, or moral enlightenment as evidence that they have moved beyond supposedly primitive faith. Both can use the mind to protect the self from the Lord. One says, "I have the right system." The other says, "I have transcended your system." Christ asks whether truth has brought the person to Him.

The same concern applies to Bible memorization and religious fluency. A person raised in church can finish verses, identify doctrinal errors, explain prophecy, distinguish dispensationalism from covenant theology, discuss spiritual gifts, and debate eschatology while never having surrendered the core question of self-rule. Familiarity makes this possible because Christian language can become a professional dialect.

The answer is not less theology. It is theology brought to its proper end. The doctrine of sin should produce confession. The doctrine of grace should kill boasting. Christology should produce worship and allegiance. The doctrine of the Spirit should produce dependence and fruit. Ecclesiology should produce love and accountability. Eschatology should produce holiness and hope. When doctrine becomes an instrument of self-exaltation, the truth has been studied without being allowed to judge the student.

This is why James warns teachers that they will receive stricter judgment ([James 3:1](#)). Greater knowledge increases responsibility. Jesus makes a similar moral principle explicit when He speaks of servants who know their master's will and refuse it ([Luke 12:47-48](#)). Knowledge can therefore increase danger when it produces confidence without obedience.

Theological education remains a great gift to the church. The author's own work repeatedly defends rigorous biblical scholarship and doctrinal discernment. Yet the scholar must never confuse studying salvation with being saved. A doctor can understand cancer without being free of cancer. A theologian can understand regeneration without being regenerate.

Ask a painful question: when Scripture contradicts you personally, does your knowledge help you repent, or help you construct a better defense? The most dangerous theologian is not the one who knows too little. It may be the one who knows exactly which words to use so that no one notices the heart is fleeing from God.

3.7 Ministry, Ordination, Tongues, Prophecy, and Deliverance

Religious usefulness is one of the most persuasive forms of false assurance because it appears to contain external confirmation. If people were helped by my preaching, if prayers were answered, if I was ordained, if I prophesied accurately, if demons

reacted, if I spoke in tongues, if a congregation grew, if people call me "pastor" or "apostle," how could I be spiritually lost?

[Matthew 7:21-23](#) exists to destroy that argument. Jesus imagines people appealing to prophecy, exorcism, and mighty works done in His name, yet He rejects their appeal. Chapter 1 of this book developed that warning at length. Here the narrower point is personal assurance: ministry activity cannot function as proof of regeneration.

Ordination is a public act of ecclesial recognition. In the New Testament, churches appoint elders and set apart people for ministry through prayer and laying on of hands ([Acts 13:1-3](#); [Acts 14:23](#); [1 Timothy 4:14](#); [Titus 1:5](#)). The author's earlier teaching rightly emphasized that ordination should recognize God's prior calling and qualifications rather than create spiritual life ex nihilo (Sangwa, 2024d). A certificate, collar, title, apostolic-succession claim, denominational credential, or institutional office cannot make an unregenerate person regenerate.

The pastoral qualifications themselves prove the point. First Timothy 3 and [Titus 1](#) do not say, "If he has been ordained, assume his character is sound." They require observable character before and during leadership. Peter tells elders not to shepherd for shameful gain or domineer over those entrusted to them ([1 Peter 5:1-4](#)). Ministry office places a person under greater accountability, not beyond examination.

Spiritual gifts require equal care. Paul tells the Corinthians that they are not lacking in spiritual gifts, yet spends much of the letter correcting division, pride, sexual sin, litigation, disorder, and abuse of the Lord's Supper ([1 Corinthians 1:7](#); [1 Corinthians 3:1-3](#); [1 Corinthians 5:1-13](#); [1 Corinthians 6:1-8](#); [1 Corinthians 11:17-34](#)). In [1 Corinthians 13:1-3](#) he deliberately imagines extraordinary speech, knowledge, faith, generosity, and sacrifice without love and calls them spiritually empty. Gifts are not the same category as mature fruit.

Speaking in tongues is a particularly important case because Christians disagree strongly about its continuation and theological significance. Fairness requires distinguishing classical Pentecostal teaching from caricature. The Assemblies of God, for example, teaches that speaking in tongues is the initial physical evidence of baptism in the Holy Spirit, but it explicitly distinguishes that experience from the new birth and identifies the inward evidence of salvation as the Spirit's witness and the outward evidence as a life of righteousness and holiness (Assemblies of God, n.d.). One can disagree exegetically with the initial-evidence doctrine without falsely claiming that all Pentecostals teach, "If you speak in tongues, you are saved."

At the same time, individuals and congregations can still use manifestations as informal assurance in precisely that way. A person may conclude, "I spoke in tongues, therefore my salvation cannot be questioned." Paul refuses that inference. Even within a continuationist framework, not all gifts are given to all believers, and his rhetorical questions include, "Do all speak in tongues?" ([1 Corinthians 12:29-30](#)). More fundamentally, [Romans 8](#) identifies belonging to Christ with having the Spirit, not with possessing one particular manifestation ([Romans 8:9-16](#)).

Prophecy requires testing. Scripture does not instruct believers to accept a message because the speaker felt certainty, used the phrase "thus says the Lord," disclosed private information, or made an emotionally powerful prediction. The church is told to test everything and hold fast to what is good ([1 Thessalonians 5:19-22](#)). John commands believers to test the spirits because many false prophets have gone out into the world ([1 John 4:1](#)). [Deuteronomy 13](#) warns that even a sign cannot validate a message that leads away from the true God ([Deuteronomy 13:1-5](#)).

Deliverance ministry presents similar dangers. The New Testament clearly depicts demonic oppression and Christ's authority over evil spirits. Christians need not explain away every spiritual conflict as psychology. But neither should they turn dramatic deliverance encounters into proof of salvation, ministerial authority, or theological correctness. The seven sons of Sceva attempted to use Jesus' name as spiritual technique and were exposed ([Acts 19:13-17](#)). Simon Magus desired spiritual power while his heart remained corrupt ([Acts 8:18-24](#)). Spiritual spectacle can coexist with spiritual darkness.

The New Age and occult environment makes experiential testing even more necessary. Trance, channeling, energy language, visions, spirit guides, divination, and claims of healing can produce intense subjective certainty outside biblical Christianity (Hanegraaff, 1996; Sangwa, 2026h). The Christian response is not to assume all unusual phenomena are identical or to assign demonic causation without evidence. It is to refuse the premise that unusual experience is self-authenticating. The biblical Christ, apostolic gospel, moral fruit, truthfulness, and submission to Scripture remain decisive.

Ministers should therefore ask harder questions than, "Is God using me?" God can use flawed people, reluctant people, and even hostile powers within His providence. The better questions are: Am I walking in the light? Am I accountable? Do I repent when corrected? Is my hidden life congruent with the gospel I proclaim? Do I love people more than platform? Do I use spiritual claims to serve or to control?

A person can hide from God in ministry more effectively than in many obvious sins because ministry produces applause. The microphone can become a fig leaf. Ordination can become armor against conviction. Spiritual gifts can become a résumé presented to Christ. [Matthew 7](#) tells us in advance that He will not be impressed by the résumé.

3.8 Charitable Works, Morality, and Respectability

The respectable counterfeit does not usually say, "I saved myself." It says something softer: "Surely God sees that I am a decent person." The person may be generous, faithful to family, active in humanitarian work, honest in business, courteous, disciplined, and socially useful. These qualities should not be mocked. Human

goodness at the level of neighbor-love has real value. The error is using it as atonement.

Chapter 2 addressed the doctrine directly: good works cannot reconcile guilty sinners to God because justification is God's gift in Christ, not a wage for comparative morality (Sangwa, 2026f). The present issue is how good works become a reassurance narrative.

Cornelius is instructive because Luke describes him in strikingly positive terms. He is devout, God-fearing, generous to the poor, and devoted to prayer ([Acts 10:1-4](#)). God notices his prayers and gifts. Yet God still sends Peter to proclaim the saving message concerning Jesus Christ ([Acts 10:34-48](#); [Acts 11:13-14](#)). Cornelius's moral seriousness does not make the gospel unnecessary. Rather, God's providence brings the gospel to him.

The rich young ruler also represents moral confidence. He can point to serious commandment-keeping, but Jesus exposes the idol his morality has not dethroned ([Mark 10:17-22](#)). The Pharisee in [Luke 18](#) lists fasting and tithing while comparing himself favorably with others. Jesus contrasts him with the tax collector pleading for mercy and says the latter goes home justified ([Luke 18:9-14](#)). The problem is not that fasting or tithing are evil. The problem is that religious performance has become evidence in the case for self-righteousness.

Modern respectability has many versions. A politically conservative Christian may trust family values, sexual restraint, patriotism, sobriety, and discipline. A politically progressive Christian may trust activism, inclusion, generosity, advocacy, and moral concern for the marginalized. A wealthy donor may trust philanthropy. A poor but sacrificial parent may trust endurance and family responsibility. A scholar may trust integrity. A humanitarian may trust service. A church volunteer may trust decades of sacrifice.

Every one of these can be genuinely good. None is the righteousness of Christ.

This warning does not flatten moral differences. A faithful spouse and an adulterer are not morally identical in their conduct. A truthful public servant and a corrupt official are not equally harmful to society. The gospel does not require us to pretend that all behavior has the same earthly consequences. It requires us to deny that relative moral superiority can justify anyone before the absolutely holy God.

There is a particularly Christian form of this counterfeit: confidence based on being "better than the world." The person does not drink, does not smoke, dresses modestly, avoids certain entertainment, gives regularly, and opposes cultural immorality. These disciplines may reflect wisdom and obedience, depending on the issue. But if they become a platform for contempt, the broad road has simply changed clothes. Jesus' most severe critiques of religious hypocrisy target people who maintained outward rigor while neglecting justice, mercy, faithfulness, and inward purity ([Matthew 23:23-28](#)).

The same danger exists in communities shaped by high ethical expectations. Christian schools, ministries, and churches can reward respectable performance so effectively that people learn how to appear converted. A young person discovers which sins may be admitted safely and which must be hidden. Adults learn the vocabulary of testimony. Leaders learn how to confess minor weaknesses while concealing major patterns. Respectability becomes a survival skill.

The gospel dismantles this system by making confession safer than pretending. Christ did not come for people who can maintain the strongest image. He came to save sinners ([1 Timothy 1:15](#)). The justified person no longer needs moral achievements to function as a courtroom defense because Christ is the defense.

Good works then return to their proper place. They become evidence of living faith, love of neighbor, stewardship, gratitude, and Spirit-produced fruit ([Ephesians 2:8-10](#); [James 2:14-26](#); [Galatians 5:22-23](#)). They matter greatly, but precisely because they are freed from the impossible task of saving us.

If you are charitable, give thanks to God and continue. If you are disciplined, use discipline to love Him and neighbor. If you have avoided destructive sins, do not invent a testimony of rebellion. But never stand at the foot of the cross and tell God that Christ's righteousness is unnecessary because yours is respectable.

3.9 "God Knows My Heart" and "I Have Always Believed"

"God knows my heart" can be one of the most comforting sentences in Scripture or one of the most dangerous, depending on what the speaker means. It comforts the falsely accused because God sees what human observers cannot. It terrifies the hypocrite for exactly the same reason.

The phrase is often used today as a shield against moral examination. A person is confronted with conduct Scripture forbids and replies, "God knows my heart." The implication is that inward sincerity cancels outward disobedience. But biblical heart-language does not work that way. God tells Samuel that human beings look at outward appearance while the Lord looks at the heart ([1 Samuel 16:7](#)). That is not permission to disregard conduct. It is a warning that God's judgment penetrates deeper than conduct. Jeremiah says the human heart is deceitful and desperately sick, asking who can understand it, and immediately answers that the Lord searches the heart ([Jeremiah 17:9-10](#)). Jesus teaches that evil actions flow from within, from the human heart ([Mark 7:20-23](#)).

God knowing the heart is therefore not a loophole. It is the end of loopholes.

The strongest defense of the phrase should still be acknowledged. Human beings do judge superficially. A person may be misunderstood, slandered, racially stereotyped, dismissed because of poverty, or condemned for a matter of conscience that Scripture

leaves free. In such cases, appealing to God's perfect knowledge can be an act of faith. Paul himself can speak of a clear conscience while recognizing that the Lord is the final judge ([1 Corinthians 4:3-5](#)). The problem is not trusting God's knowledge. The problem is using God's knowledge to override God's Word.

"I have always believed" is similarly ambiguous. Some believers raised in Christian homes genuinely cannot remember a time when they consciously rejected Christ. They should not be forced to invent one. Saving faith does not become invalid because its beginnings are hard to date.

But "believe" can also mean almost anything. A person may mean, "I have always believed there is a God." James says demons believe that God is one and shudder ([James 2:19](#)). Another may mean, "I have always believed Jesus existed." Historical assent is not saving trust. Another may mean, "Christianity has always been my religion." That is identity, not necessarily faith. Another may mean, "I believe God loves everyone." True as a statement of divine benevolence, it can still be used to avoid the biblical call to repentance and faith.

Saving faith has an object and content. It is trust in the biblical Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son who died for sins and rose, as the only sufficient Savior and rightful Lord ([Romans 3:21-26](#); [Romans 10:9-13](#); [1 Corinthians 15:1-4](#)). Faith includes knowledge and assent, but it also involves personal reliance. The believer does not merely accept that a parachute exists. He entrusts himself to it.

This is where private spirituality can counterfeit faith. A person may say, "I do not need organized religion; I have my own relationship with God." Sometimes this is a wounded person's reaction to church abuse and must be treated compassionately. Institutional betrayal can make religious structures frightening. The answer is not to shame the wounded back into unsafe settings. It is to help them distinguish Christ from abusers and, in due time, seek healthy Christian fellowship.

In other cases, "my own relationship with God" means that the self has become final authority. God never contradicts the person's desires because "God" has become the name given to inward approval. This is especially compatible with modern spiritualities that emphasize an inner divine presence, higher self, Christ consciousness, or universal spirit. Such language can sound close to Christian intimacy while dissolving the Creator-creature distinction and the uniqueness of Christ (Hanegraaff, 1996; Sangwa, 2026h). Biblical faith is personal, but it is not self-authored. The God we know personally is the God who speaks and may contradict us.

Sincerity is therefore morally relevant but not saving. Paul was sincere in persecuting Christians and later described himself as acting ignorantly in unbelief, not as justified by good intentions ([1 Timothy 1:12-16](#)). A sincere error remains error. A sincere false gospel remains false. A sincere idol does not become God.

The practical test is simple to state and difficult to evade: when Scripture exposes something in you, does "God knows my heart" lead you to confession or to defense?

If the phrase means, "Lord, You know the truth about me better than I do; search me and lead me," it is close to the prayer of [Psalm 139:23-24](#). If it means, "My motives exempt me from Your commands," it has become presumption.

God does know your heart. That is why you do not need to perform for Him. It is also why you cannot deceive Him. The gospel's comfort is not that the heart is naturally safe. It is that God gives a new heart and cleanses the guilty through Christ ([Ezekiel 36:25-27](#); [Hebrews 10:10-22](#)).

3.10 Nominal Christianity and Religious Familiarity

There are people for whom the gospel is not strange but overfamiliar. They know when the preacher is about to quote [John 3:16](#). They can predict the altar call. They know the worship songs, the doctrinal slogans, the controversies, the calendar, the church politics, and the expected language of testimony. Christian words have become part of the furniture of consciousness.

Familiarity can be a gift. The mind stocked with Scripture has resources the Spirit can bring to remembrance. A long history in church can provide examples of faithfulness, intergenerational wisdom, and habits of prayer. The danger is not familiarity itself. It is immunity.

Jesus experienced a form of this in Nazareth. The people knew His family context so well that familiarity became part of their unbelieving offense: "Isn't this the carpenter?" ([Mark 6:1-6](#)). The point should not be pressed beyond the text, but it illustrates how proximity can coexist with unbelief. Hebrews makes the theological principle explicit in another context: good news was proclaimed, but the message did not benefit those who heard because it was not united with faith ([Hebrews 4:2](#)).

Nominal Christianity describes identification without the saving reality to which the name should refer. The term can be misused if it becomes a contemptuous label for people who attend less often or belong to older traditions. Frequency of attendance is not an infallible measure of regeneration. A housebound believer, persecuted believer, shift worker, or wounded person may face real barriers to participation. The point is not statistical churchgoing. It is the gap between profession and faith.

Recent U.S. survey data provide a striking cultural frame. Sixty-two percent of adults identified as Christian in 2023-2024, while only about one-third reported attending religious services at least monthly in the survey's comparable attendance measure, and only 54 percent of Christians reported personal membership in a congregation (Pew Research Center, 2025a, 2025b). These numbers cannot tell us how many are genuine believers, and no spiritual inference should be made from attendance alone. They do show that Christian identity can persist at levels different from

institutional participation or personal practice. Nominality is therefore not an invented pastoral category. It names a real possibility within cultural identification.

Religious familiarity can also produce a defensive mechanism: "I already know this." The person hears "repent" and mentally files it under basic doctrine for beginners. The cross becomes elementary material rather than the place where pride dies. Warnings about false assurance are applied to cult members, Catholics, prosperity preachers, progressive Christians, liberal theologians, charismatics, cessationists, or whoever the person's preferred out-group happens to be. The familiar believer becomes skilled at exporting conviction.

This is why churches must preach the gospel to church people. Pastors should not assume that a congregation gathered on Sunday is a room full of regenerate people needing only advanced instruction. Paul writes to churches and still warns against receiving grace in vain, self-deception, idolatry, immorality, and unbelief ([1 Corinthians 10:1-12](#); [2 Corinthians 13:5](#)). Hebrews addresses a worshiping community with severe warnings and strong encouragement. First John gives tests of life precisely to people within the Christian sphere.

Religious institutions can unintentionally deepen nominality when they make belonging easier to measure than faith. The church knows who paid dues, completed classes, received rites, or signed forms. Those things are administratively visible. Regeneration is not. The temptation is to treat what can be recorded as if it were what finally matters.

A nominal Christian may also be morally serious. He may believe Christian ethics are good for society. She may value family, education, social order, charity, and religious heritage. Christian civilization can be admired without Christ being trusted. Cultural Christianity can oppose secularization while remaining spiritually unconverted.

The opposite temptation is fashionable deconstruction for its own sake, treating familiarity as proof that inherited Christianity must be abandoned. Familiarity does not make a doctrine false. The answer to nominal Christianity is not novelty. It is reality. The gospel may be ancient and familiar, yet the living Christ is never merely background.

The question is whether the words still reach the conscience. When you hear "Christ died for sinners," do you hear information or rescue? When Scripture names sin, do you hear someone else's problem or your Lord's voice? When the table is set, do you participate from habit or remembrance? When you sing, are you speaking to God or reciting community music?

One of the most dangerous places to sleep is in a familiar sanctuary because no alarm sounds unusual anymore. The mercy of God is that His Word is still living and active ([Hebrews 4:12](#)). It can make the familiar terrifyingly fresh and the long-known gospel newly precious.

3.11 Genuine Assurance Versus Presumption

A book about false assurance can itself become dangerous if it leaves tender believers unable to rest. Some readers are already skilled at finding reasons to doubt themselves. They revisit every prayer, scrutinize every motive, compare every emotion, and interpret each failure as proof that Christ has rejected them. That is not the purpose of biblical warning.

Scripture gives assurance because God does not want His children to live as permanent spiritual orphans. John says he writes to those who believe in the name of the Son of God so that they may know they have eternal life ([1 John 5:13](#)). Paul speaks of the Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are God's children ([Romans 8:15-16](#)). Hebrews urges believers to draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith because of Christ's priestly work and cleansing ([Hebrews 10:19-22](#)). Christian assurance is real.

The question is what it rests on.

Presumption rests on a substitute. "I was baptized." "I prayed the prayer." "I joined the church." "I speak in tongues." "I am ordained." "I have always believed." "I am a good person." "I know doctrine." "God used me." "I felt peace." Each statement may describe something true. Presumption turns it into a final argument.

Biblical assurance begins outside the self, in the person and work of Christ. The Son has accomplished redemption. His death is sufficient. His resurrection is real. His promise to receive those who come to Him is trustworthy ([John 6:37](#)). Whoever believes in Him has eternal life ([John 3:16](#); [John 5:24](#)). He is able to save completely those who draw near to God through Him because He always lives to intercede for them ([Hebrews 7:25](#)). The first ground of assurance is not the quality of our memory but the quality of our Savior.

Assurance is received through present faith. This is why the New Testament so often speaks in the present tense about believing, abiding, following, and continuing. The believer does not earn salvation by maintaining faith as a work. Faith is the empty hand that keeps receiving Christ. Asking, "Am I trusting Him now?" is often healthier than obsessing over whether a childhood prayer achieved the correct level of sincerity.

The Spirit's witness and the fruits of regeneration also matter. First John repeatedly joins assurance to confession of the true Christ, obedience, love for fellow believers, a transformed relationship to sin, and perseverance in apostolic truth ([1 John 2:3-6](#); [1 John 2:7-27](#); [1 John 3:6-10](#); [1 John 3:14-24](#); [1 John 4:1-6](#)). This does not create justification by works. Fruit does not become the root. It does mean that Scripture does not encourage a person to claim certainty while persistently denying every biblical mark of new life.

The distinction between evidence and ground is therefore essential. Christ's righteousness is the ground. Faith receives Him. The Spirit seals and testifies. Fruit confirms that grace is not barren. Perseverance demonstrates the enduring reality of faith. No single moment of emotional triumph replaces this biblical pattern.

Sensitive consciences need particular protection here. A real believer may experience severe doubt, depression, intrusive thoughts, spiritual dryness, grief, trauma, or seasons of weak assurance. Psychological distress can affect felt certainty without changing the objective sufficiency of Christ. The person who hates sin, confesses it, seeks help, longs for Christ, and fears being separated from Him should not be treated like the hardened person who celebrates rebellion and resents every call to repentance. Struggle is not the same as peace with sin.

Likewise, serious failure does not automatically prove that every previous profession was false. Peter denied Jesus and wept bitterly; the risen Christ restored and recommissioned him ([Luke 22:54-62](#); [John 21:15-19](#)). David committed grievous sin and experienced severe discipline, confession, and restoration ([2 Samuel 11-12](#); [Psalm 51](#)). The gospel is not fragile enough that one fall automatically destroys every hope. But grace is also not sentimental enough to call unrepentant persistence harmless. The same Peter who was restored later tells believers to be sober and vigilant ([1 Peter 5:8-9](#)).

Presumptuous consciences need the opposite pastoral word. If your confidence is strongest exactly where Scripture's warnings should disturb you, do not silence the disturbance. If you defend a settled pattern of sin by appealing to a prayer, baptism, denomination, spiritual gift, or doctrine of security, you are using Christian truth as anesthesia. The correct use of assurance makes a believer love Christ more, not fear repentance less.

The church should therefore learn to speak conditionally without becoming evasive. To the repentant believer: "Look to Christ. His promise is stronger than your feelings." To the hardened professor: "Do not use grace to bless what Christ calls you to forsake." To the uncertain seeker: "You do not need to manufacture an experience. Come to Christ." To the person trapped in ritual confidence: "Honor the sign, but trust the One signified." To the religious expert: "Your knowledge cannot justify you." To the minister: "Your platform will not stand in the judgment. Christ must."

Assurance also has an eschatological direction. The New Testament connects hope with holiness and readiness. Everyone who has the hope of seeing Christ purifies himself as He is pure ([1 John 3:2-3](#)). Paul describes believers waiting for God's Son from heaven after turning from idols to serve the living and true God ([1 Thessalonians 1:9-10](#)). The Blessed Hope is not a reward for the most anxious end-time speculation. It is the hope of people whose refuge is Christ.

The pre-tribulation expectation held in this volume should therefore intensify readiness without creating another false assurance. Believing the correct rapture chronology cannot save. Knowing prophecy charts cannot regenerate. Expecting Christ before the tribulation cannot substitute for belonging to Christ.

Eschatological orthodoxy becomes another counterfeit if the heart says, "I understand the timeline, therefore I am ready."

Readiness is personal. If Christ came today, what would you point to? A baptismal date? A church card? A prayer from childhood? A theological degree? A ministry? A spiritual manifestation? Your philanthropy? Your moral record? Or would you say, with all your remaining weakness, "My hope is Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for sinners. I have no other righteousness"?

That answer is not weak assurance. It is the strongest assurance possible because it rests where God's promise rests.

Conclusion: Do Not Rest in the Sign When Christ Is the Reality

Counterfeit conversion rarely requires a person to reject Christianity completely. It only requires something Christian to become large enough to hide Christ.

A family can hide Him when inherited identity becomes new birth. Baptism can hide Him when water becomes a guarantee detached from faith. Communion can hide Him when participation becomes insurance. A church can hide Him when institutional belonging becomes the verdict. A prayer can hide Him when remembered words replace present trust. An altar can hide Him when walking forward becomes the gospel. Childhood emotion can hide Him when a powerful memory becomes more authoritative than the Word. Theology can hide Him when knowledge becomes righteousness. Ministry can hide Him when usefulness becomes assurance. Gifts can hide Him when manifestation becomes proof. Morality can hide Him when respectability becomes atonement. The phrase "God knows my heart" can hide Him when sincerity becomes lord.

The answer is not to destroy every sign. It is to return every sign to its proper place.

Be baptized because Christ commands disciples to be baptized, not because water can replace Christ. Receive the Lord's Supper because He gave it to His church, not because bread and cup can make unbelief safe. Join a faithful church because Christians belong to Christ's body, not because a membership roll is the Lamb's book of life. Pray because faith speaks to God, not because a formula can compel grace. Teach children the gospel because they can truly believe, not because family faith is hereditary. Study doctrine because truth matters, not because knowledge justifies. Serve because love labors, not because ministry purchases a verdict. Seek the Spirit's fullness and gifts according to Scripture, but do not confuse gifts with holiness. Do good because grace creates a people zealous for good works, not because good works can become your cross.

And if this chapter has exposed that your confidence has been resting in something other than Christ, do not protect the counterfeit. That exposure is mercy.

You do not need to repair your old testimony before coming to Jesus. You do not need to decide whether the prayer at age nine was sincere enough before trusting Him now. You do not need to know whether your baptism was accompanied by the exact internal state required by your tradition before coming to Him now. You do not need to build a more impressive record. You need the Savior.

Turn from every rival refuge. Confess your sin without bargaining. Believe the gospel. Christ died for sins, rose bodily, reigns as Lord, intercedes for His people, and will return. Whoever comes to Him will not be cast out ([John 6:37](#)). Whoever has the Son has life ([1 John 5:11-12](#)). There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus ([Romans 8:1](#)).

For the tender believer, hear that last sentence carefully. The purpose of examining false assurance is not to make Christ harder to reach than He is. He is not asking you to achieve perfect introspective certainty before He will receive you. Stop looking for a hidden merit in your conversion story. Look to Him. Your tears are not the Savior. Your lack of tears is not the Savior. The clarity of your memory is not the Savior. Christ is.

For the presumptuous believer, hear the warning with equal clarity. Do not make grace the guardian of rebellion. Do not point to a religious event while resisting the Lord to whom the event was supposed to point. The broad road is wide enough for baptismal certificates, church offices, altar-call memories, spiritual gifts, and impeccable reputations. Jesus' warning in [Matthew 7](#) exists because Christian clothing can travel toward destruction.

The final question of this chapter is therefore not, "Which Christian things have happened to me?" It is, "Do I have Christ?"

If you have Him, the signs become gifts rather than idols. The church becomes family rather than savior. Good works become fruit rather than currency. Doctrine becomes light rather than pride. Memory becomes testimony rather than foundation. And assurance becomes deeper because it is no longer forced to rest on the unstable story of what you once did.

It rests on what Jesus Christ has done, on what He promises, on the Spirit who gives life, and on the living faith that clings to Him until the day faith becomes sight.

That is the assurance worth having when He comes.

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