

Lesson 22: 2LCF Chapter 18: Of the Assurance of Grace and Salvation

Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

2 Peter 1:10-11

There are perhaps few doctrines of the Christian faith that are as experientially rich as the doctrine of the assurance of salvation. And yet, in like measure, there are few experiential aspects of the Christian faith that are more fragile and elusive than that very assurance.

As the framers of the Confession drafted this chapter, they largely relied upon wording of the Westminster Confession and Savoy Declaration. In fact, the 2LBC is virtually the same in content and structure as the Savoy Declaration of their congregational paedobaptist brethren. This is largely due to the fact that these previous confessions already contained a strong response to the Roman Catholic attack upon believers' assurance of salvation.

This attack can be clearly seen when one looks at the writing of Roman Catholic leaders and their councils. David Wissel illustrates with the following account:

- Cardinal Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621), a leader in the Catholic Counter-Reformation, wrote that “*the greatest of all Protestant heresies is assurance.*”
- The Council of Trent, which Bellarmine vigorously defended, states in Session 6, Canon 16: “If anyone saith, that he will for certain, of an absolute and infallible certainty, have that great gift of perseverance unto the end, unless he have learned this by special revelation; let him be anathema (accursed).”
- Summarizing Trent’s teaching in layman’s terms, one Catholic publication put it this way: “As sinners we are not *assured* of our salvation. But Christians, who faithfully use the Sacraments—channels of God’s saving grace—without giving up, can certainly *hope* for salvation.”²³¹

For centuries, Rome not only obscured the light of the gospel, but also denied any possibility of assurance to its adherents. Instead they fabricated an elaborate system of works, rituals, and indulgences that promised the *possibility* of salvation for only the most devoted adherents. This can be seen in the experience of Martin Luther, who sometimes spent up to six hours per day in confession of sin in an effort to gain assurance. Luther later wrote about this experience:

My conscience could never achieve certainty but was always in doubt and said: “You have not done this correctly. You were not contrite enough. You omitted this in your confession.” Therefore the longer I tried to heal my uncertain, weak, and troubled conscience with human traditions, the more uncertain, weak, and troubled I continually made it.²³²

²³¹ David Wissel, *How the Roman Catholic Doctrine of Assurance Distorts the Conscience*, 9Marks Blog: <https://www.9marks.org/article/how-the-roman-catholic-doctrine-of-assurance-distorts-the-conscience>

²³² Michael A. G. Haykin, “*Luther’s Timely Discovery of a Merciful God*,” The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary: https://equip.sbts.edu/publications/towers/luthers-timely-discovery-merciful-god/#_edn8

The actions of the Roman Catholic Church amounted to a full-scale attack on the biblical doctrine of assurance. For this reason, when the Reformed church began to articulate and publicly confess the true teaching of Scripture, they were careful to formulate a strong response to Rome. This chapter contains their response:

Waldron outlines this chapter as follows:

Outline:

- I. Assurance is possible (Paragraph 1)
 - A. The danger of this possibility
 - B. The fact of this possibility
- II. Assurance is infallible (Paragraph 2)
 - A. The fact of its infallibility
 1. Stated Negatively
 2. Stated Positively
 - B. The roots of its infallibility
 1. The promises of the gospel
 2. The marks of grace
 3. The testimony of the Spirit
 - C. The fruits of its infallibility
- III. Assurance is attainable (Paragraph 3)
 - A. The difficulty of attaining assurance
 - B. The provision for attaining assurance
 - C. The duty of attaining assurance
- IV. Assurance is variable (Paragraph 4)
 - A. The fact of this variation
 - B. The reasons for this variation
 - C. The limits of this variation²³³

As we begin our study, it is helpful to define “assurance”. The following definitions are helpful:

Sam Waldron provides this definition:

Assurance of grace and salvation is not assurance that God's promises are true. It is assurance that they are ours. It is knowing that oneself is saved and will be saved... While theologians have debated as to whether or not assurance is of the essence of faith, there should be no debate as to whether or not assurance is of the essence of hope. For it is, indeed, of the essence of the hope. The grace of hope is, scripturally, a personal, confident expectation of salvation (Romans 5:2, 5; Philippians 1:19, 20).²³⁴

Similarly, Sinclair Ferguson offers this detailed definition:

Assurance is the conscious confidence that we are in a right relationship with God through Christ... It is the confidence that we have been justified and accepted by God in Christ, regenerated by the Spirit, and adopted into his family, and that through faith in him we will

²³³ Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 5th ed. (Welwyn Garden City, UK: EP Books, 2016), 267.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 268.

be kept for the day when our justification and adoption are consummated in the regeneration of all things.²³⁵

Finally, Beeke and Smalley articulate the vital importance of this assurance in the Christian life:

Assurance is the nerve center of doctrine put into use—that is, God's truth applied to our lives. It is linked to the work of the Spirit at every point in the chain of salvation, touching every facet of our Christian life and experience. Assurance is broad in scope, profound in depth, and glorious in height. To be sure, full assurance is not essential to saving faith, but it is vital for the well-being of our faith. Yes, it is possible to be saved without assurance, but it is not possible to be a healthy Christian without assurance.²³⁶

Paragraph 1.

Although temporary believers and other unregenerate men, may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favor of God and in a state 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.

Job 8:13,14; Matt. 7:22,23; 1 John 2:3, 3:14,18,19,21,24, 5:13; Rom. 5:2,5

Exposition

Paragraph one clearly conveys that real assurance of salvation is possible. Yet, even as this is asserted, the Confession qualifies this statement by pointing out that false assurance may also be experienced by “temporary believers”.

The Danger of Assurance

While assurance is a biblical doctrine, there are some who are liable to experience a form of false assurance. The Confession identifies these as “temporary believers” and “other unregenerate men”. Here it is plainly stated that temporary believers are *not* those who are truly regenerate and then fall away, but those who make a profession of faith that does not endure, and so prove to be unregenerate.

Some may question the use of this language; however, it is simply referring to those whose apparent experience of salvation is false because it is temporal in nature. This kind of temporary faith is found in Christ’s Parable of the Sower:

Mark 4:3-8

3 “Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. 5 Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. 6 And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns

²³⁵ Sinclair B. Ferguson, “*The Reformation and Assurance*,” *The Banner of Truth*, no. 643 (April 2017): 20.

²³⁶ Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology, Volume 3: Spirit and Salvation* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2021), 767.

grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. 8 And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”

Our Lord provides the explanation of this parable a few verses later:

Mark 4:14-20

14 The sower sows the word. 15 And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. 16 And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. 17 And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. 18 And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, 19 but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. 20 But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.

By identifying this initial danger, the doctrine of assurance is held in careful tension with the very real danger that many people will make professions of faith that appear to be genuine, and yet they will not persevere (see chapter 17 of the Confession). This calls for careful discernment. We must not make a superficial assumption that we or others are “permanent believers” simply because we profess faith in Christ. Here we are warned against presumption; this calls for caution, but not for the denial of assurance promoted by Roman Catholicism.²³⁷ Rather, each Christian is called to carefully examine himself and ensure that qualities of saving faith are present in him.

Paul writes: *“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!”* (2 Corinthians 13:5)

The Fact of Assurance

Here the Confession explains that one can know with certainty that they are in “a state of grace” and they may “rejoice in the hope of the glory of God”.

We should not believe this because the Confession states it, but because this is the plain teaching of Scripture.

Job 19:25-26

25 For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at the last he will stand upon the earth.
26 And after my skin has been thus destroyed,
yet in my flesh I shall see God

Psalms 32:1-2

1 Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
2 Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

²³⁷ Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 5th ed. (Welwyn Garden City, UK: EP Books, 2016), 269.

2 Timothy 1:12b

12b ... for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me.

2 Timothy 4:6-8

6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

Romans 8:38-30

38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Philippians 1:6

6 And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

23 Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

Hebrews 6:11-12

11 And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, 12 so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

1 John 5:13

13 I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.

We have so many precious promises of God in which to ground our assurance. He who called us is faithful. We must not be like the hyper-calvinists of Charles Spurgeon's day, who were so opposed to the Arminian errors of their day, that they overcorrected to the point of arriving at the same conclusions of their opponents. Spurgeon comments:

I have seen their long faces. I have heard their whining periods, and read their dismal sentences in which they say something to this effect—"Groan in the Lord always, and again I say groan! He that mourneth and weepeth, he that doubteth and feareth, he that distrusteth and dishonoureth his God, shall be saved." That seems to be the sum and substance of their very ungospel-like gospel.²³⁸

²³⁸ Spurgeon, "*Full Assurance*," 535.

Paragraph 2.

This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope, but an infallible assurance of faith, founded on the blood and righteousness of Christ revealed in the Gospel; and also upon the inward evidence of those graces of the Spirit unto which promises are made, and on the testimony of the Spirit of adoption, witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God; and, as a fruit thereof, keeping the heart both humble and holy.

Heb. 6:11,19; Heb. 6:17,18; 2 Pet. 1:4,5,10,11; Rom. 8:15,16; 1 John 3:1-3

Exposition

In paragraph two, the “facts, roots, and fruits” of assurance are laid out.²³⁹ Here the Confession outlines three grounds for assurance:

1. The blood and righteousness of Christ revealed in the Gospel.
2. The inward evidences of the graces of the Spirit.
3. The testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits.

Some theologians have divided these grounds into two separate categories:

- I) The Objective Foundation of Assurance
- II) The Subjective Supports of Assurance²⁴⁰

I) The Objective Foundation of Assurance

It is noteworthy that the Confession does not principally ground assurance of salvation in one’s obedience or performance, but in the blood and righteousness of Christ.

Jeffrey Smith comments:

The emphasis in both Confessions (Westminster and 2LBC) is on the fact that the first root of assurance is totally outside of us in the realities and promises of the gospel; namely, Christ and His work for us freely extended to us in the gospel, and the promises of salvation to all who trust in Him and His work alone. This is the taproot of assurance, the primary source, the objective foundation of assurance in the heart of the believer.²⁴¹

This is not a paradigm imposed upon Scripture, but we find this very mindset in the Apostle Paul, who bases the inseparable love of Christ for the believer, not on the man’s performance, but on Christ’s finished work.

Romans 8:31-37

31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? 33 Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? 36 As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

²³⁹ Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 5th ed. (Welwyn Garden City, UK: EP Books, 2016), 267.

²⁴⁰ Jeffrey Smith, “Chapter Eighteen: Of the Assurance of Grace and Salvation,” in *A New Exposition of the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, ed. Rob Ventura (Ross-shire: Mentor, 2022), 331-33.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 331.

It has also been pointed out that Christ offers a steadfast assurance to believers because the basis for this assurance is bolstered by his ongoing ministry of intercession. Here the author of Hebrews agrees:

Hebrews 7:25

25 Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

Speaking about the work of Christ, Spurgeon offers this hearty encouragement:

"My soul has done this full many a time, when her evidences of salvation have been dim; and I bid you do the same when you are in like case. If you cannot come to Jesus as a saint, come as a sinner; only do come with simple faith to Him; and you shall receive joy and peace."²⁴²

In "Heaven on Earth," Thomas Brooks wrote this about faith in Christ that produces assurance:

Oh, it does wonderfully endear Christ and the things of Christ to the soul... my heart is taken with Christ, it is raised and ravished with his love; my soul is burning, my soul is beating towards Christ. Oh, none but Christ, none but Christ! I cannot live in myself, I cannot live in my duties, I cannot live in external privileges, I cannot live in outward mercies, I cannot live in common providences; I can live only in Christ, who is my life, my love, my joy, my crown, my all in all.

II) The Subjective Supports of Assurance

Regenerate believers will always possess a sincere faith in Christ, with the understanding that they are only, ever, and always justified by faith alone in Him. Yet, regenerate believers will not possess a faith that is alone. The evidence of God's grace will always be present in them, no matter how dim.

Jeffrey Smith explains this when he writes:

The subjective supports of assurance are the evidences of Christ's work in us, or what are sometimes called the evidences of grace, or the marks of the new birth. The salvation Christ gives to sinners includes two major and inseparable components. It includes a change of status and standing before God, which is solely based on Christ's work for us, and it includes a change of nature, which is the result of Christ's work in us.

Relying on 1 John's words on a believer's changed nature, Smith identifies the following evidences of grace in a Christian's life. These do not form the basis for a Christian's assurance, by they support and confirm the inward working of God's Spirit in a believer:

- 1) The true children of God, see and feel that they are sinners in need of Christ and seek to deal honestly with God about their sins (1 John 1:6-2:2).
- 2) A person who has been born again is marked by repentance from sin. He is looking to Christ alone for salvation, but he is also endeavouring to turn from and forsake all of his sins as he is made aware of them (1 John 3:9).
- 3) The believer desires and endeavours to obey God's Commandments (1 John 2:3).

²⁴² Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892), *Spurgeon's Sermon Illustrations: Choice Selections from the "Prince of Preachers,"* compiled and edited by David O. Fuller (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1990), 23-24.

- 4) Those who belong to Christ to have a practical affectionate and attachment to God's people (1 John 3:14).²⁴³

An adapted tract by J.C. Ryle, published by Grace Fellowship Church Edmonton, also outlines several inward evidences, these can be found here: <https://www.gfcedmonton.com/are-you-born-again>

The Holy Spirit also acts as a "Divine agent of assurance", granting us the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba Father."²⁴⁴

Romans 8:15-16

15 For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" 16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

But, what does it mean that the Spirit acts as a divine agent of assurance? Smith explains:

... the witness of the Spirit is not simply the witness to our sonship given by the marks of the new birth, and ... it is not some secret inward voice or special revelation in your heart telling you that you are a Christian... I agree with the greater part of credible, respected, and Reformed exegetes and theologians that the Spirit witnesses with our spirit, not by some special revelation, but by enabling us clearly to discern from the scriptures the evidence of His work in our hearts and by making the promises of the gospel precious to us and by working faith in us to lay firm hold of them.²⁴⁵

Paragraph 3.

This infallible assurance does not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and struggle 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 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 Spirit, 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. Isa. 50:10; Ps. 88; Ps. 77:1-12; 1 John 4:13; Heb. 6:11,12; Rom. 5:1,2,5, 14:17; Ps. 119:32; Rom. 6:1,2; Titus 2:11,12,14

Paragraph 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 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 destitute of the 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 meantime, they are preserved from utter despair. Song. 5:2,3,6; Ps. 51:8,12,14; Ps. 116:11; 77:7,8, 31:22; Ps. 30:7; 1 John 3:9; Luke 22:32; Ps. 42:5,11; Lam. 3:26-31

²⁴³ Jeffrey Smith, "Chapter Eighteen: Of the Assurance of Grace and Salvation," in *A New Exposition of the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, ed. Rob Ventura (Ross-shire: Mentor, 2022), 335-336.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 336.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

Exposition

Paragraphs three and four instruct believers that assurance is attainable—and should be sought—and yet it is variable and subject to change in the course of one's life.

In paragraph three, the framers of the Confession enter into an age-old debate about the nature of assurance. Some have argued that assurance belongs to the essence of faith in such a way that those who do not possess assurance, do not possess saving faith.

Here the Confession departs from this position and argues for a definition similar to one that we have already considered. *"Assurance of grace and salvation is not assurance that God's promises are true. It is assurance that they are ours."*²⁴⁶

Here the Confession also exhorts the believer to fulfill their obligation to "give all diligence to make his calling and election sure..."

2 Peter 1:10-11

Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

But, on this point, many Christians will ask how they may strengthen their assurance.

Jonathan Edwards provides the following counsel:

Many persons in such a case spend time in a fruitless labor in pouring over past experiences, and examining themselves by signs which they hear laid down from the pulpit, or read in books. There is other work for them to do, which, while they neglect, all their self-examinations are like to be in vain, if they should spend never so much time in them. The accursed thing is to be destroyed from their camp, and Achan to be slain, and until this be done they will be in trouble. It is not God's design that men should obtain assurance in any other way, than by mortifying corruption, 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 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 maintained it 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.²⁴⁷

Jeffrey Smith gives this advice:

1. Give diligence to obtaining a clearer and fuller views of the gospel.
2. Give diligence to grow in grace and practical godliness.
3. Give diligence to proper and prayerful self-examination.
4. Give diligence to praying for the witness of the Holy Spirit.

²⁴⁶ Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 5th ed. (Welwyn Garden City, UK: EP Books, 2016), 268.

²⁴⁷ Jonathan Edwards, Works, Vol. 1, "Religious Affections," 263.

We will conclude with Sam Waldron's words on assurance:

The means mentioned are ordinary means available to all believers: prayer, the study of the Word, corporate worship, preaching, baptism, the Lord's Table, Christian fellowship... it is the duty of every Christian to attain infallible assurance not only because such assurance is attainable, but because it is sanctifying. Enlargement "in peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13; Nehemiah 8:10), "love and thankfulness to God" (I John 4:19, 16), and "strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience" (Romans 6:11) all tend (as the texts cited make clear) not only to their comfort, but also to their holiness and the greater glory of God in them. There are many holy reasons to have assurance! It is not selfish to desire and labour to attain it. It is rather your solemn duty.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁸ Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 5th ed. (Welwyn Garden City, UK: EP Books, 2016), 272-73.