

# ASSURANCE AND GOOD WORKS IN THE *THREE FORMS OF UNITY*

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## Introduction

And if the elect of God were deprived of this solid comfort, that they shall finally obtain the victory, and of this infallible pledge or earnest of eternal glory [in short, if they were deprived of assurance], they would be of all men the most miserable.

Thus ends *Canons* V:10. It puts into most eloquent words the preciousness of the assurance of salvation to the child of God. When the child of God, who believes God's Word, and who believes in the sinfulness of the world, the coming judgment and the wrath of God against sin, doubts his own assurance, he thus doubts whether God loves him, and seriously considers the possibility that God is set against him with all His might and being, and will throw him into the eternal fires of hell. And as such, the child of God who has no assurance is "of all men the most miserable." On the other hand, the believer who is assured of God's eternal, immutable, omnipotent love for him can and does count everything else as "dung" in comparison with this knowledge (Phil. 3:8).

In short, without assurance all Christian doctrine with everything God has done for His people through Christ is of absolutely no benefit to God's children here on earth.

For this reason, the doctrine of assurance, and the question of *how* this assurance is obtained, ought to be very important to each believer, especially because our confessions teach "that believers in this life have to struggle with various carnal doubts, and that under grievous temptations they are not always sensible of this full assurance of faith and certainty of persevering" (*Canons* V:11).

One important aspect of assurance, with which this essay will deal, is the following extremely practical question, which many of God's children face: if a believer looks within himself and fails to see a certain standard of holiness, or

even doubts whether he has any holiness whatsoever, should he then conclude that he is unregenerate or even reprobate? Should he doubt his salvation?

The question is not whether an *unbeliever* should consider himself outside of God's kingdom by the evidence of his wicked works—that is obviously the case. The question concerns those who trust in Christ alone for salvation—believers.

It is also taken for granted that the genuineness of faith can only be proven to *others* through works, as James teaches in his inspired epistle. Furthermore, it is taken for granted that the church must declare all idolaters, adulterers, thieves, liars, etc., to be outside the kingdom unless they repent, as the Scriptures and the confessions abundantly declare.

This essay, therefore, is not a treatment of the doctrine of assurance as such, but rather a treatment of assurance and its relationship to good works. Furthermore, this essay will focus on the answer to this question as found in the *Three Forms of Unity (TFU)*, the doctrinal standard of all Reformed churches of the Dutch Calvinist tradition.

The false answers to this question given by some Reformed and Presbyterian churches, though closely related, can be grouped into two distinct categories: First, those who make assurance spring from and depend upon a mystical, special revelation of the Holy Spirit subsequent to justification, and second, those who claim that a believer ought not to have assurance *until* he sees in himself good works.

To the former group belong most Puritans and their modern-day followers such as Joel Beeke.<sup>1</sup> The proponents of the latter view are found especially among “Reformed” Baptists, also heavily influenced by the Puritans, led by men such as John Piper and Paul Washer.<sup>2</sup>

## Justification by Faith Alone Apart From Works

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<sup>1</sup> This view is directly refuted by the *Canons V:R:5*. For a detailed refutation of this view, as well as for a clear, positive statement of the biblical doctrine of assurance in general, I would recommend David J. Engelsma's *The Gift of Assurance* (Evangelism Committee of the Protestant Reformed Church, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed refutation of John Piper's view of assurance, see Manuel Kuhs, “A Critical Examination of John Piper's Christian Hedonism,” *British Reformed Journal*, Issue 52, pp. 15-32; Issue 53, pp. 20-34.

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Since the *TFU* do not contain a systematic treatment of the doctrine of assurance, the way to begin clarifying its position on this topic is much the same as in Scripture—one must start with the clear, unambiguous parts. And the most clear and important statement made in the *TFU* in this respect is that doctrine which Luther called the “article of a standing or a falling church,” that most glorious doctrine restored and first systematically developed in the Reformation—*justification by faith alone apart from works*.

That this doctrine is fundamental to the doctrine of assurance might come as a surprise to many today. This is because, sadly, even most of the Reformed and Presbyterian church world has forgotten a most fundamental truth for which the Reformation saints shed their blood in the thousands. As David J. Engelsma states it, “Justification is not simply the forgiveness of sins. Justification is the forgiveness in the forum of the believer’s consciousness.”<sup>3</sup>

To be forgiven in our consciousness *is* assurance. The doctrine of justification by faith alone dealt not merely objectively with the forgiveness of sins by grace alone and not by works, but also subjectively with the *experience* of this forgiveness. This was so intrinsic to the Protestant Reformation, and these two aspects of justification are so inherently united, that the *Belgic Confession* states both of these aspects without clear distinction in its article on justification. Notice especially the end of Article 23:

... we always hold fast this foundation, ascribing all the glory to God, humbling ourselves before Him, and acknowledging ourselves to be such as we really are, without presuming to trust in anything in ourselves, or in any merit of ours, relying and resting upon the obedience of Christ crucified alone, which becomes ours when we believe in Him. This is sufficient to cover all our iniquities, *and to give us confidence in approaching to God; freeing the conscience of fear, terror, and dread, without following the example of our first father, Adam, who, trembling, attempted to cover himself with fig leaves.*

Note: According to Article 23 of the *Belgic Confession*, justification includes assurance. Justification by faith alone is “sufficient ... to give us confidence.”

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<sup>3</sup> Engelsma, *The Gift of Assurance*, p. 7.

We will understand the importance and centrality of this to the Reformation if we consider the context of this great work of God. What was it that drove Luther to search the Scriptures? His *lack of assurance*! And why did he lack assurance? Why did he spend all his waking hours in terrible fear of damnation, which he attempted to ward off by doing many “good works”? Because the Romish Church taught that there can be normally no assurance whatsoever, that salvation depends on the good works of man, that good Christians must live all their lives in uncertainty and at best with the prospect of many years in purgatory. Luther discovered the doctrine of justification in his search for assurance! He not only wanted his sins to be forgiven, he wanted to *know* that his sins were forgiven! He longed ardently for the *experience* and *knowledge* of the love and favour and gracious smile of God.

Why did *sola fide* sweep over Europe? Why were thousands of poor peasants and rich aristocrats willing to be burnt at the stake for this doctrine? Because *sola fide* not only taught that forgiveness objectively is by grace alone apart from works, outside of our experience, but taught that believers *actually experience* this forgiveness in the way of faith alone—that they do not need to perform good works to somehow attain this assurance! And having this most treasured possession of the absolute certain knowledge of the love of God *for them in particular*, they were willing to be led as sheep to the slaughter, and do all good works.

This is also clarified by the very meaning of the word “justification.” To justify means to “declare righteous;” it does not mean to “make righteous.” God justifies the elect, *declares* them righteous, on the *basis* of their being righteous—righteous in Christ. So when the Reformation taught that we are justified by faith alone apart from works, it not only denied that our works are in any way the *basis* of our justification, but that God declares us righteous *in our conscience* by faith alone apart from works!

That justification by faith alone includes assurance is confessional for all churches which hold to the *TFU* by Article 23 of the *Belgic Confession*.

To make this truth even clearer, the *Heidelberg Catechism* explicitly makes assurance an integral part of faith itself:

Q. 21. What is true faith?

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A. True faith is ... an assured confidence, which the Holy Ghost works by the gospel in my heart; that *not only to others, but to me also*, remission of sin, everlasting righteousness, and salvation are, freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits.

The same is also implied in *Canons* V:9:

Of this preservation of the elect to salvation, and of their perseverance in the faith, true believers for themselves may and *do obtain assurance according to the measure of their faith*, whereby they arrive at the *certain* persuasion that they ever will continue true and living members of the church, and that they experience forgiveness of sins, and will at last inherit eternal life.

These two closely related truths stated in the confessions, namely, that both *justification* and *faith* include assurance, *must* form the basis of any further examination of the doctrine of assurance as found in the *TFU*.

We can immediately state that this condemns that most terrible doctrine of assurance espoused by most of the Puritans and their followers today, such as Joel Beeke, which explicitly deny that assurance is an integral part of faith, and positively state that one may have faith without having assurance. The practical result of this doctrine is that these churches are filled with hordes of confessing members in good standing, who do not address God as “our Father” when praying and do not partake of the Lord’s Supper, because they do not consider themselves saved.<sup>4</sup>

### **Assurance and Good Works**

In our discussion of justification by faith alone, and especially in our brief consideration of the historical background of the development of this precious doctrine, we have at least hinted at the relationship between assurance and good works, and thus at the answer to the question examined in this essay.

The answer is this: we are justified (declared righteous), even in our own conscience, by faith alone apart from good works. That is, a person who genu-

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<sup>4</sup> Engelsma, *The Gift of Assurance*, p. 14.

inely trusts in Christ alone for salvation ought to be assured of his salvation *even if he does not see good works in himself yet*—because we are justified by faith alone apart from good works.

To deny this is a return to Rome. To deny this is to return to the system of good works prevalent in the medieval church, in which church members had no assurance and performed good works in order to gain not merely their actual forgiveness, but also the assurance thereof.

To echo the words of *Canons V:R:5*, by denying this truth, “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.”

This truth is fundamental to the *Heidelberg Catechism*, because comfort is the guiding thought behind the three-part division. The order of these three parts is not random; it is both temporal (the order in which we experience them in time) and logical.

Q. 2. How many things are necessary for thee to know, that thou, enjoying this comfort, mayest live and die happily?

A. Three: the first, how great my sins and miseries are; the second, how I may be delivered from all my sins and miseries; the third, how I shall express my gratitude to God for such deliverance.

The third part, which concerns the doing of good works, is primarily a description of “how I shall express my gratitude to God for such deliverance,” and is entitled “Of Thankfulness.” How can someone who is not *already* assured of his salvation “express [his] gratitude to God for such deliverance” and thus do good works?

Good works are therefore clearly identified as being done by believers who *already have* assurance.

The *Belgic Confession* even explicitly states, in Article 24, that good works are impossible apart from assurance:

... it is so far from being true that this justifying faith [which includes assurance] makes men remiss in a pious and holy

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life, that on the contrary, without it they would never do anything out of love to God,<sup>5</sup> but only out of self-love or fear of damnation.

The same article then continues to declare that good works always (and necessarily) *follow* justification (which justification includes assurance according to the previous article) because good works organically sprout out of “the good root of faith:”

[Truly good] works, *as they proceed from the good root of faith*, are good and acceptable in the sight of God, forasmuch as they are all sanctified by his grace; howbeit they are of no account towards our justification. For it is by faith in Christ that we are justified, even before we do good works; otherwise they could not be good works, any more than the fruit of a tree can be good before the tree itself is good.

The *Heidelberg Catechism* puts it most simply and bluntly when it asks:

Q. 91. But what are good works?

A. Only those which proceed from a true faith ...

This “true faith” includes assurance according to Question 21. Thus, since a good work requires assurance, a person who doubts his salvation can never correctly see any good works in himself. For, already doubting his salvation, and knowing that assurance is a prerequisite for good works, he must therefore conclude that he has no good works. This is the terrible predicament of those of God’s children who struggle with doubt, when they are told that to attain assurance they must first see good works in themselves.

In fact, to tell one who despises his sins and trusts in Christ that he ought *not* be assured of his salvation as long as he does not see good works in himself, is in direct opposition to the spirit of *Canons* I:16.

Much less cause have they to be terrified by the doctrine of reprobation who, though they seriously desire to be turned to

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<sup>5</sup> Love for God is the most basic requirement of a good work, see *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. & A. 4.

God, to please Him only, and to be delivered from the body of death, cannot yet reach that measure of holiness and faith to which they aspire; since a merciful God has promised that He will not quench the smoking flax nor break the bruised reed.

In short, a person who trusts in Christ alone for salvation ought never to doubt his election, no matter how little fruit he may see in himself, and no matter what sin he may have committed. Ultimately, this is because God has promised to save all those who cling to Christ as their only hope, and God's promises never fail and ought therefore never to be doubted.

The promises of God are unconditionally for those who believe. Since they are unconditionally for those who believe, those who believe ought never to doubt their salvation, since there are no conditions for them to fail to meet.

### Antinomianism?

Inevitably this doctrine of assurance will bring the charge of antinomianism. Indeed, in this we are in good company with the Apostle Paul, whose doctrine of justification equally brought this charge (Rom. 3:8; 6:1-2, 15). As such, any doctrine of justification (including assurance) which does *not* bring this charge is not the biblical doctrine.

Each of the documents which make up the *TFU* refutes this age-old charge made against the doctrine of justification. In the *Heidelberg Catechism*, this is seen in Q. & A. 64:

Q. 64. But doth not this doctrine [of justification by faith alone] make men careless and profane?

A. By no means; for it is impossible that those who are implanted into Christ by a true faith should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness.

The *Belgic Confession* even makes justification a *prerequisite* to good works in Article 24, as shown previously. Perhaps even more strikingly, *Canons V* deals with this charge explicitly as part of its treatment of *assurance*, and, similar to the *Belgic Confession*, it turns the charge around to state that assurance is so far from being a hindrance to good works that it is actually a *source* of good works:

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This certainty of perseverance, however, is so far from exciting in believers a spirit of pride, or of rendering them carnally secure, that, on the contrary, it is the real source of humility, filial reverence, true piety, patience in every tribulation, fervent prayers, constancy in suffering and in confessing the truth, and of solid rejoicing in God; so that the consideration of this benefit should serve as an incentive to the serious and constant practice of gratitude and good works, as appears from the testimonies of Scripture and the examples of the saints.

Neither does renewed confidence or persevering produce licentiousness or a disregard to piety in those who are recovering from backsliding; but it renders them much more careful and solicitous to continue in the ways of the Lord, which He hath ordained, that they who walk therein may maintain an assurance of persevering; lest, by abusing His fatherly kindness, God should turn away His gracious countenance from them, to behold which is to the godly dearer than life, the withdrawing thereof is more bitter than death, and they in consequence hereof should fall into more grievous torments of conscience (*Canons V:12-13*).

### The “Practical Syllogism:” A *Strengthening* of Assurance

We have established the creedal and biblical truth that assurance is not based in any way upon our own good works, and that in fact assurance is a prerequisite for good works. *Only once we have established this* are we in a position to say that there is indeed a *secondary* relationship between assurance and good works. That is to say, good works are not in any way part of the *foundation* of our assurance; the foundation is solely the “merits of the suffering and death of our Saviour” which we appropriate by faith alone. But with this foundation having been established, our assurance is *further strengthened* by observing in ourselves good works, which are a part of the infallible fruits of election.

We may compare this to the believer’s certainty of the soon return of Christ. Though the believer is already certain of it, yet this certainty is strengthened by the observation of the (infallible) predecessors of Christ’s return—increas-

ingly frequent and wide-spread war, “natural” disasters, apostasy, etc. But if he were not already convinced of Christ’s return, the signs would not convince him either.

That is to say, what is known as the “practical syllogism” (the logical reasoning that “since I see good works in myself, and since only the regenerate can do good works, I can therefore conclude I am saved”) *must* be rejected when this is put forward as the *foundation* of assurance, as is done by many “Reformed” Baptists such as John Piper and Paul Washer. However, it is a valid source for *strengthening* the assurance which already exists through faith alone apart from good works.

This is the *only way* in which Answer 86 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* may be understood when it says that one reason we ought to do good works is “that every one may be assured in himself of his faith by the fruits thereof.” This is especially clear when one considers that the *Catechism* previously defined faith as already including assurance of personal salvation.

This is also (and for the same reasons) the only valid way in which to interpret certain parts of the *Canons of Dordt*, such as the following:

The elect in due time, though in various degrees and in different measures, attain the assurance of this their eternal and unchangeable election, not by inquisitively prying into the secret and deep things of God, but by observing in themselves, with a spiritual joy and holy pleasure, the infallible fruits of election pointed out in the Word of God—such as a true faith in Christ, filial fear, a godly sorrow for sin, a hungering and thirsting after righteousness, etc. (*Canons* I:12).

... 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. So especially the apostle Paul: No creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:39). And John declares: And he that keepeth his commandments abideth in him, and he in him. And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he gave us (I John 3:24) (*Canons* V:R:5).

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In light of what was previously discussed, these parts of the confessions cannot and may never be interpreted as meaning that a *believer* who fails to see any good works in himself ought therefore to doubt his salvation.

In fact, it is important to point out that nowhere do the *TFU* teach that a person who cannot see in himself any good works *ought* therefore to doubt his salvation. Of course, *ought* and *do* are very different; the *Canons* indeed teach that believers who fall into “great and heinous sins” (V:4) *do* (but not “ought to!”) lose their assurance (cf. V:5, 13).

Furthermore, it is in fact impossible to have the “practical syllogism” as the *foundation* of assurance. If good works are rightly understood as being truly good only if they proceed from a true faith and faith includes assurance (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. & A. 21, 91), it will be understood that a work is only good if it is done out of assurance, as a work of gratitude. In other words, a believer struggling with assurance who looks into himself to see if there are any good works present, must conclude that since he does not have assurance, he therefore does not have truly good works. And thus, the “practical syllogism” will leave him forever in doubt and return him to the terrors of the papists.

Those who do not (at least yet) believe on Christ for salvation *ought* to be terrified by the complete lack of good works on their part and conclude that they are not saved. They then ought to repent of their sins and believe on Christ.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, the preaching should follow the Form for the Administration of the Lord’s Supper, which on the one hand declares,

all idolaters ... all despisers of God, and of His Word, and of the holy sacraments; all blasphemers; all those who are given to raise discord, sects, and mutiny in church or state; all perjured persons; all those who are disobedient to their parents and superiors; all murderers, contentious persons, and those who live in hatred and envy against their neighbours; all adulterers, whoremongers, drunkards, thieves, usurers, robbers, gamesters, covetous, and all who lead offensive lives [have no part in the kingdom of Christ].

On the other hand, this part of the preaching ought not to

deject the contrite hearts of the faithful, as if none might come to the Supper of the Lord [and by implication, have assurance of salvation] but those who are without sin; for we do not come to this Supper to testify thereby that we are perfect and righteous in ourselves; but on the contrary, considering that we seek our life out of ourselves in Jesus Christ, we acknowledge that we lie in the midst of death; therefore, notwithstanding we feel many infirmities and miseries in ourselves, as namely, that we have not perfect faith, and that we do not give ourselves to serve God with that zeal as we are bound, but have daily to strive with the weakness of our faith and the evil lusts of our flesh; yet, since we are (by the grace of the Holy Spirit) sorry for these weaknesses, and earnestly desirous to fight against our unbelief and to live according to all the commandments of God; therefore we rest assured that no sin or infirmity which still remaineth against our will in us can hinder us from being received of God in mercy, and from being made worthy partakers of this heavenly meat and drink.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), pp. 269-270.