

The Westminster Standards on the Assurance of Faith (1)

The assurance of faith is not merely a theoretical subject in theology, but has immense practical implications for every believer. Many Christians have questions such as: *“Is my faith real?”*, or: *“How can I be certain that there is no eternal damnation, but salvation in Jesus Christ?”*

The Westminster Standards, a group of 17th century confessional documents, are among the most widespread confessions in present-day Christianity, upheld by many Reformed and Presbyterian churches. These Standards contain several statements regarding the assurance of faith. In a series of installments we will take a closer look at the doctrine of these Standards concerning the assurance of faith, and test whether this doctrine is according to Scripture.[1]

In the articles on the Westminster Standards the following abbreviations will be used:

LC	-	Westminster Larger Catechism
WCF	-	Westminster Confession of Faith
WS	-	Westminster Standards

In this first installment we will provide an overview of the Westminster Standards' doctrine concerning the assurance of faith.

Full assurance

The Westminster Confession of Faith (hereafter: WCF) has the following statement on faith in section 14.3:

“This faith is different in degrees, weak or strong; may be often and many ways assailed, and weakened, but gets the victory: growing up in many to the attainment of a full assurance, through Christ, who is both the author and finisher of our faith.”

In “many” believers (not necessarily in *all* believers, apparently) faith grows up to “a full assurance”. This section implies that, according to the WCF, ‘full assurance’ is not of the essence of faith; rather, it is a result, a fruit of faith. What is meant by ‘full assurance’? Is this a special kind of assurance, to be distinguished from another sort of assurance?

State of grace

In chapter 18 the WCF elaborates on the assurance of faith, under the heading “Of the assurance of grace and salvation”. In section 18.1 the WCF teaches:

“Although hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favor of God, and estate of salvation (which hope of theirs shall perish): yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed.”

The assurance spoken about by the WCF is the certainty of a Christian whether he or she is in “the state of grace”.

Three foundations

In section 18.2 the WCF goes on to provide a definition of this ‘certainty’:

“This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God, which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.”

This article has two notable aspects. Firstly, the WCF here defines three foundations for an ‘infallible assurance’: (a) divine promises of salvation; (b) inward evidence of grace, and; (c) the testimony of the Spirit.

Secondly, the ‘certainty’ of the believer whether he or she is ‘in the state of grace’ is defined as *“an infallible assurance of faith”*. This explains why in the WCF section 14.3 is spoken about a ‘full assurance’ – this is similar to the ‘infallible assurance’, which is the assurance of a believer that he or she is in ‘the state of grace’.

Assurance and essence

In section 18.3 the WCF elaborates on this ‘certainty’ or ‘infallible assurance’ and says this *“does not so”* belong to the essence of faith that a true believer may not wait long before attaining it (see underlined part):

“This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it: yet, being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto. And therefore it is the duty of everyone to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure, that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love

and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance; so far is it from inclining men to looseness.”

In WCF section 18.3 the phrase “*does not so belong to the essence of faith*” could be interpreted as saying that assurance belongs to the essence of faith, but not “so” (i.e. ‘in such a way’) that occasionally a believer could not wait for, or lose, this assurance. In this way, it may be argued, assurance still belongs to the essence of faith. This interpretation, however, is excluded by the Larger Catechism (hereafter: LC) Q&A 81, which explicitly denies that ‘assurance of grace’ belongs to the essence of faith:

Q. 81. Are all true believers at all times assured of their present being in the state of grace, and that they shall be saved?

A. Assurance of grace and salvation not being of the essence of faith, true believers may wait long before they obtain it; and, after the enjoyment thereof, may have it weakened and intermitted, through manifold distempers, sins, temptations, and desertions; yet are they never left without such a presence and support of the Spirit of God as keeps them from sinking into utter despair.

It should be noted that the LC Q&A 81 does not speak about a ‘full’ or ‘infallible’ assurance, even although in Q&A 80 it used the wording of the WCF (“*Can true believers be infallibly assured that they are...*”), but simply speaks about being assured of “*their present being in the state of grace*” and the “*assurance of grace and salvation*”. This confirms what we derived already from the WCF section 18.1 and section 18.2, namely that the Standards define ‘full’ or ‘infallible’ assurance as the assurance of being in the state of grace.

In a nutshell...

We can summarize the teaching of the Westminster Standards on assurance of faith as follows:

1. 'Full' or 'infallible' assurance of faith is the certainty of a believer that he or she is in the 'state of grace' (WCF 14.3, 18.1 and LC Q&A 81);
2. This 'infallible assurance' has three foundations: (a) divine promises of salvation; (b) inward evidence of grace, and; (c) the testimony of the Spirit (WCF 18.2);
3. This 'infallible assurance' does not belong to the essence of faith, thus true believers may have to wait long before they obtain this assurance, or may have it weakened or intermitted (WCF 18.3 and LC Q&A 81).

In our next installment, DV, we will take a look at a common Presbyterian interpretation of these statements.

[1] The author of these articles is M.R. Vermeer