

CHAPTER 18

OF THE ASSURANCE OF GRACE AND SALVATION

[This chapter should be studied along with WCF 14:3; saving faith grows to assurance.]

The possibility of assurance

“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; which hope of theirs shall perish; 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 a state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God; which hope shall never make them ashamed.”

It is true that many hypocrites think they are saved and will go to heaven, but that they hope falsely (as those who worked miracles in Matt 7:21-23).

But it is also true that a real Christian can have a true assurance of his own salvation; and that assurance will not let him down (1 John 2:3; 3:14, 18-19, 21, 24; 5:13).

Note, however, that true Christians may have this assurance. Just because you may have doubts about your salvation does not mean you are unsaved. But certainly it is much better to know we are God’s children—this assurance is one of the foundations of a happy and successful Christian life.

The sources of assurance

“2. 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.”

The true assurance of salvation is not based on a mistake or a false hope, but on divine promises (Heb 6:11, 17-19). Some say Christians “need” religion to help them get along in life

or to have mental peace, but that the religion itself is untrue. The Bible and Christianity reject this idea. Our faith is real because its object—Jesus Christ and his promises—is real.

The primary agent in our assurance is the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. Evidence of his inward graces in our lives gives us assurance (2 Pet 1:4-5, 10-11; and the verses in 1 John mentioned above).

Also the Holy Spirit gives us an inward assurance that we are indeed God’s children (Rom 8:15-16). His presence with us is the seal that we truly belong to God (Eph 1:13-14; 4:30).

The importance of assurance

“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: 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.”

It is possible to be saved and not have assurance. For example, the song of Heman the Ezrahite in Ps 88 shows the heart of one from whom God has withdrawn, apparently, the assurance of salvation; yet he cries out in faith to God. The Lord honors even faltering faith, as in Mark 9:24.

But it also is possible for the Christian to attain this assurance (Eph 3:17-19). And it is our duty to seek this assurance (2 Pet 1:10). We do not need a further supernatural revelation to give us this assurance; it comes through God’s sovereign pleasure and the use of the ordinary means of grace—obedience to God, the Bible, prayer, and the sacraments.

True Christian assurance does not lead to a loose and sinful life (Rom 6:1-2; 8:1; 1 John 3:2-3). Rather, it leads to greater holiness and many fruits of the Spirit:

- Peace
- Joy
- Love
- Thankfulness
- Strength
- Cheerfulness
- Obedience

These spiritual benefits are the fruits of assurance (Rom 5:1-2, 5; 14:17; 15:13).

Lapses of assurance

“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: 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, and by the which, in the mean time, they are supported from utter despair.”

As mentioned before, one can be a Christian and not have assurance of his salvation. But it is even possible to lose that assurance after the Christian has obtained it. Such was the experience of Asaph (Ps 73:1-16; 77:1-9).

At least four possible causes can lead to this loss of assurance:

- Some special sin
- Some bad temptation
- Neglecting the means of assurance
- God’s withdrawing assurance for his purposes (cf. WCF 5:5)

But whenever a true Christian loses his assurance of salvation, God keeps him from utter despair, as he kept Israel during their apostasy (Mic 7:7-9). Our Confession notes the mitigating circumstances of this period without assurance; the true Christian is “never utterly destitute” of the following:

- Seed of God
- Life of faith
- Love of Christ
- Love of the brethren
- Sincerity of heart
- Conscience of duty

It is out of these qualities, which are present always in the true Christian, that assurance of faith is rekindled.

The Christian has the means to regain his assurance. In the end, perhaps he will be stronger in his faith, since he has learned to trust more in God and less in himself.