

A Calvinist's Misunderstanding of the Assurance of Salvation

On numerous websites R. C. Sproul is quoted as revealing in 1989 (if not before) that his understanding of salvation did not include assurance that he, personally, was saved from eternal damnation. He asserted that he was not able —nor was anyone able —to know if they are truly saved. The lengthy quote is no longer posted on his ministry's website although it has been repeatedly cited as sourcing to Ligonier's November issue of *Tabletalk* magazine that year. But **Sproul's conclusion reveals misunderstanding of the climactic point of soteriological truth:**

[Sproul stated], I went to my room and began to read the Bible. On my knees I said, "Well, here I am. I can't point to my obedience. There's nothing I can offer...I knew that some people only flee to the cross to escape hell...I could not be sure about my own heart and motivation. Then I remembered John 6:68...Peter was also uncomfortable, but he realized that *being uncomfortable with Jesus was better than any other option!*"¹

If this is not an urban legend, then we ought to find Sproul's clarification, attestation, or refutation of the widely disseminated statement. So, on the assumption Sproul continues in agreement with the position, certain questions and comments are incumbent. Sproul is not just incidentally influential. He is accountable for his sensitive (if not sensational) confession:

1. The scenario depicts the biblical injunction that we correctly regard the *basis* of our salvation. In my lifetime I've repeatedly known of those who, when suddenly born again —freely admit they *thought* they were "right with God" *before* —but in an instant realized they'd been relying on a false gospel, a false reason for their prior confidence. Believing the salvific power of the gospel, this belief the application turning them away from idols to the living God, *they were spiritually reborn*. At that moment these souls admit their *prior doubt was well founded*...they'd not been born again but had no way of knowing they were deceived until that moment when the washing of the Word by the power of the Holy Spirit brought them out of spiritual darkness into the light of rebirth according to John 3:3, 5, and 7. **The point is this: if one doubts their salvation —there's likely good reason to do so.** Therefore, how is it, that after years of having walked in *presumed faith*, Sproul suddenly doubted on that day? The answer to this question is known only to Sproul and his Maker.
2. "I can't point to my obedience. There's nothing I can offer." *Precisely*. Faith alone in Christ alone does not check any baggage at the terminal counter. Could this mean on that day Sproul realized he'd been offering, at least partially, his "good works"? Again, only the Lord knows. But it is worth repeating that the only qualification we can bring to the table is *our abject need for unmerited grace*.

¹ Dave Hunt, *What Love Is This? Calvinism's Misrepresentation of God* (Bend, OR: The Berean Call, 2006), 486-87, emphasis added.

3. "...I knew that some people only flee to the cross to escape hell." Goodness, gracious! Does Sproul intimate there are souls with better motives? True, as we grow in Christ, we repeatedly fall in love with Him again and again as we see the value of obedience at all cost and *adoring Him simply for who He is*. But, really, **is there going to be loss of reward at the Judgment Seat of Christ for those who rationally recognize the intuitively obvious value of eternal life with Christ compared to life without Him?** By this statement, Sproul intimates an elevation of himself over less introspective and articulate souls.
4. "I could not be sure about my own heart and motivation." Knowing the certainty of human depravity (a Calvinist staple), with each soul totally incapable of even a decent thought (taught by TULIP's "T"), how could Sproul have the slightest inkling that **his heart might be capable of better than what is described by Jeremiah?** When we are born again we do not bring any speck of goodness—even if offered tentatively. We come as convicted souls deserving of only death but thankful for the certainty of life provided by the Cross of Christ. Does Sproul's statement indicate one might be capable of even a pinch of the right motivation? This *is* intimated by his statement.
5. "Then I remembered John 6:68...Peter was also uncomfortable, but he realized that *being uncomfortable with Jesus was better than any other option!*" This expresses the most obvious theological error in Sproul's lesson. John states that Peter responded to Jesus' probing question. "...Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life." **If the verse is read in context there is not much room for concluding Peter reasoned as Sproul states**—willing to be uncomfortable *with* Jesus more than comfortable *without* Him. It is significant that **Sproul did not include verse 69**. "*We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God.*" **This** is the only basis on which one is saved: belief that the death, burial, and resurrection of God Himself provides the propitiation necessary to convert a soul from death to life—and that conversion with complete assurance the soul is immediately sealed, predestined to the glories ordained.
6. The most telling conclusion drawn from his statement is entirely missing by Sproul. "...*being...with Jesus...*!" What could this mean other than that *Sproul realized he was saved?* **If "being with Jesus" is not a statement of being in Christ, then what is?** If it is *not* a statement of faith, then Sproul is saying Peter was also not saved, but only that he presumed to be so. Twenty-five years later, I ask, "Does R. C. Sproul still "not know" if he belongs to Christ, is with Christ in heavenly places?" If so, it's likely due to that fandangled system he keeps trying to prop up with his philosophical arguments and his preference for a garden of dying TULIP's. It's time to smell the fragrance of the Rose of Sharon—who comes with no thorny strings attached.

This commentary is offered because when **we speak, write, and share our beliefs worldwide, as Sproul so eloquently does, we are not immune from others critiquing those**

beliefs. The issue is not simply Sproul's personal salvation (which is entirely the province of our sovereign Lord); he is an acclaimed teacher and is subject to having his teaching challenged when the effect of his teaching is detrimental to those who lack discernment necessary to recognize his less than accurate theological positions.