

Our Assurance of Faith: The Nature of Assurance

Michael Woody | Hebrews 10:19–31

Assurance is not always instantaneous, nor is it always without doubts, but assurance will come for those who resolutely rest on Christ.

WHY THIS TOPIC?

1. The topic of assurance of faith is one with a myriad of theological views:
 - a. Rome holds to no assurance as one must be in the church to be saved and, even then, one has no assurance of their eternal destiny.
 - b. Arminianism holds that one has no assurance because belief is fallible and one can be found without belief.
 - c. Finally, we have strong warnings on falling away in Hebrews - one which looms immediately in front of us.
2. Some people have assurance of faith and they should not - their life is wrecked with sin, they bear no mark of Christ within them, but they prayed a prayer so they think all is fine.
3. Our confession makes a statement on assurance that has caused some area of dispute: This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it.
4. This statement in paragraph 3 has been a source of contention to some - “This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith” as it can be initially perceived as denying the role of faith, as the Confession disagreeing with Calvin, or as an area of contention for those who would call themselves with the Marrow men.

5. Today I want to do three things to set the stage for the next sermon
 - a. Not All Who Name Christ are Christ's
 - b. True Believers may be harassed with doubts
 - c. Union with Christ is the answer for those harassed with doubts
 - d. Assurance is possible for the believer

ASSERTION 1: NOT ALL WHO NAME CHRIST ARE CHRIST'S (MATTHEW 7:21-23)

1. Not all professors of faith are actually saved.
2. Scripture offers no peace that those who have prayed a prayer are saved.

ASSERTION 2: TRUE BELIEVERS MAY BE HARASSED WITH DOUBTS

1. It is possible for a true believer to be harassed with doubts? The answer to this is Yes.
2. Survey of Calvin, the Confession and the Marrow Brethren on this topic:
 - a. Calvin's did not hold that one would not ever doubt salvation.
 - b. The Confession states that assurance "does not so belong to the essence of faith," that the "believer may wait long" and struggle much in receiving it.
 - c. The Marrow men believed that faith and assurance were inseparable, but they believed that faith can be afflicted by doubts and can even lack a sense that they are accepted by God.
3. The Marrow of Modern Divinity called those true believers who doubted, "A child of light walking in the darkness." They got this name from Isa. 50:10.
4. The early Church and our New Testament dealt with these truths in Matthew 5:12; Romans 8:38-39; and 1 Peter 1:4-5
 - a. In Matthew 5:12 Jesus encourages His disciples in the face of persecution to continue believing.

- b. In Romans 8:38-39 Paul contends that nothing can separate us from the love of God rooted in the work of Christ.
- c. Peter assures us that there is an inheritance in Heaven for God's elect - 1 Peter 1:4-5

ASSERTION 3: UNION WITH CHRIST IS THE ANSWER FOR THOSE HARASSED WITH DOUBTS

1. Arminianism contends that if one can be assured they are in Christ that this will lead to moral indifference.
2. The Confession proclaims, [believers] may in this life be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed.
3. A question we must ask is if all true believers will always and immediately possess assurance? The Confession uses the word "may" as believers will not always **have** assurance but I will state that we **should have** assurance.
4. Therefore, we must ask the question, How is assurance obtained?
5. Sinclair Ferguson contends that assurance is a reflexive act and I agree - and I believe this is the point where a perceived difference comes between those who agree with Calvin vs. those who agree with the Morrow men vs. those who agree with the Confession.
 - a. Faith is where one grasps ahold of Christ and it is the sole means whereby one is united to Christ. Assurance is a result of our union with Christ.
 - b. Ferguson states, The direct act of faith says, "Christ is able to save," while the reflex act says, "I am someone who has been saved through faith in Christ."
 - c. Calvin states, The knowledge of faith consists in assurance rather than in comprehension....He alone is truly a believer who, convinced by a firm conviction that God is a kindly and well-disposed Father toward him, lays hold on an undoubted expectation of salvation. . . . No man is a believer, I say, except him who,

leaning upon the assurance of his salvation, confidently triumphs over the devil and death.

d. Scripture supports this reflexive perspective

i. Scripture contends in 1 John 5:13 that we should have assurance of our salvation.

ii. In 1 Jo 2:3 we know that our assurance is based on our resulting obedience.

iii. 1 John 3:24 and Romans 5:5 tell us additionally that when we are in Christ we have the Spirit.

6. Our salvation is where we believe in Christ but assurance is a grace that follows salvation yet we are always in a battle with unbelief.

a. The LBCF 18:2 had stated, This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope, but an infallible assurance of faith founded on the blood and righteousness of Christ revealed in the Gospel; and also upon the inward evidence of those graces of the Spirit unto which promises are made, and on the testimony of the Spirit of adoption, witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God; and, as a fruit thereof, keeping the heart both humble and holy.

b. The confession further contends at the end of 18:4, that believers are preserved from utter despair.

7. Several thoughts from Calvin:

a. Calvin holds that assurance is of the essence of faith in the sense that Christ is its object; whereas when the believer looks at himself set within the prevailing circumstances of life, and particularly in the context of the conflict of the flesh against the Spirit, he or she never experiences faith in terms of its hermetically sealed definition.

b. Calvin recognized that his definition of what faith is should not be isolated from his description of what the believer actually experiences. Indeed, faith cannot be

defined in any other way. It cannot be defined in terms of struggles, doubts, fears, and frailties. It must be defined in terms of wholehearted trust in Christ.

- c. Ferguson sums up a third element from Calvin, In Christ we are no longer dominated by the flesh, but by the Spirit; but we are not yet delivered from the flesh. So long as this eschatological tension exists for the believer, so long will there be—in Calvin’s view—a gap between the definition of faith and the actual experience of the believer.

ASSERTION 4: ASSURANCE IS POSSIBLE FOR THE BELIEVER

1. Calvin stated it, 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.
2. The Confession said, This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties, before he be partaker of it.
3. Some contend that while Calvin made assurance of the essence of faith, the Westminster Divines denied it, and that Calvin’s scheme gave no place to the practical syllogism, while the Westminster Divines emphasized it.
 - a. Ferguson responds, In the Institutes Calvin is defining faith; in the Confession of Faith the Westminster Divines are describing assurance. Two related but quite different things are being discussed and contrasted as though they were the same.
 - b. In fact when the Westminster Divines define the activity of faith, they speak of it as “accepting, receiving and resting on Christ alone for justification, sanctification and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace” in 14:2.
 - c. The principal acts of saving faith have immediate relation to Christ, accepting, receiving, and resting upon him alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.
4. Scripture speaks in Hebrews 10:23

5. As Ferguson states, we do not accept, receive, and rest on someone we believe to be untrustworthy.
6. How then do we have assurance? In Hebrews 7:25

CONCLUSION

I want to close with the following statement from Calvin for those who are beset with doubts, The root of faith can never be torn apart from the godly breast, but clings so fast to the inmost parts that, however faith seems to be shaken or to bend this way or that, its light is never so extinguished or snuffed out that it does not at least lurk as it were beneath the ashes . . . but that, though it be assailed a thousand times, it will prevail over the entire world.

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

Calvin stated the following to encourage the believer

1. There is an assurance in faith, because it accepts and rests on Christ.
2. This assurance of Christ is set within a spectrum as it presses itself into the consciousness of the believer.
3. This distance between the definition and the experience of faith is explained in terms of the conflict between the flesh and the Spirit in which the believer is involved. It is part of the not-yetness of the Christian life.