

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 reformatorisch 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.

The Westminster Standards on the Assurance of Faith (4)

In this fourth installment we will discuss the Scriptural, Reformed teaching on the assurance of faith as taught in the Heidelberg Catechism (hereafter: HC). This teaching comes especially to the foreground in Lord's Day 7 (*"What is true faith?"*), Lord's Day 1 (*"What is your only comfort in life and death?"*) and Lord's Day 32 (*"...why must we yet do good works?"*).

A. Lord's Day 7: What is true faith?

The HC, Lord's Day 7, Q&A 21, defines faith as *"a sure knowledge" and "a firm confidence, that not only to others, but also to me, God has granted forgiveness of sins"*.

The object of faith

It should be noted that the HC not only teaches that assurance belongs to the 'essence' of faith (*"faith is..."*), but also that this assurance concerns the personal forgiveness of sins (*"also to me..."*). The assurance of faith, therefore, is not only an assurance about 'objective truth' (such as God's existence, Christ's substitutionary atonement, etc.), but also about being in *"the state of grace and salvation"* (as the WCF 18.1 words it). Prof. H. Bavinck correctly remarks:

"Faith (...) is by its very nature nothing other than the subjective, personal (passive in habitual faith, active in actual faith) acceptance of Christ with all his benefits".[1]

In her teaching on the assurance of faith, the HC stands in contrast with the WS;

the HC clearly goes so far “(...) as to teach that the special object of justifying faith is the favour of God towards us for Christ’s sake”, as the prominent Presbyterian commentator A.A. Hodge remarked (see our second installment).

Knowledge and confidence

If the special object of faith is God’s favour towards us, it is impossible to make a sharp distinction (let alone a *temporal* distinction) between ‘knowledge’ and ‘confidence’, as if the one is possible without the other. Bavinck rightly states:

“For the knowledge (cognition) as Calvin views it includes trust (fiducia), and trust in turn is not possible without knowledge. The two do not stand in juxtaposition, nor are they linked merely by the words “not only but also” (HC Q&A21, MV), but they are organically interconnected. In both of them what counts is the reception of Christ, a personal acceptance, not of a doctrine but of the person of Christ, as he is presented to us in the gospel”.[2]

Being or well-being

The HC clearly teaches that a firm confidence, assurance, inseparably belongs to faith. This is a Scriptural doctrine, as Hebrews 11:1 says: “Faith is the substance (‘firm confidence’, MV) of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen”. To cite Bavinck once again:

“This faith, finally, carries its own certainty with it (...) faith by its very nature includes complete certainty. (...) And when Rome rejected this certainty, the Reformation, especially Calvin, again asserted it in keeping with Scripture: “Faith is never ignorant of itself.” (...) This certainty, which relates both to the objective grace of God in Christ and to the believer’s subjective participation in it, is not an external additive to faith but is in principal integral to it from the start.”[3]

The whole distinction between ‘being’ and ‘well-being’ should be abandoned, as prof. K. Schilder stated in his argument against the (Further Reformation and

pietistic) distinction between a so-called 'refuge-taking faith' and 'assuring faith':

"We would like to see the couple in a relationship, "where love befalls as follows": the being (uncertain searching for refuge) is enough, but the well-being (to know oneself secure in the other) is reserved for special times."[4]
[5]

B. Lord's Day 1: What is your only comfort?

In our previous installment we came along some interpretations of the WS, such as that the WS speak about another *kind* of assurance, the 'assurance of sense' (which does not belong to the essence of faith) instead of the 'assurance of faith' (which belongs to the essence of faith). Is this view compatible with the teaching of the HC?

An only comfort

The HC in Lord's Day 1, Q&A 1, speaks about an only comfort in life and death, so any 'assurance of sense' (or any other assurance) is included in this comfort. How then do we receive this exclusive comfort?

To answer this question, we should take note that in Lord's Day 1 it is already a believer who is speaking. In his commentary on the HC, Schilder pointed out that this comfort is "*a rational consideration, 'ratiocination', syllogism*" which is "*in faith, on the authority of the Word*", which also includes the 'sense' of assurance:

"it does not foremost look unto his own assurance, to conclude from that to godly steadfastness; but the reverse: it "considers" (...) the God given covenant faithfulness and is thereby assured, also feels assured." (author's emphasis, MV)[6]

This 'starting point' of the HC excludes a distinction between the 'assurance of faith' and the 'assurance of sense'. There is an only comfort in the 'ratiocination'

of faith, and if there is something ‘extra’ that can be attained (such as an ‘assurance of sense’) this comfort would no longer be an only comfort.

Ultimately – although often unnoticed or denied by Presbyterians, see WCF 18.3 – the WS’ teaching that assurance does not belong to the essence of faith will lead to the search for something extraordinary, an ‘extra’ to faith. In our third installment we saw that J.R. Beeke (who speaks about the ‘quest’ (!) for full assurance) tries to bring Calvin and later ‘Reformed’ orthodoxy in agreement, and he does so by an appeal to, among others, Alexander Comrie.[7] [8] Schilder rightly opposed this distinction between ‘assurance of faith’ and ‘assurance of sense’ made by “(...) *English theologians cited by Alexander Comrie*”:

“For those who see things in this way there remains no conclusion but that there is an ordinary, and an extraordinary comfort: the assurance of faith distills the medicine of the ordinary, the assurance of sense the medicine of the extraordinary. The comfort of Lord’s Day 1 then in fact is no longer the only one in-life-and-in-death.” (author’s emphasis, MV)[9]

The Spirit assures

In Lord’s Day 7, Q&A 21, faith is not only defined as a firm confidence, but this article also professes: *“This faith the Holy Spirit works in my heart by the gospel”*. This Scriptural truth is also confessed in Lord’s Day 1: *“Therefore, by His Holy Spirit, he assures me of eternal life”*. Faith is founded upon God’s promises in Christ Jesus, and the Holy Spirit testifies of these promises. Faith is assurance. [10] [11]

C. Lord’s Day 32: Assurance by the fruits of faith

In the HC, Lord’s Day 32 is the first section on our thankfulness. It is important to keep this in mind: good works are not a means to attain assurance, but are integral to the life of the believer. The only true faith is a faith working through love (Gal. 5:6); a dead faith is an oxymoron. Therefore, we can be assured by the fruits of faith only if we have faith (which is founded on God’s promises alone). In

a sermon on Lord's Day 32, Schilder illustrates this with an example:

"Therefore, faith is proven by faith itself, through its fruits. Just as, when the organ plays, I know that its electrical blower is turned on and brings wind in the pipes, so I know that I believe and will remain a believer (...) For the believer his good work is indeed, if his faith remains, a fruit of thankfulness. But those who do not know that the organ works electrically, those who have not heard that, cannot say: the electrical blower is on, for the organ plays. Those who do not see the connection between the pipes and the electrical blower, do not make this connection. Only those who know his connection, say: the pipes sound, therefore, the electrical blower is turned on. And likewise: those who do not see the connection between good works and faith, cannot find evidence in the sounding pipes of my God-praising sentences that the electrical blower of my heart is turned on. And if I start doubting whether I have faith, and whether my good works can be traced back to faith, then there is no evidence. If I start doubting whether the electrical blower or a manual system delivers wind in the blowers, then no evidence can be provided." (author's emphasis, MV)[12]

Schilder concludes:

"If I have faith, then I can say: the fruits are there, so I am alive. But when I doubt for a second, and leave this doubt for what it is, then I could say: I did this and that, and therefore I belong to the believers - but that is wrong. Therefore, it (i.e. to look at good works, MV) does not help at all, when you doubt or are uncertain, nothing helps than only the Word. To say "yes" to God is a primordial obligation, and it does not help to have a list of fruits. Only this particular thing helps: God cannot lie, and clearly speaks to you personally: Come to me, I have no pleasure in dead people."(author's emphasis, MV)[13]

We do not receive an assurance "*founded*" upon good works, nor on "*inward evidence of grace*" (WCF 18.2): our assurance is based on God's promises in Christ Jesus, through living faith. Faith is assurance.

D. Summary

In the HC, the church confesses that faith is assurance. This is a Scriptural teaching, and we should loud and clearly refute any Presbyterian denial of this doctrine, in the words of David J. Engelsma:

“Presbyterian commentators on these statements acknowledge that the Westminster Standards teach that assurance belongs to the well-being of faith departs from the teaching of the Reformation. Usually, they frankly attribute this departure from the teaching of the Reformation to the influence of the Puritans (see A.A. Hodge, Robert Shaw, William Cunningham, and Barry H. Howson. (...)) Curiously, at the same time, these Presbyterian theologians strive mightily to get assurance back into the essence of faith in some respect. They make strange distinction, for example, between assurance of faith (supposedly of the essence of faith after all, but not experienced) and assurance of sense (experienced assurance, which is what assurance is by definition); or between absolute, unwavering assurance and doubtful, wavering assurance (which is no assurance), or between an objective assurance (of which a believer is supposed to be unconscious) and a conscious assurance (which is what assurance is by definition). Thus, these Presbyterians indicate deep unease with their and their creeds’ denial that faith is assurance, as well they might. The Bible is overwhelmingly clear and powerful, that faith is confidence, not doubt.”[14]

This is a Reformed, Calvinistic teaching:

“Briefly, he alone is truly a believer who, convinced by a firm conviction that God is a kindly and well-disposed Father toward him, promises himself all things on the basis of his generosity; who relying upon the promises of divine benevolence toward him, lays hold on an undoubted expectation of salvation.”[15]

In our final installment, DV, we will discuss the teaching on assurance in the Canons of Dort.

[1] H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics. Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation*, vol. IV (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 130. As we saw in our third installment, the *habitus/actus* distinction underlies much of the Puritan confusion about faith. In this citation, Bavinck apparently uses the term 'habitual faith' as synonym for regeneration: "*Faith increasingly became the name for that new, normative spiritual, and comprehensive, relationship in which God first of all (in regeneration or habitual faith) directs us to himself, and we, with all our capacities and powers (in actual faith), direct ourselves to God*" (p. 130). Elsewhere, Bavinck criticizes Alexander Comrie for emphasizing faith as a disposition ('*habitus*'), and quotes Gijsbertus Voetius: "*This [principle] cannot be called faith except by analogy and improperly by metonymy (substitute name, MV) of the cause or of the principle: it is no more faith than seed is a tree, or an egg a chicken, or a bulb a flower*" (*ibid.*, p.114 f.).

K. Schilder even more clearly points out the danger of the concept that faith is a seed (*habitus*) out of which the act (*actus*) of faith flows. He points out that the term *habitus* originally meant the 'habit', the characteristic property, of a person: "*Believing is: performing the act of faith. Believer is a description of the person in whom the act of faith occurs regularly, in whom the act determines his life (....) You can be a boxer without boxing all the time*" (K. Schilder, *Americana. Collegeverslagen der door Prof. Schilder in Amerika gehouden lezingen. April-Juni 1939*, url: http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/schi008amer01_01/schi008amer01_01_0005.php, p. 38).

[2] Bavinck, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

[3] Bavinck, *op. cit.*, p. 131. Bavinck sees the Reformed teaching on assurance as the (Scriptural) 'middle route' between the errors of (a) antinomianism (lit.: 'against the law', i.e. Christians are not bound to moral laws), which teaches faith as a merely 'rational' act, and (b) nomistic pietism, which teaches faith as a prerequisite 'condition' for salvation. Timothy A. Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 274, argues that the WS' teaching on assurance did not originate out of pastoral concerns (e.g. doubting believers in many congregations), but is influenced by the response of neonomianism against antinomianism.

[4] K. Schilder, *Heidelbergse Catechismus*, vol II (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre,

1949), p. 580. The Further (or Dutch Second) Reformation was a theological 'movement' in the Netherlands from roughly 1600-1750 which was influenced by English Puritanism.

[5] W.G. de Vries, 'Centrum en grenzen der kerk XIII', *De Reformatie* 46/9 (1971): pp. 317-318 points out the danger of the distinction between *esse* ('being') and *bene esse* ('well-being') with regards to the church (e.g. discipline belongs to the *bene esse* of the church) and faith (e.g. assurance belongs to the *bene esse* of faith), and calls it a "(...) *philosophical distinction that has had wrong influences on Reformed theology*". He points out that this distinction can lead to two dangerous approaches: either the well-being is seen as something less important (e.g. discipline as a mark of the true church is not 'essential'), or it is seen as an 'ideal state' (e.g. proper discipline should be strived for, but can never be fully attained).

[6] K. Schilder, *Heidelbergse Catechismus*, vol I (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1947): p. 33.

[7] Especially in J.R. Beeke, 'Does assurance belong to the essence of faith? Calvin and the Calvinists', *The Master's Seminary Journal* 5/1 (Spring 1994): pp. 43-71.

[8] David J. Engelsma, *op. cit.*, p. 13 rightly points out that the erroneous Puritan doctrine on assurance already shows up in the title of Beeke's book "*The Quest for Full Assurance*" in speaking about the 'quest for', instead of 'gift of', assurance.

[9] K. Schilder, *op. cit.*, p. 34. Schilder also points to the fact that Lord's Day 1 does not speak about the grounds for comfort, but the content (Ursinus used the word 'parts') of our comfort, which is 'considered' through faith, and argues that anyone who professes Lord's Day 1 is not on the road towards comfort, but has full comfort.

[10] The WCF 18.2 says that our assurance is founded upon, among others, "(...) *the testimony of the Spirit, (...) which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption*". It seems better to avoid the word 'founded' in this respect - our faith is founded upon God's promises in Christ Jesus. A.N. Hendriks, 'Het getuigenis van de Heilige Geest in gereformeerde belijdenissen', *De Reformatie* 72/9 (no. 1996): pp. 189-192 notes that in the WCF the testimony of the Holy Spirit receives "*an own place and*

function in service of the assurance of faith" (author's emphasis, MV), although he sees the same distinction in the Canons of Dort, V, 10. We hope to discuss this article of the Canons of Dort in our next installment. The order of 'foundations' in WCF 18.2 may suggest that there is first 'the divine truth of the promises', then 'the inward evidence of grace', and finally 'the testimony of adoption'. At least some Puritan commentators see the first foundation ('divine truth of the promises') as something that tends to "*directly strengthen our assured hope*" (A.A. Hodge, see our second installment) but to which the testimony of the Spirit is added; however, being 'directly strengthened' by God's promises is already the testimony of the Spirit, who also assures us of the truth of Scripture (which 'knowledge' is always combined with 'firm confidence').

[11] Many Puritan (and Further Reformation) authors taught the 'sealing with the Holy Spirit' as a separate moment in the spiritual life of believers. Ephesians 1:13-14, although often used as a proof text for this error, leaves no room for this teaching: the message of this text is that when the Ephesians came to faith (which was probably recent for several of them), they received this sealing immediately.

[12] K. Schilder, *Preken*, deel III (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1954): pp. 287-288. Schilder wrote this in an era when some church organs still had a manual system (pedals) by which wind was blown through the pipes.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 288

[14] David J. Engelsma, 'Faith is Assurance', *The Standard Bearer* 80/19 (Aug. 2004): pp. 436-438.

[15] J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* III,2,16 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960): p. 562.

The Westminster Standards on the

Assurance of Faith (3)

In our previous installment we saw that Presbyterian theologian A.A. Hodge openly admitted that the Westminster Standards depart from the teaching of Calvin and the Heidelberg Catechism. Some modern theologians, however, try to lessen (or deny) a gap between the early Reformers and later 'Reformed orthodoxy' (e.g. the Puritans).[1] In this third installment, we will first discuss this attempt to reconcile Calvin and later 'Reformed Orthodoxy'. Second, after discussing the Puritan 'method' of attaining assurance, the scholastic root of the (erroneous) Puritan teaching on assurance will be examined.

Calvin the Puritan?

John Calvin (1509-1564) defined faith as follows:

"a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence towards us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit".[2]

Some theologians, however, note that Calvin's works contain passages that seemingly contradict this statement. Theologian J.R. Beeke points out that Calvin at several places speaks about doubts in the believer, and in his commentary on John 20:3 allegedly even speaks about 'faith without awareness':

"There being so little faith, or rather almost no faith, both in the disciples and in the women, it is astonishing that they had so great zeal; and, indeed, it is not possible that religious feelings led them to seek Christ. Some seed of faith, therefore, remained in their hearts, but quenched for a time, so that they were not aware of having what they had. Thus the Spirit of God often works in the elect in a secret manner. In short, we must believe that there was some concealed root, from which we see fruit produced. Though this feeling of

piety, which they possessed, was confused, and was accompanied by much superstition, still I give to it — though inaccurately — the name of faith, because it was only by the doctrine of the Gospel that it was produced, and it had no tendency but towards Christ. From this seed there at length sprang a true and sincere faith, which, leaving the sepulchre, ascended to the heavenly glory of Christ.”[3]

Beeke explains these ‘contradictions’ by pointing out some ‘principles’ that underlie Calvin’s approach to this issue, especially:

1. The difference between the *definition* of faith (‘faith as it ought to be’) and the *experience* of faith (‘faith as it is’), and;
2. The difference between the ‘*germ (or seed) of faith*’ and the ‘*consciousness of faith*’.[4]

This leads Beeke to the conclusion that both Calvin and the Puritans agreed that “*assurance may be possessed without always knowing it*”.[5] In his thinking, this is the ‘umbrella’ under which Calvin and the Puritans can be united. The difference between Calvin and the WS then becomes a difference in emphasis:

“Calvin was defining faith in its assuring character; the Confession was describing what assurance is as a self-conscious, experimental phenomenon”.[6]

Calvin the Reformer

Beeke’s view on Calvin’s teaching on assurance has to be challenged to a considerable extent.

Firstly, as Beeke himself notes, the fact that the feeling of assurance increases and decreases in proportion to faith does in itself not weaken the link between assurance and faith.[7] Even when faith is not always what it ‘ought to be’, it can still contain assurance according to the ‘measure’ of faith.

Secondly, Calvin did not teach a thing like 'faith without awareness' as the Puritans did. Williams rightly criticizes Beeke in this respect:

"The (Puritan, MV) method for becoming aware of this assurance is through observing the evidences within self. In other words, this awareness is obtained through a reflexive act of faith by the means of the practical syllogism. (...) In contrast to this teaching, Calvin taught that one cannot produce these evidences, unless he first "feels" and "tastes" that God is merciful to him. The point being made is that the person must be aware of God's graciousness to him; this is not merely a speculative assurance, but it involves a conscious awareness. "We must remember," Calvin declares, "that the beginning of repentance is a sense of God's mercy." Thus, by stating that one must become aware through evidences or by reflecting upon these evidences destroys the role of assurance in Calvin's teaching. An aware assurance is the means to these evidences (emphasis MV)".[8]

Calvin did indeed speak about the 'seed of faith', however, this is different from 'faith without awareness': it is the root out of which faith springs.[9]

Thirdly, according to Calvin, as we saw, faith is a 'firm and certain knowledge' that is 'revealed to our mind'. This definition already contains the notion of 'self-consciousness' and 'experience': faith is knowledge, of a firm and certain character! The Puritans (and Beeke in their course) do not merely describe assurance as an experiential phenomenon, but change its definition by asserting that 'assurance without awareness' is possible. If assurance does not entail 'knowledge', then it may not be rightly called assurance anymore.

Well-being of faith

In the WS, assurance is an 'extra' to faith, something that belongs to the *well-being* of faith, and not to its *being*, its *essence*. One Puritan, Thomas Brooks (1608-1680), even puts it as follows:

“Now though this full assurance is earnestly desired, and highly prized, and the want of it much lamented, and the enjoyment of it much endeavored after by all saints, yet it is only obtained by a few. Assurance is a mercy too good for most men’s hearts, it is a crown too weighty for most men’s heads. Assurance is optimum maximum, the best and greatest mercy; and therefore God will only give it to his best and dearest friend. Augustus in his solemn feasts, gave trifles to some, but gold to others. Honor and riches, etc., are trifles that God gives to the worst of men; but assurance is that ‘tried gold,’ Rev. 3:18, that God only gives to tried friends. Among those few that have a share or portion in the special love and favor of God, there are but a very few that have an assurance of his love. It is one mercy for God to love the soul, and another mercy for God to assure the soul of his love.”[10]

How can this ‘optimum maximum’ be arrived at? As we saw in our first installment, the WS point to three ‘foundations’, of which the last two (the ‘inward evidences of grace’ and the ‘testimony of the Spirit’) are especially important in this respect.

Syllogisms

The Puritans used two methods of logic reasoning by which assurance could be attained, so-called *syllogisms*. A syllogism is a logical argument that has a general statement (called the ‘major premise’), a specific statement (called the ‘minor premise’) and leads to a conclusion, for example:

Major premise: All Dutch people are thrifty.

Minor premise: Klaas is Dutch.

Conclusion: Therefore, Klaas is thrifty.

The Puritans used so-called ‘practical syllogisms’ and ‘mystical syllogisms’. The practical syllogism was, as Beeke describes, “*based on the believer’s sanctification and good works*” and goes as follows:

“Major premise: According to Scripture, only those who possess saving faith will receive the Spirit’s testimony that their lives manifest fruits of sanctification and good works.

Minor premise: I cannot deny that by the grace of God I have received the Spirit’s testimony that I manifest fruits of sanctification and good works.

Conclusion: I have saving faith”.[11]

The mystical syllogism focused on the believer’s inward life of faith and goes as follows:

“Major premise: According to Scripture, only those who possess saving faith will so experience the Spirit’s confirmation of inward grace and godliness that self will decrease and Christ will increase.

Minor premise: I cannot deny that by the grace of God I experience the Spirit’s testimony confirming inward grace and godliness such that self decreases and Christ increases.

Conclusion: I am a partaker of saving faith.”[12]

As Beeke notes: “By the 1640s, Puritans were accepting the mystical syllogism on par with the practical syllogism”.[13] This was the ‘mindset’ of the Puritan ‘fathers’ at the Westminster Assembly! Of course, a confession should not be judged according to the opinion of its authors, but in the light of Scripture. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the WS, by speaking about the assurance being “*founded*” (WCF, section 18.2) upon the ‘inward evidence of grace’ and the ‘testimony of the Spirit’, show traces of this Puritan thinking.

Habitus and actus

In these syllogisms the focus is on answering the question “*Do I have true faith*”? As we saw, this stems from a difference that is made between, on the one hand, the ‘germ of faith’ (and the ‘assurance of faith’), and, on the other hand, the ‘consciousness of faith’ (and the ‘assurance of sense’). This Puritan distinction is

related to the concept of '*habitus*' and '*actus*' of faith. The *habitus* (principle) of faith is given at regeneration, and can be present without the *actus* (act) of faith. Assurance becomes present when out of the *habitus* the *actus* develops.

This scholastic distinction between *habitus* and *actus* has old philosophical roots in the Aristotelian concept that all things have 'potentiality' (*habitus*) and 'actuality' (*actus*). In theology, this leads to the idea that man is fully passive in receiving faith ('potentially'), and out of this springs faith ('actually'), which is recognized by a practical and/or mystical syllogism.[14]

This sort of scholastic thought has done much damage to the church; philosophical and scholastic terms should be used with much care and caution, if at all.

In our next installment, DV, we will discuss the rich Scriptural, Reformed teaching on the assurance of faith.

[1] A main proponent of this 'thesis of continuity' is prof. Richard A. Muller, currently professor of Historical Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary. A defender of this 'thesis' with regards to the 'assurance of faith' who has gained some popularity is Joel R. Beeke, president of the Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary and pastor of the Heritage Reformed Congregations (a split-off from the Netherlands Reformed Congregations). His defense of the Puritan view on assurance is supported by this 'thesis of continuity', and motivated by his own 'Puritan' thinking. We will shortly discuss his (erroneous) view on assurance in this installment. It should be noted that this approach to the assurance of faith (and this interpretation of the WS) has historical precedents in the 'Marrow Controversy' in Scotland (early 18th century, with Thomas Boston, Ralph Erskine and Ebenezer Erskine, authors that are still widely read in Puritan circles).

[2] J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster

Press, 1960): p. 551.

[3] J.R. Beeke, *The quest for full assurance. The legacy of Calvin and his successors* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2007), pp. 43-44.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 44-46 and pp. 51-52.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 53.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 53.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 52.

[8] Timothy A. Williams, *The Heart of Piety – An Encouraging Study in Calvin’s Doctrine of Assurance* (self-published e-book, 2010): pp. 269-270.

[9] In his commentary on Joshua 2:11, Calvin says about Rahab: “(...) *she gives proof to her election, and that from that seed a faith was germinating which afterwards attained its full growth*”, see J. Calvin, *Commentary on Joshua*, url: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom07.v.i.html>. C. Graafland, *De zekerheid van het geloof. Een onderzoek naar de geloofsbeschouwing van enige vertegenwoordigers van Reformatie en Nadere Reformatie* (Amsterdam: Bolland, 1961), pp. 41-44 points out that Calvin with the expression ‘seed of faith’ refers to the unshakable Word of God.

[10] Thomas Brooks, ‘Heaven on Earth: a Serious Discourse Touching a Well-Grounded Assurance’ in *The Works of Thomas Brooks* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1866), url: <https://thepuritans1.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/thomasbrooksvol-2.pdf>, vol. 2, p. 335. This is quoted in David J. Engelsma, “*The Gift of Assurance*” (South Holland, Il.: Evangelism Committee of the Protestant Reformed Church, 2009), url: http://www.prca.org/pamphlets/Pamphlet_109.pdf, p. 10.

[11] J.R. Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality* (Grand Rapids Mi.: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), p. 180.

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 181.

[14] A good discussion (in Dutch) of the *habitus/actus* distinction, answering the

‘thesis of continuity’ mentioned above, can be found in C. Ouwendorp, *Jeruzalem en Athene – Een blijvende worsteling in de theologie* (Delft: Eburon, 2012), chapter 8.

The Westminster Standards on the Assurance of Faith (2)

In this second installment, we will discuss a Presbyterian explanation of the Westminster Standard’s teaching on the assurance of faith. We will mainly follow the commentary on the Westminster Confession by Presbyterian theologian A.A. Hodge (1823-1886).[1] Other commentators on the assurance of faith in the WS basically follow the same explanation.[2]

Full assurance

In the first installment we saw that the WS speak about a ‘full assurance’ of faith. Hodge noted this as well and comments:

“But since true faith exists in various degrees of strength, and since its exercises are sometimes intermitted, it follows that the assurance which accompanies true faith is not always a full assurance” (author’s emphasis).[3]

Is this a correct explanation of the WS? In our first installment we saw that the phrase ‘full’ or ‘infallible’ assurance in the WS does not refer primarily to the *degree* of faith, but to the certainty of the believer that he or she is in the state of grace. Perhaps Hodge’s commentary is fitting with section 14.3 of the WCF, but

certainly not with WCF Chapter 18 and LC Q&A 81!

In this commentary, Hodge seems indeed to have had section 14.3 in mind, for after this comment he goes on to write:

“Besides this, the phrase “full or infallible assurance”, in this Chapter (i.e. WCF chapter 18, MV), does not relate to the certainty of our faith or trust as to the truth of the object upon which the faith rests – that is, the divine promise of salvation in Christ – but to the certainty of our hope or belief as to our own personal relation to Christ and eternal salvation” (editor’s emphasis).[4]

Here, Hodge correctly presents the teaching of the WS, as summarized in our first installment: a) the WS speak about the assurance of being in the state of grace, and b) this assurance is seen as non-essential to faith.

Assurance of hope

Hodge in length explains this teaching of the WS: according to him, the Standards speak about the ‘assurance of hope’ (Heb. 6:11) instead of the ‘assurance of faith’ (Heb. 10:22). The latter is a faith in the truth of Christ’s sufficiency and promises, while the first is the persuasion that we are true believers. The ‘assurance of hope’ is also called an ‘assurance of sense’, because it rests upon the inward sense the soul has about the reality of its own spiritual experiences:

“The first (i.e. assurance of faith, MV) is of the essence of faith, and terminates directly upon Christ and his promise, and hence is called the direct act of faith. The latter (assurance of hope, MV) is not of the essence of faith, but its fruit, and is called the reflex act of faith, because it is drawn as an inference from the experience of the graces of the Spirit which the soul discerns when it reflects upon its own consciousness. God says that whosoever believes is saved – That is the object of direct faith. I believe – That is the matter of conscious experience. Therefore I am saved – That is the matter of inference and the essence of full assurance” (author’s emphasis).[5]

Three grounds

In our first installment, we saw that the WS' teaching on assurance also had a third aspect, namely the 'three grounds' on which the assurance ('assurance of hope', as we just learned) is derived.

According to Hodge, the first ground of assurance ('the divine truth of the promises of salvation') in itself is not the assurance, it *induces* assurance:

"assurance of the truth of the promise tends, in connection with a sense of our personal reliance upon it, directly to strengthen our assured hope that it will be fulfilled in our case also."[6]

The three foundation of assurance (the others being the 'inward evidence of grace' and 'the testimony of the Holy Spirit', see first installment) are all put together in the same framework by Hodge: faith includes trust, trust works hope, and the 'fullness of hope' is assurance:

"Full assurance, therefore, which is the fullness of hope resting on the fullness of faith, is a state of mind which is the office of the Holy Ghost to induce in our minds in connection with the evidence or our gracious character above stated".[7]

The Calvinists against Calvin?

Is this a Biblical doctrine on the assurance of faith, is it Reformed? Before we answer this question, let us take a look at how Hodge believes this doctrine relates to what the Reformers and 'some Reformed confessions' teach:

"The Reformers (...) went so far as to teach that the special object of justifying faith is the favour of God towards us for Christ's sake. Therefore to believe is to be assured of our own personal salvation. This Luther, Melancthon and Calvin taught. This is the doctrine taught in the Augsburg Confession and

Heidelberg Catechism. It is not, however, taught in any other of the Reformed Confessions, and, as will be seen below, is not the doctrine of our Standards" (emphasis MV).[8]

In our next installment, we will look at an approach to bring Calvin and that which is called later 'Reformed orthodoxy' in agreement.

[1] A.A. Hodge, *A Commentary on the Confession of Faith - with questions of theological students and Bible classes* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1869).

[2] See e.g. F.R. Beattie, *The Presbyterian Standards: An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Richmond, Da.: The Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1896): p. 241 f., J. Macpherson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1881): p. 113 f., and G.I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1964): p. 131 f..

[3] A.A. Hodge, *op. cit.*, p. 330.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 330.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 331.

[6] *Ibid.*, .p. 325.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 327.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 325.