

The Westminster Standards on the Assurance of Faith (5, final)

In this fifth and final installment we will discuss the Scriptural, Reformed teaching on the assurance of faith as taught in the Canons of Dort (hereafter: CoD). In our previous installment we saw that the HC teaches that true faith is *"(...) a firm confidence that not only to others, but also to me, God has granted forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness, and salvation (...)".* Christians may wonder: where does this faith come from? And will I persevere in this precious faith tomorrow, under all circumstances? The CoD provide some Scriptural guidance in answering these questions.

A. The assurance of election

The CoD in chapter I confess the assurance of election against the following Arminian error:

"In this life there is no fruit, consciousness, or certainty of the unchangeable election to glory, except such as is based upon a changeable and uncertain condition" (CoD, I, 'Rejection of Errors', 7).

Canons of Dort I,12

The CoD strongly refute this error and reply: *"To speak about an uncertain certainty is not only absurd, but also contrary to the experience of believers"* (CoD I, 'Rejection of Errors', 7). The CoD I,12 confesses that the elect *"in due time, though in various stages and in different measure (...)"* receive the assurance of election:

"by observing in themselves (...) the unfailing fruits of election pointed out in

the Word of God – such as a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for their sins, and a hunger and thirst for righteousness.”

Fruits of election

Do the CoD, by pointing at the “*fruits of election*”, teach that assurance is also “*founded upon (...) the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made (...)*” (WCF 18.2)? This would be a wrong conclusion for several reasons.

Firstly, we should note that this article was written as a response to the Arminian error that there is no certainty of election. The CoD point to the ‘experience’ of the saints over against the ‘speculations’ by the Arminians, who, in a rational manner, were “*inquisitively prying into the hidden and deep things of God (...)*”.[1]

Secondly, this article speaks about the assurance of election, which should be distinguished from the assurance of faith, as a Reformed minister, the late Rev. D. van Dijk noted:

*“One of the marks that is mentioned here is indeed: “**the true faith in Christ**”. The person thus, who operates as prescribed in this article (CoD 1,12, MV) is assured by himself that he has true faith. It is indeed for him one of the things based on which he comes to the conclusion that he is elected. This article thus is not about the assurance of faith, but about the insight into, the assurance of, the fact that the salvation – which we partake through faith – roots in, springs from the eternal, unchangeable, sovereign election of God. It is possible that someone knows, in Christ and through faith, to be reconciled with God and to be an heir of eternal life, without having the blessed insight that this whole salvation is a fruit of Gods election.”* (author’s emphasis, MV)[2]

Thirdly, this article speaks about growth in the assurance of election: “(..) *though in various stages and in different measure (...)*”. Faith is assurance; and the marks of living faith, if seen in faith, will function as a secondary means to strengthen faith.[3] The assurance of election, as a ‘dimension’ of the assurance of faith, can only be based on God’s promises in Christ Jesus alone.

Fourthly, the structure of the CoD, chapter I should be taken into account:

“God has decided to call and draw the elect effectively into communion with Christ through His Word and Spirit (CoD I,7). In this communion, one is taught to walk the way of salvation (CoD I,8), and from this flows the fruits of election by the Spirit (CoD I,9). Therefore, out of this, one may also look back on the way that he could accomplish, and He may, by a Spirit-wrought joy, conclude, how much his life has been converted into union with Christ.”[4]

Faith is assurance

The CoD are in agreement with John Calvin in his ‘Congregation on Election’ (1551):

“Would you like to know whether you are elect, see whether you are in Christ Jesus. Those who through true faith in Jesus Christ have union with Him, can be assured, that they belong to those that are elect from eternity and are His children. Him that finds himself in Jesus Christ, and is a member of His body through faith, is assured of his salvation. If we want to know this, it is not necessary that we climb above this, to ask that which should be still hidden to us in this hour. But see how Christ humiliated Himself with respect to us. He points out the ‘why’ in His Son. It is as if He says: ‘See, here am I. Look unto me and profess, that I adopted you as my children.’ (...) When we accept the testimony of salvation, that is presented to us in the gospel, we profess and are assured that God has elected us. And thus believers do not have to doubt their election. That they may be fully assured, since they were called by the preaching of the gospel, that they partake in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the promise He did to them in His name. For our Lord Jesus Christ is the foundation of these two, namely: the promise of our salvation and the

graceful election, that has happened before the foundation of the world”.[5]

The CoD are also in full agreement with the HC: faith is assurance.[6]

B. The assurance of preservation

The CoD in chapter V, articles 9-13 confess the assurance of preservation. Also this chapter is fully in agreement with the HC: faith is assurance, through which we have an ‘only comfort’.

The measure of faith

The CoD V,9 confesses that true believer can be certain of the preservation of the elect and the perseverance of the believers, thereby pointing at two aspects of the same precious truth: God’s work (preservation) and its outworking in the believer’s life (perseverance). A precious truth indeed – yet the CoD do not stop at this point, let alone that they would ‘confess’ that true believers “(...) *may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it (...)*” (WCF 18.3, see our first installment). In this article, the CoD also confess:

“And they are indeed certain according to the measure of their faith, by which they firmly believe that they are and always shall remain true and living members of the church, and that they have forgiveness of sins and life eternal.”

The CoD, in full agreement with the HC, confess: faith is assurance regarding “(...) *forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness, and salvation (...)*” (HC, Lord’s Day 7). Believers are assured according to the “*measure of their faith*” – the confessions do not deny that faith can vary, but still faith is assurance:

“Although knowing, agreeing, and trusting are supplied jointly, they are not constant or always present in us but do vary together. Sometimes as an activity they are entirely absent; yet they also mature together. When a person experiences growth in faith, all three increase jointly; however, a period of

decline takes place as well. We may observe variations of progress and weakening, of great acts of faith and of a total absence of such deeds of faith. In considering these distinctions, we use as starting point the thought that confidence, the certainty concerning our own salvation, is just as strong as knowledge. Confidence or trust can sometimes be absent, but then also God in many ways is a remote God.”[7] [8]

Assurance and church membership

The CoD V,10 confesses that, similar to the assurance of election (CoD I,12), the assurance of preservation and perseverance is based on God’s promises, received through a (living) faith.[9] Not all English versions accurately reflect the Dutch original. The CoD use the expression “*springs from*” instead of “*produced by*”, and starts with “*Hence...*”:

“Hence, this assurance does not spring from a certain private revelation besides or outside the Word, but from faith in the promises of God (...).”

This connection to CoD V,9, by using the word ‘hence’, should not be overlooked. Believers are assured, because faith is assurance. How can we receive the assurance of preservation? Does this assurance spring from a certain private revelation? Not at all! It springs from faith, because faith is assurance.

Faith is primarily assurance of present membership in the church, and out of this also “*springs*” the assurance of future membership:

“In this article, it is confessed that the believers have assurance according to the measure of their belief, that they are and always shall remain true and living members of the church. Members of the church! Therefore, as believers we may never follow our self-willed ways. We may nor be content by ourselves, or withdraw from the true church, or not join it (Belgic Confession, art. 28). The way to come to assurance is the way of the church with her means of grace. That line of thought is maintained in the Canons of Dort. Also in this chapter. Our calling is clear, if we want to receive and be confirmed in the assurance of perseverance: To the church! Listen to the Word! Use the

sacraments! Seek continually the ministry of reconciliation, the preaching of forgiveness of sins and eternal life. In that way we firmly and certainly believe that we are true, living members of the church and will always remain that (HC, Lord's Day 21)."[10]

The CoD do not pull apart 'assurance of preservation' and 'assurance of faith', but closely tie these together!

An only comfort

The CoD V,11 confesses that the assurance of faith and perseverance are not always felt. Assurance of faith and perseverance is according the "*measure of faith*" (CoD V,9), for faith – and faith alone – is assurance. In an edifying section on CoD V,5-15, prof. K. Schilder explains this as follows:

"That is my only comfort. Besides and above this, there is none. (...) For in times, when I miss the "feeling" of salvation (CoD V,5,11) I certainly do not keep a residue of comfort-by-faith, but the ratiocination of faith has been put aside for a time; in that ratiocination itself we feel, have experience. For those that through gross sins felt in the misery of such loss "suspend the exercise of faith" (CoD V,5), through which exercise indeed belongs the ratiocination of faith; and when they again perform the reckoning of faith, then therein and thereby immediately returns the "experience" of grace (CoD V,7). Why can this return? Because him who lacks "assurance of sense", based on what he observes through introspection, by looking inward, depends on the presence of "assurance of faith"? Or because he comforts himself with that which is "in or at him"? Definitely not: because he again exercises "faith in the promises of God" (CoD V,10); for those promises are "for our comfort" (!) most abundantly revealed and to those promises the Holy Spirit leads us back; and not through an immediate, self-sufficient, instant "enjoyment" that befalls us from above, but in a pursuit, a pursuing of a good conscience and good works (CoD V,10) returns the solid comfort, as conscious ratiocination of faith. For God is the Father of all comfort (CoD V,11); He provides with the temptation also "the" way of escape (an escape in all respects). The perseverance of the saints is no ground for comfort in and out of itself, but itself is revealed "for the

consolation” (CoD V,15); itself belongs to the promised benefits as well. Through this perseverance the saints persevere, e.g. also in the comforting through faith.”[11] (author’s emphasis, MV)

There is no assurance apart from faith:

“Therefore, brethren (...) let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith (...) Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful” (Hebr. 10:22-23).

C. Summary

The believer has assurance of election, the deepest ‘dimension’ of faith, when he or she takes into account God’s election *“before the foundation of the world”* (Eph. 1:4). The assurance of preservation springs from faith, by which believers *“firmly believe that they are and always shall remain true and living members of the church, and that they have forgiveness of sins and life eternal”* (CoD V,9).

The CoD are fully Scriptural, and in agreement with the HC, in confessing that faith is assurance.

[1] See C. Trimp, *Klank en Weerklank. Door prediking tot geloofservaring* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 1989): p. 138.

[2] D. van Dijk, ‘Kenmerken en hoofdstuk 1 § 12 van de Dordtse Leerregels’, *De Reformatie* 22/28 (March 7, 1953): p. 182. He points out that the Canons use 2 Cor. 13:5 as a proof text, in which Paul speaks to believers. As an aside, the ‘assurance of faith’ and the ‘assurance of election’ can be distinguished, but should not be driven apart; for instance, we fail to see how a believer who has ‘assurance of faith’ would at the same moment doubt his election: *“The assurance of election is inseparably related to the assurance of faith. It is its deepest dimension.”* [J. Kamphuis, *Begrensde ruimte. Een keuze uit artikelen en lezingen*

van prof. J. Kamphuis (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1996): p. 122 (author's emphasis, MV)].

[3] See A.N. Hendriks, 'Hoe zijn wij zeker van onze verkiezing?', *De Reformatie* 69/4 (Oct. 23, 1993): p. 63.

[4] C. Trimp, *op. cit.*, p. 144. Although the remark by Trimp (p. 138) that we can receive assurance of election by the marks of our faith should be questioned, as noted by A.N. Hendrik, *op. cit.*, p. 64 (fn. 21) and S. de Marie, 'Het reformatorsch gedachtegoed: Lijdelijkheid en bevindelijkheid (5)', *Gereformeerd Kerkblad De Bazuin* 2/44, url: <http://www.gereformeerdkerkbladdebazuin.nl/artikel/432>.

[5] Cited in C. Trimp, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

[6] This conclusion is reinforced by a minor, yet striking aspect of CoD I,16. In the original version it does not read: "*Some do not yet clearly discern in themselves a living faith in Christ, an assured confidence of heart (...)*", but: "*Some do not yet clearly discern in themselves a living faith in Christ, **or** an assured confidence of heart (...)*". This aspect is noted by A.N. Hendriks, 'Geloofszekerheid en de vruchten van de Heilige Geest II (Dordtse Leerregels)', *De Reformatie* 58/47 (Sep. 10, 1983): p. 751 (fn. 11). The word 'or' (Latin: *seu*) here denotes equivalence, not an alternative; in the CoD, a 'living faith' is an 'assured confidence'.

[7] S.G. de Graaf, *Het ware geloof* (Kampen: J.H. Kok NV, 1954): p. 139. The English translation is through S.G. de Graaf, *The true faith* (transl. by Rev. Richard Stienstra), url: <http://spindleworks.com/library/DeGraaf/DeGraafTheTrueFaith.pdf> and has been slightly adapted to more accurately reflect the Dutch original.

[8] Assurance in itself is always 100% certainty, e.g. a believer cannot be 80 or 90% 'sure' that he or she has forgiveness of sins. Also, faith is always 100% assurance ["(...) *by which they firmly believe(...)*", CoD V,9]. However, faith can, and should, grow: "*The example is not filling up a glass of water that was half-full - and half-empty. But the example is the growth of a seed, which contains everything the plant will be, into a mature plant*" [David J. Engelsma, 'Certain assurance', *The Standard Bearer* 80/1 (Jan. 15, 2004): p. 173].

In an edifying article on 'Scriptural distinctions with respect to 'faith', the late

prof. B. Holwerda discussed the distinctions between 'little faith' vs. 'great faith' and 'weak faith' vs. 'strong faith' [collected in B. Holwerda, *Populair wetenschappelijke bijdragen* (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1962): pp. 34-48]. He points out, using Scriptural examples, that:

- a) In Scripture, faith always is an act, an act-of-trust;
- b) A 'little faith' is an interruption of the activity of faith (cf. Matthew 8:26, which speaks about 'little faith', with Mark. 4:40, which speaks about 'no faith');
- c) A 'weak faith' is a faith with exceptions, it does not accept Christ and all his benefits (e.g. 1 Cor. 8:7);
- d) A 'small faith' like a mustard seed (Matt. 17:20) is enough, since faith does not take from its own stock, but grasps the infinite power of God;
- e) Since a 'small faith' is enough, we should not pray for an increase in faith (Luke 17:20); instead, we should pray that God confirms (against 'little faith') and strengthens (against 'weak faith') our faith.

[9] According to A.N. Hendriks, *op. cit.*, p. 750, there is no significance in the order of evidences, as in CoD V,10 the order is: a) 'promises', b) 'testimony of the Spirit', and c) 'clear conscience and good works', while in CoD V, 'Rejection of Errors', 7 the order is: a) 'marks peculiar to the children of God', and b) 'the very constant promises of God'. It should be taken into account that CoD V, 'Rejection of Errors', 7 rejects the Arminian error and therefore starts with the 'experience' of the saints (over against the Arminian error), while CoD V,10 is a positive confessional statement. Our assurance can be only based on God's promises.

[10] E. Knoop, *De Dordtse Leerregels dichterbij gebracht* (Kampen: Uitgeverij Van den Berg, 1992): pp. 167-168.

[11] K. Schilder, *Heidelbergse Catechismus*, vol I (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1947): p. 37.