



CHAPTER ONE

“WHERE’S THE ASSURANCE?”

Where’s the beef?” is a line made famous by the 81-year-old actress, Clara Peller, in a 1984 advertisement for Wendy’s restaurants. She had just bought a hamburger at a Wendy’s competitor, and found it to be a huge fluffy bun with a very small beef patty. Her question implied that something important, something expected, seemed to be missing: “Where’s the beef?”

“Where’s the assurance?” When I ask this question, I am thinking that one of the most important aspects of the Christian life, one that God has promised and that every Christian should possess, seems to be missing in the lives of many. One reason is an apparent confusion about how a sinner can be saved. People in general, including many Christians, assume that we will go to heaven *if we are good enough*. If we live a good life, do all of the right things, and avoid sinning, we have a *good chance* of being allowed into heaven. The problem is that one can never be sure that he or she is “good enough” to make the cut.

One George Barna poll found that 63 percent of the U.S. population thinks that if a person is good enough, he can earn his way to heaven. Even a third of those identifying themselves as born-again Christians said the same thing! Our Sunday newspaper magazine, *USA Weekend* (Dec. 19-21, 1986), included a cover article on the subject, “What are your chances of going to heaven?” These words appeared in big letters on the cover, along with pictures of

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three individuals and their brief answers to the question. A middle-aged fellow from Illinois said his chances were “50-50. The older I get, the more I think my chances will improve.” A rather young matron from Indiana said, “My chances are kind of slim—maybe 50-50. You have to be more than a nice person. But I’m still in the running.” A Florida man was pretty laid back about it: “Eighty-five percent. I don’t think the entrance exam will be that tough.” As I reflect on these answers, it seems clear that these folks (at least the first two) are measuring their chances of going to heaven in terms of *how good they perceive themselves to be*. You can almost see them picturing God holding up a balance scale, with their sins on one side and their good deeds on the other. In fact, they seem to fear that even 51% good would not be “good enough.”

This confusion about assurance manifests itself in many other ways. A Bible college recruiter reported in a letter the results of a survey of college-bound Christian youth. (I assume that after every question there were several answers from which one could choose.) One of the questions on the survey was, “What is your main goal in life?” The answer given most often was “gaining eternal life.” Another question was, “What are your greatest fears in life?” The answers checked most often were “death” and “the final judgment.” It is difficult to imagine a greater spiritual tension than this! Where’s the assurance?

Commenting on a Gallup poll, an article in a periodical called *Emerging Trends* (January 1998, 1) says, “A majority of Americans (56%), with most describing themselves as Christians, say that when they think about their death, they worry ‘a great deal’ or ‘somewhat’ that they will ‘not be forgiven by God.’ Half of all interviewees (51%) worry about dying when they are removed or cut off from God or a higher power.” The article draws this conclusion: “Such findings . . . raise the question of whether Christians in the U.S. have an understanding of the Christian meaning of ‘grace’, and suggest the need for more effective biblical teaching in Christian churches in this country.”

What is the root of this lack of assurance? Why do some have it, and others do not? It all depends on one’s overall approach to salvation and to acceptance with God. In the final analysis there are two

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distinct ways of relating to God, two distinct ways of conceptualizing and pursuing the pathway to salvation.

These ways stand in sharp contrast to one another, and in fact are quite the opposite of each other. In theory both ways can lead to heaven; but in reality only one will actually work for sinners, and that is the one that comes through Jesus Christ. The problem is that most people in the world, including almost all non-Christians, are aware of only one of these ways, and that is the one that won't actually work. Thus even those who are conscientiously seeking salvation (as they understand it) are engaged in an exercise of futility. In fact many Christians themselves, who in reality are on the right pathway to God, do not really understand what it is all about and how it is different from the futile one. Herein lies the reason for confusion about assurance. Real assurance is possible only when one is relating to God through Jesus Christ, and then only when he or she understands the nature of this relationship.

The contrast between these two systems of relating to God can be depicted in a number of ways, thusly:

EGOCENTRIC	vs.	THEOCENTRIC
RELIGION	vs.	CHRISTIANITY
LAW	vs.	GRACE
WAGES	vs.	GIFT
GOD'S HOLINESS	vs.	GOD'S LOVE
GOD'S WRATH	vs.	GOD'S GRACE
DO	vs.	DONE

Most of these contrasts will be explained in this and the following two chapters.

In the first place, and perhaps most fundamentally, some people have an *egocentric* concept of salvation and relation to God, and others have a *theocentric* concept. The egocentric approach sees salvation as something that is to be pursued mainly for our own sakes, and something that is dependent mainly upon what we are able to accomplish. The theocentric approach, on the other hand, sees even our salvation as something we pursue primarily for the glory of God, and something that is dependent upon what God himself has done for us.

This distinction is well illustrated in the life of Martin Luther. Philip Watson, in his book *Let God Be God!* (Fortress 1947),

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describes Luther's "Copernican revolution" from egocentric to theocentric salvation. First of all, when Luther entered the monastery of the Augustinian Eremites at Erfurt in 1505, the ultimate reason he did so was "in order to save his soul." He had "an imperious sense of the need for a right personal relationship to God. He wanted to be sure of his standing with God, to 'find a gracious God', to assure himself of God's goodwill toward him; and the monastic vow was the most certain means to that end" (Watson, 15).

He became a diligent student of the Bible. "It was, above all, his study of the Scriptures and in particular of the Epistle to the Romans, that finally brought Luther to deliverance" (20).

"Luther gained a new conception of God—or rather, he entered into a new relationship to God, a relationship established not on the basis of Luther's righteousness—his fulfilment of the commandment of love toward God according to the Law—but on the basis of God's righteousness—God's fulfilment of His promises of love, according to the Gospel, toward Luther" (21).

Sometimes when someone makes a 180-degree turn in his thinking, as did Luther, we call it a Copernican revolution. "For just as Copernicus started with a geocentric, but reached a heliocentric conception of the physical world, Luther began with an anthropocentric or egocentric conception of religion, but came to a theocentric conception. In this sense, Luther is a Copernicus in the realm of religion" (34).

"Hence the possibility is given . . . of two main types of religion, according as one or the other of these two factors predominates and becomes the centre of gravity, so to speak, in the relationship. If the religious relationship centres in man—if my relation to God depends essentially upon me—then it can be described as anthropocentric or egocentric; if it centres in the eternal and the divine, then it is theocentric" (34).

"In egocentric religion, fellowship with God depends ultimately on man's achievement and is sought ultimately for man's own ends. God is characteristically conceived in terms of the answer to human problems and needs.

"In theocentric religion, on the other hand, God is the sovereign and unquestionable Lord of man's existence. He confronts man with compelling authority; and in His presence there is no place left for egoism in any form." The key to my relationship with God

does not lie finally with me. Nothing that I may do or become can decisively ensure my standing with God. I cannot establish a claim to His favour or control His dealings with me. He is not to be moved by my merits or worthiness or by anything else of mine. On the contrary, I am moved by Him. I am moved both to seek fellowship with Him and to strive to do His will—not for the sake of any benefit I may derive therefrom, but simply and solely because such is His good pleasure and my unconditional obligation. (35)

“In the [medieval] Catholic conception of Christianity, it is in the last analysis man who occupies the centre of the religious stage; in Luther’s reforming conception it is God” (37).

Here, man must be content to receive undeserved the gifts God wills to bestow on him, and to obey without thought of reward the commandments God pleases to give him. In other words, he must let God really be God, the centre around which his whole existence moves. This theocentric emphasis can be described as the fundamental motif of Luther’s entire thought. (38)

The tendency of even Christian people to conceive of their relation to God in an egocentric way is illustrated in the survey of college-bound Christian youth mentioned near the beginning of this chapter. One of the questions on the survey was “What is your main goal in life?” The answer given most often was “gaining eternal life.” We should stop and think about this. If our *main goal* in life is “gaining eternal life,” this is the essence of egocentricity! It is not wrong to desire and seek eternal life, but even this is not something we should do just for our own sake! Jesus has told us what our main goal should be: “Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness” (Mt 6:33). “First” means *first of all*; it refers to the most important thing in our lives. What should be that most important thing? “His kingdom.” The basic meaning of the word for “kingdom” is not the realm over which a king reigns, but his status of *kingship*, i.e., his honor and glory and dominion as king. That is the meaning here. In all that we do, even in our pursuit of salvation, what we should be seeking first of all is to honor and glorify God our Savior and King.

This tendency to pursue salvation in an egocentric way is also seen in the common idea, even among Christians, that whether we are saved or not *depends on us*: upon our works, upon our goodness, upon our achieving a certain level of holiness. This is a mentality that is dif-

difficult to avoid. Let me suggest a test. I ask you, the reader, to examine yourself, and ask yourself whether your relationship to God is ultimately egocentric or theocentric. What follows is a test question that can help you decide. After reading the question, simply close your eyes and formulate in your mind an honest answer: "If you were to die (or Christ should come) at this very moment, would you be saved or lost?" [STOP AND THINK ABOUT IT.] Now, for our purposes what matters is not whether you answered yes or no, but *what first came into your mind* as you began to formulate your answer. Were your first thoughts about yourself, e.g., "Do I really deserve salvation? Have I sinned since I last asked for forgiveness? I'm not good enough for heaven!" This is the egocentric mind-set. Or were your first thoughts about the grace of God and the cross of Christ? Did you say something like "Yes, thanks be to God and His wonderful promises through Jesus Christ!"

Only when we, like Luther, finally come to this theocentric approach to God and salvation will we be blessed with a confident assurance of our salvation status. Many Christians are in serious need of a "Copernican revolution" in this regard.

Referring back to the listing above, the second way of characterizing the two different ways of relating to God is the contrast between *religion* and *Christianity*. In a widely used little book called *How to Be a Christian without Being Religious*, first published in 1967, Fritz Ridenour popularized this distinction. At first glance, one might think, "This sounds great! No more religion! No more prayer, church attendance, Bible reading, all those 'religious' things! And I can still be a Christian!" But this is not the point. When Ridenour uses the word "religious," he is not thinking about religion in the general sense of "doing religious things," or things done in conscious worship of and service to God. These are all still necessary. He is using it in a more specific sense, i.e., a religious activity is something one does for the specific purpose of working his way into the presence of God, for the purpose of earning and deserving God's blessings. It has to do not so much with the activity itself, but with the motive and goal one has for engaging in such activity. Ridenour's point is that Christianity is different from all world religions and all "religious" activity, because it focuses not on our works as ways of making ourselves right with God, but on God's works through Jesus Christ whereby he

makes our relationship with him possible.

In his original introduction to *How to Be a Christian without Being Religious*, Ridenour explains

it this way: “Christianity is more than a religion, because every religion has one basic characteristic. Its followers are trying to reach God, find God, please God through their own efforts. Religions reach up toward God. Christianity is God reaching down to man. Christianity claims that men have not found God, but *that God has found them*. To some this is a crushing blow. They prefer religious effort—dealing with God on their own terms. This puts them in control. They feel good about ‘being religious.’ Christianity, however, is not religious striving. To practice Christianity is to *respond* to what God has done for you.”¹

Here is another practical test by which the reader may determine whether his relationship to God is just “religious” or is truly Christian. It is a question often used by D. James Kennedy in his writing and preaching ministry. The question is simply this: “If God were to ask you, ‘Why should I let you into my heaven?’ what would you say?” Do you have an answer prepared, in case such a question is asked? What kind of answer would be acceptable to God? We should be aware that the answers many people have in mind are “religious” (egocentric) in nature, while others are truly Christian (theocentric). The former may be considered *wrong* answers, the latter *right* answers. A bit later, in chapter three below (64-65), I will say more about these two kinds of answers and give examples. For a preview, one may read **Luke 18:9-14**.

My point again is that anyone who is burdened by a merely *religious* relationship with God, whether in reality or in perception only,

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¹ This distinction between Christianity and religion was emphasized by Karl Barth in his *Church Dogmatics I/2* (T. & T. Clark, 1956). In §17 of this volume Barth expounds upon “The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion” (280-361). By “revelation” he is referring primarily to Jesus Christ as the one true revelation of God. Another influential writer who spoke of “religionless Christianity” was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, especially in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* (English tr. 1953). See also Jacques Ellul, in *Living Faith* (Harper, 1983): “The opposition between religion and revelation can really be understood quite simply. We can reduce it to a maxim: religion goes up, revelation comes down” (129). This last quote sounds a lot like Ridenour, but these writers do not necessarily mean exactly what he is saying. See Leon Morris, *The Abolition of Religion: A Study in “Religionless Christianity”* (London: Inter-Varsity, 1964).

will have a weak or even nonexistent assurance of his or her salvation. To one who has the mind-set of religion, how can he ever be sure that he has climbed high enough on the mountain of holiness to be acceptable to God? There will always be doubts.

In the above listing of different terms to describe the two ways of relating to God, the third set of contrasting terms is *law* vs. *grace*. These are the terms the Apostle Paul uses in *Romans* for the purpose of delineating this distinction; they are roughly equivalent to *egocentric* vs. *theocentric*, and *religion* vs. *Christianity*. Following Paul's example, these are the terms I will use throughout this book (see chapter three especially). Before explaining these, though, in the next chapter I will explain how the two possible ways of relating to God are determined by God's own nature.