

What We Believe: Knowing and Loving our Doctrines  
 Adult Sunday Studies 2023-24  
 26 | Assurance & Perseverance

### APPLYING OUR UNION WITH CHRIST: ASSURANCE AND PERSEVERANCE

*Calvin on Justification, Assurance and Sanctification:* "The grace of justification is not separated from regeneration [or, sanctification], although they are things distinct. But because it is very well known by experience that the traces of sin always remain in the righteous, their justification must be very different from reformation into newness of life (cf. Rom. 6.4). For God so begins this second point in his elect, and progresses in it gradually, and sometimes slowly, throughout life, that they are always liable to the judgment of death before his tribunal. But **he does not justify in part, but liberally**, so that they may appear in heaven as if endowed with the purity of Christ. No portion of righteousness sets our consciences at peace until it has been determined that we are pleasing to God, because **we are entirely righteous before him**. From this it follows that the doctrine of justification is perverted and utterly overthrown when doubt is thrust into men's minds, when the assurance of salvation is shaken and the free and fearless calling upon God suffers hindrance - nay, when peace and tranquility with spiritual joy are not established. . . . For **faith totters if it pays attention to works**, since no one, even of the most holy, will find there anything on which to rely." - *Institutes*, 3.XI.11

- Notice how the truths of justification - the basis for which we can stand before God - and assurance are so intimately connected

### ASSURANCE OF SALVATION - WCF 18

**Key Passages:** Heb. 6.13-20; 2Peter 1.3-11; 1John 1.5-2.6

**It's Possible!** "18.1. Although hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favor of God, and estate of salvation(a) (which hope of theirs shall perish(b)): yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, may, in this life, **be certainly assured that**

**they are in the state of grace,(c)** and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed.(d)” [(a) Mic 3:11; Deut 29:19; John 8:41; (b) Amos 9:10; Matt 7:22-23; (c) 1 John 5:13; 1 John 2:3; 1 John 3:14,18-19,21,24; (d) Rom 5:2,5]

- Just as there are false conversions, there are also those with deceived assurances. The question, of course, is how do we know if we’re deceived? There’s no magic bullet, you just pursue Christ humbly “in the right use of ordinary means” (see below).

**Infallible Basis - 18.2.** “This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope;(e) but an infallible assurance of faith **founded upon** the divine truth of the promises of salvation,(f) the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made,(g) the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God,(h) which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.(i)” [(e) Heb 6:11,19; (f) Heb 6:17-18; (g) 2 Pet 1:4-11; 1 John 2:3; 1 John 3:14; 2 Cor 1:12; (h) Rom 8:15-16; (i) Eph 1:13-14; Eph 4:30; 2 Cor 1:21-22]

- Founded upon:
  - Divine Truth
  - Inward evidence of the promises of salvation, which are repentance and sanctification
  - Testimony of the Spirit

**Not identical to faith, but available to all ordinarily - 18.3.** “This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties, before he be partaker of it:(k) yet, being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto.(l) And therefore it is the duty of everyone to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure,(m) **that thereby** his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance;(n) so far is it from inclining men to looseness.(o)” [(k) 1 John 5:13; (l) 1 Cor 2:12; 1 John 4:13; Heb 6:11-12; Eph 3:17-18; (m) 2 Pet 1:10; (n) Rom 5:1-2,5; Rom 14:17; Rom 15:13; Eph 1:3-4; Ps 4:6-7; Ps 119:32; (o) 1 John 2:1-2; Rom 6:1-2; Titus 2:11-12,14; 2 Cor 7:1; Rom 8:1,12; 1 John 3:2-3; Ps 130:4; 1 John 1:6-7]

**Notice the Fruits of Assurance** - as opposed to motivation for “looseness”, that is, antinomian (see below).

WCF 16, on Good Works, reads that good works can “strengthen believers’ assurance.” They are not the basis, but can strengthen it.

**Assurance shaken, but not lost - 18.4.** “True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as, by negligence in preserving of it, by falling into some special sin which woundeth the conscience and grieveth the Spirit; by some sudden or vehement temptation, by God's withdrawing the light of his countenance, and suffering even such as fear him to walk in darkness and to have no light:(p) yet are they never utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart, and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may, in due time, be revived;(q) and by the which, in the meantime, they are supported from utter despair.(r)” [(p) Ps 51:8,12,14; Eph 4:30-31; Ps 77:1-10; Ps 31:22; Matt 26:69-72; Luke 22:31-34; (q) 1 John 3:9; Luke 22:32; Ps 51:8,12; Ps 73:15; (r) Mic 7:7-9; Jer 32:40; Isa 54:7-14; 2 Cor 4:8-10]

### **PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS** (Over against the "Perfection of the Saints")

**Definition:** WCF 17.1: They, whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.(a) [(a) Phil 1:6; 2 Pet 1:10; Rom 8:28-30; John 10:28-29; 1 John 3:9; 1 John 5:18; 1 Pet 1:5,9]

**Basis:** WCF 17.2: This perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father;(b) upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ,(c) the abiding of the Spirit, and of the seed of God within them,(d) and the nature of the covenant of grace:(e) from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof.(f) [(b) Ps 89:3-4,28-33; 2 Tim 2:18-19; Jer 31:3; (c) Heb 10:10,14; Heb 13:20-21; Heb 9:12-15; Rom 8:33-39; John 17:11,24; Luke 22:32; Heb 7:25; (d) John 14:16-17; 1 John 2:27; 1 John 3:9; (e) Jer 32:40; Ps 89:34-37; Jer 31:31-34; (f) John 6:38-40; John 10:28; 2 Thess 3:3; 1 John 2:19]

**Depths through which we're carried:** WCF 17.3: Nevertheless, they may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into

grievous sins;(g) and, for a time, continue therein:(h) whereby they incur God's displeasure,(i) and grieve his Holy Spirit,(k) come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts,(l) have their hearts hardened,(m) and their consciences wounded;(n) hurt and scandalize others,(o) and bring temporal judgments upon themselves.(p) [(g) *Exod 32:21; Jonah 1:3,10; Ps 51:14; Matt 26:70,72,74; (h) 2 Sam 12:9,13; Gal 2:11-14; (i) Num 20:12; 2 Sam 11:27; Isa 64:7,9; (k) Eph 4:30; (l) Ps 51:8,10,12; Rev 2:4; Matt 26:75; (m) Isa 63:17; (n) Ps 32:3-4; Ps 51:8; (o) Gen 12:10-20; 2 Sam 12:14; Gal 2:13; (p) Ps 89:31-32; 1 Cor 11:32]*

**Notice also a section on Providence (WCF 5.5)** - "The most wise, righteous, and gracious God doth oftentimes leave, for a season, his own children to manifold temptations, and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and, to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for sundry other just and holy ends."

This should give us both assurance in the face of our own sins and struggles as well as the courage and hope to love other Christians who seem to be stumbling. The grace of God is so deep!

### **Excursus on Antinomianism vs. Union with Christ**

\*From Sinclair Ferguson's *The Whole Christ*

#### **1. Common Root of Legalism and Antinomianism - separating God from His Law or Christ from His Benefits**

1. Begun in the Garden, there was a "divorce between God's revealed will and his gracious, generous character. In Eve's case antinomianism was itself an expression of her legalism! Legalism is simply separating the law of God from the person of God [out of a] distorted view of God as the giver of his law. The 'lie' that we now believe is that 'to glorify God' is not, indeed cannot be, 'to enjoy him forever,' but to lose all joy."

1. "The more basic issue is: How do I think about God, and what instincts and dispositions and affections toward him does this evoke in me?"

2. It is “too possible to have an *evangelical head* and a *legalistic heart*. . . for one of the diseases the marrow [controversy] exposed was the subtle thought that my growth in holiness strengthens my **justification**. Confirm it? Yes. But strengthen it? Never! Does this sound slightly antinomian? Of course - *but only if one is listening with legalistic ears.*”

## 2. Union with Christ

1. The remedy for legalism is grace, but “it is not ‘grace’ as commodity, grace as substance (RC heresy). It is grace in Christ. For God’s grace to us *is* Christ. Yes, it is the atonement; but not atonement as theory, or as an abstract reality, something that has an identity of its own outside of and apart from the Lord Jesus. For Christ himself, clothed as he is in the gospel work, *is* the atonement - ‘He is the propitiation for our sins.’”
2. ‘You must first have Christ himself, before you can partake of those benefits by him.’ - “otherwise Christ himself ceases to be central and becomes a means to an end”
  1. “This is accompanied by an **increased stress on our experience of salvation** rather than on the grace, majesty, and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.”
3. “Boston felt the **sheer graciousness of the Christ** of the gospel was being stifled by a Calvinism that had developed a preaching logic of its own and had become insensitive to the style and atmosphere of the New Testament. In his view God’s particular election had too easily been distorted into preaching a doctrine of conditional and conditioned grace. That often goes hand in glove with a form of gospel preaching that is in danger of severing the elements in the *ordo salutis* from ‘Jesus Christ and him crucified’ - that is from Christ *himself*.”

## 3. Assurance of Salvation

1. “**Direct**” or “**Reflex**” act of faith
  1. Direct act of faith is justifying faith, which involves some certainty - “accepting, receiving and resting” on Christ himself - “Christ is able to save”
  2. Reflex act is assurance of salvation, where the *direct object is the believer, not Christ* - “I am someone who has been saved through faith in Christ”

1. This is the evidence of our justification, by which we know we are justified, NOT the grounds by which we are justified
  1. Ground for believing vs. ground for believing *that* you have believed
  2. Assurance is "Self-awareness that one has this confidence and is among those when he saves"
  3. "the act of faith contains within it the seed of assurance" but is not identical
2. **Enemies of Assurance:**
  1. Tendency to forget salvation is all grace
  2. Wrong notion of the Father, who sent the Son in love
  3. Forget that Justification is both final and complete - eschaton come early
  4. Confusing the foundation of salvation with the means by which assurance is confirmed and developed - also cannot have self-examination of your own faith apart from the exercise of the faith - **"there is no assurance derived simply by examining our sanctification"** (214)
3. Growing in assurance, through obedience, entails confirming our salvation to ourselves
  1. **But when you doubt your assurance, do not force obedience in order to get assurance**
    1. **False assurance** - don't want to give false means or evidences of assurance - Boston "stressed the importance of *believing giving rise to obedience, not obedience giving rise to assurance irrespective of believing*. Such faith cannot be forced into us by our efforts to be obedient; it arises only from larger and clearer views of Christ. Herein lies the paradox: we want to talk and think about how to get better evidences: Boston is concerned that we **get a better grip of Christ**. Then the evidences will grow like fruit." - 204