BLESSED ASSURANCE, JESUS *is* MINE

The Biblical Doctrine of Assurance



CORNELIS P. VENEMA

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Ligonier Ministries

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Acknowledgements

Behind every book lies a story of how it came to be written and then published. The crucial element in any such story focuses on the book's genesis: Why was the book written, and who contributed significantly to its writing and eventual publication?

The story of this book begins with an unexpected and gracious invitation from Aaron Garriott, writing on behalf of the board of Ligonier Ministries, to prepare a manuscript for publication. The invitation was not open-ended regarding the book's topic. I was asked to submit a list of possible topics and, if one of them met with the board's approval, it would become the focus of the book. Among the topics I submitted was the doctrine of the assurance of salvation, a matter of vital importance in the ministry of gospel of Jesus Christ and in the life of Christian believers. Shortly after submitting these topics, Aaron informed me that the doctrine of the assurance of salvation was the preferred choice. I tell this story to express my profound thanks for the board's encouragement and contribution to the genesis of, and provision for, this book's preparation and publication.

In addition to my gratitude for the willingness of Ligonier Ministries to publish this book, I am also grateful for a number of people with whom I have engaged on this topic throughout my years as an instructor in doctrinal studies at Mid-America Reformed Seminary. These interlocutors include students who have taken my course on the doctrine of the person and work of the Holy Spirit, a course that treats the doctrine of assurance. The pastoral significance of this topic for the work of the gospel ministry stimulated many questions and lively discussions from which I have learned more than I have taught. But they also include my faculty colleagues J. Mark Beach and Andrew Compton, coeditors of the *Mid-America Journal of Theology,* for which I have written a number of essays in recent years on the doctrine of assurance. Conversations with these and other colleagues, all of whom have served in the pastoral

ministry, have often engaged the doctrine of assurance and its significance in the ministry of the gospel.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank those who contributed to the editing, improvement, and preparation of my manuscript for publication. I am thankful for the work of Monica Allen, who edited the manuscript for consistency in style and format before it was submitted to the publisher, and for Karen Magnuson and Kevin Gardner, whose work in the final editing of the manuscript was invaluable. I am also grateful for the encouragement and assistance of Aaron Garriott and Michael O'Steen on behalf of Ligonier Ministries.

In the opening of the book, I mention a former parishioner whom I met in the early years of my pastoral ministry. While all believers may struggle with assurance at various times in their earthly pilgrimage, this parishioner, like many believers, spent a good deal of his life struggling to obtain assurance. To such believers, I dedicate this book in the hope that it might be of some help to them in cultivating a greater sense of assurance based on the riches of God's grace toward us in Christ Jesus.

Abbreviations

BC	Belgic Confession
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
CD	Canons of Dort
CNTC	John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, 12 vols. (Oliver and Boyd, 1960)
	John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, 12 vols. (Eerdmans, 1959–1972)
Com.	Commentary on
HC	Heidelberg Catechism
ICC	International Critical Commentary
Institutes	John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Westminster, 1960)
LW	Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, American ed., 82 vols. (Fortress/Concordia, 1955–)
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
WA	Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar, 1883–)
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism

Introduction

The Doctrine of Assurance in an Uncertain Age

Sitting on a shelf in my home office is a plaque, titled "Friendship," that reads: "Some friends are the kind we remember, whether they're near or far. Some friends are never forgotten, that's the kind of friend you are." Though the words on this plaque may be a little prosaic, they remind me of one of the happiest events that occurred during the early years of my ministry as a young pastor of a church in southern California.

The plaque was given to me by a member of the congregation who, after many years of struggle with doubts and uncertainties about his salvation, made his public profession of faith when he was sixty-five. During the first several months of my pastorate, I viewed him as a brother in the Lord and an exemplary member of the congregation. He was always present at the Sunday worship services and was an active participant in other congregational events. Upon reviewing the church directory several months after beginning my pastoral ministry, however, I discovered that he was a baptized member of the congregation who had never publicly professed his faith in Jesus Christ. When I made this discovery, I immediately visited him and inquired why he had not confirmed his faith in Christ, even though he gave every indication that he was a believer. His answer to my inquiry was straightforward and surprising. As he described it, he was fearful that if he were to profess his faith, he could have no confidence that his faith was a genuine, nonhypocritical one. Nor could he be sure that his professed faith in Jesus Christ would be born out of a genuine and heartfelt sorrow for his sins.

After this first visit, I returned to my parishioner's home on numerous occasions, urging him to embrace the gospel promise in Christ and publicly profess his faith. In the course of these visits, I learned that the church in which he had been nurtured as a child taught that assurance of salvation is an elusive, rare jewel in the experience of most church members. Without a dramatic and incontrovertible experience of the Holy Spirit's work in regeneration and conversion, most of the church members were discouraged from professing their faith and receiving the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Before anyone could come to Christ in response to the gospel call, the person had to demonstrate a deep and heartfelt awareness of his sin and unworthiness. Nothing less than this would suffice as a proper preparation for turning to Christ in faith and trusting the gospel promise of forgiveness.

Only after my repeated visits and encouragements to profess his faith did my friend become convinced that he should do so. The Scripture verse that convinced him was the Apostle Paul's familiar words to the Philippian jailer: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:31). When I spoke rather bluntly to him, suggesting that he was too proud to believe God and heed this call (given in the form of an imperative, a command), he relented and declared himself ready to profess his faith. After a joyful service on the Lord's Day in which he professed his faith, he presented me with the plaque on friendship.

I tell this story because it is a reminder that there is no greater joy in the Christian life than the joy that comes when we believe in Jesus Christ and trust the promises of the gospel that are ours in Him. Nor is there any greater distress in the Christian life than the fear that God has abandoned us or the fearful prospect that we are still in our sins and beyond the reach of God's grace. This story illustrates the truth of Christ's words in the parable of the lost sheep, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost" (Luke 15:6). Heaven rejoices when lost sinners come to Christ in faith and repentance, even as the father of the Prodigal Son said to his older brother when he begrudged the grace shown to his younger, wayward brother: "It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found" (v. 32).

I also rehearse this story because it illustrates something of the weight and importance of this book's topic, the assurance of salvation. There is finally

no more important question that anyone could ask in the course of his life than this: Where do I stand before God, the Judge of all the earth? How can I be confident of His mercy and favor toward me as the God of my salvation? Without such confidence, believers will not fully experience the thankfulness and joy that ought to be the hallmarks of their lives in fellowship with Christ. They will not know the strength that belongs to those whose joy is in the Lord (Neh. 8:10). Nor will they be able to adequately express their thanksgiving for the unspeakable gift that is theirs in the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 9:15; cf. Rom. 7:25; 1 Cor. 15:56–57).

Assurance in Church History

While the assurance of salvation brings unspeakable joy and thankfulness to believers, in the history of the church the topic of assurance has received a mixed reception. In the early church, and especially in the Roman Catholic Church at the time of the Reformation, the assurance of salvation was the exception to the rule. Only a few "saints," and then only on the basis of a special revelation that supplemented what is revealed in Scripture, were able to obtain an assurance of their election and salvation. For most believers, assurance was beyond reach. The most that believers could obtain in this life was a probable assurance of their salvation, and this assurance was based on the fragile ground of their own good works. According to the Roman Catholic Church's position, the teaching that believers could have a hearty confidence in God's grace toward them in Christ would only encourage believers to become lackadaisical about their salvation and indifferent to their obligation to do good works. If salvation were by grace alone through faith alone, the inevitable consequence would be a kind of lazy presumption that believers are in a state of grace no matter how carelessly they live. To use the language of the Apostle Paul, the assurance of salvation on the basis of God's grace alone can provoke this question: "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" (Rom. 6:1). If we may enjoy "peace with God" on the basis of Christ's work alone (5:1), what will prevent us from concluding that it doesn't matter whether we walk in newness of life and sincerely seek to do what pleases God?

One of the distinctive features of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century and the subsequent teaching of the Reformed tradition was an emphasis on the assurance that believers may and ought to have about their

salvation. When the Reformers recovered the fullness of the gospel, especially the doctrine of justification by grace alone on the basis of the work of Christ alone, they also recovered the peace and confidence before God that is given to those who place their trust in Him. Both the leading theologians of the early Reformation, Martin Luther and John Calvin, emphasized that true faith in the gospel's promise of forgiveness and free acceptance with God includes a confidence or firm persuasion of God's mercy and favor. As we will observe in the course of our study, the Reformation's understanding of the gospel of free acceptance with God on the basis of Christ's work as Mediator was the occasion for a newfound confidence in God's favor. Furthermore, because Luther and Calvin were Augustinian in their doctrine of God's merciful election of His people in Christ, they were able to root this assurance in the certainty that God's purpose to save His people will never be thwarted or frustrated. True assurance includes not only the confidence that I am now saved but also the confidence that the work of the three persons of the Holy Trinity includes the promise that believers will persevere in faith to the end. Because God's steadfast love and gracious work are unfailing, believers may be sure that He will bring His good work of salvation in them to completion (Phil. 1:6). Only within the framework of a biblical view of salvation by grace alone, undergirded by a proper understanding of God's sovereign purpose of election, does the doctrine of assurance flourish.

Yet despite the general Reformation consensus that assurance properly belongs to true faith, considerable debate has taken place among interpreters of the Reformed tradition as to whether later Reformed orthodoxy weakened or even abandoned this consensus. A vigorous debate continues between those who regard the view of assurance in later Reformed orthodoxy to be broadly in harmony with the Reformers' view and those who claim that there was a departure from their view. Without prematurely going into the details of the debate in this introduction, I mention the emergence of this debate on the continuity between earlier and later Reformed views of assurance because it will constitute a significant focus of my study. One of my aims in studying the doctrine of assurance is to make a modest contribution to the resolution of several questions that have arisen within the context of this debate. A central claim of my study is that the difference between earlier and later Reformed views of assurance does not reflect a substantial difference in doctrine. While there may

be some divergences in emphasis or approach to the doctrine of assurance in the Reformed tradition, these divergences represent different accents within the framework of a position that is the common legacy of Reformed theology. I will argue that these divergent views belong to a common inheritance in which assurance is viewed as a proper and ordinary component of true faith. Even though some Reformed theologians do not view assurance as belonging to the "essence" of true faith, the consensus opinion that assurance *ought* to be the experience of believers, at least in some measure, is never abandoned.

General Observations About Assurance in Modern Times

Before concluding this introduction with a summary of the plan of the book, I believe it is important to make a few general observations about the current ecclesiastical and historical environment that has a significant bearing on the topic of assurance.

Within the contemporary Christian church, not only in North America but elsewhere as well, the biblical doctrine of assurance has fallen on hard times. Among the mainline churches, various forms of universalism that cannot be squared with the biblical teaching on assurance are embraced. Some forms of universalism teach that there are many pathways to God and thereby deny the truth that there is but one Mediator between God and man. Even when these universalistic teachings fall short of strict universalism—namely, that all human beings without exception will be saved—the presumption reigns that at the end of the day, most people will find their way into favor with God. Others teach a more distinctively "Christian" version of universalism. In their view, Christ is the only Savior, but the reach of God's grace and love toward fallen sinners in Him ultimately entails the salvation of all, with perhaps an exception for the most notorious and incorrigible of sinners. Denying the biblical teaching on God's holiness and righteousness, many modern theologians hold to the sentiment that God's love will triumph in most cases. Even when it is granted that not all will be saved, few mainline theologians are ready to affirm the historic Christian teaching that those who are not saved are destined for eternal punishment. Refuge is often taken at this point in some form of annihilationism, which teaches the eventual dissolution and nonexistence of those who are not saved by Christ. Or refuge is sought in the teaching of a second opportunity for salvation by faith after death (but see Heb. 9:27). Even within

the circle of evangelical churches, soft forms of universalism (annihilationism and a second opportunity to be saved after death) find some traction.

But it is not only the mainline churches that have abandoned the historic doctrine of assurance, particularly in the form expressed at the time of the sixteenth-century Reformation. Within a secularized society in which there remains a residue of cultural Christianity, many subscribe to what might be called a teaching of *justification by death.* As R.C. Sproul observes, the "idea of a final judgment to which all people will be subjected has all but disappeared from our thinking."[1] When someone dies, it is not uncommon for the funeral service to focus inordinately on the life of the deceased. Eulogies are spoken to show why the deceased is a suitable candidate for some form of ongoing life in communion with God. As one popular American writer is said to have expressed it, "They say such nice things about people at their funerals that it makes me sad to realize that I'm going to miss mine by just a few days."[2] I quote this somewhat irreverent quip because it helps explain why so many, even "Christian," funeral services these days are "Christless." Little or nothing is said about the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ and the urgency of being found in Him by faith in order to have any sure basis for confidence in the face of death and the coming judgment.[3] Though there may be some mention of the gospel of Jesus Christ and His saving work, the message conveyed, whether implicitly or explicitly, is that our hope rests in part (or perhaps even wholly) on the kind of life we have lived. Even though the terms *semi-Pelagian* and *Pelagian* might not be known, the assumption is that "good" (though not necessarily perfect) people go to heaven when they die. And so the deceased person is "beatified" at death through the good words that are spoken about him at his funeral. The only thing needed to grant hope that God will justify or say a good word about us upon death and in His judgment is that we lived a generally good life. Ultimately, God would surely not refuse to save someone who has lived a worthy life!

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1 R.C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess: A Systematic Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith,* rev. ed. (Reformation Trust, 2019), 258.

2 Garrison Keillor, as quoted in "Garrison Keillor on the Joys of Aging." *The Saturday Evening Post* (April 18, 2022).

3 See R.C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess*, 258: "Part of the reason for this modern disinterest [in the doctrine of justification] may be our concept of the last judgment. The idea of a final judgment to which all people will be subjected has all but disappeared from our thinking, and even from the preaching in most of today's pulpits—despite Jesus' repeated warning that we will all stand before God, and that every idle word that we speak will be judged."

I do not mean to exaggerate the current decline of the church and its teaching. My point is that the biblical doctrine of the assurance of salvation flourishes only within the framework of gospel preaching that focuses on Christ and His saving work. The essential ingredients of this doctrine include a biblical view of the nature of human sinfulness and its consequences ("the wages of sin is death"; Rom. 6:23); a biblical understanding of God's holiness and righteousness; a biblical understanding of Christ's person and work, including His death for our sins and His resurrection for our justification (4:25); and a biblical view of faith and repentance by which we are joined to Christ and participate in all the benefits of His saving work. Unhappily, these themes are at best muted or at worst all but absent from the contemporary church's preaching and teaching. Rather than heralding the "good news" of what God has done to save sinners through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, much preaching amounts to little more than pious advice or counsel on how we may live fruitful and successful lives in this world.

In addition to the ecclesiastical environment in which the biblical doctrine of assurance is unable to flourish, the modern mind is not congenial to the idea that life has any certainties or that anyone could have an "infallible assurance" of salvation, to use the Westminster Confession of Faith's striking language.[4] In his fine little book on the topic of assurance, written in the first half of the twentieth century, Louis Berkhof observed, "We are not living in an age in which Christian certitude can be taken for granted":

> Doubts respecting the most fundamental truths of the Bible are rampant everywhere and are also making inroads in the Church of Jesus Christ. Question-marks are fast taking the place of positive assertions of the truth. Such an atmosphere is not conducive to the assurance of salvation, but threatens to rob the Christian of this precious gem.[5]

Berkhof's observation about the modern mind is even more evident today. The destructive effects of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment's

4 WCF 18.2, in *The Good Confession: Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, rev. classroom ed. (Mid-America Reformed Seminary, 2013), 201. Quotations from the Reformed confessions throughout the book are taken from this volume.

5 Louis Berkhof, *The Assurance of Faith* (Eerdmans, 1939), 11.

denial of the Christian doctrine of divine revelation are not difficult to discern. In an increasingly secularized world, agnosticism about the existence of God and hostile forms of atheism have worked together to undermine any confidence that we can know what is true. When a society abandons God and His Word, it can only deconstruct the foundations of historic Christian theology and the gospel promise of salvation through faith in the Christ of the Scriptures. In his summary of G.K. Chesterton's outlook on the modern world, Émile Cammaerts rightly observes, "When men choose not to believe in God, they do not thereafter believe in nothing. They then become capable of believing in anything."[6] But what they profess to believe rests solely on the uncertain foundation of human credulity or opinion. When people reject the authority of God's Word in Scripture, it is scarcely possible for them to believe the promises of the gospel of Jesus Christ and rest in the confidence that God looks upon us with favor in Him. The corrosive spirit of skepticism about any truth claims, especially that those who believe the gospel's promises will be saved, is a characteristic feature of the modern mind. In the absence of the presence of God and the Word that He has spoken in the gospel of Jesus Christ, there no longer remains any place for truth, especially the sure and certain hope that believers may have about their salvation (cf. Heb. 1:1–4; 11:1). As Luther remarked at the time of the Reformation, we may believe with certainty what God declares in Scripture because "the Holy Spirit is not a skeptic" (*Spiritus sanctus non est skepticus*).[7] Unless the Word spoken in Scripture is true and certain, faith in the promises of God is vain.

One of the modern period's most striking features is the emergence of a new idolatry of the self that also has profound and destructive implications for the biblical doctrine of assurance. When sinful human beings suppress the truth of God's Word and the gospel of Jesus Christ, they inevitably create an idol out of some creature in which to repose their trust and find some form of redemption or salvation (see Rom. 1:18–25). As Calvin strikingly expressed the matter, the human mind in its fallen condition has become

6 Émil Cammaerts, *The Laughing Prophet: The Seven Virtues and G.K. Chesterton* (pdf ed.; Chesterton Society, 1937), 230. Though this observation is commonly attributed to Chesterton, it actually represents Cammaerts' summary of Chesterton's viewpoint.

7 Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, in *LW*, 33:24: "Nothing is better known or more common among Christians than assertion. Take away assertions and you take away Christianity."

an "idol-making" factory.[8] In the modern period, the idolatry of the self has become an obsession whose consequences strike at the heart of a biblical view of man (anthropology) and any possibility of true assurance in God's presence. Rather than recognizing human beings as God's image bearers who were created to be like Him in true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, contemporary society and culture believes that human beings' identity lies in the freedom to define their "authentic self" in whatever way they please. Far from viewing humans as fallen creatures in Adam who need to be restored after the image of Christ, the current idolatry of the self maintains that we have the wherewithal to define (create) who we are and achieve whatever identity we want for ourselves.

One of the clearest ways that this Promethean view of the self comes to expression is in the sexual revolution that has occurred in modern societies.[9] *Expressive individualism*, as this view of the self is often termed, affirms that individual human beings may choose to create their own authentic selves and act accordingly. Within the arena of human sexuality, for example, this view of the self justifies an ever-widening range of sexual identities and behaviors.[10] Remarkably, the inevitable result of this view of the self is a growing sense of unease and anxiety about personal identity and fulfillment in modern cultures. Just as other idolatries prove futile and foolish, the idolatry of the self not only produces uncertainty about personal identities but also fails to deliver on its lofty promise of fulfillment and happiness. Rather than a pathway to personal redemption and satisfaction, it becomes a pathway to *self*-destruction and disappointment.

---

8 John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.11.8.

9 Prometheus was the Titan in Greek mythology who took fire from the Olympian gods and gave it to the human race in the form of knowledge, technology, and civilization. Since Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher who gave prophetic expression to modern humanism, the figure of Prometheus has been symbolically used to ascribe mythic and godlike powers to human beings. This mythical view of human power and capacity lies embedded in the idolatry of the self in modern culture.

10 Many excellent sources detail the history and emergence of what I am calling the *idolatry of the self* or, more commonly, *expressive individualism*. Among the best of these sources, see Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Crossway, 2020); Carl R. Trueman, *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Crossway, 2022); Matthew P.W. Roberts, *Pride: Identity and the Worship of Self* (Christian Mentor, 2023). Roberts' book provides an excellent assessment of the modern idolatry of the self and its unhappy fruits. He argues convincingly that the only antidote to this idolatry is found in the gospel of our true identity in the whole Christ, who forgives our sins and renews our lives after His image.

Even though my study will not focus in any significant way on these contemporary alternatives to the biblical doctrine of assurance, it is written out of the conviction that the only way to come to a true and sure knowledge of ourselves in God's presence is the way of faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because many people in our contemporary world have rejected the one and only way to a proper understanding of themselves—the way of union with Christ by faith—they are ready to embrace cheap and unsatisfying alternatives, such as the idol of self-expression and self-satisfaction in an imaginary world of their own making.

The only antidote to the futility of the idolatry of the self that plagues modern societies is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Perhaps nowhere in all the confessions of the Reformation is this more compellingly expressed than in the Heidelberg Catechism's opening question and answer. There, the Reformation's recovery of the gospel is beautifully captured in terms of its implications for an assurance of salvation that is deeply rooted in the saving work of the triune God:

> Q. 1. What is your only comfort in life and death?
>
> A. That I, with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ; who with His precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, wherefore by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto Him.

According to this question and answer, an integral feature of the comfort that believers may have in union with Christ by faith is the assurance of salvation and eternal life. This comfort is ultimately found in the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, not in the idols of this or any other age (2 Cor. 1:3).

The Plan of This Book

I conclude this introduction with a brief exposition of the plan of the book. The book proceeds in four parts or stages.

The first part of the book treats the Reformation's recovery of the gospel and the assurance of salvation that it provides. In the writings of Luther and Calvin, arguably the two most influential theologians of the sixteenth-century Reformation, we will find that the recovery of the biblical doctrine of free justification on the basis of the work of Christ alone provided an answer to the long-standing denial of assurance in the Christian church. Though Luther and Calvin did not stand alone in their recovery of the gospel, they do serve as illustrative figures whose understanding of the gospel of God's sovereign and undeserved grace in Christ allowed them to emphasize the confidence that belongs to true faith when it embraces the gospel promise of salvation.

The second part of the book focuses on the way that the Reformed confessions treat the topic of assurance. Two of these confessions, the Canons of Dort and the Westminster Standards, were written in the aftermath of the Reformation and provide the most expansive formulation of the doctrine of assurance. Since both these confessions are often alleged to have departed from the original Reformation's emphasis on the assurance of salvation, my exposition of their teaching will seek to demonstrate that this allegation is unwarranted. While these confessions, written in the first half of the seventeenth century, acknowledge the struggle that believers may experience with doubts about their salvation, they do not substantially depart from the view of Luther and Calvin that assurance properly belongs to true faith.

Whereas the first and second parts of the book primarily aim to set forth the Reformation and confessional formulation of the doctrine of assurance, the third part examines the scriptural basis for the doctrine. In the history of Reformed theology, the consensus opinion is that there are three grounds for the assurance of salvation: (1) the promises of the gospel; (2) the witness of the Holy Spirit to the adoption of believers; and (3) the evidence of true faith in believers' lives and conduct. Despite the consensus that obtains on these grounds, there is also a diversity of opinion in the Reformed tradition on the relative importance of and relation between these grounds. My aim in this part of the book is to evaluate the biblical evidence for identifying these three grounds of assurance and to offer my own view of their nature and relative importance in relation to the others. This will be especially the case in chapter 6, which treats the disputed issue of the Holy Spirit's role in granting assurance to believers.

The study concludes in the fourth part with a chapter that addresses the doctrine of assurance from a pastoral perspective. In that chapter, I will address two pastoral questions that frequently surface with regard to the assurance of salvation: What are some of the most common hindrances to believers' cultivation of assurance? And what are some of the proper means whereby the assurance of salvation can be cultivated and strengthened?

My hope is that my study of the doctrine of assurance in the Reformed tradition will shed further light on a number of questions that continue to be posed in discussions of the topic. But more importantly, I hope the study will be an encouragement both for believers who know the joy and thanksgiving that accompany their sure confidence in God's favor toward them in Christ and for believers who may struggle to come to assurance for various reasons.

Part One

THE REFORMATION RECOVERY OF THE ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

1

Martin Luther's Struggle to Find a Merciful God[1]

One of the most noteworthy features of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation was the recovery of the biblical teaching of salvation by grace alone, apart from works. Martin Luther and John Calvin, arguably the two most important figures in the development of Reformation theology, were Augustinian in their doctrines of grace, including the doctrine of God's sovereign and merciful purpose of election. Though Luther and Calvin's common formulation of the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone stands out as a preeminent expression of Reformation theology, it was born out of the conviction that God's grace and mercy in Christ are the indispensable foundation on which the assurance of salvation rests. The free grace of justification provides the only biblical answer to the question posed by the teaching of the late-medieval Roman Catholic Church: How can we be assured that God is merciful to us?

At the time of the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church's consensus teaching was that ordinary believers could not have an assurance of their salvation. From the early Middle Ages onward, the prevailing sentiment within the church was that the assurance of salvation is a rare gift that only a few of the faithful may enjoy. On the one hand, the hesitancy to affirm the propriety of a robust sense of assurance was born out of fear that such assurance might encourage moral laxity or carelessness on the part of the faithful. On

1 This chapter and the next are revisions of an essay that will be published in a forthcoming volume, *Safe in the Arms of Sovereign Love* (Crossway), edited by David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson, and are used by permission of the editors and publisher.

the other hand, this reservation was rooted in a semi-Pelagian theology that emphasized the role of human cooperation and the performance of good works in salvation, particularly to find acceptance and favor with a holy and righteous God.

The Roman Catholic Church's predominant position was clearly articulated at the Council of Trent (1545–63). Though the council affirmed that "no pious person ought to doubt of the mercy of God, or the merit of Christ, and of the virtue and efficacy of the sacraments," it expressly condemned the "vain confidence of heretics" (that is, the Reformers).[2] Two statements from the sixth session of the council capture well the predominant view of the Roman Catholic Church:

> For even as no pious person ought to doubt of the mercy of God, . . . 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, which cannot be subject to error, that he has obtained the grace of God.[3]

> No one, moreover, so long as he is in this mortal life, ought so far to presume as regards the secret mystery of divine predestination, as to determine for certain that he is assuredly in the number of the predestinate; . . . for except by special revelation, it cannot be known whom God hath chosen unto himself.[4]

Because the Roman Catholic Church taught that the process of justification (*processus iustificationis*) requires the continued cooperation of faith as it was formed through love by the infusion of grace in the sacraments, ordinary believers, who are not made perfect in righteousness during this life, could not be confident of their final acceptance with God. Moreover, because ordinary believers may fall out of a state of grace through mortal sin, they were never permitted an ultimate confidence that they would be found righteous at the

2 "Council of Trent, Sixth Session," ch. 9, in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, rev. David S. Schaff (1877; repr., Baker, 1985), 2:98.

3 "Council of Trent, Sixth Session," ch. 9, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 2:98–99.

4 "Council of Trent, Sixth Session," ch. 12, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 2:103.

last judgment. Certainty or assurance about God's final reception of believers into His presence was ordinarily unobtainable in this life.

I rehearse briefly the classic Roman Catholic denial of the assurance of salvation to provide the context within which to consider the teaching of Luther and Calvin on the assurance of salvation in this chapter and the next. In this chapter, we will begin with Luther's view of assurance, which included a robust emphasis on the assurance that believers ought to have by virtue of their justification by grace alone through faith alone. In Luther's theology, the note of assurance is sounded clearly and vigorously. In some respects, it might be called the leitmotif of his theology. Despite Luther's bold affirmation of the assurance that believers have on the basis of their justification before God by grace alone, however, I will also identify some developments within later Lutheranism that tended to undermine such assurance.

Luther on the Assurance of Salvation

The story of Luther's early struggles with assurance as an Augustinian monk is well known.[5] Luther himself testified to his struggles in two telling autobiographical comments:

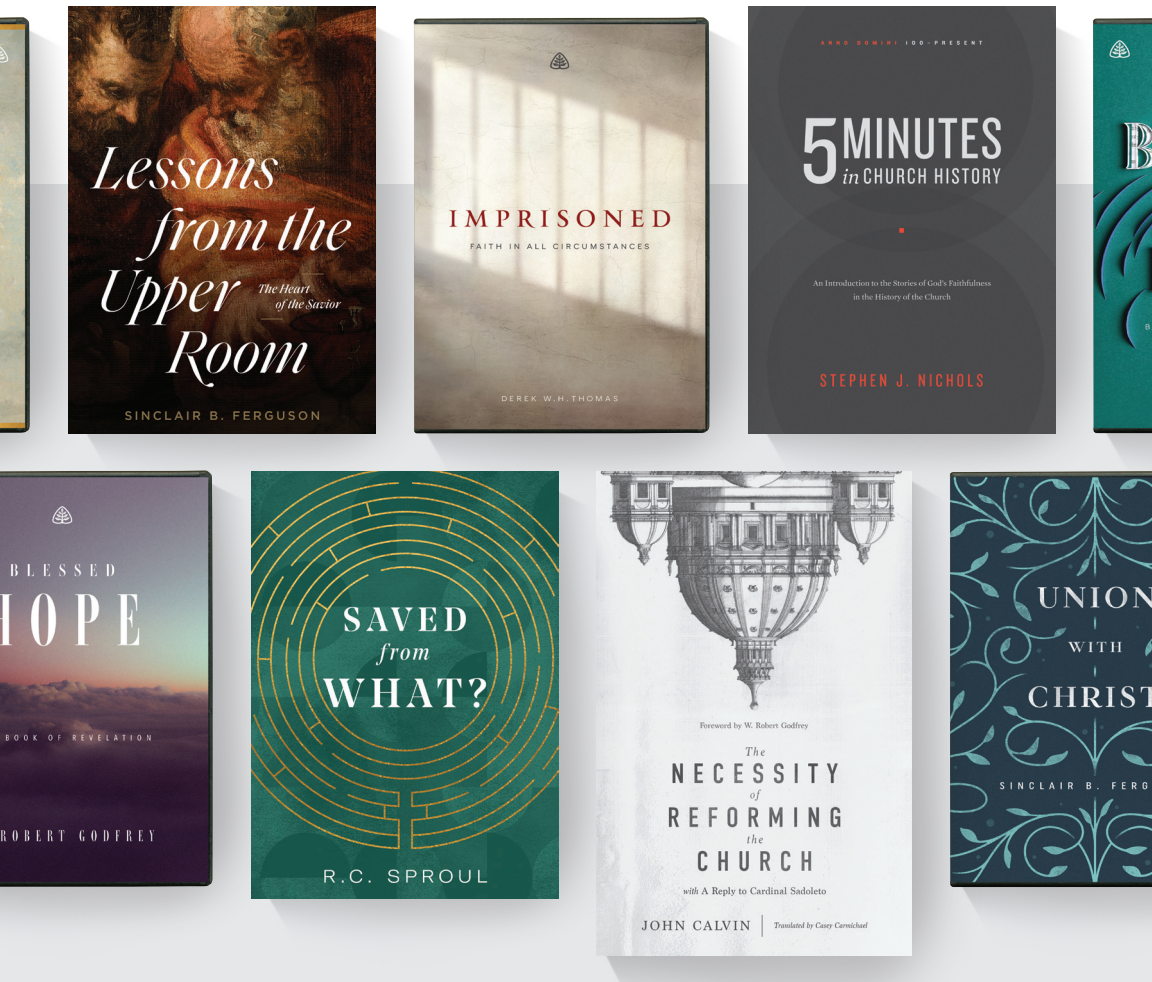
> I was a good monk, and kept my order so strictly that I could say that if ever a monk could get to heaven through monastic discipline, I should have entered in. All my companions in the monastery who knew me would bear me out in this. For if it had gone on much longer, I would have martyred myself to death, what with vigils, prayers, reading and other works.[6]

> When I was a monk I tried with all diligence to live according to the rule, and I used to be contrite, to confess and sedulously perform my allotted penance. And yet my conscience would never give me certainty. But I always doubted and said, "You did not perform that correctly. You were not contrite enough. You left that out of your confession." The more I tried to

5 See Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (1950; repr., Hendrickson Classic Biography, 1977), 1–49; David C. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 2nd ed. (1995; repr., Baker Academic, 2002), 1–11; E. Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1953), 102–20. Rupp's brief account of Luther's spiritual struggle for assurance is especially helpful.

6 Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar, 1883–), 38:143. Hereafter *WA*.

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