

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN:

THE ASSURANCE OF GRACE AND SALVATION

Assurance is Possible

1. *Although temporary believers and other unregenerate persons may be deceived by erroneous, self-engendered notions into thinking that they are in God's favour and in a state of salvation – false and perishable hopes indeed! – yet all who truly believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and love Him in sincerity, endeavouring to conduct themselves in all good conscience according to His will, may in this life be certainly assured that they are in state of grace. They may rejoice in hope of the glory of God, knowing that such a hope will never put them to shame.*

The subject of assurance is not the certainty that God's promises are true (that comes under Saving Faith, Chapter 14), but the certainty the promises are true *for me*. The Confession states that assurance is possible and beneficial, against the Catholic denial; but that it is also possible to have a false assurance, against those who are careless about holiness.

(a) The Danger of **False** Assurance (lines 1-3). Many are deceived into thinking they are Christians when they are not: so many at the judgment day (Matthew 7:21-23), Simon Magus (Acts 8:13), the Pharisee (Luke 18:11-12). There are many warnings against being deceived (1 Corinthians 6:9, 15:33, Galatians 6:7, Ephesians 5:6, 1 John 1:8, 3:7).

(b) The Possibility of **True** Assurance (lines 3-7).

1. The character of those who may have true assurance –
 - They “truly believe in the Lord Jesus Christ” and “love Him in sincerity”. There is a false faith as well as a true one (see John 2:23-25, Acts 8:13, James 2:14-26); there is a professed love which is not a sincere one (1 John 4:20).
 - They are “endeavouring to conduct themselves in all good conscience according to His will”. They are serious about holiness. See Section 2 for the roots of assurance.
2. About what they may be assured – Certainty “that they are in a state of grace”. Not that they have done enough good works to be rewarded with salvation. But that God has begun to deal with them in grace in Christ and, because it is grace, He will continue to so do unto glory (Romans 5:2,20-21, 6:14).
3. The fruit of such assurance – A hope of being glorified on the last day which is so sure that they can begin to rejoice now (Romans 5:2). Because it depends upon the God of grace there is no possibility of failure.

Assurance is Infallible

2. *The certainty of salvation enjoyed by the saints of God is not mere conjecture and probability based upon a fallible hope, but an infallible assurance of faith based upon the blood and righteousness of Christ revealed in the gospel. It also results from the inward evidences of the graces of the Holy Spirit, for to those graces God speaks promises. Then again, it is based upon the testimony of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of adoption, for He bears His witness with our spirits that we are the children of God. Such witness results in the keeping of our hearts both humble and holy.*

“Infallible” means ‘not deceiving’. There is an assurance of salvation which will not deceive us, about which we cannot be mistaken, which goes beyond mere “probability”. No one should deny assurance out of fear of being mistaken or self-deception.

(a) The **fact** of infallible assurance (lines 1-2). It is stated both negatively and positively. There is the following Biblical evidence that there is such an assurance.

1. Assurance ought to be sought for (Hebrews 6:11, 2 Peter 1:10).
2. Various marks are given as a basis for certainty. The letter of 1 John was written for this very purpose (5:13). One mark, for example, is ‘loving the brothers’ (3:14).
3. It is the experience of God’s people in the Bible: Job (19:25), David (Psalm 23:6), Paul (Philippians 1:23, 2 Timothy 1:12, 4:6-8).

(b) The **roots** of infallible assurance (lines 2-6). They are three:

1. The promises of the gospel – The first root is not to be found in our experience but in the objective facts of the gospel. “The blood and righteousness of Christ” are the content of the promises. The gospel promises sinners that if they will believe in Christ, His blood will cleanse them from all sin, and His righteousness will be reckoned to their account so that they will be acceptable to God (see Acts 13:38-39, 2 Corinthians 5:18-21, Hebrews 10:19-22).
2. The marks of grace – “inward evidences of the graces of the Holy Spirit”. The gospel promises are only for those who believe and repent, and who therefore bear the fruits of true faith and true repentance (Luke 3:8). John’s first letter focuses on three such marks: pursuing personal righteousness (2:3-5, 29, 3:4-10, 24), practising genuine love towards other Christians (2:9-11, 3:10-18, 4:7-12, 19-21), and professing correct doctrine about Jesus (2:20-27, 4:1-6, 14-15). The same Spirit who enables us to believe the promise of the gospel, also works in us to produce this fruit.
3. The testimony of the Spirit – Romans 8:16. Without the Holy Spirit we are not able to discern these graces, or to gain assurance from knowing their presence (see 1 Corinthians 2:12). This witness is more than our making conclusions from the presence of graces, but neither is it a direct communication. The Spirit is both the author of the promises of the gospel and of the graces in a Christian, and He is the One who gives spiritual enlightenment (see Ephesians 1:17-18a). The *work* of the Spirit is the testimony which he gives.

(c) The **fruits** of infallible assurance (lines 6-7). Catholics have long maintained that when the doctrine of infallible assurance is believed it leads to presumption, pride and wickedness. The Confession teaches that the opposite is true. It “results in the keeping of our hearts both humble and holy”. Humble because we know it is all of grace and nothing of works (1 Corinthians 4:6-7); holy because our hope is perfection in glory (1 John 3:2-3). If there is no infallible assurance, then no matter how carefully one seeks to heed the word of God, there can be no sure hope and so even the form of godliness may be thrown off.

Assurance is Attainable

3. *The infallible assurance of salvation is not an essential part of salvation, for a true believer may wait for a long time, and struggle with many difficulties, before he attains to it. It is not a matter of extraordinary revelation, for if he makes a right use of the means of grace, and is enabled by the Spirit to know the things that believers receive freely from God, he may well attain to it.*

It therefore becomes the duty of every one to be as diligent as possible in making his calling and election sure. By doing this he will experience greater joy and peace in the Holy Spirit, greater love and thankfulness to God, and an increased strength and cheerfulness in dutiful obedience. These things are the natural outcome of the assurance of salvation, and they constitute strong evidence that assurance does not lead men into loose living.

(a) The **difficulty** of attaining assurance (lines 1-2). Not everyone possesses this infallible assurance the moment he truly believes in Christ. The Philippian jailer knew he was justified (Acts 16:30-34), but this is not everyone's experience. It is possible to have saving faith without infallible assurance (see 2 Peter 1:10, 1 John 5:13).

Note: Remember the difference between being assured that the promises are *true* unto salvation (saving faith), and being assured that the promises really belong to *me* and that I have been saved (infallible assurance). These two are confused when it is taught that assurance is the essence of saving faith, and that a person who does not have assurance does not have faith.

(b) The **way** for attaining assurance (lines 3-5). God has provided two things, "the means of grace" and being "enabled by the Spirit". "Extraordinary revelation" is denied, such as a dream, or claiming to hear a voice from heaven. The means are ordinary means available to all believers: prayer, Word of God, corporate worship, preaching, baptism and Lord's table, Christian fellowship (see Acts 2:42).

(c) The **duty** of attaining assurance (lines 6-10). It is a duty upon all Christians so seek for such assurance both because it is attainable, and because it is sanctifying. The following benefits are listed:

1. "greater joy and peace in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13).
2. "greater love and thankfulness to God" (1 John 4:16).
3. "increased strength and cheerfulness in dutiful obedience" (Romans 6:11).

To have such benefits from assurance cannot possibly lead to loose living, as is the objection from Catholics in particular.

Assurance is Variable

4. *True believers may find that their assurance of salvation fluctuates; sometimes more, sometimes less. They may prove neglectful in preserving it, as for example, if they give way to some particular sin that wounds their conscience and grieves the Spirit; or a strong temptation may suddenly spring upon them; or God may see fit to withdraw 'the light of His countenance' and cause darkness to envelop them, a course He sometimes takes even with those who fear His name.*

Yet, whatever happens, certain things inevitably remain with them – the new nature which is born of God, the life of faith, the love of Christ and the brethren, sincerity of heart and conscience of duty – and by reason of these and through the work carried on by the Spirit within them, the assurance of salvation may in due time be revived. In the meantime the same influences preserve them from utter despair.

Assurance is not all or nothing; for various reasons it may “fluctuate”. But believers will always be kept “from utter despair”. Assurance exists in direct relation to our growth in grace. As we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ so we grow in genuine assurance (2 Peter 1:5-11, 3:18).

(a) Causes of variation in assurance (lines 1-6).

1. Falling into particular sin (Psalm 51:8,12, Ephesians 4:30). How David suffered before he acknowledged his sin to God (Psalm 32:3-4)!
2. Sudden strong temptation – not necessarily giving in to it, but a temptation that so shakes the Christian that he questions whether he can really be a Christian (see Psalm 31:22, 77:7-8).
3. God sovereignly but temporarily withdrawing His smile – something the Puritans considered a possibility for reasons of fatherly discipline to test faith, or to show our total dependence upon Him, or the all-sufficiency of His grace (so Job's experience). See Ferguson, *Deserted By God*, in which he considers Psalms like 13, 42-43, 55, 73, and 102.

(b) The things that cannot vary (lines 7-11). “The new nature which is born of God, the life of faith, the love of Christ and the brethren, sincerity of heart and conscience of duty.” These things cannot cease to be for they are the essence of what it means to be a Christian. It is what Peter calls being born again of an imperishable seed (1 Peter 1:23). Being a Christian is not just something we do, but primarily what God works in us, making a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).