

The Theology of the Westminster Standards
WCF 18.3 – The Experience of Assurance

“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.” – 1 John 5:13

“The being in a state of grace will yield a man a heaven hereafter, but the seeing of himself in this state will yield him both a heaven here and a heaven hereafter.” – Thomas Brooks

I. Review

A. The Danger of Self-Deception (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) ... (WCF 18.1)

B. The Possibility of True Assurance (WCF 18.1)

... 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. (WCF 18.1)

C. The Grounds of Assurance (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. (WCF 18.2)

1. Three grounds of Christian assurance

- a. The reliability of the promise-making God “...who never lies ...” (Titus 1:2)
- b. The inward evidence faith in Christ and (faulty, but true) obedience (1 John 4:7).
- c. The testimony of the Holy Spirit that we are a child of God (Rom 8:15–16)

2. Sometimes people think, “How can I be sure that Jesus loved *me* and gave himself for *me*.” How does believing the following texts help get us out of this cycle of doubt?

- a. **Matt 11:28** – “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”
- b. **John 1:11–13** – “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”

II. The Experience of Assurance (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 18.3)

- A. “Is assurance of the essence of faith?” (“Deniers” vs. “Affirmers”)
1. Roman Catholicism – *“No pious person ought to doubt of the mercy of God, of the merit of Christ, and of the virtue and efficacy of the sacraments, even so each one, when he regards himself, and his own weakness and indisposition, may have fear and apprehension touching his own grace; seeing that no one can know with a certainty of faith ... that he has obtained the grace of God”* (Council of Trent, Justification, 6th session, chapter 9).
 2. Reformed theologian, Robert Shaw – *“Whoever rests upon a person for doing a certain thing in his favor must have a persuasion, or assurance, that he will do that thing for him ... In like manner, to believe in Christ for salvation is to be persuaded or assured that we shall be saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*
 3. Heidelberg Catechism 21 – Q. What is true faith? *A. True faith is a sure knowledge whereby I accept as true all that God has revealed to us in His Word. At the same time it is **a firm confidence** that not only to others, but also to me, God has granted forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness, and salvation, out of mere grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits. This faith the Holy Spirit works in my heart by the gospel.”*
- B. How does WCF 18.3 answer the difficult question of whether assurance is “of the essence of faith”?
- C. What rewards or benefits are in store for those who seek to grow in Christian assurance? How can we do this?
- D. Some people worry that if we are sure about our salvation then we will live carelessly. How does Scripture and WCF 18.3 correct this misunderstanding?
1. **Ps 130:2** – *“But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.”*
 2. **1 John 3:2–3** – *“Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. ³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.”*
 3. **Heb 6:10–12** – *“For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do. ¹¹ And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, ¹² so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”*