

# 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.

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## 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 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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](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.