

# —A Study of the Westminster Confession of Faith—

## *Good Works, Perseverance, and Assurance WCF 16-18*

### Introduction

- As the divines are working toward a full-orbed portrayal of the responsive and responsible side of the Christian life, they include a chapter on Good Works. Ferguson suggested several reasons for this:
  - 1. In the face of the threat of Catholicism, they have a great fear exalting good works to the position of either merit or supererogation.
  - 2. But they're also concerned with denying the importance of good works on the false reasoning that since we're justified by grace, there's no need for good works.
  - 3. They're concerned, within a broad spectrum of contexts, with the danger of distorting the idea of good works in such a way that we make something that isn't a good work (i.e. isn't commanded by God) binding on the life of the church or the conscience of the individual.
- Hence there are several layers of background to their writing this chapter. The role of good works in the gospel, the distortion of works in Roman theology, the lack of the importance of works in antinomianism, the imposition of things as "good works" and therefore binding on the conscience of believers and marring their Christian liberty.

### Of Good Works

#### I. A definition § 1

##### A. What is it that constitutes a good work?

1. It must be such as God has commanded in His holy Word, Mic 6.8; Rom 12.2; Heb 13.21. The law of God is the sole rule of man's obedience, and no action, however plausible in appearance, can be properly called good unless it is required by the Supreme Lawgiver, Dt 12.32.
2. Those actions which have no warrant from the Scriptures, but are devised by men, out of blind zeal, cannot be reckoned as good works, Mk 7.1-8. God will reject such things, saying, "Who has required this at your hands?" (Isa 1.11-12; Col 2.16-23).
3. Moreover, actions which God has not commanded cannot be transformed into good works by good intentions, 1Sam 13.9-13; 15.17-23. Men have thought they were doing God good service when they were committing atrocious crimes, Jn 16.2; Acts 26.9.

##### B. A work commanded by God is good in itself, but something more is required to make it good as performed by us. It must be performed:

1. From a right heart—one united with Christ by faith, Jn 15.5; Js 2.18, 22.
2. From a right motive—out of love for God and in obedience to God, Jn 14.15
  - a) **Hodge**, "The moral character of an act always is determined by the moral character of the principle or affection which prompts to it."
3. In a right manner—out of dependence upon the righteousness of Christ for acceptance, Heb 11.6
4. To a right end—for the glory of God, 1Cor 10.31

#### II. A Description of the Character and Value of Good Work § 2

##### A. This section describes the character of good works as "the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith," which express our thankfulness to God, bring strengthening and blessing to the Christian of a practical defense for the Gospel, and bring glory to God.

1. Our good works cannot be profitable to God since He is infinitely perfect and all-sufficient in Himself and no addition can be made to His essential glory or happiness, Job 22.2; 35.7.
2. Neither can our good works have any augmenting influence on our justification before God, which is perfect in Christ, Rom 3.20; nor can our good works be the ground of our title to heaven or eternal life, Rom 6.23.
3. Still, her performance of good works must be constantly inculcated and earnestly urged upon all Christians (Tit 3.8, 14; Heb 10.24); and they serve many valuable purposes:

- a) They are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith, Js 2.18. An inoperative faith is a dead faith, Js 2.2, 6.
- b) They are expressions of our gratitude to God, Ps 116.12-13; 1Pet 2.9
- c) They strengthen our assurance because they are confirmations to us as well as expressions to others that there is a consistency between what we profess (to be new creatures in Christ) and how we live, 1Jn 2.3-5; 2Pet 1.5-10. Since all inconsistency between profession and expression (thru good works) is bound to raise questions about the profession, the consistency of the profession and expression strengthens the assurance of the individual.
- d) They edify the brethren, 2Cor 9.2; Mt 5.16.
- e) They adorn our profession of the gospel, Tit 2.5, 9-12; 1Tim 6.1.
- f) They stop the mouths of adversaries, 1Pet 2.15; Dan 6.5
- g) They glorify God, 1Pet 2.12; Phil 1.11; Jn 15.8
- h) They are essentially requisite to an admission into heaven. Though they do not merit everlasting life, yet they are indispensably necessary in all who who are heirs of the grace of life, Rom 6.22; Heb 12.14.
  - (1) **Hodge**, “They are necessary to the attainment of salvation, not in any sense as a prerequisite to justification, nor in any stage of the believer’s progress meriting the divine favor, but as essential elements of that salvation, the consubstantial fruits and means of sanctification and glorification.”
  - (2) **Hodge**, “A saved soul is a holy soul, and a holy soul is one whose faculties are all engaged in works of loving obedience. Grace in the heart cannot exist without good works as their consequent.”

### III. The Source of our Good Works § 3

- A. In opposition to Pelagians and Arminians, the Confession states that our ability to go good works is not of ourselves, but wholly of the Spirit of Christ.
  - 1. We learned in Chapter 10 on Effectual Calling that, upon regeneration, a supernatural habit, or vital principle of grace, is implanted in the souls of all true believers, whereby they are disposed and enabled to perform acts of holy obedience (Ezk 36.26-27).
    - a) In respect to the implantation of this permanent holy principle into the soul by the Holy Spirit, the soul is passive (cf. Chp. 10); but the instant this new moral disposition or tendency is implanted, the moral character of its exercises is necessarily changed and the soul becomes active in good works, as before it had been active in evil ones. The first of these good works, as we saw in Chapters 14 & 15, is faith and repentance, both immediate and necessary fruits of sovereign monergistic regeneration.
    - b) And, as we saw in Chapter 13, sanctification is a work God’s free grace in which He continues graciously to sustain, nourish, and guide the exercise of this permanent habit of grace implanted into the soul at regeneration.
  - 2. Yet, notwithstanding this power or ability which we received, an actual influence of the Holy Spirit is required for the right performance of every single righteous act, Jn 15.5; 2Cor 3.5; Heb 13.20-21.
    - a) On Heb 13.20-21 Owen wrote, “The necessity, and the efficiency of actual grace unto every acceptable act of holy obedience, cannot be more directly expressed.”
    - b) Every holy act must be prompted and enabled by the Spirit; and yet we must understand that these are the saint’s own acts. Thus “while seeking the guidance and support of the Spirit of grace, the saint must actively cooperate with it, acting, like every free agent, under the influence of motives and a sense of personal responsibility” (**Hodge**).
- B. **Ferguson**, “The divines now emphasize that good works don’t simply spring from a regenerate nature but emerge only from the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. One of the functions of what they’re saying is they won’t let the believer isolate himself from an ongoing dependence on the

power of the Lord. The believer can't think, "I can do these works because I've been regenerated." He needs the continued work of the Holy Spirit."

1. But, note the balance: "yet are they not hereupon to grow negligent, as if they were not bound to perform any duty unless upon a special motion of the Spirit." This is a guard against the inner-light enthusiasts (like the Quakers) who think they need to wait for the Spirit to move them before they do anything.

C. The divines argue that the way the Spirit works is consistent with the way He speaks in the Scriptures, so that the access we have to the mind of the Spirit is not immediately by the promptings of the Spirit, but rather by reflecting on the teaching of Scripture. And as we seek to discharge the responsibilities given to us in Scripture we are in an ongoing way dependent on the Holy Spirit and diligent in stirring up the grace of God that is in us.

1. **Hodge**, "God's will is exhibited to us objectively in His written Word. The obligation to voluntary obedience binds our consciences. The Holy Spirit does not work independently of the Word, but through the Word; nor does He work irrespectively of our constitutional faculties of reason, conscience, and free will, but through them (Phil 2.13). It hence follows that we can never honor the Holy Spirit by waiting for His special motion, but that we always yield to and co-work with Him when we, while seeking His guidance and assistance, use all the means of grace, and all our own best energies, in being and doing all that the law of God requires. It is never the *waiters* for grace, but always the active *seekers* for grace and *doers* of His Word that God approves, Lk 11.9-13; Js 1.22-23."

IV. Anti-Catholic polemic, denying the possibility of works of supererogation § 4

A. The Roman Catholic church teaches that there are works above and beyond what God requires, which, if one does them, he performs more than God requires and consequently can have a superfluous degree of merit that may be transferred to others for their benefit.

1. First of all, it is wrong that our works are meritorious, Lk 17.10; Job 9.2.

2. Secondly, it is wrong to suppose that we can finish the work of God such that we can do "extra" works. Who has ever satisfied the plain demands of even the first commandment, Lk 10.27? Moreover, sin taints all we do, Js 3.2; 1Jn 1.8. Our Saviour taught us to pray daily for forgiveness because we daily sin.

3. **Hodge**, "Works of supererogation are in their own nature impossible under the law of God."

V. Another anti-Catholic polemic, denying that our good works are meritorious § 5

A. The Roman Catholic church teaches that the good works of saints are meritorious of eternal life. The divines confess that we cannot, by our best works, merit pardon of sin, or eternal life, at the hand of God. There are several reasons for this:

1. The very nature of the moral law is one of obligation and not supererogation. Being creatures under law, any obedience whatsoever we offer to God is but what is required. If the moral law is obligatory then it is *impossible* for any of our obedience to be supererogatory, Lk 17.10.

2. Our good works cannot profit God or satisfy for the debt of our former sins, Rom 3.20; Ps 16.2. Thus no action of ours can lay God under obligation to us. All that is possible to us is already a debt we owe to Him as our Creator and Preserver. We are already so far in debt to God that we could never bring God in debt to us.

3. All our good works proceed from the almighty agency of the Spirit of grace, Phil 2.13; and since they are not performed in our own strength, we can merit no reward by them.

4. Even our best works, as such, have such a taint of sin mixed with them, that rather than merit anything at the hands of God, they rather cannot even endure the severity of His judgment, Ps 143.2. Therefore the best of our works need to be atoned for by the blood, and presented through the mediation, of Christ, before they can find acceptance with the Father.

5. Our best works bear no proportion to the inestimable blessing of eternal life, 2Cor 4.17; 1Cor 4.7

VI. Despite the imperfection of our good works, they are yet accepted by God for Christ's sake § 6

- A. Since believers have their persons accepted by God in Christ (Eph 1.6), then their good works cannot but be accepted as well, for His sake, 1Pet 2.5; Ex 28.38; Gen 4.4; Heb 11.4. Our union with Christ secures the acceptance of our good works for His sake, Col 3.17; cp. 1Cor 10.31.
  - 1. Moreover, the good works we perform—by the Spirit’s prompting and agency—are the very works God intended for us to do in our very election in Christ, Eph 2.10. God cannot but accept those works, once done, which He prepared for us to do.
- B. It’s clear that our persons must be accepted before our works of obedience can be accepted (Gen 4.4; cp. Czech 7.2-6). Yet, the best of our good works are not accepted by God as they are ours, but only upon account of the merit and mediation of Christ. As our persons are accepted in the Beloved (Eph 1.6), so our works are only acceptable to God by Jesus Christ (1Pet 2.5).
- C. **Hodge**, “In the dispensation of the gospel, the gracious work of the believer and the gracious reward he receives from God are branches from the same gracious root. The same covenant of grace provides at once for the *infusion* of grace in the heart, the *exercise* of grace in the life, and the *reward* of the grace exercised. It is *all* of grace—a grace called a reward added to a grace called a work.”

#### VII. Works done by unbelievers § 6

- A. This section is also leveled against the Roman Catholic church, which teaches that the works of unbelievers can be so pure as to be free from sin and meritorious with God.
- B. The divines acknowledge the following regarding the works of unbelievers:
  - 1. They may be materially, externally good as regards the matter, and in that sense beneficial to themselves and others, 1Kgs 21.27, 29; 2Kgs 10.30-31; Phil 1.15-18.
  - 2. Yet, because they do not proceed from a right heart purified by faith in Christ (Heb 11.4, 6), nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word of God (1Cor 13.3; Isa 1.12), nor are done to a right end, for the glory of God (Mt 6.2, 5, 16), they are therefore sinful in God’s eyes and can neither please Him nor merit anything at His hands (Tit 1.15; Isa 1.10-17; Amos 5.21-22; Hos 1.4; Rom 9.16; Tit 3.5). See § 1.
  - 3. Thus while the works of unbelievers may be materially good, they are not formally good. They are destitute of everything that can render an action good and acceptable in the sight of God, Rom 8.8. In short, good works are to be considered not merely materially, but also in terms of motivation and God-centeredness.
    - a) Instead of pleasing God, their works are sinful and deserve His wrath and curse, Prov 15.8.
    - b) **Colquhoun**, “All unconverted persons are said in Scripture to be sinners, or workers of iniquity (Ps 53.4); and their works, however advantageous many of them may be to themselves or others, are all, notwithstanding, represented as *sins*, in the account of an infinitely holy God; for although many of them may be *materially* good, yet *all* of them are *formally* evil, and therefore they are an abomination to Him (Prov 15.8).”
    - c) **Hodge**, “They are at best, all of them, not only imperfect works, morally considered, but ungodly works religiously considered. They are therefore in the Scriptural sense *not* good works, nor can they satisfy the requirements of God, nor merit grace, nor make the soul fit for the reception of grace.”
- C. Yet, it must not be inferred that unbelievers may therefore live in the neglect of any duty which God has commanded of them. Though their prayers, for example, cannot be acceptable to God, yet their neglect of prayer would be more sinful and displeasing to Him. Their neglect of duty is always represented in Scripture as more criminal, Ps 10.4; Jer 10.25.
  - 1. **Hodge**, “But as long as men stay away from Christ, and refuse to submit to the righteousness of God, all their use of the means of grace and all their natural virtues are sins in God’s sight... Their sin lies not in their doing them, but in their personal attitude of rebellion, and in the absence of proper motives and objects.”

VIII. Let us remember, then, that the gospel is a doctrine according to godliness, that we are to live soberly, righteously, and holily in this world, that through faith we establish the law, and that all who name the name of Christ must depart from iniquity and be fruitful in good works.

## Introduction

- ° Given that the divines are dealing with the response and responsibility of the individual to the covenant of grace, the emphasis in this Chapter is on the responsibility of the Saints to persevere. But they also want to emphasize the certainty of that perseverance by grounding it in the works of God.

## Of Perseverance

- I. Perseverance is inseparable from the rest of the acts of redemption § 1
  - A. Since God has effectually called, regenerated, and sanctified His elect by His Spirit, they can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace. This is leveled against both Catholic and Arminian theology.
    - 1. It's implied by this that partial apostasy is possible (confirmed in § 3); but total and final apostasy is impossible. No man who has been once received into the divine favor can be ultimately deprived of salvation.
    - 2. Since salvation is not a work of man, but the work of God, and since God holds the saints in His hands, rather than the saints holding God in their hands, and since salvation is a work that God begins in order to end, rather than a work that man attempts, but may fall short, the elect shall certainly persevere to the end and be saved, Phil 1.6; 2Pet 1.10; Jn 10.28-29; 1Jn 3.9; 1Pet 1.5, 9.
  - B. **Ferguson**, “The regenerate never fall finally from the state of grace, but this isn't simply because the regenerate are regenerate. Regeneration alone would not be sufficient to guarantee the perseverance of the saints—but regeneration never exists in the abstract.”
  - C. Observations offered by **Shaw** on this Chapter:
    - 1. *The privilege of final perseverance is peculiar to true believers*
      - a) Many in the visible Church are nominal Christians who will either fall away or be finally cast off by Christ on the Day of Judgment. They are joined to the Church by an external profession, but they are not vitally united to the Head of the Church by the Spirit of grace. They assume the form of godliness but have nothing of its vital power. They bear the name of life, but are spiritually dead. Such nominal Christians may and will finally apostatize. They never knew the grace of God in truth and in a season of trial their real character will be exposed by open apostasy.
      - b) Thus those who totally and finally fall away were never rooted in Christ, 1Jn 2.19.
      - c) This enables us to explain several examples of apostasy mentioned in the Scripture in perfect consistency with the final perseverance of the saints. The stony ground hearers which fell away were specifically said to have no root in themselves, Mt 13.21. The apostates referenced in Heb 6.4-6 are expressly shown in v.9 not to have the things that accompany salvation, despite the high things ascribed to them. Those mentioned by Peter who had escaped the pollutions of the world and were again entangle in them and overcome evidently never experienced a true change of nature, 2Pet 2.20. And the fall of Hymeneus, Philetus, Demas, and Judas must therefore evidence that they were never truly united to Christ. Apostasy is possible in the Church of Christ, Heb 10.26-29—indeed, total and final apostasy can only happen within the Church of Christ—but it does not and cannot happen to true believers, Jn 10.28-29.
    - 2. *The perseverance of the saints is not owing to their inherent strength, or to any measure of grace they have already received, but solely to divine grace.*
      - a) In themselves, believers are weak and wholly insufficient to continue stedfast and secure in the faith. Satan, the world, and their own evil hearts are too great an enemy for them to withstand in their own strength. The failure of the saints in Scripture are meant, in part, to prove as much, 2Sam 11; 1Kgs 11; Mt 26. We learn that we are safest when we are most deeply sensible of our own weakness and most entirely dependent upon divine grace, Lk 22.32.

3. *The perseverance of the saints does not secure them from partial falls, but from total and final apostasy.*
  - a) The caution addressed to “him that thinks he stands, to take heed lest he fall” (1Cor 10.12), and the ardent prayers of the saints that God would cleanse them from secret faults and keep them back from presumptuous sins (Ps 19.13), manifest that though none of the saints can fall from a state of grace, yet they may fall into very great sins. Indeed, the scriptures furnish many examples of falls and backslidings in the most eminent saints (Job, Moses, David, Solomon, Peter). “Saints may fall from grace, but they can never fall out of grace.”
  - b) The fact that true saints may fall into grievous sins is by no means incompatible with their final perseverance. The Lord promises to heal their backslidings (Hos 14.4) and discipline them accordingly (Ps 89.30-32). But they will never finally fall away because the Lord remains faithful to His covenant with Christ (Ps 89.19-37).
4. *The perseverance of the saints secures the preservation of the principle of grace in their souls, though it may greatly decay as to its exercise.*
  - a) A saint may at times appear like a tree almost killed by a long and severe winter. He may seem to be without fruit, without verdure; even without life and in the grip of death. But, under all the witherings of the believer, God’s seed remains in him, 1Jn 3.9. It cannot die and it cannot but be revived in due time, Lk 22.32; Jn 21.17.

D. Observations offered by **Hodge** on this Chapter:

1. *It is absurd to say that this doctrine is inconsistent with man’s free will.*
  - a) As God does not make a man come to Christ, so He does not constrain Him to continue in Christ, irrespective of his will. God graciously causes a man to persevere in willing. That is the whole truth. God can and does control the free wills of His people without limiting their liberty, making them “willing in the day of His power,” (Ps 110.3), and “working in them both to will and do for His good pleasure,” (Phil 2.13).
2. *This doctrine is not liable to the charge of fostering a spirit of carnal security, on the ground that we if we are once in grace we cannot lose grace or be lost, do what we please.*
  - a) The true doctrine is *not* that salvation is certain if once we have believed, but that *perseverance in holiness* is certain if once we have believed.
  - b) A tendency to relax watchful effort to grow in grace because true Christians will not be allowed to fall away totally is a direct evidence that we are not in a gracious state.
  - c) This doctrine teaches, not that persistent effort on our part is not necessary in order to *secure* perseverance in grace to the end, but that in this effort we are *certain* of success; for it is God who works in us to that end, Phil 2.13.
3. *The perseverance of believers in grace is wrought by the Holy Spirit, not irrespective of, but through, the free will of the man himself.*
  - a) Therefore it is a duty as well as a grace.
  - b) The *grace* of it should be preached for the encouragement of the diligent. The *duty*, and absolute necessity of it to salvation, should be preached to quicken the slothful and to increase the sense of obligation felt by all.

II. The basis for this certainty is expounded as being in God § 2

- A. The perseverance of the saints is secured by the immutability of the decree of election. The purpose of God to bestow salvation and eternal life upon a certain number of the sons and daughters of Adam necessarily included a determination to do all that was requisite to make them fit for the enjoyment of it, and to preserve them amidst all snares and temptations and falls to the full possession of it. In other words, the decree of an end necessitates the decree of the means to get there. If our glorification is the end for which God appointed us, then our perseverance is the means by which God infallibly brings us to it.
- B. It is secured by the merit of Christ’s sufferings and death.

1. Christ purchased the church with His own blood (Acts 20.28) and all their iniquities were laid on Him (Isa 53.6). He sustained the full penalty for their sins (Jn 19.30) and obtained an eternal redemption (Heb 9.12). How, then, is it possible that any could fall away? The loss of even one would endanger all the rest and undermine the security of all. Christ precluded this with His own promise in Jn 6.37-39.
  - C. It is secured by the perpetuity and prevalence of Christ's intercession, Heb 7.25; Lk 22.32; Jn 17.11, 15; Jn 11.42.
  - D. It is secured by the constant indwelling of the Holy Spirit, Jn 14.16; 1Cor 6.19. The Holy Spirit seals us against the day of redemption and He is the earnest of our final inheritance, 2Cor 1.22; Eph 1.13-14.
  - E. It is secured by the unchangeable nature of the covenant of grace, Jer 32.40; Ps 89.29-37.
  - F. It is secured by the indissoluble union that subsists between Christ and believers, Jn 15.5; 1Cor 12.12; Jn 14.19-20.
  - G. The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints has often been represented as unfriendly to the interests of holiness; but this is a misrepresentation.
    1. The perseverance promised is a perseverance in holiness, 2Cor 5.14-15; 1Th 4.1, 10.
    2. The perseverance of the saints affords no encouragement to neglect the means which God has appointed for their perseverance, Mt 26.41; Phil 2.12; 2Pet 1.5-10.
  - H. Summing up this section, **Ferguson** says, "So, the certainty of perseverance is not simply from the fact that the Christian is regenerated, but from the context in which that regeneration takes place as the fruition of God's eternal purposes in the context of the indwelling work of Christ and the power of the power of the Holy Spirit that the perseverance is assured."
- III. Giving an account for the language of "neither totally nor finally fall away" in Section 1 § 3
- A. Saints may and do fall away, they may and do backslide, they may and do commit most grievous sins, and they may and do bring great dishonor to God, suspicion to their professions, discredit to the gospel, shame to the Saviour, grief to the Holy Spirit, and decay to their graces and comforts; but, for reasons already stated, they can never totally or finally fall away, Jer 32.40; Ps 89.29-37.
  - B. The disobedience of the saints is dealt with by God as by their Father in heaven, who disciplines them for their good, using correction for their instruction and His manifest displeasure as a means of bringing them to repentance and continuance in the faith, Ps 119.67, 71.
  - C. **Ferguson**, "There is an infallible perseverance on the part of the elect, yet they may fall for a time. Here the divines emphasize, based both on Scripture and their observations, that because believers remain sinners, it's possible for them to fall into grievous sins and experience in several dimensions the consequences of that—both in relationship to the smile of God and the work of the Holy Spirit and in relationship to their own conscious awareness of the pleasures and blessings of being a Christian.
- "And again one of the things that concerns them here is that at the point of its inception, it's not possible for the believer to look at the spiritual drift in his life and say "I'm only backsliding and I'll persevere." They're concerned with the fact that the backsliding and final apostasy are, in terms of observable powers, *identical*. And this is the reason why it's so important for the believer to be conscious of the way in which he can be exposed to temptation and to rest on the promises of God, on the work of Jesus Christ, on the abiding of the Holy Spirit.
- "So, we're again taken back to the fact that the water-tight system of Reformed theology, guaranteeing the final salvation of the elect and the perseverance of the saints can't be the resting place for the saint. Rather the place for him to rest is in this conscious way on the power and promises of God. That is simply to say that the perseverance of the saints is a perseverance *in* faith and never a perseverance *apart from* faith. Just as in the next Chapter, they will underline that the assurance that the believer enjoys of salvation is an assurance he can know only within the context of faith.
- "So, in response to "Yes, I understand all this about the perseverance of the saints and the assurance

that believers may have. But, how can I be assured, apart from faith that I'll persevere?" the answer is that you can't, because there is no perseverance apart from faith and there is no assurance apart from faith because they are the perseverance *of* faith and the assurance which *faith* enjoys. So, neither in their doctrine of perseverance nor in their doctrine of assurance are the divines minimizing the significance of the ongoing exercise of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Without that, neither assurance nor perseverance is possible. In Chapter 17, they state this in a straightforward way in connection with perseverance."

- D. So the point being made here is this: you can't be sure that you'll persevere because you believe that saints persevere. The only way you can be sure that you'll persevere is by being that saint who perseveres and by continuing in an ongoing way to exercise faith, Col 1.23; Heb 3.12-14. They want constantly to come back to the principle that there's nothing given to us in the theology of the gospel that says "and this will be true to you apart from faith." The certainty of our salvation comes in exactly the same channel as the salvation itself comes, namely *by faith*.

### Of Assurance

- I. Despite the false assurance of many, believers may be certainly assured of being in a state of grace § 1
- A. Given that true saving grace produces external fruits and works in the life that are seen and attested by men, it is possible for an unbeliever to mimic those external works and thereby not only deceive himself but others into thinking that he is in a state of grace when he is not.
1. We've already seen the such external works are only good and acceptable in the sight of God if they spring from the right internal work, namely regeneration and the agency of His Holy Spirit. But the hypocrite is void of the internal work and therefore is self-deceived, entertaining a false assurance, Mt 7.21-23.
- B. Moreover, given that the promises of the gospel are preached to all men and that salvation is offered freely to all men, it is possible for an unbeliever to snatch at those promises ignorantly or proudly in his own strength and upon his own righteousness, assured that they are fulfilled in him, when they actually require him to deny his own strength and righteousness in order to enjoy them. This also leads to a false assurance and profession of being a recipient of grace while being actually void of it.
- C. Yet, those who truly believe in Christ, love Him in sincerity, and endeavor to walk before Him holily, are able in this life to enjoy an infallible assurance that they are in a state of grace and may rejoice in the hope of the glory God, which will not make them ashamed (Rom 5.2, 5).
1. Thus assurance can be come by without any special or immediate revelation, in the due use of the ordinary means. This is confirmed by:
    - a) The exhortations in Scripture that Christians examine themselves and give diligence to attain this assurance, 2Cor 13.5; 2Pet 1.5-11; Heb 6.11.
    - b) The Scriptures exhibit many marks or characteristics of genuine believers, by which they may be certainly assured that they have believed in Christ, 1Jn 2.3, 5; 3.14, 19; 5.13.
    - c) We have many examples of the attainment of this assurance in the history of the personal experience of the saints, Ps 17.15; 23.6; 73.24; Job 19.25; Rom 8.37-39; 2Cor 5.1; 2Tim 1.12; 4.6-8; Phil 1.23.
  2. **Hodge** says we can distinguish true and false assurance by the following tests:
    - a) True assurance begets unfeigned humility whereas false assurance begets spiritual pride, 1Cor 15.10; Gal 6.14.
    - b) True assurance leads to increased diligence in the practice of holiness while false assurance leads to sloth and self-indulgence, Ps 51.12-13, 19.
    - c) True assurance leads to candid self-examination and to a desire to be searched and corrected by God while false assurance leads to a disposition to be satisfied with appearance and to avoid accurate investigation, Ps 139.23-24.
    - d) True assurance leads to constant aspirations after more intimacy with God, 1Jn 3.2-3.



## II. The nature of this assurance, experientially § 2

- A. It can be a total, infallible, real, confident assurance because the basis of it in the promise of God is an infallible basis. Thus it's not a probable assurance founded on a fallible hope, but a certain assurance founded on a certain promise that those who believe will be saved. If those who believe will be saved, it is possible for those who believe, resting on that promise, to enjoy an infallible assurance of faith that will not fail them.
- B. Further, besides being founded upon the divine truth of God's promises, it is founded upon the evidence of those graces unto which His promises are made as well as the testimony of the Spirit of adoption.
  1. In practical terms this means that the same saving faith (worked in us by God) which rests upon God's promise of salvation in Christ on the one hand, also works on the other hand in a manner consistent with those promises in the lifestyle of the believer. And since the faith which saves is the work of the Spirit of adoption in the soul, He also works in the heart of the believer consistent with that work in the soul to bear witness that we are children of God.
  2. It furthers our assurance that the Spirit who bears witness is also said to be the earnest of our inheritance in God, Eph 1.13-14; 4.30; 2Cor 1.21-22, so that this assurance of faith is not merely (in the Wesleyan sense) an assurance that I am *now* saved but an assurance that, being now saved, I will be *forever* saved. The divines want to emphasize that there is an infallibility about the promise of God and a security/stability in the assurance that the believer will enjoy.

## III. The lack of true assurance § 3

- A. It is possible to be a genuine believer and not a believer who enjoys the rich sense of the grace of salvation which assurance affords because assurance does not belong to the essence of faith.
  1. Whereas there is a measure of assurance which belongs to the essence of faith when one believes or is assured that Christ can and will save him if he trusts in Him, yet the further assurance that one is therefore saved and conscious of that salvation 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."
    - a) In other words, it's possible (for a variety of reasons) to be a genuine believer and not a believer who enjoys this rich sense of the grace of salvation; genuine faith in Christ may be present where a recognition of the consciousness of genuine faith in Christ may not be present.
    - b) **Hodge**, "It is evident that trust itself is something different from the certainty that we do trust, and that our trust is of the right kind."
    - c) In order for assurance to belong to the essence of faith (which by definition is founded on testimony), one would have to read in the Scriptures the declaration that he in particular is in a state of grace. Since this does not exist, a man may have true faith in Christ and yet lack the assurance of that he is thereby truly in Christ savingly.
      - (1) In Chapter 14 on Faith, we distinguished between the assurance which belongs to faith and the further assurance which follows upon faith as between the *assurance of faith* and the *assurance of sense*. Recall:
        - (2) The former is objective and the latter is subjective.
        - (3) The former has as its object the faithfulness of God in the gospel testimony, while the latter has as its object the existence of a gracious work in the soul.
        - (4) The former arises from a single view of what is contained in the Word of God, while the latter arises from a combined view of His Word outside of us and His work within us.
        - (5) The former is an assurance that God is presently giving Christ, with His salvation, to us in the free offer and promise of the gospel; the latter is an assurance that Christ and His salvation are already ours in real possession and enjoyment.
        - (6) The former is therefore inseparable from saving faith, while the latter is both separable and often actually separated from the exercise of true faith.

- B. The pastoral guidance for this situation follows next: “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.”
1. We can attain true assurance for ourselves in particular through the use of ordinary means, 1Cor 2.12; 1Jn 4.13; Heb 6.11; Eph 3.17-19.
  2. A genuine believer who doesn't enjoy the full assurance of faith and salvation can be brought to enjoy that full assurance of faith and salvation by employing the means of grace that God has given us. That means the preaching of the Word, the company of God's people, the fellowship of prayer, and baptism and the Lord's Supper are all different means by which the Lord brings true believers to an assured consciousness of the significance and implications of the real faith which they have in Jesus Christ.
- C. Since we can attain true assurance, it is our duty to strive to attain it, 2Pet 1.10. And the great benefit of attaining it is:
1. Our hearts will be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, which are all the proper fruits of this assurance, Rom 5.1-2, 5; 14.17; 15.13; Eph 1.3-4; Ps 4.6-7; 119.32.
  2. Thus assurance puts a melody into our obedience and provides an ease and zeal in the joy of serving the Lord because the psychology of obedience, rather than producing a spirit of license produces a spirit of zeal and cheerfulness.
- IV. The experience of true assurance § 4
- A. The infallibility of the assurance we enjoy isn't necessarily the same thing as our infallibly constant consciousness of it.
1. Since this assurance rests upon the consciousness of gracious experiences and the witness of the Holy Spirit, and since true Christians may fall away and backslide from the exercise of grace, it necessarily follows that this assurance is subject to being shaken, diminished, and intermitted in many ways.
    - a) It will suffer by the lack of perseverance in the exercise of grace.
    - b) It will suffer by a fall into sin which results in the withdrawal of the Spirit's comforts and testimonies, 1Th 5.19.
    - c) It will suffer by a sudden vehement temptation that draws the believer into sin.
    - d) It will suffer when the Lord, in discipline, withdraws the light of His countenance.
- B. But since the true believer can neither totally nor finally fall away, though he may lose his assurance he can never lose the principle of grace from which it springs. Therefore through the blessing of God and the diligent use of the appropriate means he may strengthen his assurance when it is weak and regain it when it is lost.
1. **Murray** once said that the self-consciousness of the believer at its lowest can never sink as low as the self-consciousness of the unbeliever at its highest. That's the point the divines make here: believers are ever supported from utter despair by the gospel of God's grace in Jesus.

#### Bibliography:

An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith, Robert Shaw  
 The Confession of Faith, A. A. Hodge  
 Westminster Standards class at WTS 2001, Sinclair Ferguson

#### Assignments:

\*Read Chapters 16-18 in Hodge

\*Read Chapters 16-18 in the WCF

\*Memory work: Good Works: Mic 6.8; Js 2.14-26; Eph 2.10; Jn 15.4-6; Phil 2.12-13; Eph 1.6; Pr 21.27.

Perseverance: Phil 1.6; Rom 8.30; Heb 7.25; Jn 6.38-40. Assurance: 1Jn 5.13; Rom 5.5; 1Cor 2.12; Rom 8.15-16; 1Jn 2.1-2; 2Pet 1.10; Lk 22.32.

—Next class: 8AM on **9 Apr** for a study of **WCF 19 & 20**, The Law of God & Christian Liberty