

ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

“But, although it is necessary to believe that sins neither are remitted, nor ever were remitted save gratuitously by the mercy of God for Christ's sake; yet is it not to be said, that sins are forgiven, or have been forgiven, to any one who boasts of his confidence and certainty of the remission of his sins, and rests on that alone; seeing that it may exist, yea does in our day exist, amongst heretics and schismatics; and with great vehemence is this vain confidence, and one alien from all godliness, preached up in opposition to the Catholic Church. But neither is this to be asserted, -that they who are truly justified must needs, without any doubting whatever, settle within themselves that they are justified, and that no one is absolved from sins and justified, but he that believes for certain that he is absolved and justified; and that absolution and justification are effected by this faith alone: as though whoso has not this belief, doubts of the promises of God, and of the efficacy of the death and resurrection of Christ. For even as no pious person ought to doubt of the mercy of God, of the merit of Christ, and of the virtue and efficacy of the sacraments, even so each one, when he regards himself, and his own weakness and indisposition, may have fear and apprehension touching his own grace; *seeing that no one can know with a certainty of faith, which cannot be subject to error, that he has obtained the grace of God.*” (**Council of Trent, sixth session, §9, “Against the Vain Confidence of Heretics”**)

“The principle heresy of Protestants is that saints may obtain to a certain assurance of their gracious and pardoned state before God.” (**Cardinal Robert Bellarmine, 1542-1621**)

I. 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 (which hope of theirs shall perish): yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love Him in sincerity, endeavouring to walk in all good conscience before Him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed.

II. This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God, which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.

III. This infallible assurance does 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: 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. And therefore it is the duty of every one to give all diligence to make his calling and

election sure, 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; so far is it from inclining men to looseness.

IV. 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 wounds the conscience and grieves 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: yet are they never so 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; and by the which, in the mean time, they are supported from utter despair.”

--**Westminster Confession of Faith**, Chapter 18, “On Assurance of Grace & Salvation”

Article 12: The Assurance of Election

Assurance of this their eternal and unchangeable election to salvation is given to the chosen in due time, though by various stages and in differing measure. Such assurance comes not by inquisitive searching into the hidden and deep things of God, but by noticing within themselves, with spiritual joy and holy delight, the unmistakable fruits of election pointed out in God's Word-- such as a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for their sins, a hunger and thirst for righteousness, and so on.

Article 13: The Fruit of This Assurance

In their awareness and assurance of this election God's children daily find greater cause to humble themselves before God, to adore the fathomless depth of his mercies, to cleanse themselves, and to give fervent love in return to him who first so greatly loved them. This is far from saying that this teaching concerning election, and reflection upon it, make God's children lax in observing his commandments or carnally self-assured. By God's just judgment this does usually happen to those who casually take for granted the grace of election or engage in idle and brazen talk about it but are unwilling to walk in the ways of the chosen.

-- **The Canons of Dordt (1618-19)**

“No such signs are to be expected, that shall be sufficient to enable those saints certainly to discern their own good estate who are very low in grace, or are such as have much departed from God and are fallen into a dead, carnal, and unchristian frame. It is not agreeable to God’s design that such should know their good estate: nor is it desirable that they should, but, on the contrary, every way best that they should not; and we have reason to bless God, that He made no provision that such should certainly know the state that they are in, any other way than by first coming out of the ill frame and way they are in.” (**Jonathan Edwards**, *Religious Affections*, p. 121)

“It is not God’s design that men should obtain assurance in any other way than by mortifying corruption, and increasing in grace, and obtaining the lively exercises of it. And although self-examination be a duty of great use and importance, and by no means to be neglected, yet it is not the principal means by which the saints do get satisfaction of their good estate. Assurance is not to be obtained so much by *self-examination* as by *action*. The Apostle Paul sought assurance chiefly this way, even by ‘forgetting the things that were behind, and reaching forth unto those things that were before, pressing towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus; if by any means he might attain unto the resurrection of the dead.’ And it was by this means chiefly that he obtained assurance: I Cor. 9:26, ‘I therefore so run, not as uncertainly.’ He obtained assurance of winning the prize, more by running than by considering. The swiftness of his pace did more towards his assurance of a conquest than the strictness of his examination.” (**Jonathan Edwards**, *Religious Affections*, p. 123)

"When we speak of the grounds of assurance, we are thinking of the ways in which a believer comes to entertain this assurance, *not* of the grounds on which his salvation rests. The grounds of salvation are as secure for the person who does not have full assurance as for the person who has." (**John Murray**, "The Assurance of Faith," in *Collected Writings of John Murray, Volume 2: Systematic Theology*, p. 270).

"...that an infallible assurance is not an invariable accompaniment of true faith, is not to be confused with any lack of certitude respecting the object of faith. Every believer is assured of God's reality and the truth of the gospel. These are the certainties which constitute the ground of faith itself, and it does not exist except as it entertains the assurance of these certitudes. Faith is not compatible with uncertainty as to its object, though it may consist with uncertainty as to the possession of the salvation which is the result of faith." (**John Murray**, "The Assurance of Faith," pp. 266-67)

“The jewel of assurance is best kept in the cabinet of an humble heart.” (**Thomas Watson**, *A Body of Practical Divinity*)

“But does this [Calvinist view] really help? The fact is that no one can know for certain who are the true disciples and the false disciples. If a person is in the former group [Calvinist], he has still to heed the warning: only by so doing can he show that he is one of the elect. In other words, the Calvinist ‘believer’ cannot fall away from ‘true’ faith, but he can ‘fall away’ from what proves in the end to be only seeming faith. The possibility of falling away remains. But in neither case does the person know for certain whether he is a true or a seeming disciple. All that he knows is that Christ alone can save and that he must trust in Christ, and that he sees signs in his life which may give him some assurance that he is a true disciple. But these signs may be misleading. It comes down to a question of assurance. Whoever said, ‘The Calvinist knows that he cannot fall from salvation but does not know whether he has got it,’ had it summed up nicely. But this can be counterfeit and misleading. The non-Calvinist knows that he has salvation—because he trusts in the promises of God—but is aware that, left to himself, he could lose it. So he holds to Christ. It seems to me the practical effect is the same...It emerges that in practice the Calvinist believer is in no better position than the Calvinist.” (**I. Howard Marshall**, “The Problem of Apostasy,” p. 73, 79)

“On the other hand, this doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, if rightly understood, should cause genuine worry, and even fear, in the hearts of any who are ‘backsliding’ or straying away from Christ. Such persons must clearly be warned that only those who persevere to the end have been truly born again. If they fall away from their profession of faith in Christ and life of obedience to him, they may not really be saved—in fact, the *evidence* that they are giving is that they are not saved, and they never really were saved. Once they stop trusting in Christ and obeying him (I am speaking in terms of outward evidence) they have no genuine assurance of salvation, and they should consider themselves unsaved, and turn to Christ in repentance and ask him for forgiveness of their sins. At this point, in terms of pastoral care with those who have strayed away from their Christian profession, we should realize that *Calvinists and Arminians* (those who believe in the perseverance of the saints and those who think that Christians can lose their salvation) *will both counsel a ‘backslider’ in the same way*. According to the Arminian this person was a Christian at one time but is no longer a Christian. According to the Calvinist, such a person never really was a Christian in the first place and is not one now. But in both cases the biblical counsel given would be the same: ‘You do not appear to be a Christian now—you must repent of your sins and trust in Christ for your salvation!’” Thought the Calvinist and Arminian would differ on their interpretation of the previous history, they would agree on what should be done in the present.” (**Wayne Grudem**, *Systematic Theology*, p. 806)

“A Christian without assurance is seldom concerned about good works. Rather, his or her spiritual energy is consumed by wondering if he or she is saved. J.C. Ryle states in his classic work *Holiness*: ‘A believer who lacks an assured hope will spend much of his time in inward searchings of heart about his own state. Like a nervous, hypochondriacal person, he will be full of his own ailments, his own doubtings and questionings, his own conflicts and corruptions. In short, he will often find that he is so taken up with his eternal welfare that he has little leisure for other things and little time for the work of God.’” (**Joel Beeke**, “The Fullness of Grace,” p. 110)

DEFINITIONS

“Assurance of faith is the conviction that one has been redeemed by Christ and will enjoy everlasting salvation.” (**Joel Beeke**, “**The Fullness of Grace**,” p. 107)

“By ‘Christian assurance,’ I refer to a Christian believer’s confidence that he or she is already in a right standing with God, and that this will issue in ultimate salvation.” (**D.A. Carson**, “**Reflections on Assurance**,” p. 384)

“...the undoubted certainty that a person belongs to Christ, possesses his saving grace, and will ultimately enjoy everlasting salvation.” (**Joel Beeke**, *Quest For Full Assurance*, p. 5)

“Assurance of salvation is a God-given awareness that He has accepted the death of Christ on your behalf and forgiven you of your sins. It involves confidence that God loves you, that He has chosen you, and that you will go to heaven. Assurance includes a sense of freedom from the guilt of sin, relief from the fear of judgment, and joy in your relationship with God as your Father.” (**Donald Whitney**, *How Can I Be Sure I’m A Christian?*, p. 12)

“Thus, they say that even though according to our present state of righteousness we can judge concerning our possession of the grace of God, the knowledge of final perseverance remains in suspense. A fine confidence of salvation is left to us, if by moral conjecture we judge that at the present moment we are in grace, but we know not what will become of us tomorrow!” (**John Calvin**, 3.2.40)

JOHN CALVIN ON FAITH & ASSURANCE

“Therefore our mind must be otherwise illumined and our heart strengthened, that the Word of God may obtain full faith among us. Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.” (**John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 3.2.7**)

“...faith is a knowledge of the divine benevolence toward us and a sure persuasion of its truth.” (**John Calvin, 3.2.12**)

“Also, there are very many who so conceive of God’s mercy that they receive almost no consolation from it. They are constrained with miserable anxiety at the same time as they are in doubt whether he will be merciful to them because they confine that very kindness of which they seem utterly persuaded within too narrow limits. For among themselves they ponder that it is indeed great and abundant, shed upon many, available and ready for all; but that it is uncertain whether it will even come to them, or rather, whether they will come to it. This reasoning, when it stops in mid-course, is only half. Therefore, it does not so much strengthen the spirit in secure tranquility as trouble it with uneasy doubting. But there is a far different feeling of full assurance that in the Scriptures is always attributed to faith...there is no right faith except when we dare with tranquil hearts to stand in God’s sight. This boldness arises only out of a sure confidence in divine benevolence and salvation. This is so true that the word ‘faith’ is very often used for confidence. Here, indeed, is the chief hinge on which faith turns: that we do not regard the promises of mercy that God offers as true only outside ourselves, but not at all in us; rather that we make them ours by inwardly embracing them.” (**John Calvin, 3.2.15-16**)

“Briefly, he alone is truly a believer who, convinced by a firm conviction that God is a kindly and well-disposed Father toward him, promises himself all things on the basis of his generosity; who, relying upon the promises of divine benevolence toward him, lays hold on an undoubted expectation of salvation. As the apostle points out in these words: ‘If we hold our confidence and glorying in our hope, firm even to the end.’ [Heb. 3:7]. Thus, he considers that no one hopes well in the Lord except him who confidently glories in the inheritance of the Heavenly Kingdom. No man is a believer, I say, except him who, leaning upon the assurance of his salvation, confidently triumphs over the devil and death...And everywhere he so teaches as to intimate that we cannot otherwise well comprehend the goodness of God unless we gather from it the fruit of great assurance.” (**John Calvin, 3.2.16**)

“Still, someone will say: ‘Believers experience something far different: In recognizing the grace of God toward themselves they are not only tried by disquiet, which often comes upon them, but they are repeatedly shaken by gravest terrors. For so violent are the temptations that trouble their minds as not to seem quite compatible with that certainty of faith.’ Accordingly, we shall have to solve this difficulty if we wish the above-stated doctrine to stand. Surely, while we teach that faith ought to be certain and

assured, we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt, or any assurance that is not assailed by some anxiety. On the other hand, we say that believers are in perpetual conflict with their own unbelief. Far, indeed, are we from putting their consciences in any peaceful repose, undisturbed by any tumult at all. Yet, once again, we deny that, in whatever way they are afflicted, they fall away and depart from the certain assurance received from God's mercy." (**John Calvin, 3.2.17**)

"To sum up: When first even the least drop of faith is instilled in our minds, we begin to contemplate God's face, peaceful and calm and gracious toward us." (**John Calvin, 3.2.19**)

"...thence unbelief obtains weapons and devices to overthrow faith. Yet these are always directed to this objective: that, thinking God to be against us and hostile to us, we should not hope for any help from him, and should fear him as if he were our deadly enemy...And when any sort of temptation assails us—suggesting that God is our enemy because he is unfavorable toward us—faith, on the other hand, replies that while he afflicts us he is also merciful because his chastisement arises out of love rather than wrath...Thus the godly mind, however strange the ways in which it is vexed and troubled, finally surmounts all difficulties, and never allows itself to be deprived of assurance of divine mercy." (**John Calvin, 3.2.20-21**)

"We seek a faith that distinguishes the children of God from the wicked, and believers from unbelievers. If someone believes that God both justly commands all that he commands and truly threatens, shall he therefore be called a believer? By no means! Therefore, there can be no firm condition of faith unless it rests upon God's mercy." (**John Calvin, 3.2.30**)

"Indeed, if we should have to judge from our works how the Lord feels toward us, for my part, I grant that we can in no way attain it by conjecture. But since faith ought to correspond to a simple and free promise, no place for doubting is left. For with what sort of confidence will we be armed, I pray, if we reason that God is favorable to us provided our purity of life so merit it?" (**John Calvin, 3.2.38**)

SCRIPTURE

Colossians 2:2 / I Thessalonians 1:5 / Hebrews 6:11, 10:22 / II Corinthians 13:5 / Romans 5:1-11 / Romans 8:28-39 / I John 2:3, 5-6, 23-25, 3:2-3, 14, 18-21, 4:13, 17, 5:11-13 / Ephesians 3:12 / II Peter 1:3-12 / I Peter 1:3-9 / John 6:37-40, 44-47, 54, 10:9, 25-30, 17:6-17 / Philippians 1:6 / II Timothy 1:12, 4:18 / I Thessalonians 5:23-24 / II Corinthians 1:20-22, 3:3, 5:5 / I Thessalonians 5:9 / I Corinthians 1:8-9 / Jude 24-25 / Ephesians 1:13-14, 4:30 / Mark 9:24

SELECTED WORKS

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