

THE CONFESSIONAL DOCTRINE OF ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

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The fact that many who profess to have assurance of salvation are only deceiving themselves, should not lead true believers to belittle the importance of the doctrine. The fact that some may hold an erroneous view of a doctrine, or abuse it, does not justify anyone in relegating that doctrine to the background. In modern “evangelistic” circles the doctrine of the assurance of salvation is asserted with a kind of religious abandon which creates a suspicion that the foundations upon which it rests are anything but secure. It is, therefore, necessary that God's people should have true and Scriptural views on a doctrine which is so beneficial and comforting to them.

The Westminster Divines, in their Confession of Faith, after having set forth the Christian life, in all its varied experiences, describing its origin in divine grace, its essential quality in faith, its characteristic repentance, its fruition in good works, and its permanent and blessed perpetuity, add a chapter (xviii) on "Assurance of Grace and Salvation, in which they speak not only of the perseverance of the believer, but of the full, perfect and happy certainty to which he may through grace attain. The sections dealing with the doctrine under discussion are as follows; “(i)- Although hypocrites and other unregenerate men, may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of - being in the favour 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 a state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God; which hope shall never make them ashamed. (ii) This certainly 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 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 everyone 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 loose-ness. (iv)-True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as, by negligence in preserving 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 meantime, they are supported from utter despair."

The same doctrine is clearly set forth in the Larger Catechism, as follows: - "Q 80--Can true believers be infallibly assured that they are in the estate of grace, and that they shall persevere therein unto salvation? A. -- Such as truly believe in Christ, and endeavour to walk in all good conscience before Him, may without extraordinary revelation, by faith grounded upon the truth of God's promises, and by the Spirit enabling them to discern in themselves those graces to which the promises of life are made, and bearing witness with their spirits that they are the children of God, be infallibly assured that they are in the estate of grace, and shall persevere therein unto salvation. Q. 81 --Are all true believers at all times assured of their present being in the estate of grace, and that they shall be saved? A.--Assurance of grace and salvation not being of the essence of faith, true believers may wait long before they obtain it; and, after the enjoyment thereof, may have it weakened and intermitted, through manifold distempers, sins, temptations, and desertions; yet are they never left without such a presence and support of the Spirit of God as keeps them from sinking into utter despair."

Needless to say, the Divines gave considerable attention to the statement of this doctrine, as is indicated in *The Minutes of the Westminster Assembly*, and produced a well-balanced statement which steered clear of the views held by so many of the Reformers that assurance of one's salvation was of the essence of faith, while on the other hand rejecting the Romanist and Arminian view

that such assurance is not attainable. The Westminster Divines were not simply theologians, expert and careful expounders of the doctrines of The Christian faith, but they were men deeply taught by the Holy Spirit. The theology of The Westminster Confession is infused with life, and the warmth of a heart-experience suffuses it, without which it would lose much of its appeal to Spirit-taught men and women. Perhaps in no chapter do these characteristics show themselves so distinctly as in the words quoted above. It was one of the finest features in the theology presented in the Confession that the Divines were careful not to make their experience the basis of their doctrine as did some of The Reformers in the doctrine in question, but checked their experience by the doctrine they found set forth in God's word. The theologian taught by God's Spirit must seek to avoid presenting a system of truth, tasteless and devoid of life; while, on the other hand, he must equally be on his guard against basing his doctrine altogether on his experience. The Westminster Divines avoided these pitfalls into which so many have fallen, by taking their doctrine from the living oracles, and bringing to the touchstone of these same oracles their experience. How necessary these precautions are is vividly brought home to one in reading some dry statements of doctrine or, on the other hand, listening to the presentation of certain phases of experience, which may be nothing more or less than the vagrant thoughts of uninstructed expounders. It was not so with the Westminster Divines.

By "assurance of grace and salvation" they evidently mean the believer's assurance that he is in a state of grace and that he has a personal interest in the salvation of Christ. In stating their doctrine, they had in view, as already noted, the errors of the Romanists and the Arminians on this subject. (i) The former deny that it is possible to attain more than a probable persuasion of salvation, except by extraordinary revelation. This erroneous view is founded on their view, of the nature of faith. Saving faith, according to Romish teaching, was essentially assent (*assensus*). The Reformers maintained that it was essentially trust (*fiducia*). Dr. W. Cunningham says: "There is an appearance of greater simplicity and metaphysical accuracy in representing faith as in itself a mere assent to truth, and trust and other graces as its necessary consequences. But the right question is, What is the meaning attached in Scripture to the faith which justifies and saves? Upon this question we agree with the Reformers in thinking that in Scripture usage faith is applied, in its highest and most important sense, only to a state of mind of which trust in Christ as a Saviour is a necessary constituent element" (*The Reformers and*

Theology of the Reformation, p. 122). (ii) The Arminians, in denying the doctrine of the believer's final perseverance, were led into this false position of denying the possibility of any man attaining to a greater certainty of salvation than that he who perseveres unto the end shall be saved. Through this view, founded upon their erroneous and unscriptural teaching of perseverance, they fell into error. It will thus be seen that both the Romanist and Arminian doctrine on this subject was founded on error and led to error. It is a warning to us to see that the foundation is well and truly laid according to the plan set before us in the divine oracles.

We have already pointed out the danger of introducing into theology an individual experience, which at times and in many cases may be abnormal. It would be wrong to insist that every believer must necessarily have an experience such as Lydia, or Paul, or the Philippian gaoler. Some who have passed through a very trying and unforgettable experience are in danger of insisting that others must pass through a similar experience if they are to enter the kingdom. While we are to guard against laying down as the standard what, after all, may be an abnormal experience, there are certain things that hold true of all that are effectually called, with the exception of "elect infants dying in infancy" (Conf. X iii) and "elect persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word" (ibid.), and these are, as stated by the Westminster Divines, that the saved are called "by His Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God; taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and by His almighty power determining them to that which is good; effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ; yet so as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace" - (Conf. X i). This well-balanced statement sets forth the normal experience of all those whom God has predestinated unto life and whom He has effectually called. In thus stating the case the Westminster Divines guard against a lifeless doctrine that never touches the heart and a sentimental emotionalism that often passes for Christian experience, but which at best is only the vagrant impulse of a wayward heart.

There have been times in the history of the Church when Spirit-taught men, who were endowed for the special work assigned them, have introduced their experience, which, on certain points, was abnormal, into their doctrine. This was notably so with the Reformers, that noble band of men raised up by God

to witness for His truth amidst the throes of a mighty conflict which shook error to its very foundations. Most of these men enjoyed in their own experience an assurance of their salvation that enabled them to stand their ground in the face of tremendous opposition. Added to this was the opposition from the Romish theologians who asserted the impossibility of enjoying certainty with regard to one's personal salvation. Dr. Cunningham thus states the point at issue: "The leading topic of discussion was this: Whether, without any special revelation, believers could and should (*possent et deberent*) be assured of their justification and salvation? This was practically the question that was controverted. It is one of great practical importance, and orthodox divines, in general, have continued ever since to concur with the Reformers in answering it in the affirmative. But though this was practically the real point controverted, though the papists were most anxious to persuade men that they could attain to no certainty upon this point, except either by a special revelation or by the testimony of the Church, yet this was not just the precise form which the question assumed in the controversy; and the reason of this was one we have already hinted at, viz., that the more reasonable Romanists shrank from meeting the question, as thus put, with a direct negative, and fell back upon the topic of the kind or degree of the assurance or certainty that was ordinarily attainable by believers. Into this discussion of the nature and grounds of the certainty that might attach to this matter, the Reformers were unfortunately tempted to follow their opponents. In the heat of the controversy many of them were led to lay down the untenable position, that the certainty or assurance ordinarily attainable by believers was of the highest and most perfect description, that it was the certainty of faith, or, as they sometimes expressed it, the certainty of divine faith, the same certainty with which men believe in the plainly revealed doctrines of God's Word. And then, again, it was as an argument, or proof in support of this extreme and untenable position as to the kind or degree of certainty, that they were led on to assert, that this personal assurance was necessarily involved in justifying faith, nay, was its distinguishing characteristic, and belonged, of course, to its essence" (*op. cit.*, pp. 123, 124).

These views were taught by many of the Reformers in their polemical and practical treatises. We find them set forth in the Lutheran symbolical books of the Confession of Augsburg, and its Apology, and in The Saxon and Wittenberg Confessions. They find no place, however, in the symbolical books of the Reformed or Calvinistic Churches, although certain expressions in them may

indicate that such views were held by their founders. Luther held this view as to personal assurance, though there are passages in his works in which a more correct view of saving faith is given. Calvin taught in his *Institutes*, and also in his *Catechism* of Geneva, that saving faith necessarily implies personal assurance. It must be pointed out, however, that while Luther's and Calvin's views were held by many of the Reformers, yet there were some eminent Reformers such as Peter Martyr, Musculus, and Zanchius who did not share their views.

We come now to discuss the view held by the Marrowmen, Thomas Boston, Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine, and others, who were so called because they maintained many of the doctrines advocated in a book entitled, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. While they were one with the Reformers in maintaining that saving faith is not merely an *assensus* (assent) but includes *fiducia* (trust), they differed with those Reformers who held that this trust included the believer's assurance that he was a saved person, and that this assurance was of the essence of faith. The Marrowmen, while in full sympathy with the Confessional doctrine, made use of a phrase, "assurance of faith," to which they gave a new meaning. They drew a distinction between "assurance of faith" and "assurance of sense." The former is the direct act of faith (*actio fidei directa*), and the latter the reflex act of faith (*actio fidei reflexa*). What they termed the assurance of sense or the reflex act of faith is "the infallible assurance" of the Confession, the assurance that a believer may have of his salvation. By the "assurance of faith," or the direct act of faith, they meant the assurance that is exercised in believing. In the act of believing the believer is exercising assurance. This is the kind of assurance that the Apostle credits the Thessalonians with having, when he says: "For our Gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance," The Gospel was received by them as the very message of heaven. The Marrowmen's distinction between "the assurance of faith" and "the assurance of sense," though the terms are open to objection because of the confusion caused by their use, must be kept clearly before us if justice is to be done to the theological position of these worthy men. In their eagerness to find the Reformers on their side they did not always exercise due care in quoting from their writings, for some of the Reformers, as we have seen, used assurance in a different sense from that in which they used it. Not only was the Marrow doctrine misunderstood in the early XVIIIth century, but in quarters where one would expect better their position has been mis-stated. Even so

distinguished and careful a theologian as Dr. Cunningham allows himself to write thus: "While the generality of the Reformers and some modern divines, especially those known in Scotland as Marrowmen, have regarded it as comprehending this last element also and have thus come to maintain that personal assurance is necessarily and directly included in the exercise of saving faith or belongs, to its essence" (*op. cit.*, p. 123).

This is not the true position of The Marrowmen as may be seen from some of their authoritative, books and statements. For instance, in *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, Evangelista, after pointing out that believers are no longer under the law as a covenant of works, turns to Neophytus and addresses him thus: "Wherefore, as Paul and Silas said to the jailer, so say I unto you: 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved,' that is, be verily persuaded in your heart that Jesus Christ is yours and that you shall have life and salvation by Him; that whatsoever Christ did for the redemption of mankind He did it for you" {II iii). The Representors, in their Representation in answer to Query viii put to them, thus define what they mean by this assurance: "There is a full persuasion, by reflection, spiritual argumentation or inward sensation, which we are far from holding to be of the essence of faith; but this last being mediate and collected by inference as we gather the cause from such signs and effects as give evidence of it; it is very different from that confidence or persuasion by divines called the assurance of faith. . . . Further as to the difference between these two kinds of assurances, the assurance of faith has its object and foundation without the man, but that of sense has them within him." If this assurance of faith is essential to saving faith, what explanation then do the Marrowmen give as to the doubts of believers? They answer: "While these doubts are in the believer they are not in this faith, which from its very nature and exercise is as opposite to them as light to darkness or the flesh to the Spirit, which, though they be in the same person, are contrary the one to the other (Gal. v 17). And, therefore, faith wrestles against them, though with varied success, it being so far over-come sometimes and brought under by main force and superior strength of prevailing unbelief that the true faith cannot be more discerned than the fire when it is covered with ashes or the sun when wrapped up in thick clouds." The most lucid summary of the Marrow doctrine which we know, will be found in that excellent *Treatise on Saving Faith* by Dr. Colquhoun, Leith, who himself accepted the Marrow doctrine. "It may be remarked," he says, "that there is a very great difference between the assurance of faith and the assurance of sense, which is one of the fruits of

faith. The assurance of sense is a believer's assurance that he is already united to Christ, and is in a state of grace. The assurance of faith is as inseparable from faith as light is from the sun; but it is quite otherwise with the assurance of sense. A man cannot have faith without having assurance in it; but he may have faith and not have assurance of it. For, though the mind cannot but be conscious of its own act, yet whether that act have the peculiar properties and nature of saving faith cannot satisfactorily be known but by reflexion. The assurance of sense or reflexion, then, is not a believing in Christ; but it is a believing that we have believed in Him. It is not a direct act terminating on Him, but a reflex act by which we are assured of the saving nature of that direct act. But, although the direct act may be without the reflex, yet the latter cannot be without the former. A man must begin to believe before he can begin to know that he has believed.... The assurance of faith is commonly not so strong nor sweet as the assurance of sense which is supported by evidences. By the former, a man trusts upon the warrant of the free offer and promise that Christ will do the part of a Saviour to him; by the latter he believes upon the inward evidences of grace, that his faith is unfeigned and operative. By the one, he is assured of the truth of what God hath said to him; by the other, of the reality of what God hath wrought in him. By that he trusts he shall be pardoned and saved; but by this he is persuaded that he is pardoned and saved in part already. The object of the assurance of faith is Christ revealed and offered in the Word; the object of the assurance of sense is Christ formed and perceived in the heart. The former is the root and the latter is the fruit."

The controversy in connection with the Marrow doctrine of saving faith passed into England, where it found an able defender in James Hervey, the author of *Theron and Aspasio*. His view was attacked by Robert Sandeman with great acuteness in *Letters on Theron and Aspasio*. Sandeman's views were adopted by Dr. John Erskine, Greyfriars, Edinburgh, the noted Evangelical leader, in his *Theological Dissertations*. Archibald Maclean, Edinburgh, a Baptist, and Dr. Chalmers, the famous preacher and divine, also held Sandeman's view that faith is a bare belief of the bare truth. Dr. Stewart, Dingwall, in a little book, *Hints on Faith and Hope* (1845), held the same view. Sandeman was ably answered by Wilson in his *Palaemon's Creed Reviewed*, by Cudworth in his *Defence of Theron and Aspasio*, and by Andrew Fuller in his *Strictures on Sandemanianism*. Sandeman's views were adopted by the Glasites to which denomination he belonged, and also by The Old Scots Independents, who trace their history back to 1768. The Bereans or Barclayites, another small sect, the

followers of John Barclay, who was deposed by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1773, while holding that the assurance of the Westminster Divine was of the essence of faith, rejected the Marrow doctrine with scorn (*Assurance of Faith Vindicated*, p. 185). In America the Marrow view as set forth by Hervey was attacked by Bellamy in his *Letters and Dialogues between Theron, Paulinus, and Aspasio*, while Dr Anderson, in his *Scripture Doctrine of Appropriation*, ably defended it. Among the writings of more recent divines who advocate the same view is to be mentioned Dr. James Buchanan's Cunningham Lectures on *The Doctrine of Justification*.

Prof. A. A. Hodge has summarised the Confessional doctrine on the subject as set forth in chapter xvii under the following heads: “(i) There is a false assurance of salvation which unregenerate men sometimes indulge, in which they are deceived, and which shall be finally disappointed. (ii) There is, on the other hand, a true assurance, amounting to an infallible certainty, which sincere believers may entertain as to their own personal salvation, which shall not be confounded. (iii) This infallible assurance of faith rests - (1) Upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation. (2) Upon the inward evidence of those graces unto which those promises are made. {3) The testimony of the Spirit of adoption, witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God,” (*Class-book on the Confession of Faith*, p. 230). True assurance may be distinguished from false by the following characteristics: - (i) The assurance begets humility; false assurance begets spiritual pride (I Cor. xv 10; Gal. vi 14). (ii) True assurance leads to activity; false to sloth and indolence (Ps. li 12, 13, 19). (iii) True assurance leads to self-examination; false to self-satisfaction (Ps. cxxxix 23, 24). In true assurance there are longings after God (I John iii 2, 3).

The assurance of their personal salvation to which true believers may attain is not a bare conjectural persuasion founded upon a fallible hope, “But an infallible assurance of faith, founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation {Heb. vi -1, 18}, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made (II Pet. i 4, 5, 10, n; I John ii 3), the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God (Rom. viii 15, 16); which spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption (Eph. i 13, 14; iv 30; II Cor. i 22).” In sections iii and iv the Confession teaches that this “infallible assurance of faith” (i) does not so belong to the essence of faith but a true believer may wait long and conflict with many difficulties before he be a partaker of it (I John v 13; Is. i 10; Mark ix 24; Ps. lxxxviii; lxxvii 1-12). (ii) Yet diligent use of the ordinary

appointed means is to be made for its attainment. “And therefore, it is the duty of every one to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure” (II Pet. i 10).

We return again to the experience of the Reformers. God gave these noble instruments a convincing assurance of their own salvation such as stood them in good stead, in the day of battle, though many of them erred in saying that such personal assurance was or the essence of saving faith. Donald Cargill, the Scottish martyr, had this assurance of his own salvation to a remarkable degree, as held also Donald Matheson, the Kildonan bard. The benefits accompanying genuine assurance are attainable by the use of the ordinary means, and surely, they are worth seeking. Some of these are set forth in section (iii) of chapter xviii of the Confession as peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, love and thankfulness to God, strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience.

This personal assurance of salvation may be shaken, diminished and intermitted. Such experiences arise, as the Confession informs us, from “negligence in preserving 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 have no light.” It is when God's people have such experiences that they may wrongly conclude that the doctrine of personal assurance of salvation is untenable, and so fall into the error of reading into their doctrine what may after all be only a passing phase of their experience. We have in this article, endeavoured to “redd the marches,” to use a well-known and significant Scottish phrase, between true and false assurance. True assurance is attainable by the use of ordinary means, and is accompanied by comforting and strengthening fruits.