

Theology for Life
Faith Presbyterian Church
Lesson 22: Assurance

Last time: *Perseverance is a work of God that enables his elect to remain faithful to the end. From a human perspective, some may appear to fall away from genuine faith, but God encourages true Christians to find their confidence in him and his promises.*

How can we tell if we or others are saved? What should we do when we experience serious doubts?

WCF 18.1. *Although hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favor of God, and estate of salvation (which hope of theirs shall perish): yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed.*

Assurance of salvation is a good thing. God wants us to be assured of our salvation. The litany of promises in scripture testify to the fact that God wants us to be assured. If you lack assurance, it will adversely affect your life.

Only a fraction of the present body of professing Christians are solidly appropriating the justifying work of Christ in their lives. Many have so light an apprehension of God's holiness and of the extent and guilt of their sin, that consciously they see little need for justification. Below the surface, however, they are deeply guilt-ridden and insecure. Many others have a theoretical commitment to this doctrine, but in their day-to-day existence they rely on their sanctification for justification ... drawing their assurance of acceptance with God from their sincerity ... their recent religious performance or the relative infrequency of their conscious, willful disobedience. Few start each day with a thoroughgoing stand upon Luther's platform: you are accepted, looking outward in faith and claiming the wholly alien righteousness of Christ as the only ground for acceptance, relaxing in that quality of trust which will produce increasing sanctification as faith is active in love and gratitude.

Richard Lovelace

What is the ground of our assurance?

Two common Reformed answers (both believe we are justified by faith in Christ alone)

1. Our works determine our assurance: Some say we discern our assurance by examining the fruit of our lives.

- James 2:24 "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone."
- James 2:18 "But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works."

- 1 John 1:6–7 “If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. [7] But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”

2. God’s redemptive love determines our assurance: Others say works play a secondary role. We should not examine our works to determine our assurance.

- Galatians 3:11 “Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’”
- 2 Corinthians 13:5 “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!”
- Ephesians 2:8–9 “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

Finding Assurance

Shall we determine our standing with God subjectively or objectively? What difference would each make?

How does 18.2 answer that question?

WCF 18.2. This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God, which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.

If we understand assurance subjectively, we could never attain “infallible assurance.” Our confidence in looking at ourselves (our work, our fruit, the quality of our faith) will give every true believer doubts. We know our actions are filled with sin and mixed motives.

“For every look at self, take ten looks at Christ” Robert Murray M’Cheyne

WCF 18.3. *This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it: yet, being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto. And therefore it is the duty of everyone to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure, that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance; so far is it from inclining men to looseness.*

WCF 18.4. *True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as, by negligence in preserving of it, by falling into some special sin which woundeth the conscience and grieveth the Spirit; by some sudden or vehement*

temptation, by God's withdrawing the light of his countenance, and suffering even such as fear him to walk in darkness and to have no light: yet are they never utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart, and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may, in due time, be revived; and by the which, in the meantime, they are supported from utter despair.

Can a person lose their assurance of salvation? Does that mean they are no longer a Christian?

According to 18.3 how does a Christian strengthen assurance (i.e. “make his calling and election sure”)?

What does all this have to do with the Lord's Supper? If a person falls into some grievous sin, should he/she partake of the Lord's Supper that week? What is the basis of our assurance? What exactly do we “examine” relative to the basis of our assurance—and how does the Lord's Supper assist us in this?

Connecting the Dots: Where Theology meets Life

Summary: God wants us to have, but doesn't guarantee, assurance of our salvation. Assurance will not be found by looking inwardly at our performance or our experience. It can only be found by looking at what Christ has accomplished.