

THE
Gift
OF
Assurance



Prof. David J. Engelsma

About the author

The approach of the author, David J. Engelsma, in the pamphlet to the precious doctrine of assurance is the approach of a pastor and teacher. The author received his theological training from the Protestant Reformed Seminary. He was ordained into the ministry in 1963 and served as pastor of Loveland Protestant Reformed Church from 1963-1974 and as pastor of the Protestant Reformed Church of South Holland from 1974-1988.

In 1988 he was appointed to the chair of Dogmatics and Old Testament Studies in the Protestant Reformed Seminary where he served faithfully until being declared emeritus in 2008. He has been a staunch and vigorous defender of the Reformed faith.

As editor of the Reformed periodical, *The Standard Bearer*, for many years, he has written many articles in defense of the biblical Reformed faith. He has authored several books such as: *Better to Marry*, *Common Grace Revisited: A Response to Richard J. Mouw's He Shines in All That's Fair*, *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers*, *Hyper-Calvinism And The Call Of The Gospel*, *Marriage*, *The Mystery Of Christ And The Church*, *Prosperous Wicked and Plagued Saints: An Exposition of Psalm 73*, *Reformed Education*, *The Sixteenth-Century Reformation of the Church*, and *The Reformed Faith of John Calvin: the Institutes in Summary*.

Published by the
EVANGELISM COMMITTEE
of the
Protestant Reformed Church
P.O. Box 478,
South Holland, Illinois 60473

Ph: (708) 333-1314
E-mail: shevangelism@juno.com
Website: <http://www.southhollandprc.org>

Additional copies of this booklet, tapes, and literature
can be obtained by contacting the above listing.

First Printing 2009

Cover:
A special thanks to Ryan Worries
for the cover design.

Contents

	page
Foreword	3
Scripture: Romans 8:1-17	5
Introduction	6
Controversy over Assurance	8
Assurance, an Indispensable Work of the Spirit	18
Biblical Doctrine: Sealing	20
Sealed, When and How?	22
Witnessing with Our Spirit	30
Justified by Faith	33
The Assurer	39
By the Gospel of Grace	40
Beyond “Mere Faith”	46
By the Truth	49
Whom the Spirit Assures	51
.....	
ADDITIONAL REFORMED PAMPHLETS	55
Special Tape Albums:	59
Order Form	62

Foreword

by Rev. Nathan Langerak, pastor of
the South Holland Protestant Reformed Church

The Evangelism Committee of the Protestant Reformed Church of South Holland presents this pamphlet to the reading public with enthusiasm. The truth that the author of this pamphlet presents is of the greatest interest to the life of the church and the child of God in the world. It is the precious truth of the assurance of one's salvation, that is, the absolute assurance and confidence that one is elect, a child of God, and the heir of all the blessings of salvation that are ours in the cross of Jesus Christ and by the application of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. It is in the confidence of this truth that the Apostle trumpets in Romans 8 that the believer, in the face of a host of differing trials and tribulations, is more than a conqueror. About this same confidence the Apostle says in 1 Corinthians 15 that the absence of it makes us of all men most miserable.

Over against this precious truth of the assurance of salvation the author earnestly contends with the error that, under the guise of piety, inexcusably robs many souls of this comfort of the gospel by making assurance a fruit of our working, and by denying that assurance is of the essence of faith.

The error is serious. The author likens it to Arminianism and the Romish works righteousness. He thoroughly demonstrates this severe, but just, condemnation of this error and exposes it as a theology of doubt and a form of classic mysticism.

The error is also widespread. It is promoted in books by renowned authors. It is preached from the pulpits of many churches that have the name Reformed. It is accepted among Reformed and Presbyterian theologians as an accurate teaching of Calvinistic and Reformed spirituality.

The doctrine that he teaches over against this sickly mysticism is the wholly wonderful and gracious gift of assurance of one's own salvation by the work of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. This is not the exclusive possession of a few "super-saints" who have, after a life-long quest, finally attained this assurance by their work. This is the gift of the Holy Spirit to all of God's people, the young and the old, the new convert and the aged saint, and the parent and the child.

The author's treatment of this glorious—and comforting—truth is a treatment by a pastor and a teacher who ministered to God's people in the churches and who in the seminary taught others so to preach the gospel as the balm of Gilead. Our prayer in publishing this pamphlet is we believe similar to the author's in writing it: that the exposure of a prevalent error to which many have been held captive and the clear explanation of the truly Reformed and biblical doctrine of assurance, might deliver those in bondage to a theology of doubt into the freedom, comfort, and peace of the precious gift of assurance.

Scripture: Romans 8:1-17

¹ *There is* therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.

³ For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh:

⁴ That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

⁵ For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit.

⁶ For to be carnally minded *is* death; but to be spiritually minded *is* life and peace.

⁷ Because the carnal mind *is* enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.

⁸ So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹ But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.

¹⁰ And if Christ *be* in you, the body *is* dead because of sin; but the Spirit *is* life because of righteousness.

¹¹ But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you.

¹² Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh.

¹³ For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.

¹⁴ For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.

¹⁵ For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.

¹⁶ The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God:

¹⁷ And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.

The Gift of Assurance

Introduction

The Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Jesus Christ causes the believing child of God to know his own salvation with certainty. The Spirit gives assurance of salvation. This is an especially vital and precious work of the Spirit.

Assurance is an especially vital and important work of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. When in John 14-17 He promised the Holy Spirit to His church, Jesus called this Spirit the “Comforter”: “The Father...shall give you another Comforter” (John 14:16). As the other Comforter of the church and the individual member of the church, the Spirit comforts us with the assurance that our sins are forgiven; with the assurance that we have been given by the Father to Jesus Christ as His people; with the assurance that we are united to Christ in the covenant of grace; and with the assurance that one day we will be with Christ where He is in heaven. In short, the Spirit comforts us that we were saved from eternity past, are saved now, and will be saved everlastingly.

Lacking this assurance, we are not comforted, but are terribly uncomfortable, indeed, terrified. Failing to give this assurance, the Spirit is no Comforter at all.

Indicating how important the assurance of His people by the other Comforter was to Jesus, when He said farewell Jesus declared, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you...Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:27). Peace is the experience of being reconciled to God, of being in a relation of friendship with God on the basis of the forgiveness of sins. And this peace for each of us is *assurance* that God is my friend and Father for Jesus’ sake. There is no peace for anyone, if he lacks assurance of his own salvation, but only terror. Of course, this peace is due to the work of the Comforter within us assuring us of God’s love for us, Christ’s death for us, and our own personal salvation.

Assurance is especially vital and precious to us ourselves. Without assurance, our heart is very much troubled and afraid. Doubt of salvation is the worst fear of all the fears to which humans are liable.

Assurance of salvation is an aspect of salvation itself. God wills, not only that we be saved, but also that we *know* that we are saved. Then, and only then, do we enjoy salvation. Then, and only then, can we praise and thank Him, so that He is glorified by us, which is the ultimate purpose of salvation. One who lacks assurance cannot thank, praise, and glorify God.

Salvation itself is experiential, involving our conscious certainty of salvation, for example, justification, the chief benefit of salvation. Justification is not simply the forgiveness of sins. Justification is the forgiveness *in the forum of the believer's consciousness*, as the Protestant Reformation has taught us.

What good is salvation to me, if I do not *know* it, if I live in *doubt* of it?

What good is the Comforter to me, if I cannot confess, truthfully, concerning myself personally, what the Heidelberg Catechism puts on the lips of every man, woman, and child who believes the gospel of Jesus Christ from the heart in its first question and answer:

[My only comfort in life and death is] that I...belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ, who with his precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and redeemed me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must work together for my salvation.¹

¹ Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 1, in Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, repr. 1966), 307, 308. The explanation of this personal assurance of every believer is given by the Catechism when it adds, "Wherefore, by his Holy Spirit, he [Jesus Christ]

Controversy over Assurance

It is deplorable that the Spirit's work of assuring believers and the true, spiritual children of believers is controversial. I do not now refer to the open denial of the possibility of the assurance of salvation by the Roman Catholic Church, by all churches that proclaim the false gospel of Arminianism, and by the proponents of the covenant theology of the Federal [Covenant] Vision in reputedly Reformed and Presbyterian churches. By virtue of their common teaching that salvation is conditional, that is, dependent upon the will and works of the saved sinner, Rome, churches embracing the lie of free will, and the Federal [Covenant] Vision all openly proclaim that saints can fall away into eternal perdition. This is the denial of assurance of salvation with a vengeance.²

also assures me of eternal life.” Assurance is an aspect of Jesus' saving work, with redemption and preservation. The reason for the Catechism's confidence that every believer has assurance, so that he can honestly confess the first question and answer, is that Jesus assures of eternal life every one whom He has redeemed. For the Catechism, one might as well deprive some whom Christ redeemed of the work of preservation, or of the work of making them willing and ready to live to Christ, as to deprive them of the Spirit's work of assurance.

² For Rome's denial of assurance, see the Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Sixth Session (“Decree of Justification”), chapters 12, 13, in Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1890), 103, 104); for the Arminian denial of assurance, see the “Opinions of the Remonstrants [Arminians],” D. (“The Opinion of the Remonstrants with respect to the fifth article, which concerns Perseverance”), in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, ed. Peter Y. De Jong (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), 227-229; for the denial of assurance by the men of the Federal [Covenant] Vision, see my *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers: Sovereign Grace in the Covenant* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2005), 135-232. A representative statement by a leading spokesman for the Federal [Covenant] Vision is in order: “Those who ultimately prove to be reprobate may be in covenant with God. They may enjoy for a season the blessings of the covenant, including the forgiveness of sins, adoption, possession of the kingdom, sanctification, etc., and yet apostatize and fall short of the grace of God...*The apostate doesn't forfeit 'apparent*

But I refer to the controversy over assurance raised by the false teaching about the Holy Spirit and assurance of many, perhaps the majority, of the Puritans in the late sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. These Puritans taught that the Spirit saves many whom He does not assure of salvation. From many of those whom He does finally assure of salvation He withholds assurance for a long time—*years, many years*—after their conversion and coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Some regenerated believers never receive the gift of assurance. These miserable souls must live all their troubled life and then die without assurance, without ever being able to confess the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism, even though God elected them, Christ died for them, and the Spirit regenerated them and united them to Christ. Expressions by leading Puritans and the actual condition of churches held in bondage by this teaching leave the distinct impression that those believers who never receive assurance, but die in doubt, are the majority.

These Puritans taught that assurance is not so much the gift of the Holy Spirit as it is the work of the church member himself. Having convinced believers that they (the believers) had not received assurance with their faith, these Puritans then exhorted the believers to pray fervently, to work arduously, and to struggle heroically, often for many years, in order at last, by dint of all this spiritual work, to obtain assurance.

These Puritans taught that assurance is, and should be, a real problem for many, if not most, believers and children of believers. It is normal to lack assurance; normal to wonder whether one is really saved; normal to struggle with the question of assurance; normal that one's relation to assurance is that of a "quest," a long, even *lifelong*, "quest," with no assurance of a favorable outcome of the quest, namely, finding assurance in this life; and, therefore, also, normal to abstain from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

blessings' that were never his in reality, but real blessings that were his in covenant with God' (Steve Wilkins, quoted in *The Covenant of God*, 193).

Leading Puritans, men who are highly regarded by contemporary disciples of the Puritans, taught that the Spirit gives assurance only to a very few of God's children, leaving the rest of us, the vast majority of His children, to live and die in doubt.

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 friends. 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.³

³ Thomas Brooks, "Heaven on Earth: A Serious Discourse, Touching a Well-Grounded Assurance," in *The Works of Thomas Brooks*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, repr. 1980), 335. The quotation is given in part in J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 181. Of Thomas Brooks, Puritan scholar J. I. Packer says that he was "one of the greatest of the later Puritans" and one of the "finest Puritan minds." Packer states that Brooks' teaching on assurance "represent[s] the main current of Puritan thinking" and is the "particular" aspect of "the Puritans' most valuable contributions to the church's theological heritage" (see Packer, 179, 180). In the name of the sixteenth century Reformation of the church, confessional Reformed doctrine, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the comfort of believers and their children, I say no to the Puritan doctrine of assurance. Saying no to

A Reformed student of Scripture and the Reformed creeds struggles for words with which to express opposition to, and indignation at, the Puritan doctrine of assurance. It is no doctrine of assurance at all, but a cruel doctrine of doubt, at least, for the great majority of those who “have a share or portion in the special love and favor of God.” Not only does it rob the great majority of God’s believing children of the precious, priceless assurance of the love of God for them and their salvation, shutting them up to the unspeakable misery of the fear, whether God hates them and will damn them at death, but it also casts the gravest aspersions on the Fatherhood of God in Jesus Christ. What godly, earthly father, loving all his children, gives assurance of his love to a “very few” of his children, but withholds this assurance from the majority of them? Such a father would make himself subject to the discipline of the church on the ground of the grossest dereliction of parental duty. Indeed, what earthly father would demand of his children that they “endeavor,” that is, work, for years in order to obtain after many years, or even at the end of life, the assurance that he in fact loves them? What Christian would swallow the assertion that it is one parental mercy for the believing father to love his children, but another parental mercy for the father to assure the children of his love? What strange mercy is it to love one’s children, but have them live in the terror that their father hates them?

That God’s Fatherhood does not suffer in comparison with the fatherhood of the godly man is evident from the fact that Jesus taught everyone who believes the gospel, and thus believes on Jesus Christ, from the heart, whether aged saint or new convert, grandparent or little covenant child, to call upon God in prayer and to call upon Him as “Our Father” (Matt. 6:9). To say “Our Father” to God is to express that the one who prays has assurance that God loves him, has redeemed him, saves him, and will preserve him unto eternal glory.

the Puritan doctrine of assurance, I am saying no to a teaching that is not incidental, but fundamental to Puritanism.

Here, according to Puritan theology, is a grace of salvation about which it is not true, that the one who seeks shall find. All believers seek assurance as a grace “earnestly desired and highly prized,” but only a “few,” indeed, a “very few,” ever find it. And the reason is that this grace of salvation, which rightly is “highly prized” as the “best and greatest mercy,” is obtained, not by the free gift of the Spirit of Christ, but by the working and works of the believer. “He that will have it [assurance] must work, and sweat, and weep, and wait to obtain it...none can obtain it [assurance] but such as labor for it...a man must win it [assurance] before he can wear it.”⁴ The Puritan doctrine of assurance is a form of salvation by works. A doctrine of works is necessarily also a doctrine of doubt.

Despite the clear, powerful testimony of the “Three Forms of Unity” against it, the Puritan doctrine of assurance has infected certain churches in the Dutch Reformed tradition. This occurred largely through the influence of Puritanism upon some Reformed theologians and ministers in the Netherlands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The movement influenced by Puritanism, particularly the Puritan doctrine of assurance, called itself the “*nadere reformatie*.” This name should be translated, and understood, as ‘further reformation,’ expressing the movement’s conviction that the sixteenth century Reformation did not do justice to piety and experience and that it was the high calling of the “*nadere reformatie*” to complete the sixteenth century Reformation. This, the men of the “*nadere reformatie*” set out to accomplish by a theology and ministry that emphasized personal piety and introspective experience.⁵

⁴ Brooks, 324, 325.

⁵ See the brief introduction to the “further reformation” in English in Arie de Reuver, tr. James A. De Jong, *Sweet Communion: Trajectories of Spirituality from the Middle Ages through the Further Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 15-24. de Reuver notes that the very name of the movement in the Netherlands was the importation of a distinctively English, Puritan term: “Teellinck...the father of the Further Reformation introduced the Puritan term ‘further reformation’ from England to the

Netherlands” (16). de Reuver indicates that the characteristic Puritan doctrine of assurance was central to the purpose and theology of the men of the “*nadere reformatie*”: “The Further Reformation developed a comprehensive pastoral psychology by which it intended to provide guidance on the manner in which the applied work of the Holy Spirit brought people to certainty of faith [that is, assurance of salvation—DJE]” (17). The significance of de Reuver’s work is his frank acknowledgment that the experientialism and spirituality of the further reformation were (and *are!*) derived from the medieval (Roman Catholic) mystics. Almost all reliable analysis of the “*nadere reformatie*” is found in the Dutch language. de Reuver gives the sources. Completely unreliable, indeed misleading, is Joel R. Beeke’s account of assurance in Calvin and the Reformed tradition. His book is ominously titled *The Quest for* (not: “Gift of”) *Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Banner of Truth, 1999). As the subtitle indicates, Beeke contends that the Puritan and “*nadere reformatie*” doctrine of assurance was a faithful development of the doctrine of Calvin, when, in fact, it was a radical departure from the Reformer’s and, indeed, the entire Reformation’s doctrine, as the Puritans themselves acknowledged. Playing on the ambiguity of the adjective, “full” (“full assurance”), Beeke assures his Reformed readers that the Puritan and “*nadere reformatie*” doctrine of assurance can be harmonized with the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism, that “true faith...*is*...a hearty trust which the Holy Ghost works in me by the Gospel, that not only to others, *but to me also*, forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation, are freely given by God,” etc. (Heid. Cat., Q&A 21, in Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 3, 313; emphasis added). In fact, the Puritan and “*nadere reformatie*” doctrine flatly contradicts the Catechism. Regarding the fundamental issue, whether assurance is an aspect of the essence of faith (what faith *is*) or merely a possible “fruit” of faith (for a few favored saints after years of agonizing, laborious “quest” for assurance), Dr. Beeke hunts with the hounds and runs with the hares. Treating Calvin (and the Reformation), Beeke acknowledges that “it [faith] possesses assurance in its very nature. Assurance, certainty, trust — such is the essence of faith” (*Quest*, 38). Summing up, however, and expressing the Puritan and “*nadere reformatie*” thinking on assurance (which is his own thinking), Beeke tells us that “full assurance of personal salvation constitutes the well-being or fruit of faith rather than the essence of faith” (*Quest*, 276). Assurance now is a “goal, duty, and desire” (*Quest*, 275). The injurious thrust of *The Quest for Full Assurance* is a wholehearted defense and promotion of the Puritan and “*nadere reformatie*” doctrine of assurance (which robs many of the comfort of the gospel and drives them to doubt and despair) as though it were the teaching of Calvin, the Reformation, and the

Puritanism's erroneous doctrine of assurance is being spread throughout Great Britain, North America, and the world by influential organizations and theologians who promote Puritan and "further reformation" theology.

The effects of this false doctrine of assurance are dreadful. Entire Reformed and Presbyterian congregations languish in doubt of their salvation and, therefore, persist in open disobedience to Christ's command to His church and to all who believe on Him, that they partake of the Lord's Supper (Matt. 26:26-29). It is reliably reported that in the Netherlands today (2008) is a Reformed congregation of more than one thousand members of which only five or ten old members regularly partake of the Lord's Supper. The rest of the members, in the bondage of the Puritan doctrine of assurance, abstain, lacking assurance of salvation. All too believable is the rest of the report: The minister of the congregation recently issued a warning against too great liberty in the congregation in coming to the Lord's Table.⁶ Presbyterian churches in Scotland suffer from the same dread malady.

confessions (which emphatically it is not). Stoeffler affirms, and demonstrates, the influence of Puritanism on the "*nadere reformatie*": "Reformed Pietism on the Continent was heavily indebted to the Puritans" (F. Ernest Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965, 118).

⁶ Ironically, it was a Puritan theologian who exposed the gross wickedness of the Reformed preachers who are responsible for keeping adult members of their congregation from the Lord's Supper: "[Satan] discourages them [church members] from duty by suggesting to them their unworthiness...By this temptation, the devil takes many off from coming to the Lord's table. Oh, says he [through ministers devoted to the discouraging of the saints—DJE], this is a solemn ordinance, and requires much holiness: how darest thou so unworthily come? you will eat and drink unworthily. Thus, as Saul kept the people from eating honey, so the devil by this temptation, scares many from this ordinance, which is sweeter than honey and the honey-comb" (Thomas Watson, *Body of Divinity*, Grand Rapids: Baker, repr. 1979), 592.

Many persons, publicly professing faith in Christ and living regular lives of obedience to the law in love for God, live all their life doubting whether they are loved by God and saved, and die in the terror of the real possibility of being damned.

The Puritan doctrine of assurance was not that of the Reformers. This is freely admitted by Reformed theologians who defend the Puritan doctrine of assurance. The Presbyterian theologian William Cunningham condemns the teaching of Calvin and all the other Reformers on assurance as “exaggerated and erroneous.”⁷ Calvin’s doctrine of assurance and its radical difference from that of the Puritans are expressed in his definition of faith:

Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward 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.⁸

⁷ William Cunningham, “The Reformers and the Doctrine of Assurance,” in *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (London: The Banner of Truth, 1967), 118.

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes*, tr. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.2.7. Contrary to the foolish dodge of Puritanism, the “further reformation,” Cunningham, and others, that Calvin (and the entire Reformation) defined faith only as faith existed in Europe at the extraordinary time of the Reformation, this, namely, knowledgeable (full) assurance of one’s own personal salvation, is what faith is always and everywhere—at the time of the Reformation in Europe, in the Old Testament, in the New Testament, in seventeenth century England and the Netherlands, and in twenty-first century Scotland and North America. Of Calvin’s definition of faith, Herman Bavinck judges that it is “correct as well as complete.” Indeed, “no more beautiful definition is conceivable than that faith is a firm and certain knowledge of the mercy that God has shown us in Christ. Essentially, what else is Christian faith but the assurance...that ‘the eternal Faith (sic; should be “Father”—DJE) of our Lord Jesus Christ...is our God and Father because of Christ His Son’” (Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *Holy*

For Calvin, all the Reformers, and the Reformation of the church in the sixteenth century, faith *is* assurance of salvation, faith *essentially* is assurance: “Faith [is] a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us.” Assurance, therefore, is the gift of God by the Holy Spirit to everyone to whom God gives faith. The Spirit works assurance in everyone in whom He works faith, and He works assurance in and with the working of faith. Of vital importance in Calvin’s definition, in view of the separation of faith and assurance by the Puritans and the promoters of the “*nadere reformatie*,” past and present, is Calvin’s deliberate identification of the sealing by the Spirit, which refers to the Spirit’s assuring the child of God of his salvation, as the giving of faith itself. The Holy Spirit seals the believer, not years after giving him faith, if at all in this life, as was the doctrine of the Puritans, but *when He gives him faith*.

With the entire Reformation, Calvin taught that the fatherly love of God for all His children dear expresses itself by giving all of them, young and old, hoary-headed saints and new converts, the assurance of His love for them.

Not only did Calvin and the entire Reformation affirm that the gospel of grace assures all believers of God’s love and their salvation, this assurance of God’s people was one of the main purposes of the Reformation. The necessity of the Reformation was Rome’s holding the people in the bondage of doubt concerning their salvation. Calvin stated this in his great treatise, “The Necessity of Reforming the Church” (1544).

Lastly, there was another most pestilential error, which not only occupied the minds of men, but was regarded as one of the principal articles of faith, of which it was impious to doubt, viz., that believers ought to be perpetually in suspense and uncertainty as to their interest in the divine favor. By this

Spirit, Church, and New Creation, ed. John Bolt, tr. John Vriend, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008, 128).

suggestion of the devil, the power of faith was completely extinguished, the benefits of Christ's purchase destroyed, and the salvation of men overthrown. For, as Paul declares, that faith only is Christian faith which inspires our hearts with confidence, and emboldens us to appear in the presence of God (Rom. 5:2). On no other view could his doctrine in another passage be maintained, viz., that "we have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15).⁹

Those churches in which the majority of the members, often the large majority of members, *professing faith*, languish year after year in doubt of their salvation, under the influence of the theology of Puritanism and the "*nadere reformatie*," are not furthering the Reformation. They are not even *continuing* the Reformation. On the contrary, their gospel, which does not work assurance, but doubt, is a radical deviation from the gospel of the Reformation. In the vitally important matter of the experience of salvation, about which the disciples of the Puritans are always boasting, their miserable people do not differ from the doubting hordes of Rome. Those churches *need* the Reformation and its gospel of assurance.

As for the testimony of the Reformed confessions concerning assurance, God's gift of it to all His children, and the enjoyment of it by every believer, the Heidelberg Catechism is representative. Question and Answer 1 has every believer confess that he possesses and enjoys the only comfort in life and death, knowing with certainty that he belongs to Jesus Christ, *his* faithful Savior. The believer concludes: "Wherefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life."¹⁰

⁹ John Calvin, "The Necessity of Reforming the Church, Presented to the Imperial Diet of Spires, A.D. 1544, in the Name of All Who Wish Christ to Reign," in *Calvin's Tracts Relating to the Reformation*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844), 136.

¹⁰ Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 3, 307, 308.

Question and Answer 53 make assurance the normal work of the Spirit in His saving of every elect child of God: “What dost thou believe concerning the Holy Ghost?...that he is also given unto me, makes me by a true faith partaker of Christ and all his benefits, comforts me, and shall abide with me forever.”¹¹

In flat contradiction of Brooks, the Puritans, and the “*nadere reformatie*,” that “it is one thing for me to have faith, and another thing for me to know that I have faith,”¹² the Reformed confession teaches that the gift of true faith includes sure knowledge that one has faith; certainty that one is partaker of Christ and all His benefits; the comfort that one belongs to Christ; the confidence of preservation; and the hope of everlasting life.

This is assurance! This is assurance of one’s own personal salvation, now and everlastingly!

Assurance, an Indispensable Work of the Spirit

It is an important aspect of the gospel that God not only wills to save all His chosen people, but also wills that all of them be assured of their salvation. Contrary to the Puritan Thomas Brooks, it is one and the same mercy for God to love the soul and to assure the beloved soul of His love. To say it differently, the same mercy that loves His children moves God to cause them to know His love for them, and to know it with certainty.

Willing our assurance, God gives us assurance. He gives this precious grace as a free gift. Assurance is not our own work, our own achievement by our own hard efforts. Neither is assurance bestowed in recognition of the superior spirituality by which a few children distinguish themselves from the rest of the congregation.

God gives us assurance of salvation *with the gift of salvation itself*. Assurance of salvation is simply an aspect of salvation, and not the least aspect. Assurance is the

¹¹ Ibid., 324.

¹² Brooks, 316.

“experience” of salvation, just as certainty that I am physically alive is the experience of physical life, or certainty that I am the son of my parents is the experience of my sonship, or confidence that I am the husband of this woman is the experience of marriage.

Assurance of salvation, therefore, is the expected, normal spiritual condition and state of mind and heart of every regenerated, believing child of God. Assurance is not unusual, extraordinary, or remarkable in the congregation of believers and their children.

To be sure, assurance is wonderful and dear. That I should be assured of eternal life? That I should be able to cry, “Abba, Father,” as Romans 8:15 expresses our assurance? That I should be as certain that I belong to Christ as I am certain that I belong to my wife? This certainty is cause for daily amazement and gratitude.

But this grace is not restricted to a few specially favored Christians, mostly old. In the church of God, where the sound doctrine of the gospel is purely preached and discipline is administered, there is not a small group of elite members, set apart from the rest of the congregation and exalted on the spiritual pedestal of sitting at the Lord’s Table, by virtue of their distinguishing themselves by obtaining assurance through their hard labors. It is normal that a believer have assurance. Every believer can have, may have, and ought to have assurance. When his spiritual condition is healthy, every believer does have assurance. It is possible that a believer lacks assurance for awhile, but this is the exception. Lack of assurance by a believer is an abnormality, a spiritual disease—a *culpable* disease—for which there is a remedy.

God gives assurance as the peculiar work of the Spirit of Christ. The Father elected; the Son redeemed; the Spirit assures. To assure us sinners, the other Comforter is necessary (John 14:16).

Biblical Doctrine: Sealing

We learn the truth about assurance especially from three passages, or kinds of passages, of Scripture. The first is those texts that teach the sealing work of the Spirit. Several texts teach that the Spirit seals the believer, including II Corinthians 1:21, 22; Ephesians 1:13, 14; and Ephesians 4:30. Ephesians 1:13, 14 is the most complete teaching, as it is the most important in the controversy over assurance.

In whom [Christ] ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory.

The passage teaches that those who believe in Christ, according to God's eternal predestination, are sealed. Sealing is a work of grace within those who trust in Christ that makes them sure and certain.

The question is, in what sense? Are they sealed *objectively*, as though God does something in them that guarantees that they will persevere in faith and holiness unto everlasting life? Or, are they sealed *subjectively*, as though God works in them a conscious certainty that they are saved and shall forever be saved, that is, as though God gives them personal assurance of salvation?

The latter is the meaning: sealing is God's work in those who trust in Christ of assuring them; sealing is a work of God in their consciousness. That this is the meaning of the sealing is evident from the fact that sealing in the text follows hearing the word and believing in Christ, which are conscious spiritual activities.

Besides, Scripture knows of no special work of God following our believing that uniquely establishes that we will persevere in faith and holiness unto eternal life. Our salvation is objectively sure in God's eternal purpose of election: "The

foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his” (II Tim. 2:19). With regard to the permanency of the work of grace in us, this is certain already in regeneration, which precedes our hearing the word and believing. If God begins the work of salvation in one, He will finish and perfect it. There simply is no need or place for a work of grace following our believing that guarantees that God will not abandon the work of salvation He has begun. What follows hearing and believing is assurance of salvation in the soul of the one who hears and believes.

Not only is the Spirit the one who accomplishes the sealing, but He Himself is the seal in one who hears and believes. The Authorized Version’s translation of Ephesians 1:13 correctly gives the sense of the text: “*with* that holy Spirit of promise.” That the Spirit Himself is the seal is indicated by the related statement that immediately follows: “which [the Holy Spirit] is the earnest of our inheritance” (v. 14). This is confirmed by Ephesians 4:30, the literal translation of which text is, ‘in whom [the Holy Spirit of God] ye were sealed.’ The sphere in which the sealing took place was the Holy Spirit Himself.¹³

The Spirit Himself in the one who hears the word of God and believes in Christ *is* the assurance of salvation to the believer, just as the presence of the loving mother holding her child in her arms *is* the assurance to the child that she is the beloved child of that mother.

How mistaken, how impossible, the doctrine that the Spirit dwells in many, if not most, of the children of God, while they go on, year after year, lacking the sealing, that is, assurance of salvation! As though it is possible, indeed normal, that people have the Comforter, but no comfort!

Sealed, When and How?

¹³ The Authorized Version translates Ephesians 4:30, “*whereby* ye are sealed,” expressing that the Spirit is the divine means of sealing, which is true, but not the precise thought of the text. The original Greek is “*en hoo*.”

When and how the believer is sealed with the Spirit is the question.

Many of the Puritans and certain of their contemporary disciples, agreeing that sealing is the assuring of the sealed of their salvation, contend that the sealing is a work of the Spirit that follows faith in Christ in time, often after many years. Therefore, it is common, if not the norm, they insist, that believers lack assurance of salvation.

With reference to sealing, or witnessing, as the Spirit's work of assuring the believer of his salvation, Thomas Brooks wrote:

Though the Spirit be a witnessing [that is, sealing—DJE] Spirit, *yet he doth not always witness* [that is, seal—DJE] *to believers their adoption, their interest in Christ, etc.* There is a mighty difference between the working of the Spirit, and the witness of the Spirit. There are oftentimes many glorious and efficacious works of the Spirit, as faith, love, repentance, holiness, etc., where there is not the witness of the Spirit (Isaiah 1:10)...Though the Spirit of the Lord be a witnessing and a sealing Spirit, yet he doth not always witness and seal up the love and favor of the Father to believers' souls...¹⁴

Thomas Goodwin, whom J. I. Packer praises highly as the best of the Puritan exegetes of Paul and whose doctrine of assurance, according to Packer, “represent[s] the main current of Puritan thinking,”¹⁵ is clear and emphatic that the sealing with the Spirit taught in Ephesians 1:13, 14 is a work of the Spirit distinct from faith and a work following the gift of faith in time. The necessary implication of Goodwin's doctrine of sealing is that it is reserved only for a very few believers. “*The work of faith is a distinct thing, a different thing, from*

¹⁴ Brooks, 520. The emphasis is Brooks'.

¹⁵ Packer, 179, 180.

the work of assurance.” Basic to Goodwin’s insistence on this difference between faith and assurance, or the sealing with the Spirit, is Goodwin’s denial that faith in Jesus Christ is assurance of salvation. Faith in Christ is merely a confidence that the promises of the gospel are true. It is not a confidence that the promises of the gospel are true *for oneself*. Faith in Jesus Christ, faith in Jesus Christ from the heart, leaves the believer doubting whether he himself is the beloved object of the promises of the gospel. “It must be granted, that in all faith there is an assurance; but of what? Of the truth of the promise...But the question here [that is, concerning being sealed with the Spirit—DJE] is about the assurance of a man’s interest; that is not always in faith.”¹⁶

The sealing with the Spirit follows the Spirit’s work of giving faith to the elect child of God in time. Goodwin suggests that this is usually a long time, for the believer must wait and work for the sealing that gives assurance:

You that believe are to wait for this promise [of being sealed]...Serve your God day and night faithfully, walk humbly; there is a promise of the Holy Ghost to come and fill your hearts with joy unspeakable and glorious, to seal you up to the day of redemption. Sue this promise out, wait for it, rest not in believing only, rest not in assurance by graces only; there is a further assurance to be had.¹⁷

¹⁶ Thomas Goodwin, “An Exposition of the First Chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians,” in *Works of Thomas Goodwin*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1861), 235; the emphasis is Goodwin’s.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 248. In his book, *The Object and Acts of Justifying Faith*, Goodwin acknowledges that many who finally obtain assurance do so only after many years. To the statement “that though assurance may be vouchsafed to some of lower rank than apostles, yet it is to such as are of long standing Christianity, who after long experience have hope and assurance begotten in them,” Goodwin responds, “I grant it, that many not till then have had it” (Thomas Goodwin, *The Object and Acts of Justifying Faith*, Marshallton, Del.: National Foundation for Christian Education, n.d., 357).

The line, “Rest not in believing only,” incredible in one who claimed to be furthering the Reformation, is fatal to the Puritan doctrine of assurance, and damning.

Although Goodwin does not expressly say so, he puts assurance—personal assurance that one—(a believer in Jesus Christ!) - is saved - forever out of the reach of most believing children of God. For the sealing with the Spirit, that gives assurance, is an immediate, extraordinary, mystical experience:

There is an immediate assurance of the Holy Ghost [the sealing with the Spirit], by a heavenly and divine light, of a divine authority, which the Holy Ghost sheddeth in a man’s heart, (not having relation to grace wrought, or anything in a man’s self,) whereby he sealeth him up to the day redemption...One way [of assurance] is *discursive*; a man gathereth that God loveth him from the effects...But the other [the sealing with the Spirit] is *intuitive*, as the angels are said to know things...There is light that cometh and overpowereth a man’s soul, and assureth him that God is his, and he is God’s, and that God loveth him from everlasting.¹⁸

This is the unbiblical, “sickly” mysticism of the Puritan doctrine of assurance. This mysticism is fundamental

¹⁸ Goodwin, *Works*, 233. The Puritan Richard Sibbes’ doctrine of sealing is the same as that of Brooks and Goodwin. “Sealing is not the work of faith, but it is a work of the Spirit upon faith, assuring the soul of its estate in grace.” Sealing is an experience of “spiritual ravishings,” “the extraordinary feeling of the Spirit,” “superadded” to justification by faith and to sanctification. Many of God’s believing children lack assurance, not having been sealed with the Spirit. Therefore, Sibbes exhorts them to “labor...for this seal, to have our souls stamped with the Spirit of God” (Richard Sibbes, *Works of Richard Sibbes*, vol. 3, *An Exposition of 2nd Corinthians Chapter One*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, repr. 1981, 442-484).

to the Puritan doctrine. The dependency for assurance upon strange experiences by the people in churches committed to the Puritan doctrine of assurance is not an unfortunate aberration. It is the inevitable, necessary effect and fruit of the Puritan doctrine. The result is two-fold. First, assurance, or the sealing with the Spirit, is forever beyond the reach of most of the people. They never experience the “light that cometh and overpowereth a man’s soul.” They live and die in the dreadful misery of doubt—doubt that God loves them, doubt that Christ died for them, doubt that their sins are forgiven, doubt that they will go to heaven. The Puritan divines, past and present, will answer to God for the souls of these people.

The second result is that those elite few who suppose they have received the light that overpowers a man’s soul and therefore are certain that they are saved lean on a broken reed. Their state is worse than that of those who, true to the Puritan doctrine, honestly doubt. For they deliberately “rest not in believing only.” God does not assure His children of His love by immediate, mystical experiences. He assures His children by “believing only.”

With an honesty that shames those who like to leave the impression that the Puritan doctrine of assurance is faithful to Calvin, Goodwin frankly admits that his, and the Puritan’s, doctrine of assurance differs radically from that of Calvin. “Calvin,” says Goodwin correctly, taught that the sealing with the Spirit is “the work of faith itself...In believing, in the work of faith, the Holy Ghost did seal up the truth of the promise unto their hearts.” That is, Calvin taught that when a man believes the gospel the Spirit seals him in such a way that “there is an assurance of a man’s interest in those promises [of the gospel].” Goodwin rejects this doctrine of assurance. Calvin’s teaching is “what it [the doctrine of assurance] is not.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Goodwin, *Works*, 228. With this candid, and accurate, admission by a leading Puritan of the radical difference between Calvin’s and the Puritans’ doctrines of assurance, compare Joel R. Beeke’s assessment: “The Dutch divines [of the “nadere reformatie”]...did not misread Calvin

The influential English preacher D. M. Lloyd-Jones promotes the Puritan doctrine of sealing and thus the Puritan doctrine of assurance. Lloyd-Jones rightly understands the sealing with the Spirit in Ephesians 1:13, 14 as a work of the Spirit that “authenticates to us the fact that we are the sons of God, truly His people, and heirs, joint-heirs with Christ, of a glorious inheritance,” that is, the work of the Spirit assuring the believer of his salvation.²⁰ But he makes a “sharp distinction between believing (the act of faith) and the sealing of the Spirit...Sealing with the Spirit does not always happen immediately when a man believes...There may be a great interval...it is possible for a person to be a believer and...still not know the sealing of the Spirit.”²¹ “‘Sealing with the Spirit’ is something subsequent to believing, something additional to believing.”²²

This something “is an experience; it is something experimental,” indeed, “the highest, the greatest experience which a Christian can have in this world...an overwhelming experience.”²³ According to Lloyd-Jones, this “experience” is the most desirable feeling that a Christian can have, short of heaven. The truth of sealing in Ephesians 1:13, 14, in Lloyd-Jones’ judgment, is “one of the most vital statements for us as

and the Reformers [on assurance of salvation] but simply applied the teaching of the early Reformers to their own day” (Quest, 308). Hear Calvin himself: “There are two operations of the Spirit in faith, corresponding to the two parts of which faith consists, as it enlightens, and as it establishes the mind. The commencement of faith is knowledge: the completion of it is a firm and steady conviction, which admits of no opposing doubt...No wonder, then, if Paul should declare that the Ephesians, who received by faith the truth of the gospel, were confirmed in that faith by the seal of the Holy Spirit” (John Calvin, comment on Ephesians 1:13, particularly the sealing with the Spirit, in his *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957, 208).

²⁰ D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *God’s Ultimate Purpose: An Exposition of Ephesians 1:1 to 23* (Grand Rapids: Baker, repr. 1979), 266.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 249.

²² *Ibid.*, 250.

²³ *Ibid.*, 267, 270, 275.

Christian people at the present time.” The failure to understand sealing (as Lloyd-Jones explains it) has been the “chief trouble [with the Christian Church] for a number of years.”²⁴

Since the experience is the Spirit’s assurance of the believer that he is saved, it is extremely precious. But Lloyd-Jones does not tell us what this experience consists of. He admits that he cannot. The best he can do is describe the experience in the words of Goodwin, Wesley, Flavel, Edwards, Moody, Evans, and Whitefield: overpowering light; overwhelming experience; ravishing tastes of heavenly joys; “ecstasy”; an extraordinary view of the glory of Christ; a flood of tears and weeping aloud; such an experience of God’s love as caused Moody to ask God “to stay His hand”²⁵; relief of mind; rejoicing in God.²⁶

Because the all-important sealing follows faith in time, Lloyd-Jones too sets all believers seeking for sealing, that is, assurance of salvation consisting of an indescribable experience: “Are we to seek this sealing? My answer, without any hesitation, is that we should most certainly do so.”²⁷

The people must seek the sealing by working, and working hard: “Prepare the way...mortify...cleanse yourselves]...put into practice the virtues...labor at it...pray for this blessing...be desperate for it.”²⁸

Alas, however, “many Christian people have only known this just before their death.”²⁹ Thus, like a good Puritan (but a

²⁴ Ibid., 255.

²⁵ It is ominous for Lloyd-Jones’ sealing that God gives it to Pelagians such as D. L. Moody. If the Spirit of truth had anything at all to give to a Pelagian like D. L. Moody by direct revelation, it would have been this warning, “Moody, repent of your sin of teaching the false gospel of salvation by the will of man, which false gospel makes assurance of salvation utterly impossible.”

²⁶ Ibid., 274-278, 286.

²⁷ Ibid., 294.

²⁸ Ibid., 294-300.

²⁹ Ibid., 299.

very bad pastor and theologian), Lloyd-Jones shuts up many Christians to an entire lifetime of doubt whether they are saved. And since the sealing is an undefined and indescribable “experience,” Lloyd-Jones sends all believers out on an uncertain, perilous quest—the quest for the will-o’-the-wisp of a feeling that they are loved by God.³⁰

The translation of Ephesians 1:13 in the Authorized Version might lend credence to the erroneous and injurious doctrine that the sealing of the Spirit, and, therefore, assurance of salvation, follows the gift of faith in time, often after many years of working for assurance. The Authorized Version unfortunately inserts into the text the word “after”: “in whom *after* that ye believed, ye were sealed.” In the original Greek is neither the word nor the notion, “after.” Literally, the text reads this way: ‘in whom [Christ] ye also, having heard the word of the truth, the gospel of your salvation—in whom [Christ] also having believed, ye were sealed,’ etc.

The thought of the text is this: In the past (and for the Ephesian believers the not too distant past³¹) the elect saints at

³⁰ The pathetic spiritual and emotional “desperation” of disciples of Lloyd-Jones and the Puritans to get the “overwhelming experience” that will signify their assurance of salvation, which they “desperately” lack, especially on their death-bed, is the direct result of Lloyd-Jones’ teaching: “Be desperate for it.” Lloyd-Jones will answer for this “desperation.” Desperation is a “loss of hope and surrender to despair” or “a state of hopelessness leading to rashness.”

³¹ I mention this in order to call attention to the fact that within a few years of the conversion of the Ephesians the apostle could say to them that all who believed the gospel had been sealed with the Holy Spirit. Altogether apart from the fact that the sealing was contemporaneous with the hearing and believing, the apostle, writing a very short time after the Ephesians’ hearing and believing the gospel, was confident, indeed affirmed, that all the believers had been sealed, that is, received the assurance of their salvation. He did not labor under the misapprehension that for many of the Ephesian believers many years must pass before they obtained sealing. Had a Puritan written the Ephesian church he would have said, “In whom ye also, having heard the word of the truth, the gospel of your salvation, in whom, having believed, you should now strive and work for many years to be sealed with the Holy Spirit, and here are the fifteen steps of striving by

Ephesus heard the word of the truth, believed in Christ, and were sealed. These three things happened in this order, but all at the same time. The doctrine of the text is that when one believes in Christ, having heard the gospel, he is sealed with the Holy Spirit *at this time and under these circumstances*. Sealing, that is, the assurance of salvation, *accompanies* believing in Christ, as an integral element of the believing. Sealing follows believing in the order of the text as the effect of believing, just as believing is the effect of the hearing of the gospel, but as the effect that is simultaneous with the believing.³²

What the apostle adds in Ephesians 1:14 about the “earnest” is related. An “earnest” is both the foretaste of something and the guarantee of the future, complete possession of that thing. An example of an earnest from earthly life might be the down-payment one receives on a certain property. The down-payment is both the first part of the full payment and the guarantee that the full payment will be made. A better example, doing justice both to the notion of foretaste and to the spiritual reality, might be the kiss of a

which perhaps you may obtain the sealing before you die. But then again you may not.”

³² “The relation between [‘having believed,’ in Eph. 1:13] and [‘ye were sealed’] is not to be conceived as following in temporal order. There may be a logical order here; but as far as time is concerned, the [‘having believed’] and the [‘ye were sealed’] must undoubtedly be conceived as contemporaneous. ...As soon as they believed in Christ, it stands to reason that they also have the Holy Spirit; and as soon as they have the Holy Spirit, they are sealed” (Herman Hoeksema, unpublished exegesis of Ephesians 1 and 2, privately bound by the Protestant Reformed Seminary, Grandville, Michigan as “Chapel Talks on Ephesians 1 and 2,” 28). Also Herman Bavinck taught that the sealing work of the Spirit mentioned in Ephesians 1:13 occurs at the “moment” of believing: “When those who are preordained by God are called in time...then at that very moment they obtain faith and by that faith they receive justification and the adoption as children (Rom. 3:22, 24; 4:5; 5:1; Gal. 3:26; 4:5; etc.), with the assurance of sonship by the witness of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:15-16; Gal. 4:6; 2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13; 4:30)” (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, 50; emphasis added).

woman who engages to become a man's wife. The kiss is both the foretaste of the coming delights of marriage and the woman's guarantee that she will marry the man.

In Ephesians 1:14, the earnest is foretaste and pledge of the inheritance of all those who believe in Christ. It is perfect salvation, body and soul, in the new world. As foretaste and pledge, the earnest is assurance of salvation. The earnest is the Spirit Himself. And we have the Spirit as earnest in our consciousness, that is, we have assurance (such is the relation of v. 14 to v. 13), *when we believe in Christ*, not years or even months later. We have the Spirit as earnest *by believing in Christ*, not some other way, for example, by working, striving, laboring, weeping, and what not more spiritual acts.

Witnessing with Our Spirit

The second passage that teaches the truth about assurance is the most profound text on assurance in all of Scripture, Romans 8:15, 16: "For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God."

The entire eighth chapter of Romans is one glorious confession of, and exultation in, assurance. It is put in the mouth of every believing child of God. Romans 8 utterly demolishes the Puritan notion that many believers, probably most believers, live for years in doubt of their salvation and that this is the will of God for many of His dear children. Written to Roman believers and their children, only recently converted from heathendom, the eighth chapter of Romans teaches the truth that all believers, not only have salvation, but also have the assurance of salvation.

We all groan, not in doubt of our salvation, but in ardent longing for the resurrection of our body (v. 23). This is assurance.

We all know that all things are working together for our good (v. 28). This is assurance.

We all are certain that God is for us and that nothing can be against us (v. 31). This is assurance.

We all are sure that God delivered His Son up for us (v. 32). “Us” includes *me*. This is assurance.

In that marvelous exclamation of assurance consisting of verses 35-39, every believer declares his or her certainty, not only that he or she is loved by Christ and God, but also, and especially, that nothing can separate him or her from the love of God. Indeed, every believer exclaims that in all the troubles of life, which are many and severe, he or she is “more than conquerors.” This is assurance.

The entire wretched Puritan doctrine of assurance is smashed to pieces on Romans 8:35-39. Would to God the contemporary disciples of the Puritans would demolish this doctrine, forthrightly, clearly, unambiguously, and boldly, in their preaching, teaching, and writing, thus delivering thousands of doubting, despairing members of their churches from their bondage, in the mercy of God.

The sinful doubt of everyone who believes the gospel of grace from the heart must, and will, be destroyed by the sound preaching of Romans 8.

Romans 8:15, 16 is the profound explanation of the assurance of the elect believer. Verse 15 affirms the assurance of the believer: He cries, “Abba, Father.” “Abba” is the Hebrew, or Aramaic, word meaning “father.” “Father,” in the passage, translates the Greek word for father.

“Abba, Father” expresses certainty of salvation. One who knows God as his father is sure of the love of God for him in Jesus Christ. Of course, one who calls God his father is sure of his own sonship by the adoption of the cross.

“Abba, Father” is expressive of universal certainty. All believers, whether Jew or Gentile, know God as their father. Besides, Romans 8 attributes this calling upon God as father, not merely to a few super-saints like the apostle himself (although he would never distinguish himself from the

rest of the church as a super-saint), but to all who believe the gospel of grace from the heart: “*We cry.*”

“Abba, Father” is a strong affirmation of certainty. The believer is doubly sure that God is his father: “Father, Father.” The believer exclaims God’s fatherhood of him, and, therefore, also his own sonship, loudly, as one does when he is sure of something: “*We cry.*”

One thing explains this assurance of believers. Rather, one *person*, one person *within them*, explains this assurance. The explanation of the believers’ assurance is that “ye have received the Spirit of adoption.” By Him, we cry, “Abba, Father,” for this Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God.

Verse 16 is not teaching that the Spirit’s witness is *to* our spirit, as though there is one witness—the witness of the believer’s spirit as prompted by the Holy Spirit. Rather, within the believer there are two distinct witnesses, testifying to the believer that he is a son, or she, a daughter, of God. One witness to the believer is his own human spirit. As the believer hears the gospel of God’s grace in Christ and believes on Christ as presented by that gospel, his own spirit witnesses powerfully to him that he is a child of God, adopted by God’s grace in the cross of God’s own eternal Son in human flesh. This witness by his own spirit is worked by the Holy Spirit.

But this witness, powerful as it is, and prompted by the Holy Spirit, is not enough for assurance. One’s own spirit may be doubted. It is, after all, a very human spirit. Assurance of salvation on the part of a sinful, weak human does not come easy. Because of the importance of assurance, it may not rest on flimsy or assailable grounds.

There must be two witnesses, and one of them must be God Himself.

“With” the witness of the spirit of the believer is another witness, testifying the same thing. The second witness to the sonship of the believer is the Spirit. Not only does the Spirit move the spirit of the believer to witness to the believer. He Himself also, within the believer, speaks to the

believer, in a wonderful, mysterious (though not immediate), and convincing way, “You are a child of God.”

This is the end of doubt. In the mouth of two witnesses, the word of the gospel of sonship is established in the soul of the believer. This is assurance of salvation. God the Spirit has spoken in the consciousness of the adopted child. The living word of God banishes doubt. The witness of God Himself is conclusive.

Justified by Faith

The third group of passages establishing the truth of assurance are all those texts that teach justification by faith. One’s first reaction to this assertion might be that appeal to the biblical teaching of justification by faith has nothing to do with assurance of salvation. But this reaction would be mistaken. Justification implies the assurance of salvation on the part of the one who is justified by his faith. Inasmuch as justification is the certain fruit and benefit of the activity of believing in Jesus Christ, assurance is of the essence of faith.

Justification by faith is the forgiveness of the believing sinner’s sins by means of the sinner’s trusting in Jesus Christ with the faith worked in him by the Holy Spirit. Justification is the forgiveness of sins *in the sinner’s consciousness*, as the Reformation expressed with the phrase, “in the forum of the consciousness.” In the act of justification, God the judge declares in the consciousness of the sinner, “I cancel the debt of the guilt of your sins! I reckon to your account the obedience of My Son Jesus Christ!”

In this verdict, God announces the judicial ground: “My Son, your redeemer, obeyed in your stead His lifelong and died as your substitute on the cross.” There is no forgiveness except on the basis of the obedience of Christ in the forgiven sinner’s stead. The Belgic Confession defines justification as “the remission of our sins *for Jesus Christ’s sake*.”³³ Every believer *seeks* justification on the basis of the

³³ Belgic Confession, Art. 23, in Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 3, 409.

death of Christ, as the Heidelberg Catechism teaches in its explanation of the fifth petition of the model prayer, “Forgive us our debts”: “Be pleased, *for the sake of Christ’s blood*, not to impute to us, miserable sinners, our manifold transgressions, nor the evil which still always cleaves to us.”³⁴

The verdict of justification, *in the sinner’s consciousness*, therefore, includes, as part of the verdict, indeed, as the very foundation of the verdict, that Christ died for the sinner whose sins are pardoned.

This means that in the verdict of justification itself is the assurance that God loves the sinner whose sins he forgives, the assurance of such love as gave God’s only begotten Son for this sinner.

Still more, because all Scripture proclaims that Christ, His cross, and the blessing of forgiveness flow from God’s eternal love for certain sinners in the decree of election, the verdict of justification assures the sinner whose sins are forgiven that God has loved him with an eternal love. “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him” (Rom. 5:8, 9).

Assurance of the love of God for the justified sinner, on the part of every justified sinner, is the meaning of Romans 5:1: “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God.” Having peace with God is assurance, that is, conscious certainty, that the sinner is reconciled to God, because God has redeemed him in love for him.

In the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, Jesus teaches that the publican “went down to his house justified” (Luke 18:14). The meaning is that the publican returned home leaping and dancing, with gladness on his face and peace and joy in his soul, conscious and assured that God pardoned his sins in mercy for the sake of the sacrifice of the Lamb on his behalf. This was assurance of salvation. This was assurance

³⁴ Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 126, in *ibid.*, 353, 354.

of the love of God for him. This was assurance of salvation and the love of God as an essential element of justification by faith.

It is no more possible for a sinner to be justified by faith without assurance of justification, salvation, and the love of God than it would be possible for a condemned criminal to depart the courtroom in which he had just heard a favorably disposed judge acquit him without knowing that he was acquitted and that the judge was gracious.

Since every true believer is justified and since assurance of forgiveness, salvation, and the love of God is an essential aspect of justification by faith, denial that assurance of salvation belongs to justifying faith is, in fact, the denial of justification by faith — the heart of the gospel of grace.

Nevertheless, the Puritans deny that assurance of salvation is an element of justification by faith. They deny this simply by denying, as they do, that assurance, or certainty of one's own salvation, is of the essence of (justifying) faith. They deny this by denying, as they also do, that the Spirit gives assurance in and with the gift of (justifying) faith. They also deny that assurance is part of justifying faith, *explicitly*.

The first conclusion we will begin with and premise as a foundation to what follows, is, that that act of faith which justifies a sinner, is distinct from knowing he hath eternal life, and may therefore be without it, because it doth not necessarily contain prevailing assurance in it. By prevailing assurance, I mean such an assurance as overpowereth doubts and sense to the contrary, so as, in the believer's knowledge, he is able to say, Christ is mine, and my sins are forgiven; such an assurance whereby a man is a conqueror, as Paul speaks, Rom. 8:37, when he expresseth such strong assurance.³⁵

³⁵ Goodwin, *Object and Acts*, 338.

According to Goodwin and the Puritans, the justified sinner is not able to know that his sins are forgiven, or to say that Christ is his.

In asserting that justification by faith leaves the justified sinner unable to say, “My sins are forgiven,” the Puritans press their determination to deny assurance to believers to the point of absurdity. Justification by faith *is* God’s declaration to the sinner, in his consciousness, “Your sins are forgiven.” To acknowledge justification by faith (“that act of faith which justifies a sinner”), but deny that the justified sinner knows he is justified is not only false doctrine. It is absurd.

One thing is sure: This doctrine is no “furthering” of the Reformation. On the contrary, it is, in fact, a denial of justification by faith as much as is the heresy of Rome, and leaves the penitent sinner in exactly the same miserable condition: Doubt!

That the Puritan and “further reformation” doctrine of justification is the same as Rome’s in leaving believers in doubt of their forgiveness and salvation and that the Puritan and “further reformation” doctrine is diametrically opposed to Calvin’s (and the entire Reformation’s) teaching are proved, beyond the shadow of a doubt, by Calvin’s refutation of the decisions of the Roman Catholic Council of Trent regarding justification.

Trent “inveigh[ed] against what they call The Vain Confidence of Heretics. This consists, according to their definition, in our holding it as certain that our sins are forgiven, and resting in this certainty.”³⁶

Trent condemned the certainty of forgiveness, that is, justification, as the vain confidence of heretics. Puritanism and the “further reformation” do the same. Indeed, their error is worse. Puritanism and the “further reformation” condemn

³⁶ John Calvin, “Acts of the Council of Trent with Antidote,” in *Calvin’s Tracts*, tr. Henry Beveridge, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1851), 125. Calvin wrote this “Antidote” in 1547.

as vain confidence the certainty of forgiveness of *elect believers who are believing the gospel*.

With appeal to Psalm 32, Romans 5:1-5, Ephesians 3:12, Romans 8:37, and James 1:6, Calvin declares that certainty, indeed a *bold* certainty, of forgiveness is the gift of God to all believers and that it is the gift of God with forgiveness, as an element of the forgiveness itself. Charging the Roman Catholic theologians with “rob[bing] all consciences of calm placid confidence” by their “leaving it in suspense to whom and when they are forgiven,” Calvin asks, rhetorically,

Where, then, is that boldness of which Paul elsewhere speaks (Eph. 3:12), that access with confidence to the Father through faith in Christ? Not contented with the term confidence, he furnishes us with boldness, which is certainly something more than certainty.³⁷

He exposes a fundamental error of Rome, as of Puritanism and the “further reformation,” concerning faith when he adds, “faith is destroyed as soon as certainty is taken away.”³⁸

Rome, Puritanism, and the “further reformation” contend that Paul’s claims of assurance of salvation apply only to himself and a few other specially favored saints and that they had their assurance by “special revelation,” or a mystical experience. Calvin denies this contention as a “frivolous quibble”: “[Paul] claims nothing so special for himself as not to share it with all believers, when in their name as much as his own, he boldly exults over death and life, the present and the future [in Romans 8:35-39—DJE].”³⁹

At Trent, Rome declared: “Neither is it to be asserted that it becomes those who are truly justified to determine with

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 137.

themselves, without any kind of doubt, that they are truly justified.”⁴⁰ Puritanism agrees, as the quotation of Thomas Goodwin above indicates. Calvin responds: “Paul makes it [full assurance] the perpetual attendant of faith.”⁴¹

Calvin recognizes Rome’s “ingenious” ploy of seeming to do justice to the Bible’s teaching of faith’s certainty, all the while maintaining its false doctrine that individual believers are in doubt of their own forgiveness and salvation. “They think...that they ingeniously obviate all objections when they recommend a general persuasion of the grace of Christ...[while] they allow none to apply grace to themselves with the firm assurance of faith.”⁴² Puritanism and the “further reformation” employ the same subterfuge when they maintain that believers are certain that Christ forgives sins, but uncertain whether Christ forgives *their* sins.

Calvin scoffs at this worthless certainty. Those who teach it put both certainty and the efficacy of the death of Christ “in the air, so as to be only in confused imagination.” Calvin continues: “Christ is not set before me and others, merely that we may believe him to have been the Redeemer of Abraham, but that every one may appropriate the salvation which he procured.”⁴³

The gravity of the false doctrine concerning assurance of salvation is indicated by Calvin’s blunt statement, “Paul and John recognize none as the children of God but those who know it.”⁴⁴

One may say that Calvin was wrong about faith, justification, and certainty of forgiveness and eternal life. He may not say that Puritanism and the “further reformation” are faithful to Calvin (and the entire Reformation) on these great issues.

⁴⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*, 97.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

And if he says that Calvin was wrong, and that Puritanism and the “further reformation” are right, he aligns himself with Rome on some of the most fundamental issues of the sixteenth century Reformation of the church.

The Assurer

The three outstanding passages on assurance — the sealing passages, Romans 8:15, 16, and the passages teaching justification by faith alone — all reveal that it is the Holy Spirit who performs the indispensable work of assurance. Only the Spirit can assure the elect sinner that he is forgiven, saved, and a child of God. The Spirit is God, and only God can and may assure anyone of salvation. Only God knows who are His. Only God’s testimony is conclusive for the elect sinner. Mere human testimony can, and will, be doubted. It is the same with personal assurance of salvation as it is with the church’s assurance that the Bible is the word of God: assurance is due to, and rests upon, the witness of God the Holy Spirit. “The Spirit itself beareth witness...that we are the children of God” (Rom. 8:16).

The Spirit is the one who assures of salvation as the Spirit of Christ. Assurance of salvation is possible only in Christ Jesus. Ephesians 1:13 teaches that the believer is sealed *in Christ* with the Spirit: ‘*In whom* [Christ], also having believed, ye were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.’ There is no assurance for the sinner apart from Christ. Working on behalf of Christ and in union with Christ, the Spirit assures as the Spirit of Christ.

But He is the Spirit of Christ *in* the elect sinner. Only one who is *in* us, in our inmost being, can remove our deeply seated doubt, assure us in the depths of our being, and comfort us from within ourselves. No man can reach us where we must hear and be convinced that our sins are forgiven, that Christ died for us, even for us, and that we have God as our Father. But even Jesus Christ Himself outside of ourselves, alongside us, on the pulpit before us or on the couch next to us, cannot assure us. Therefore, He comes to us in the other

Comforter, the Breath of God, who penetrates our inmost being, speaking convincingly to our spirit and to us ourselves with our spirit that our sins are forgiven and that we are the children of God. It is the Spirit, within us, by whom “the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts” by the word of justification, that is, the assurance that God loves us (Rom. 5:5). It is the Spirit, within us, who, by means of the declaration that our sins are forgiven, moves us to cry, “Abba, Father.”

How does the Spirit assure the believing child of God?

By the Gospel of Grace

The Spirit does not give assurance after the manner of mysticism. He does not assure by special revelations, visions, extraordinary happenings, emotional experience, or direct whisperings in the soul, that is, whisperings apart from the preaching, reading, and meditating on the word of God and the use of the sacraments.

The sealing with the Spirit is not an extraordinary, emotional, mystical experience.

The witness of the Spirit with the spirit of the believer is not an immediate whispering, that is, a voice of the Spirit alongside and apart from the word of the gospel.

The Spirit does not cry, “Abba, Father,” in a believer apart from the proclamation of the biblical gospel of justification by faith.

The Spirit’s work of assurance is not after, in addition to, and far above His work of justifying faith in Jesus Christ.

Thus is exposed and condemned the grievous error that is fundamental to the Puritan doctrine of assurance. The Spirit does not assure by Goodwin’s overpowering light; Sibbes’ “spiritual ravishings” and “extraordinary feeling of the Spirit,” “superadded” to justification by faith; or Lloyd-Jones’ undefined, but suggestive, “greatest experience.”

The “mystical syllogism” of the leading Puritan theologians, Brooks, Goodwin, and Sibbes, who, according to

J. I. Packer “represent the main current of Puritan thinking,”⁴⁵ must be rejected, root and branch, as heretical mysticism and spiritual rubbish.

The “mystical syllogism” is an argument for assurance. For “the main current” of Puritanism it is the decisive argument for assurance. It is the subjective argument of the believer himself who ardently desires assurance of forgiveness and salvation, but, under the influence of his Puritan teachers, lacks assurance. The argument goes like this.

Major premise: Assurance of salvation consists of a special, extraordinary spiritual experience, a highly charged, mystical feeling.

Minor premise: I have had such an extraordinary (and rare) experience (by the Spirit).

Conclusion: Therefore, I am assured of salvation.

The argument is false in its entirety.

The major premise is false: assurance of salvation consists of faith in Jesus Christ, which every believer has.

The minor premise is false: the only experience worked by the Spirit in all of God’s children is the “ordinary” experience of peace and joy through believing in Jesus Christ.

The conclusion is false: assurance of salvation is solidly based only on the promise of the gospel embraced by a true faith and thus bound by the Spirit upon the believing heart and consciousness.

As false as the premises and conclusion is the whole syllogistic enterprise: The sinner is looking mainly, if not exclusively, within himself for assurance of salvation, rather than away from his sinful, uncertain self, with its fickle feelings, to Jesus Christ “out there” in the promise of the gospel.

Mysticism’s way to assurance is illusory, deceiving, and perilous. Those who desperately seek and work for assurance along the way of mysticism either doom themselves

⁴⁵ Packer, 179, 180.

to a life of doubt (because they never can obtain the “overpowering light” or achieve the “greatest experience”), or, if they do finally find the feeling they think they are seeking, consign themselves to perpetual questioning, whether the feeling was genuine (so much depends on the feeling, after all)⁴⁶, or, if they do firmly base their assurance on an experience, subject themselves to God’s condemnation (for He will have assurance of salvation, like salvation itself, come through faith that rests on Jesus Christ as evidently set forth in the Scriptures, and through faith only).

One dreadful effect of the “mystical syllogism” has always been the encouragement of the people who sit under such teaching to seek bizarre, direct revelations from God as evidence that they are saved, and to suppose that they have received such revelations. Fred van Lieburg relates a number of these incidents in the lives of eighteenth century Dutch pietists. One Egbert de Goede languished in doubt of his salvation for years, even though, according to his own confession, he believed in Christ and “was justified.” Only when he heard a voice, “I remember your sins no more,” and the preacher spoke on this very text the following Sunday did Egbert (by this coincidence) have “confirmation of his reconciliation to God.”⁴⁷ Hermanus Hermsen “received a vision in which I clearly saw our dear Lord Jesus...It was as if heaven opened,” etc.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ It is a wonder to me that all mystics and “experientialists” do not go stark, raving mad, always seeking a feeling, always trying to maintain a feeling, always basing salvation or assurance on a feeling, and, if they have such a feeling, always secretly fearing that the feeling might not be all it could be, or even that the feeling is no genuine operation of the Spirit at all. It is a great mercy of God to our physical and emotional life, as well as to the spiritual state of our soul, that salvation is by faith, not by feeling.

⁴⁷ Fred van Lieburg, *Living for God: Eighteenth-Century Dutch Pietist Autobiography*, tr. Annemie Godbehere (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 65.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 87. The autobiographies of the people influenced by the Puritan doctrine of the “mystical syllogism” are full of such visions, voices, dreams, indescribable experiences of God, and providential occurrences supposedly signifying salvation or the certainty of salvation. They are also

Salvation is not by mysticism. Assurance is not a matter of feelings. The Spirit does not work assurance by extraordinary experience.

Rather, the Spirit assures elect believers of their salvation in the same way in which the Spirit saves them, namely, by faith in Jesus Christ, as He is preached in the gospel of the Scripture.

Assurance is a gift of God in Christ to the elect child of God. It is a purely gracious gift. It is as much a gracious gift as is faith, or regeneration, or the future resurrection of the body. Assurance is not earned, or obtained, by works. It is not something that believers must strive after for years by heroic spiritual efforts and that only a few make themselves worthy of.

In that grand passage on assurance, Romans 8:15, 16, the apostle declares, about all the believers in the congregation in Rome and about their true children, the children of the promise, that “Ye have *received* the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.” The Spirit is the seal and earnest, that is, the assurer and assurance of salvation, by His witness with the spirits of the believers. Believers do not get, or obtain, or make themselves worthy of the Spirit by their hard working. Rather, they *receive* Him. They receive Him as God’s free, gracious gift to them for Christ’s sake.

“You do not have assurance of salvation,” Puritanism tells the believer, “at least not by virtue of possessing true, justifying faith. You must work hard and long to obtain it, and you cannot be sure you will ever get it.”

“You *have* the Spirit of adoption bearing witness with your spirit that you are the child of God, and, therefore, you have assurance of your own salvation,” the gospel of grace assures every believer. “You have *received* it. Therefore, be grateful for it, and live in the comfort of it.”

replete with horrifying visions and dreams of Satan, death, and hell, which were thought to have spiritual significance. The people are mostly to be pitied. Their teachers are altogether to be blamed.

Puritan theologians and their followers speak anxiously of the “*quest*” for assurance. Reformed orthodoxy thankfully rejoices in the “*gift*” of assurance.

The *Spirit* works assurance, not the believer himself.

The Spirit works assurance by means of faith, as faith hears the gospel, believes on Christ presented in the gospel, and is the instrument of justification. As Ephesians 1:13 teaches, having *heard* the word of truth, the gospel of our salvation, and having *believed* the gospel, and in Jesus Christ presented in the gospel, we were sealed in Christ with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit binds the word of God on the regenerated heart of the elect child of God, so that he believes the word of God concerning Jesus Christ and believes on Christ for forgiveness and eternal life. Precisely in this way — the way of hearing and believing — and at this moment — the moment of hearing and believing — the Spirit witnesses *to* the spirit of the believer that the believer is forgiven and saved, as Romans 8:16 teaches.

Precisely in this same way and at the same moment — the way and moment of hearing and believing the gospel — the Spirit Himself witnesses *with* the believer’s spirit to the believer himself that he is a child of God.

This witness of the Spirit to the believer with the witness of the believer’s own spirit is mysterious. But it is not *mystical*. It is not “immediate” and “direct,” that is, a witness, a voice, a “whisper,” different from, apart from, and alongside the word that the believer hears from the mouth of the preacher, or reads on the pages of Scripture. Rather, the believer hears the witness of the Spirit to him that he is a child of God, as an overwhelming, convincing, not-to-be-doubted, assuring personal certainty of forgiveness and salvation, in and by the gospel that is read and preached.

The Spirit witnesses through the word of truth, not otherwise (Rom. 1:15-17). Thus, and thus only, does Jehovah God “say unto my soul, I am thy salvation” (Psalm 35:3).

Believers receive the Spirit, also with regard to His sealing work, by the hearing of faith, not otherwise (Gal. 3:2).⁴⁹

To seek the witness of the Spirit for assurance elsewhere than in the reading and preaching of the Scriptures is foolish, wicked unbelief.

To suppose that one has heard the Spirit's "whisper" assuring of salvation in dreams, visions, strange happenings, or a voice in the night is delusion, or the experience of other spirits.⁵⁰

Beyond "Mere Faith"

It was basic to the Puritan error concerning assurance that the leading Puritan theologians taught the Spirit gives

⁴⁹ What the Canons of Dordt confess as Reformed orthodoxy concerning the assurance of preservation to final salvation holds as well for assurance of present salvation: "This assurance, however, [which, according to the Canons of Dordt, V/9, all "true believers may and do obtain"], is not produced by any peculiar revelation contrary to, *or independent of the Word of God*, but springs from faith in God's promises, which he has most abundantly revealed in his Word for our comfort; from the testimony of the Holy Spirit, witnessing with our spirit, that we are children and heirs of God (Rom. 8:16); and, lastly, from a serious and holy desire to preserve a good conscience, and to perform good works" (Canons of Dordt, V/10, in Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 3, 594; emphasis added).

⁵⁰ The evil of Puritanism's "mystical syllogism" with regard to assurance of present salvation is that condemned by the Canons of Dordt regarding assurance of future perseverance in salvation: "The Synod rejects the errors of those...who teach that without a special revelation we can have no certainty of future perseverance in this life. For by this doctrine the sure comfort of the true believers is taken away in this life, *and the doubts of the papist are again introduced into the church*, while the Holy Scriptures constantly deduce this assurance, *not from a special and extraordinary revelation*, but from the marks proper to the children of God and from the constant promises of God" (Canons of Dordt, V, Rejection of Errors/5, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches*, Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005, 177; emphasis added [Schaff does not give the Rejection of Errors sections of the Canons in English]).

assurance by a “direct” and “immediate” work and witness. In his explanation of the sealing with the Spirit, which gives assurance, Thomas Goodwin maintained that this is “an immediate assurance of the Holy Ghost, by a heavenly and divine light.” Goodwin contrasted this work of the Spirit with the Spirit’s work “by...[the] promises” [of the gospel].”⁵¹ Goodwin went on to describe sealing as “the impress of the immediate seal of the Spirit” and “an immediate witness of the Spirit.”⁵²

Richard Sibbes wrote that the Spirit gives assurance “immediately.” It is a work of the Spirit “by way of [the Spirit’s] presence...without discourse.”⁵³ In sealing some believers, “the Spirit speaks to us by a kind of secret whispering and intimation.”⁵⁴

It is true that Goodwin thought to safeguard his “immediate witness of the Spirit” against “enthusiasms” by insisting that the “immediate witness” of the Spirit “is not that it is without the Word.” When the Spirit witnesses to some believers that they are the children of God, “it is the Spirit applying the Word to the heart that we speak of.”⁵⁵ Sibbes likewise had the Spirit immediately whispering Bible texts to some believers.⁵⁶

But these provisos and caveats did not, in fact, rescue the Puritan doctrine of assurance from mysticism’s teaching of salvation as the soul’s experience of immediate contact with God. For, first, the repeated, emphatic affirmation of assurance as “immediate” and “direct” in the context of an experience of “overpowering light” and of “secret whisperings of the Spirit” inevitably opened the way both in the teaching of ministers and in the thinking and practice of the people to

⁵¹ Goodwin, *Works*, 233.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 237, 241.

⁵³ Richard Sibbes, *Works of Richard Sibbes*, vol. 5, *Expositions and Treatises from Portions of Several of the Epistles of St. Paul*, ed.

Alexander B. Grosart (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, repr. 1977), 440.

⁵⁴ Sibbes, *Works*, vol. 3, 456.

⁵⁵ Goodwin, *Works*, 250.

⁵⁶ Sibbes, *Works*, vol. 3, 456.

views and experiences of assurance that quite ignored the preaching of the word, the promises of the gospel, and Bible texts.

More importantly, once Goodwin had distinguished the “immediate testimony” of the Spirit that gives assurance from the testimony of the gospel of the blood of Jesus Christ and the corroborating testimony of the believer’s life of sanctification as a testimony “beyond all these”⁵⁷ and once he had described “immediate assurance” as a “light beyond the light of ordinary faith,”⁵⁸ he had committed himself and his followers to mysticism’s way of salvation, namely, sheer experience, apart from and “beyond” faith in Jesus Christ as presented in the preaching of the promise of the gospel.

In his enthusiasm for the extraordinary work of the Spirit of assuring some believers by an “overpowering light” and an “immediate witness,” Goodwin dared to disparage the faith that believes on the crucified Jesus Christ and trusts His atoning blood as “mere faith.”

When a man that is a believer looks upon Christ, there is a fresh flowing of the blood, and that strengtheneth faith; no man looks upon Christ but cometh off more cheerly; but this is a weak witness. Then cometh in water, that witnesseth too; but yet, I say, if you mark it, here is the Spirit, that differeth from both these, therefore there is a further testimony than either from a man’s sanctification or from mere faith.⁵⁹

“Mere faith!”

This phrase, all by itself, exposes the Puritan doctrine of assurance. It betrays as well the fundamental error of the Puritan doctrine: denial that true, justifying, saving faith is

⁵⁷ Goodwin, *Works*, 233, 234.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 236.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 233.

assurance of salvation. True, justifying, saving faith is “mere” faith, in Puritan thinking, because the best and greatest aspect of salvation—assurance—comes to a few in some other way.

The actual application and practical fruit of the Puritan doctrine of assurance are indicated, not only in the autobiographical account of the lives of simple Dutch farmers in the eighteenth century, but also in D. M. Lloyd-Jones’ glowing description of the supposed obtaining of assurance by a number of illustrious persons whose experiences are proposed as examples for all believers. Flavel had “ravishing tastes of heavenly joys” as he was out walking. Edwards had a “view...of the glory of the Son of God” as he was riding his horse in the woods. Moody was filled with the Spirit “one day in the city of New York.” Christmas Evans had the “experience” as he was “traveling over a mountain-pass.” Where Whitefield was when the “Spirit of God took possession” of his soul, Lloyd-Jones does not inform the reader, but evidently Whitefield was not in church hearing the preaching of the gospel with the congregation. Wesley’s heart was “strangely warmed” at a meeting of a Moravian society.⁶⁰

Not one of these examples for all Christians was assured of his salvation at church on the Lord’s Day under the preaching of the gospel and while using the sacraments. Not one was sealed by the Spirit by means of faith that heard the promise of the gospel and trusted in Christ for forgiveness. Not one was even reading the Bible. Of none of these notable examples of assurance does Lloyd-Jones record that the content of their “experience” was the truth—the doctrinal truth—of Holy Scripture. Rather, their assurance consisted of a vague feeling.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Lloyd-Jones, 275-278.

⁶¹ The Puritan doctrine of assurance is classic mysticism. “The hallmark of mysticism is *subjectivism*, since the center of gravity is shifted from the objective work of God outside us, the acquiring of salvation, to the subjective; not the sure Christ but the sure Christian is the ground upon which one depends. Along this line, the Word of God is made to play second fiddle to the inner witness of the Spirit; experience is cut loose from Scripture; many are enthusiasts for the ‘inner light’; and in the end it

By the Truth

The Spirit *assures* of salvation in the same way that He *saves*: by means of faith that hears and believes the word of God. For the believer's assurance of salvation, this word is, and must be, the truth, that is, the gospel of sovereign grace, at the heart of which is the gracious, unconditional promise. According to Ephesians 1:13, the sealing accompanies one's hearing "the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation." II Corinthians 1:22 affirms that God has sealed us, in the context of the declaration that the promises of God in Christ are "yea, and in him [Jesus Christ] Amen" (v. 20).

Romans 8:16 intends to teach that the Spirit bears witness with the spirit of the believer, not by means of any religious teaching whatever, not by means of a false gospel of a universal love of God dependent for its saving efficacy upon the will or good works of sinners, but *by the gospel taught in the book of Romans*. This is the gospel of sovereign grace: grace rooted in eternal election; grace merited for elect sinners by a limited, efficacious cross; grace directed to the elect sinner by the unconditional promise; grace irresistibly worked in the elect sinner by the Holy Spirit; and grace that infallibly brings every elect saint to glory. This is the one true gospel of salvation by "God who shows mercy" (Rom. 9:16).

In the false gospel of salvation by the willing or running of sinners (Rom. 9:16), there is not, and cannot be, assurance. Every form of the false gospel of conditional salvation, that is, salvation dependent upon the sinner himself,

is not the revelation of God that is decisive, but what we experience (Dutch: *bevinden*) in our hearts. From this results also the mistaken conception of faith and of the assurance of faith. With regard to faith, it is dissolved in the activity of trusting, and little remains of the certainty of faith, because everything regarding assurance must take place along a prescribed, long way of many 'spiritual conditions' and many 'experiences'" ("*Mysticisme*," in *Christelijke Encyclopaedie*, vol. 4, ed. F. W. Grosheide, H. H. Landwehr, C. Lindeboom, and J. C. Rullmann, Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1925, 290, 291; the translation of the Dutch is mine).

leaves men fearful, doubting, terrified. The Spirit does not seal or witness by such a message.

The Spirit assures by the word of God, because He is the Spirit proceeding eternally from the second person of the Trinity, the personal Word of God.

The Spirit assures by the gospel of Jesus Christ, because on Pentecost the Spirit became the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

The Spirit assures by the truth, because, as the Spirit of Christ, He is the Spirit of truth, that is, the Spirit of Scripture, of creeds and catechisms, of sound doctrine, of preaching, of faith that hears and trusts the word of God.

He is not the Spirit of immediate contact with God, of extraordinary experiences, of saving acts above and beyond “mere faith.”

Because He is the *Holy Spirit*, His assurance of the believer by means of faith is always a work that is accompanied and confirmed by His sanctifying of the believer. “As many as are led by the Spirit, they are the sons of God” (Rom. 8:14). Only in the way of a holy life can, and do, believers enjoy the assurance that they are the children of God. The Spirit witnesses with the spirit of the believer as the believer obeys God’s commandments, and *only* as he obeys God’s commandments. The believer has assurance as he walks in holiness of life, and *only* as he walks in holiness of life. This is the truth of the “practical syllogism.” Holiness is a confirming evidence of salvation to the believer, as good works are an evidence of justification.⁶²

Whom the Spirit Assures

So much is assurance an aspect of salvation itself, that the question really is, “Whom does the Spirit *save*?”

⁶² “The elect in due time...attain the assurance of this their eternal and unchangeable election...by observing in themselves...the infallible fruits of election...such as a true faith in Christ, filial fear, a godly sorrow for sin, a hungering and thirsting after righteousness, etc.” (Canons of Dordt, I/12, in Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 3, 583, 584).

The Spirit assures all of God' elect, believing, sanctified people. He is the seal and earnest to all. He bears witness with their spirit to all the saints. *All* in Ephesus who heard and believed were sealed (Eph. 1:13). *All* in the congregation at Rome who received the Spirit of adoption by believing the gospel of grace were led by the Spirit and had the Spirit's witness with their spirit that they were the children of God (Rom. 8:14-16). *Every* publican who cried out in repentance and faith, "God, be merciful to me the sinner," went home justified in his (assured) consciousness (Luke 18:14). Christ taught, indeed, commanded, *all* who pray in faith to address God as "Our Father" (Matt. 6:9).

There may be times of doubt. Some believers struggle with doubt more than do other believers. Some may doubt for some time. One who doubts must not conclude that he or she is an unbeliever, unforgiven, unsaved, or even a reprobate, so long as he is troubled by his doubt, struggles with it, and seeks deliverance from it in the gospel.

There are spiritual causes of doubt in a believer. He may, for a time, not be hearing the word and believing, because of indifference, or minding earthly things, or bitterness toward God. He may, for a time, not be living a holy life, because of worldliness, or yielding to some temptation to sin, or entrapment by the devil. He may be grieving the Holy Spirit, by hating a brother or sister, or discontentment with God's ways with him, or fighting the Spirit's assuring work by a determined doubting of his salvation. He may, for a time, be the especial target of the fieriest dart that Satan throws at the soul of one who believes and confesses the truth.

But this spiritual condition of the believer is unusual, abnormal, a weakness, a disease, and a severe temptation. From the disease, he must seek to be healed; against the temptation he must fight. Where the gospel of grace is purely, soundly, and rightly preached and where Reformed pastors carry out their pastoral work diligently and wisely, using the gospel of grace as the balm in Gilead, there will not be many

who doubt their salvation, nor will the doubt of a few last for many years.⁶³

It is false and pernicious teaching, that assurance is intended by God only for a favored few of His believing children and that the many ought to accept doubt as their portion for many years, perhaps their lifelong, in the will of God.

⁶³ Regarding the possibility of a lack of the experience of “an assured confidence of soul” concerning their own election and salvation in some believers, see the Canons of Dordt, I/16, in Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 3, 584, 585. The Canons do not regard this doubt as common among believers, much less as the norm. The usual and normal experience of the saints is certainty of their own election and salvation: “[Certainty of their own election to glory is] the experience of the saints, who by virtue of the consciousness of their election rejoice with the apostle and praise this favor of God (Eph. 1); who according to Christ’s admonition rejoice with His disciples that their names are written in heaven (Luke 10:20); who also place the consciousness of their election over against the fiery darts of the devil, asking: ‘Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God’s elect?’ (Rom. 8:33)” (Canons of Dordt, I, Rejection of Errors/7, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches*, 161, 162). Certainty of their own election and salvation is the usual and normal experience of *all* saints, of saints *as saints*, not of a specially favored, or especially industrious, severely limited caste of saints. Certainty of their own salvation is the usual and normal experience of young saints as well as old saints; of new converts as well as church members of long standing; of those who are the least holy as well as the holiest in the congregation. The Canons affirm this “consciousness” and “certainty” of the saints of their own personal election and salvation as the “fruit” of election itself, against the “error” that denies certainty of one’s own election and salvation “in this life,” except for a certainty “which depends on a changeable and uncertain condition.” To deny the certainty of their own election and salvation, “*in this life*,” of many, if not most, believers as long as they live and to teach that those few believers who do obtain certainty do so only after many years of doubt, and then only on the basis of an ineffable “experience” (a highly “changeable and uncertain condition”), are not only to strip faith of half its essence (“a hearty trust”), despoil Jesus Christ of part of His saving work—the *experiential* part (“he also assures me of eternal life”), denigrate the work of the Holy Spirit (He is the Comforter, who “comforts me”), and rob believers of peace (“peace I leave with you”), but also to make election itself ineffective and fruitless: the certainty of election and salvation is the “fruit” of election.

O believer, gratefully receive, and enjoy, assurance as the free gift of the Holy Spirit to you with and by His gift to you of faith in Jesus Christ as preached in the gospel.

Do not doubt that you have a right to assurance. God wills it. Christ earned it for you.

Do not quench the Spirit of assurance in you, by giving yourself over to doubt, as though doubt is the expected, even required, and therefore normal condition of believers.

Do not quench the Spirit of assurance either by listening to Puritan preaching that is forever questioning your assurance, forever challenging your right to assurance, forever sending you on a quest for assurance, and forever instilling doubt. The Spirit does not work assurance by means of a gospel of doubt.

Listen to the Spirit's witness in you by the gospel of grace, and to the witness of your own spirit as the Spirit testifies to your spirit, and be certain — *absolutely* certain (which is the only certainty there is).

And cry out, with all believers, young and old, aged saints who have been members of the church all their lives and recent converts, godly parents and covenant children, "Abba, Father."