

Love's Dynamic Attunement:

A Theological Aesthetic Perspective of "Assurance of Salvation"

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"If you were to die tonight, how sure are you that you would spend eternity with God? 0%...25%...50%...75%...100%." ¹ So asks Campus Crusade for Christ, one of America's largest Evangelical Protestant ministries. ² For the Campus Crusader, this question concerning "assurance of salvation" is a standard lead-in to sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Those who accept Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior can be 100% assured of their eternal salvation. How is a Roman Catholic to respond to the question? Do Catholics have an assurance of salvation? Do they have no kind of assurance with respect to salvation? Where do Evangelicals and Catholics stand with respect to one another on the question of assurance?

In 1997, the ecumenical dialogue between Evangelicals and Catholics bore fruit in a joint statement on salvation entitled, "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Gift of Salvation." In agreement, they confessed that a Christian can have an "assured hope" of salvation. This essay takes this "assured hope" as the point of departure as it seeks to elaborate on it and contribute to subsequent dialogue. Relevant to the purpose here, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, Bill Bright, was one of the Evangelical participants. ³

In this essay I will survey Bill Bright's notion of assurance of salvation. ⁴ I will note the benefits that Bright suggests result from such an assurance. I will then consider the notion of

¹ Bill Bright, "Your Life in Christ: 1. Confidence" (Orlando: Campus Crusade for Christ Inc., 1996), 3.

² For the sake of simplicity, "Evangelical" will be taken to mean the sort of Evangelical Protestantism characteristic of Campus Crusade for Christ, though there are other Evangelicals who would not fit the Crusade mold.

³ Other Evangelical participants include Charles Colson, Bishop William Frey, Os Guinness, Rev Max Lucado, Richard Mouw, Mark Noll, James J.I. Packer, and Timothy Phillips. Among the Catholics are Fr Augustine Di Noia, OP, Fr Avery Dulles, SJ, Peter Kreeft, Fr Matthew Lamb, Ralph Martin, Fr Richard Neuhaus, Fr Edward Oakes, SJ, and George Weigel.

⁴ Bright is taken as an example of the Evangelicals involved in the ECT dialogue to further explore the notion of "assurance of salvation," though he may or may not be a representative sample even of the Evangelicals who participated.

assured hope proposed by the “Evangelical and Catholics Together.” Then I will explore a Catholic perspective of a possible meaning of assured hope that may be acceptable to Evangelicals. I will do so by developing upon the “Christian Attunement” model from the theological aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar. After establishing the basics of the model, I will consider the Scriptural themes von Balthasar incorporates. Pauline theology characterizes the dynamism of attunement while orienting the believer particularly to Christ’s death and resurrection. Johannine theology characterizes attunement as relational while orienting the believer particularly to the God who is Love. I will then propose that the Christian attunement model better attains the benefits sought after by Campus Crusade for Christ’s assurance of salvation without crossing over into the absolute assurance of salvation which the official teaching of the Catholic Church rejects.⁵

Campus Crusade for Christ

Bill Bright (1921-2003) founded Campus Crusade for Christ in 1951, seeking to give every college student the opportunity to accept Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior. Today, Campus Crusade for Christ is on over 1,000 college campuses in the United States and abroad.⁶ Campus Crusade also has various other Christian ministries outside the college scene. Given their wide influence, Campus Crusade’s notion of assurance of salvation is a good place to start in dialoguing with Evangelicals.⁷ Bill Bright seems to suggest four main benefits which an assurance of salvation produces in the believer’s life: first, a greater trust in God and His

⁵In response to the Protestant Reformation, the Council of Trent (1547) condemned an absolute assurance of salvation: “that he may stand perseveringly...let no one promise himself herein something as certain with an absolute certainty, though all ought to place and repose the firmest hope in God’s help” (Chapter XIII).

⁶ See www.campuscrusadeforchrist.com/aboutus/

⁷ Though the Bible is the first place the Campus Crusader would turn, this essay leaves the Scriptural evidence for and against an “assurance of salvation” aside. There are plenty of other treatments which consider this. It seems to the author that such an approach often just leads to both sides “proof-texting” the passages which support their view. This essay rather seeks to proceed theologically (while no doubt using Scriptural themes) in proposing a model which could unite. How well the attunement model incorporates the whole of Sacred Scripture could be an object for further study.

promises, second, an abundant joy flowing from an orientation to eternal life with Christ, third, a confidence in the salvific indwelling of Christ even when feelings and experience seem to indicate otherwise, and fourth, a firm foundation on which to build one's whole Christian life.⁸ These benefits will be spelled out in the following survey of Campus Crusade's notion of assurance of salvation.

For Campus Crusade for Christ, one usually comes to receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior through what is commonly called the "sinner's prayer." This prayer involves the confession of sins to God, the acceptance of the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ, and the commitment of one's life to Christ. Through praying sincerely from the heart, Jesus is received in faith. When the gift of salvation is accepted, it is the privilege of the new believer to know with certainty that the blessing of eternal salvation is guaranteed.⁹ This certainty of salvation is based on "the trustworthiness of God Himself and His Word."¹⁰ Certainty is not based on the believer or on the act of accepting Jesus, but on God Himself, hence the first benefit is a greater trust in God. Bill Bright speaks of the joy that comes from such an assurance, the second benefit, by noting, "Eternal life begins for us the moment we accept Jesus Christ as our personal Savior. What a tremendous privilege to know that we can look forward to spending that eternity with Christ. In the last part of the passage [1 Jn 5:11-13], it says that we can know that we have eternal life. I don't have to just hope that God will accept me. I can know it!"¹¹ The trials of life can be faced with joy as the believer looks to Christ and remembers the eternal life that is to be spent with Him. The uncertainty of a mere flimsy hope for salvation could not instill such a confident joy. In the midst of trials or even the very common oscillations of mood, one may

⁸ These benefits are gleaned from Campus Crusade's Gospel tracts and Christian-development tools.

⁹ This means an "assurance of salvation" at that moment, but also a guarantee of persevering in Christ's grace.

¹⁰ Bright, "The Four Spiritual Laws" (Orlando: Campus Crusade for Christ Inc., 2000), 11.

¹¹ Bright, "Beginning Your New Life!" (San Bernardino: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1976), 5.

often feel as if God is far. However, certainty is not to be doubted because of one's feelings, hence the third benefit is a turning from experience to a confident trust in Christ: "Regardless of feelings, the sure promises of God provide confidence that Christ lives in you and that He will never leave you. This is the foundation for a growing relationship with Christ."¹² This firm "foundation on which one's Christian life can be built" is the fourth benefit.¹³ Without this foundation, Campus Crusade fears that a believer will never be able to grow in intimacy with Christ since the reality of the relationship itself could always be called into question. Every little sin could be a factor leading to doubting the relationship itself or fearing the loss of Jesus' love. Assurance of salvation allows the believer to always approach God with confidence no matter how distant God may seem.

Evangelicals and Catholics Together

Surely all Christians must deem the four fruits mentioned above as praiseworthy. Evangelicals and Catholics alike must see a confident and joyful trust in Christ as foundational. Campus Crusade implies that the foundation for this confidence in Christ comes only from the doctrine of assurance of salvation. Can Catholics who must reject an absolute assurance of salvation nevertheless share in a life of confident trust in their Savior? Following upon the affirmative answer given by the "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" (abbreviated "ECT"), the Christian attunement model will show how this is so. In regards to an assurance with respect to salvation,¹⁴ the ECT agreement puts it this way:

In this struggle [of sanctification] we are assured that Christ's grace will be sufficient for us, enabling us to persevere to the end. When we fail, we can still turn to God in humble repentance and confidently ask for, and receive, his forgiveness. We may therefore have *assured hope* for the eternal life promised to

¹² "Your Life in Christ," 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁴ The phrase "assurance with respect to salvation" is used advisedly throughout the essay as a neutral term denoting the issue of debate without already implying Campus Crusade's position by using "assurance of salvation."

us in Christ... While we dare not presume upon the grace of God, the promise of God in Christ is utterly reliable, and faith in that promise overcomes anxiety about our eternal future. We are bound by faith itself to have firm hope, to encourage one another in that hope, and in such hope we rejoice.¹⁵

Much of what ECT agreed upon echoes the lines of Bill Bright above. One can understand how he was able to sign the document. With the mutual acceptance of the phrase “assured hope,” Bright must have been comfortable because “assured” was used. This hearkens to his assurance of salvation. From the Catholic side of things, an “assured hope” is acceptable because “hope” is used. This ECT passage does not imply anything outside the traditional Catholic understanding of the theological virtue of hope. One could question whether an advance has truly been made: the notion of assured hope is just vague enough to achieve a superficial unity. Is the ECT just equivocating? Perhaps, yes and no. Yes, the ECT is using vague language that can be taken equivocally. But no, the ECT is not *just* equivocating. To have Evangelicals and Catholics come together and discuss their similarities and differences is a huge advance in itself. Furthermore, this is only the first document on salvation so of course it is going to be painted with broad strokes, such is the nature of the initial stages of continuing dialogue. It should be seen as a point of departure for subsequent dialogue, and in this it is quite a success. The document on salvation is only one of four ECT documents that have appeared since the first one in 1994.¹⁶ What follows seeks to contribute to continuing dialogue by proposing a more specific and detailed notion of assured hope using themes from Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics. My desire is that an assured hope based on Christian attunement will be acceptable to both Evangelicals and Catholics alike. In doing so, I wish to follow in the spirit of the ECT participants who throughout dialogue affirm their unity in the

¹⁵ Emphasis my own. *First Things* 79 (Jan 1998): 20-23.

¹⁶ The first was entitled, “The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium.” “The Gift of Salvation” (1997) was followed by “Your Word is Truth” (2002) and “The Communion of Saints” (2003).

Gospel, while at the same time, in “continuing discussions...seek no unity other than unity in the truth.”¹⁷

Hans Urs von Balthasar and his Theological Aesthetics

Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988), a priest and theologian from Switzerland, is one of the premier Roman Catholic thinkers in the Vatican II era. His influence on the Catholic Church can be inferred from the honors paid to him by popes. Pope Paul VI appointed him to the International Theological Commission in 1969. For his theological services to the Church, Pope John Paul II honored him with the Paul VI prize in 1984 and then named him a cardinal in 1988.¹⁸ Of the over one hundred books and hundreds of articles he has written, at the center stands his trilogy based on the transcendentals: seven volumes on Beauty, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*; five volumes on Goodness, *The Theo-drama*; and three volumes on Truth, *The Theo-Logic*.

Hans Urs von Balthasar is a good figure to put in the service of the dialogue between Catholics and Evangelicals. His theological works are saturated with Sacred Scripture and Scriptural themes. Although he does have a place for Biblical criticism, its role remains relatively restrained. While being steeped in Catholic tradition he also has new insights to offer Christendom. His new perspectives may provide a breath of fresh air for debated ecumenical issues that have become stale after years of each side saying the same thing. Although von Balthasar does not treat the issue of assurance with respect to salvation comprehensively, he does mention it explicitly at various points in elaborating his Christian attunement model. This essay considers these while also drawing out the implications of other elements of his model on an assured hope of salvation. Von Balthasar’s stance is helpful because on the one hand, he does

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Von Balthasar died shortly before the cardinal investiture ceremony.

not take a polemical stance by overly stressing that Catholics have no kind of assurance with respect to salvation, yet on the other hand, he remains faithful to Catholic tradition and the Council of Trent in rejecting an absolute assurance of salvation.

In the hope of restoring the beautiful (and hence the glory of God) to its proper place in theology, von Balthasar presents his theological aesthetics. At the center of his theological aesthetics is Jesus Christ, the Word-made-flesh. Jesus Christ, especially as the Crucified One, is the Beautiful. In the Cross the glory of God shines forth.¹⁹ How the cross reveals the glory of God is something developed throughout the seven volumes, but the reason can basically be grasped in a simple deduction: God is Love, and so the glorification of God is nothing other than the glorification of Love. Christ's death for sinners most makes manifest to the same sinners God's love for them. That the crucifixion is at the heart of beauty is something that humanity would not guess on its own: it belongs to a theological aesthetics not a philosophical aesthetics. A natural philosophical aesthetics would not put such a grotesque figure as Christ-crucified at the heart of its theory of beauty. For von Balthasar, the Cross marked the end of "all worldly aesthetics" but was "the decisive emergence of the divine aesthetic" (460).²⁰ Hence, more than applying our philosophical aesthetics to Revelation, von Balthasar wishes to allow Revelation to radically transform our aesthetical concepts. The true form of Christ can be "seen" only by faith. It is only faith that can discern the beautiful in Christ-crucified. Only faith can perceive the glory of Triune Love in the form of the Crucified One.

¹⁹ Von Balthasar sees himself following the Johannine perspective which sees a unity to the Paschal Mystery: the Son of Man lifted up on the Cross is already exalted in glory (cf Jn 3:14, 8:24), though this glory is no doubt completed in the Resurrection and Ascension. In regards to the Johannine unity of the Crucified and Risen One, von Balthasar refers to the Scriptural exegete Ignace de la Potterie (see his work *The Hour of Jesus: The Passion and the Resurrection of Jesus According to John*, trans. Gregory Murray, New York: Alba House, 1995).

²⁰ Unless otherwise stated, all quotations followed by a page number in parentheses are from von Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, vol. 1 of *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (Trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, Ed.s Fessio and Riches, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982).

Von Balthasar contends that in common everyday usage there is a tendency to reduce aesthetics to mere appearance, to be stuck on the surface. Something elicits a shiver down the spine and we call it “beautiful.” This is not the beauty that is glory. This is not the beauty that radiates from the depths. This is the mere *pretty*. Christ-crucified is not pretty, but He is beautiful. The glory of the Lord shining from Christ-crucified is the manifestation of Beauty Itself, and for the eyes of faith It elicits adoration. Von Balthasar observes the current tendency to reduce the beautiful to the pretty by lamenting, “we no longer dare to believe in beauty and we make of it a mere appearance in order the more easily to dispose of it;” and this reduction of beauty has tragic consequences: “We can be sure that whoever sneers at her name as if she were the ornament of a bourgeois past—whether he admits it or not—can no longer pray and soon will no longer be able to love” (18). With these striking words, revealing the acute nature of a theological aesthetics, I will begin my treatment of von Balthasar’s model of Christian attunement, which seeks attunement with nothing less than the beautiful in all its depths.

Christian Attunement

In the Christian attunement model, von Balthasar transforms the musical notion of attunement into a model for Christian theology. Hence some important terminology concerning attunement such as object/subject and objective/subjective can best be understood through an example in music. A violinist seeks attunement with the lead pitch. Considered from the outside, the violinist is the subject and the lead pitch is the object. From the violinist’s perspective, however, there is an objective and subjective element to attunement. The objective element is the sound of the lead pitch impressing itself upon the violinist, and the subjective element is the violinist reproducing that pitch from within his or her own sphere. The subjective is determined by the objective. It is the subjective that seeks consonance with the objective, not

vice-versa. Hence, when something is not quite right in the violinist's pitch, it is the violinist that must re-attune. Consequently, the subjective movement of attunement is inherently a surrendering of self, albeit a low level of surrender for the musician. Despite the violinist's own feelings of how things should be, the violinist must be disposed to the objective element and renounce what does not correspond. It is clear that there is nothing degrading about this self-surrender; it is an essential part of being a great violinist. The self is not destroyed, but transformed and reoriented to the object. Attunement demands an asceticism of sorts even in the musical realm: one must turn from self to seek attunement.

When von Balthasar takes up the attunement model in his theological aesthetics, he identifies the essential attitude of the subject being attuned, namely one of docile self-surrender, with the fundamental disposition of faith. Von Balthasar sees faith as a surrender of self. Faith begins to orient one's whole self to God in a disposition of pliancy in a process one gradually progresses in through love. Faith renounces one's own supposed "truth" when it contradicts God's Truth. It renounces one's own plans when not aligned to God's plans. It renounces one's own strength for God's power when God summons one beyond one's own strength. It renounces all self-determination in order to be supple clay in the hands of the Potter. Here, faith is not limited to the intellect, but is taken in the fullest sense of the word, in what could be called the "obedience of faith" (220).²¹ For von Balthasar, faith's self-surrender is the very same movement as attunement to God:

Faith in the full Christian sense can be nothing other than this: to make the whole man a space that responds to the divine content. Faith attunes man to this sound; it confers on man the ability to react precisely to this divine experiment, preparing him to be a violin that receives just this touch of the bow, to serve as material for just this house to be built, to provide the rhyme for just this verse being

²¹ Vatican II similarly described the full extent of the "obedience of faith" which "is to be given to God who reveals, an obedience by which man commits his whole self to God, offering the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals, and freely assenting to the truth revealed by Him" (*Dei Verbum* 5).

composed. This was the reaction already envisaged when the Covenant was made on Sinai: “Be holy, because I am holy.” (220)

Von Balthasar also adopts aesthetical concepts applied to beauty, namely, “form” and “splendor.” Substantial (literally “standing under”) form denotes a thing’s inner essence, rather than the mere silhouette. In living beings the substantial form signifies the internal source from which all activities ultimately spring; it is the animating life-principle of a being. In human beings, the substantial form is the “primal” unity that exists beyond the differentiation of the soul’s faculties into intellect, will, and emotion. In the Biblical sense, this unified substantial form is denoted by the term “heart.”²² Von Balthasar insists that for aesthetics not to become a mere superficial aestheticism, form must be “understood as being identical with Being, spirit, and freedom,” a “living, efficacious form” (22). “Splendor,” on the other hand, refers to the form’s manifestation of the depths of its being. Splendor is the radiance that breaks forth from within the form, as the being’s interiority is made manifest (20).

In his theological aesthetics, von Balthasar considers the archetypes of these concepts of beauty known only through Revelation. The concepts of “form” and “splendor” are transformed into “Christ-form” and “glory.”²³ The Christ-form, as Christ’s substantial form, denotes the primal²⁴ attitude or “posture” of Christ toward the Father and toward His neighbor. As will be developed later, a primary characteristic of the Christ-form is God’s power shining in weakness

²² *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) gives a good description of the Biblical notion of heart as “the dwelling-place where I am, where I live; according to the Semitic of Biblical expression, the heart is the place ‘to which I withdraw.’ The heart is our hidden center... the place of decision, deeper than our psychic drives” (par. 2563). This notion of heart especially runs strong in the Eastern Hesychast tradition. Kallistos Ware in his introduction to *The Art of Prayer* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997) describes the heart as “the primary organ of man’s being, whether physical or spiritual; it is the centre of life, the determining principle of all our activities and aspirations” (18).

²³ “Christ-form” and “glory” can be taken to be the archetypes of every created thing’s “form” and “splendor,” respectively, in the sense implied by Scripture: in Christ “all things were created” (Col 1:16) and hence bear his mark; and God’s “eternal power and deity has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (Rom 2:20) and hence reflect God’s glory.

²⁴ “Primal” is taken in the same sense above, namely, the unity beyond the differentiation of faculties into intellect, will, and emotion. A primal attitude endures through oscillations in psychological or emotional states.

as it did in Christ's death and resurrection. God's glory then, as the archetype of splendor, is made manifest from within the Christ-form. If the radiant splendor of the beautiful attracts, all the more so does God's glory breaking forth from the Christ-form draw those who behold it. Through faith, the believer today apprehends the Christ-form in Sacred Scripture, sacraments or other rituals, other Christians, all of humanity, creation, and life-events. Being attuned to Christ denotes not only an attunement to an external ethical standard, but attunement to the inner essence of Christ (the Christ-form), to his inner disposition or "pitch" of spirit. This means attunement to Christ's very heart. This attunement may begin with a merely external mimicking of Christ's actions, but as one comes to know the Person of Jesus, especially through the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit accomplishes this inner attunement.

When the subject's attunement with Christ is ultimately fulfilled in grace, the two directions of attunement come together. The objective element, the impressing of the Christ-form on the believer by God, unites with the subjective element, the Christ-form emerging from within the believer's own substantial form. The believer's substantial attunement with Christ evokes the consonance of a primal disposition. The Christ-form is no longer an alien disposition to the sanctified believer. The heart resonates with the Christ-form becoming manifest within. This is what is traditionally meant by a "taste for God."²⁵ This is obviously something that takes time for the Christian to grow into. At first this may occur only at distinct moments of special grace. For example, Christ's death and resurrection could radiate from within the Christian's own being in a victory over a struggle with sin, or Christ's own compassion could become the Christian's own in a genuine love for a difficult neighbor. Through growth in the imitation of discipleship, this attunement with Christ can become a habitual disposition. This is where the

²⁵ For instance, for St Thomas Aquinas the "taste for God" occurs on the level of substance, beyond differentiation of faculties into intellect, will, and emotion. See Jean-Pierre Torrell OP, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master* (Washington D.C.: CUA Press, 2003); especially the section on "The Experience of God," pages 94-8.

true quality of the self-surrender of faith really comes to the fore. Self-surrender is not degrading to the integrity of the human being, grinding humanity into the dust of nothingness so only God remains (226). Rather the Christian offers the depth of his or her being to be attuned with Christ by grace, so that human nature itself may manifest the Christ-form, making Christ present to the world through living like He did. In what follows, the nature of this subjective element of attunement will be illustrated through the Scriptural writings of Paul, while John will be used to illustrate the objective element.

Attunement's Scriptural Accompaniment

Von Balthasar gives a general characterization of Paul and John²⁶ which is more of an iconic sketch than an exact analytical account.²⁷ He characterizes Paul as one caught up in the movement of Christ's transforming grace, while he characterizes John as one who lovingly abides in Christ. For von Balthasar, Paul's "spiritual world is impetuous and agitated almost in a violent sense...Paul's fundamental experience is that of being snatched up by Christ's *dynamis* from one aeon and being transferred to the other. Paul overwhelms us because he has himself been overwhelmed. Damascus is a flash of lightning and remains such for the rest of the Apostle's life" (232). John, on the other hand, simply abides in love. John's spiritual world is shaped by "the calm of what 'abides'" (232). John "has been marked out ever since his first meeting with Jesus at the Jordan: "Come and See!" And they went along and saw where he was staying; and they stayed with him that day' (1:39)" (232-3). John's world is one of reposing in contemplation. The stillness and peace of eternity itself exudes from the act of beholding the Word-made-flesh.

26 Von Balthasar refers to the Scriptural texts traditionally attributed to the two apostles by their names. He is more interested in the unity of the respective Pauline and Johannine traditions than exploring historicity.

27 In other words, he gives the general tendency of the respective life and theology of each; counter-examples can of course be found for both.

Paul and John share in common the notion of faith as self-surrender, which is the docile disposition required of the subject being attuned. Of the two poles of Christian attunement, Paul characterizes the subjective, John the objective (242). The Christ-form emerges from Paul's life as he is caught up in the movement of grace. Paul's life becomes an expression of Christ's death and resurrection. Paul emphasizes the dynamism of attunement and orients the subject particularly to the Paschal Mystery. John, on the other hand, characterizes the objective element of Christian attunement. In contemplation the Christ-form is impressed on the believer. The attraction of the glory of the Lord draws the believer into the attunement. This, however, is inseparable from the indwelling of Christ. John stresses the allurements of attunement and orients the subject particularly to the personal love of God.

Dynamic Attunement

Paul has been swept up into the dynamic movement of grace. He is impelled forward toward the goal of his eternal salvation: the resurrection of his body in glory through sharing in Christ's own death and resurrection. In heaven, the epitome of the subjective element of attunement will be fulfilled, when the Christ-form (especially as God's power in weakness) shines from within Paul in all its glory.²⁸ However, already in the flight toward the goal, the flight itself is marked by the goal (228). The flight of the life of faith can be understood only with respect to its destination. In the movement of grace toward Christ, the movement *itself* is Christoformic. The experience of God's power in weakness, a death and resurrection in seminal form, is distinctively Christian, and so confirms that one is moving toward sharing in Christ's resurrection in glory. Hence, Paul wishes to boast only in his weakness (2 Cor 11:30, 12:9), so that the Christ-form can be made manifest. Examples of this can be seen in Paul's endurance of

²⁸ Since participating in the Divine Life of the Trinity through the power of Christ's death and resurrection is supernatural, even in heaven, the glorified Christian remains dependent on God's power being made manifest in creaturely weakness. Even the goodness of human nature is weak in comparison to this high calling.

persecutions, his overcoming sin, and his powerful preaching despite lack of rhetoric. God's power is shown in his weakness en route to sharing the full glory of Christ's resurrection in heaven.

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, 13:3-9, von Balthasar finds the classic text for this "new form of Christian certitude which can be called 'Christian experience'" (225). The larger context begins with chapter 10 and extends through chapter 13. The Corinthians question Paul about the authenticity of his faith. He is forced to provide a proof of Christ living within him. He responds by proving the subjective element of attunement: "The whole power of the proof lies...in the principle 'It is not I that live, but Christ lives in me'—in the objective, unsurpassable fact that the whole sphere of the ego has been overridden by the sphere of Christ" (227).²⁹ After Paul submits himself to the test of faith by giving instances of his weakness (throughout chapters 10-12), he challenges the Corinthians to submit themselves to the same test and see if they pass:

You desire proof that Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful in you. For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we are weak in him, but in dealing with you we shall live with him by the power of God. Examine yourselves, to see whether you are holding to your faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? (2 Cor 13:3-5)³⁰

The essence of the test is recognizing, within the movement of one's life, the Christ-form, as one who "was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God." Paul has been caught up in the movement of Christoformic grace and even on earth his life bears the mark of the final victory of Christ's death and resurrection. Paul's life has made manifest the nascent Christ-form, which

²⁹ This quotation refers to Gal. 2:20, so that "ego" here means the self-centeredness of sin that must be overridden for one to live according to faith in Christ.

³⁰ Unless otherwise stated, all Scriptural quotes are from the Revised Standard Version.

only makes sense when seen in reference to the actualization of it in heaven. Paul's examples from his life are signposts which indicate the goal to which he is moving.

Since the flight itself is marked by its destination, the Christoformic experience of sharing in Christ's death and resurrection seminally on earth provides the basis for an assured hope for the final resurrection in glory, but only as the Christian moves toward the goal. Von Balthasar insists that the goal of salvation "is grasped only *in flight* and not in itself, and, therefore, it cannot be translated into a static 'certainty of salvation'" (228). Assurance with respect to salvation can be grasped only dynamically as the believer moves toward the goal. In striving for the goal of salvation, the Christian can in fact be assured that God will provide the grace needed to attain salvation; God will not abandon one who seeks to take the necessary next step in the journey of salvation.³¹ This provides an assurance appropriate to the dynamism of attunement. Assurance can be grasped only with respect to the standard to which the believer is moving and not with respect to any individual basis. The Christian, like Paul, has been swept off his or her feet, as it were, by the dynamic movement of grace which propels one toward the goal of salvation. There is no longer any solid ground on which to stand in order to judge oneself. Having surrendered oneself has implications on the nature of hope: it cannot be static (228). The only way that one can catch one's footing at all is with reference to the goal to which one is moving. This is the consequence of a self-surrendering faith which entrusts itself to Christ in His weak death and resurrection in the power of God. Paul, too, surrendered the solid ground of any individual-based static assurance. This includes renouncing his achievements under the "Old

³¹ In the Lutheran Catholic Accord's 1999 "Joint Declaration on Justification" (www.vatican.va), the shared stance on the issue of assurance with respect to salvation is in accord with the position proposed here. While stressing the believer's weakness and the power of Christ's death and resurrection, the Lutherans and Catholics "confess together that the faithful can rely on the mercy and promises of God. In spite of their own weakness and the manifold threats to their faith, on the strength of Christ's death and resurrection they can build on the effective promise of God's grace in Word and Sacrament and so be sure of this grace" (par. 34). The Catholic participants go on to say that while "recognizing his own failures, however, the believer may yet be certain that God intends his salvation" (36).

Law” (cf Phi 3:5-9) and embracing the Christ-form of death and resurrection, so that in his words:

I may know [Christ] and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Phi 3:10-14)

Paul has not yet attained to the fullness of the glorious resurrection, so he is content in sharing in Christ’s weakness and suffering, confident that God’s power will rest upon him and he will attain the goal as he presses on. Note, this dynamic assurance with respect to salvation has the same orientation as the subject in attunement: the turning from one’s own standard to the object.³² The subject can only grasp attunement with respect to the standard to which he or she is moving and not on any individual basis. By turning from oneself toward the goal, Christ-crucified-and-risen, the Christian is already open to God’s power being made manifest in weakness, yet only in pressing on.³³

Keeping in mind the characteristic mark of the Christ-form, namely, the Paschal Mystery of God’s power in weakness, we can see how the Christian attunement model can assist the

³² The same orientation of attunement is proposed by the Lutheran Catholic Accord. The Lutheran participants describe assurance in this way: “believers should not look to themselves but look solely to Christ and trust only him. In trust in God’s promise they are assured of their salvation, but are never secure looking at themselves” (35). The Catholic participants, like the attunement model, stress the self-surrender of faith in entrusting oneself wholly to God: “Catholics can share the concern of the Reformers to ground faith in the objective reality of Christ’s promise, to look away from one’s own experience, and to trust in Christ’s forgiving word alone (cf. Mt 16:19; 18:18). With the Second Vatican Council, Catholics state: to have faith is to entrust oneself totally to God” (36).

³³ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of not being able to conclude that we are saved according to our feelings or works, but encourages the faithful to turn to the blessings of God in trust as they press on: “reflection on God’s blessings in our life and in the lives of the saints offers us a guarantee that grace is at work in us and spurs us on to an ever greater faith and an attitude of trustful poverty. A pleasing illustration of this attitude is found in the reply of St. Joan of Arc to a question posed as a trap by her ecclesiastical judges: ‘Asked if she knew that she was in God’s grace, she replied: “If I am not, may it please God to put me in it; if I am, may it please God to keep me there.”’” (2005) Joan’s attitude advocated here does not remain in the static moment put moves on in trust: “may it please God to put me in it” or “keep me there.”

believer even when help is needed the most.³⁴ An assured hope of salvation is needed most of all in trials of various sorts, whether in external events, spiritual desolation, or even in the struggle to overcome sin. Instead of despairing, the Christian must grasp the true Christ-form. According to Paul's formulation, it is precisely *weakness* that God transforms into power through Christ's death and resurrection. Christ's victory over sin is certainly the apex of power made perfect in weakness. The very weakness of the believer, whatever the cause, is an occasion for God's power to be made perfect through the Christ-form of death and resurrection. In fact, weakness may be what is needed to implant more deeply the self-surrendering disposition of faith, renouncing one's own strength (even as it fails) for the power of God. In this way, oscillations between consolation and desolation can serve to deepen attunement to a primal attitude that pervades even in times of distress. Persevering through these oscillations can form a habitual disposition that remains constant through emotional and psychological fluctuations. Through it all though, the believer must remain oriented toward the saving power of Christ's own death and resurrection. As we will see in the next section, the glory of the form of Christ-crucified-and-risen is "magnetic." It draws the believer forward toward the goal. Christ's death and resurrection is the only foundation for God's power being made perfect in the believer's weakness. And this alone is the basis for any assurance with respect to salvation, as Christ said to Paul in his weakness: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).

Love's Attunement

³⁴ Since this section concerns the attunement model specifically with regard to the issue of assurance with respect to salvation, there is a definite emphasis on weakness. For, it is usually the acute recognition of one's weakness that causes a wavering believer to question whether salvation will be attained. In treating Christian attunement more generally one would have to also provide an account of how natural strengths are taken up into attunement and transformed into Christ's form since grace builds on nature. Yet even in the believer's strength, he or she never gets beyond the fundamental state of dependence on God's power as one who has been (and is being) redeemed by the death and resurrection of Christ. The Paschal Mystery remains a characteristic mark of the Christian, no matter the state; God's power in weakness remains a characteristic mark of the Christ-form.

Paul has been taken hold of by Christ, but can only grasp this, in flight, as he moves toward the goal. John too has been taken hold of, but as one who reposes in contemplation, as he abides in the very same Eternal Love which he beholds. On the one hand, Paul emphasizes the subjective element of attunement: Christ's form of power in weakness emerges from Paul's life. On the other hand, John emphasizes the objective element of attunement: the Christ-form impresses itself on him as Christ abides within. Where Paul stresses movement to the goal, John stresses the goal itself. John makes evident that the goal is a Person. John seeks to be attuned to the very depths of Christ because attunement is nothing but personal union. Like Paul, John conceives of faith as a docile surrender. John stresses that the faith that surrenders is fulfilled in love (236). John beholds the Beloved, and the glory of the Beloved allures John to attuning union because the beautiful attracts.³⁵

Von Balthasar observes that the first letter of John makes manifest an "aesthetic mode of experience" (233). John begins the letter by confessing the Apostles' theological aesthetic experience of the Word-made-flesh: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life" (1 Jn 1:1). It should be clear that John's aesthetic experience is not reduced to mere appearance. John's reposing contemplation of glory goes as far as abiding even at the foot of the Cross. He has encountered the Lord of Glory.

Beholding Christ-crucified, the truly beautiful, impels John to be attuned with Christ. It is a fundamental principle of attunement that the objective element determines and supports the subjective element. In the example of the violinist, the sound of the lead pitch impresses itself upon the violinist (the objective element) and impels the docile violinist to match the pitch (the

³⁵ That the beautiful attracts is akin to the Aristotelian-Thomistic notion of the good being what all desire. One could just as easily say that the good attracts. For St Thomas, the good and the beautiful are the same in the object itself; the distinction is only in the way in which the subject apprehends it (*Summa Theologiae* I-II: 27, 1, ad 3).

subjective element). Furthermore, the more beautiful the object, the stronger the force of the objective element is. In tuning before the symphony, the lead pitch may exert some influence on the violinist, but this is miniscule compared to the magnetism of the whole orchestra in the midst of a symphony. In playing with the orchestra, the violinist may even forget him or herself, being so absorbed in the beauty of the object with which dynamic consonance is shared. The awed violinist is completely handed over to the object of attunement. Von Balthasar describes this principle of attunement in this way:

Before the beautiful—no, not really *before* but *within* the beautiful—the whole person quivers. He not only ‘finds’ the beautiful moving; rather, he experiences himself as being moved and possessed by it. The more total this experience is, the less does a person seek and enjoy only the delight that comes through the senses or even through any act of his own; the less also does he reflect on his own acts and states. Such a person has been taken up wholesale into the reality of the beautiful and is now fully subordinate to it, determined by it, animated by it. (247)

Beholding the beauty of the Lord (and hence the glory of Triune Love) transforms the believer into the same beauty. The “pull” of the Christ-form undergirds attunement, which is why prayerful contemplation is so essential to the believer’s life: the Christian must behold the beauty of the Lord while being open to being allured. This is nothing but grace, to which the believer only consents in the surrender of faith fulfilled in love. John’s reposing contemplation is nothing other than adoration. The truly beautiful elicits adoration because it overwhelms the beholder with its enticement. A purified and grace-filled *eros* is at work here. The faith which hands itself over to God expresses itself in adoration; it has an ecstatic quality (literally “standing outside oneself”). In the disposition of docile self-surrender, the believer turns from self and is absorbed in the glory of the Lord, not in the experience of an ephemeral moment but in the life-movement of Christian attunement.³⁶ The result is an “ecstasy of service,”³⁷ in attunement with

³⁶ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* expresses well this ecstatic disposition. Contrasting a superficial apprehension of the three transcendentals with the substantial response of contemplation, it speaks of those who

the “one who came to serve” (cf. Mk 10:45). The adoring Christian is animated by the glory of the Christ-form. One admires the pretty, but adores the glorious, and this with one’s whole life. Beholding the glorious Christ transforms the believer into the same Christ-form, as John says, “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (1 Jn 3:2-3).

Since the beautiful makes manifest the depths of being, the beautiful demands the depths of the beholder’s being. Adoring the glory of the Lord makes an all-encompassing inner demand on the one who beholds: the Christian, too, must become beautiful. A believer’s love for Christ is hence validated by the love and service of one’s neighbor since this is the beautiful way in which Christ Himself lived. John can conceive of no one who could be taken up into the beauty of Love and still hate his neighbor (cf 1 Jn 4:20). If the notion of love is too nebulous for some, John is concrete: he speaks of love’s commandments (1 Jn 5:3). Love has its own order, its own law. The commandments gives the broad outline of love; it points to the standard of attunement, but is not itself the fulfillment of attunement. John does not seek a mere external congruence with Christ. John seeks the deep concord of lovers: an interior harmony with Jesus (where the law is nevertheless all the more present implicitly). He seeks to share Christ’s primal attitude of obediential love toward the Father and loving service to His neighbor. He wants to be animated by Christ. This substantial attunement is one with the familiarity of personal union.

It is the personal nature of attuning union that makes von Balthasar especially skittish about any “assurance of salvation” that denotes static security. Static security implies a rigid, hardened relation not characteristic of a living relationship of love. He fears that a stingy desire for self-preservation can accompany a static security. Ungenerous self-preservation is directly

“exalt sensuality and comfort as the criteria of the true, the good, and the beautiful; whereas prayer, the ‘love of beauty’ (*philokalia*), is caught up in the glory of the living and true God” (2727).

³⁷ Cf. von Balthasar, *Prayer* trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 79.

opposed to the self-surrender of love. Static security is too turned-in-on-self. An authentic beholding of the beautiful tends in precisely the opposite direction. Von Balthasar holds that faith must maintain the disposition of self-sacrificing love:

At the foundation of the act of faith, as understood by John, there lies, even at the psychological level, the irresolvable paradox of knowing oneself (as love) in the movement towards the Beloved (a knowledge which includes the experience of God and of self) and, yet, of not being allowed to reflect upon oneself, for such a looking in the mirror of the self would incur the loss of love. (237-8)³⁸

It is only in the movement of entrusting oneself wholly to God that any kind of assurance with respect to salvation can be had. One is to have full assurance of God's love, faithfulness, mercy, and saving power. These are all assurances appropriate to a personal relationship; they are all instances of trusting in a Person. The dynamic attunement of the believer is initiated and upheld by the personal God of Love. So, for the one who desires to abide in Christ, yet questions whether or not one really does abide in Him, John refers to the Object of attunement: "By this we shall know that we are of the truth, and reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything" (1 Jn 3:19-20). The foundation for an assured hope of salvation is God Himself, the Beautiful who draws the believer as he or she consents to being attuned. Lovers no longer need to think about themselves, for they each know that the other thinks of them.³⁹ This is enough. The lover's task is only to adore the Beloved in a life of loving service. The Greater Beloved, with whom the Christian seeks personal union, first loved us (cf 4:10), and He can be trusted.

An Assured Hope of Salvation

³⁸ The parenthetical comments are von Balthasar's own.

³⁹ St Teresa of Avila provides an example of this in *The Interior Castle* (vol. 2 of her *Collected Works*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, Washington D.C.: ICS, 1980), in which she considers the words which Jesus speaks within the soul: "They were that she look after what is His and that He would look after what is hers" (438).

The Christian attunement model has provided an assurance with respect to salvation, but with three important qualifications. First, assurance can be grasped only in entrusting oneself to God in the self-surrender of the subject being attuned, not in certain knowledge: the Christian's relationship with God is grounded in the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. Second, assurance can be grasped only dynamically as one is "in flight" to the goal, not statically in a single instant: the Christian can be assured that God will provide the grace needed for one who seeks to take the necessary next step in the journey of salvation. Third, assurance can be grasped only in a manner appropriate to a personal relationship of love, not in a formula of an accomplished fact: the Christian can be assured of God's holy character, which includes aspects such as His covenantal faithfulness and love. These three qualifications amount to an assurance qualified by hope or in other words an assured hope of salvation. Now, it would certainly be a blatant caricature to say that Campus Crusade saw no need for faith since it had attained certain knowledge, became complacent in its static assurance, and sought its assurance in a formula. The opposite is true. Campus Crusade seeks to help people increase in faith as they continually grow in personal intimacy with God. To this end, however, Campus Crusade could perhaps benefit from a model of an assured hope of salvation that inherently stresses these same things, namely, self-surrendering faith, movement to the goal, and personal love. I propose that the Christian attunement model does stress these elements while still bearing the same four fruits which seem to be borne from Campus Crusade's assurance of salvation.

The first benefit, a greater trust in God and His promises, is fulfilled by the fundamental disposition inherent within attunement itself: the believer (the subject) orients him or herself to God (the object) in the docile self-surrender of faith. Entrusting oneself to the personal God, provides a full assurance of God's love and faithfulness. This is an assurance appropriate to a

living relationship of love rather than the security of a hardened petrification. Campus Crusade does in fact do a great job of stressing the relational, offering others the opportunity to have a “personal relationship with God.” Furthermore, their doctrine of assurance of salvation usually tends toward the personal by providing the framework in which a personal trust in God is elicited. Yet one could conceivably get “stuck” on the assured fact of salvation and never attain a personal trust in God. The Christian attunement model offers the benefit of a personal trust in God while ensuring that the source of assurance is God Himself and not the *doctrine* of “Assurance of Salvation.”

The second benefit, the joy of eternal life with Jesus, is attained by the attunement model dynamically. As the Christian moves toward the goal of salvation, the movement itself is Christoformic, and hence one can have a foretaste of the goal even as one moves toward the goal. In moving forward in weakness, the Christian can identify with Christ’s own weakness (like Paul) and confidently trust that he or she will also share in the power of Christ’s resurrection. Attunement orients the believer to Christ, especially in His salvific death and resurrection, as he or she is impelled forward in the magnetism of the Lord’s glory. Practically-speaking, more times than not, Campus Crusade’s doctrine of assurance of salvation serves as a developmental tool. Usually, new believers accept the doctrine and gradually learn how to turn from themselves and their own experience to a confident trust in Christ that presses on toward the goal of salvation. It is like learning to ride a bike with training wheels. Until enough forward momentum is gained (the turning from self to God), the training wheels (the doctrine of assurance) provide a sense of security. When enough forward momentum is achieved (the believer has turned to God in trust), the training wheels can be discarded. The problem is, if you keep the training wheels on too long, sometimes the forward momentum is never discovered.

With no impetus to move forward one may remain content with a static security. Campus Crusade certainly urges the believer to move on toward the goal of salvation, but within their model of assurance, there is no intrinsic impetus. With the dynamism of Christian attunement, even in the believer's weakness, the victory of Christ's resurrection impels one forward in the assured hope of God's power being made manifest, both now in the given instance of weakness and ultimately in the final goal of salvation.

The third benefit, confidence even when feelings and experience may give no basis for it, is related to the first two benefits. In trials, the Christian is to trust in God's love and the power of Christ's Paschal Mystery. Moreover, the attunement model takes into account the oscillations between consolation and desolation as part of establishing substantial attunement. A believer struggling with spiritual desolation should not take this as a sign of losing the gift of salvation, but as the opportunity to have Christ formed ever more deeply in one's humanity. The weakness of the Christian is an opportunity for Christ's power to be made perfect.

And the fourth benefit, the firm foundation on which to build one's whole life, is accomplished by the objective element of attunement. Campus Crusade sees assurance of salvation as foundational because it guarantees that Christ has not withdrawn His love. Christian attunement, instead, directs the believer to behold Christ-crucified, the Lord of Glory, as the assurance of His unconditional love. The "pull" of the beauty of the Lord undergirds the whole attunement process in grace. The struggling Christian is to allow the objective element to have its way, to allow oneself to be enticed by Christ. Instead of thinking about an assurance of salvation, the believer should contemplate Christ, especially through the Scriptures. Ultimately, that Christ, out of love, died for one's sins and rose in the power of God is the foundation of

Christian life and is the sole basis for an assurance with respect to salvation; yet this can be grasped only dynamically and according to the ways of personal love.

Such is the nature of the assured hope which the Christian attunement model provides the believer. In this essay I have gleaned the benefits which the Evangelicals in Campus Crusade for Christ perceive in their notion of assurance of salvation. Following the ECT notion of an assured hope of salvation, I have proposed a Christian attunement model based on the theological aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar. I have traced the dynamism of the model in Paul and its relational character in John. I then considered how the Christian attunement model measures up to the perceived benefits of Campus Crusade for Christ's assurance. Paul's dynamic movement of sweeping grace gives the believer, who is in the Christoformic flight to the goal, confidence in attaining the glorious resurrection. John's abiding in the contemplation of Love gives the believer, who is being allured by the Lord of Glory, trust in attaining union with the Blessed Trinity forever. Whether or not the theological aesthetic of Love's dynamic attunement has provided an assured hope of salvation acceptable to Evangelicals, we can continue to cry out together: "God of hosts, bring us back; let your face shine on us and we shall be saved!" (Ps 80:3).⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Grail Psalter