

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.