

## THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

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THE TOPIC OF THE ASSURANCE OF SALVATION is an important one, perhaps one of the principal themes of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. One of the primary fruits of Luther and Calvin's rediscovery of the scriptural teaching regarding justification was the joyful confidence this teaching afforded believers. Whereas late medieval theology denied the ordinary possibility of any sure confidence of God's favor, the Reformers emphasized the comfort of the gospel of free justification by grace alone upon the basis of Christ's righteousness alone.<sup>1</sup> The following statement of Luther in his *Lectures on Galatians* is illustrative:

I am saying this in order to refute the dangerous doctrine of the sophists and the monks, who taught and believed that no one can know for a certainty whether he is in a state of grace, even if he does good works according to his ability and lives a blameless life. That statement, widely accepted and believed, was principal and practically an article of faith throughout the papacy. With this wicked idea of theirs they utterly ruined the doctrine of faith, overthrew faith, disturbed consciences, abolished Christ from the church, obscured and denied all the blessings and gifts of the Holy Spirit, abrogated the true worship of God, and established idolatry, contempt of God, and blasphemy in the hearts of men. *For anyone who has such doubts about the will of God toward him and who does not believe for a certainty that he is in a state of grace cannot believe that he has the forgiveness of sins, that God cares about him, and or that he can be saved.*<sup>2</sup>

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1. This is clearly stated in Chapter 12 of the Sixth Session of the Council of Trent in its "Decree on Justification": "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 can not be known whom God hath chosen unto himself," Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House reprint, 1985 (1931), 2:103.

2. *Lectures on Galatians*, in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, American ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress; St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1955), 26:377 (emphasis mine).

As is evident from Luther's strong language, a core conviction of the Reformation was the insistence that believers may have confidence regarding God's favor and mercy toward them in Christ.

In the Reformed theological tradition, the assurance of salvation was generally affirmed in the sixteenth century as a proper component or element of true faith. Calvin's well-known definition of faith in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* emphasizes the confidence that characterizes faith when believers rest in the promises of the gospel: "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."<sup>3</sup> Calvin's view is echoed as well in the Heidelberg Catechism's definition of true faith: "True faith is not only a sure knowledge, whereby I hold for truth all that God has revealed to us in His Word, but also a firm confidence which the Holy Spirit works in my heart by the gospel, that not only to others, but to me also, remission of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits."<sup>4</sup> Both of these definitions underscore the confidence that believers derive from a knowledge of the truth of God's gracious promises in Christ. When the Holy Spirit works faith in the hearts and minds of believers by means of the gospel Word, believers are given assurance of God's favor and benevolence toward them, including the forgiveness of their sins and acceptance into his presence.

Despite the Reformed tradition's affirmation that assurance of salvation belongs to true faith, considerable discussion ensued in the period of early and later Reformed orthodoxy regarding the proper grounds for such assurance and the means by which full assurance of salvation may be cultivated. Interpreters of the trajectory of Reformed theology in this period differ in their estimation of the continuity between the earlier and later periods of Reformed orthodoxy. Some argue that there is considerable discontinuity between an early, robust affirmation of assurance as an element that properly belongs to true faith and a later, more tenuous affirmation of assurance as a "fruit" of true faith that is not always present in the experience of many believers.<sup>5</sup> In the modern period, many debates about the continuity between early and

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3. Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 20: The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1960), 3.2.7.

4. Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 20, in *The Good Confession: Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, revised classroom ed. (Dyer, IN: Mid-America Reformed Seminary, 2013 [1991]), 85. Citations from the Reformed confessions throughout this essay are taken from this volume.

5. For a comprehensive assessment of the degree of continuity between earlier and later views on assurance in Reformed theology, see Robert Letham, *Saving Faith and Assurance in Reformed Theology: Zwingli to the Synod of Dort*, 2 vols. (PhD diss., University of Aberdeen, 1979); Joel Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999); and Jonathan Master, *A Question of Consensus: The Doctrine of Assurance after the Westminster Confession* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015). The opening chapter of Master's book, "Setting the Stage," offers a good sketch of

later Reformed orthodoxy on the subject of the assurance of salvation have been fueled by the influence of Karl Barth.<sup>6</sup> In Barth's estimation, the Reformed doctrine of predestination undermined the early Reformer's emphasis on the assurance of salvation. In his estimation, later Reformed orthodoxy shifted away from an appeal to the gospel promise in Christ as a sure basis for assurance to an over-emphasis upon the so-called "practical syllogism" (*sylogismus practicus*).<sup>7</sup> Rather than ground assurance in the promise of the gospel, later Reformed orthodoxy became preoccupied with the role of "good works" in confirming the genuineness of a believer's faith. By taking an inventory of their outward good works and inward affections, professed believers may confirm the genuineness of their faith and thereby bolster their confidence regarding God's favor toward them.<sup>8</sup>

My aim in this article is not to settle these debates about continuity and discontinuity in the Reformed tradition on the topic of assurance. Rather, I wish to focus upon a common feature of Reformed discussions on this topic: the testimony of the Holy Spirit to the believer's adoption by God's grace in Christ. Even though this is a common feature in traditional treatments of assurance, it has not received the

debates in the modern period regarding the continuity or discontinuity between earlier and later Reformed orthodoxy on the subject of assurance (*A Question of Consensus*, 7–42).

6. See, e.g., R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1997 [1979]); Basil Hall, "Calvin against the Calvinists," in *John Calvin: A Collection of Distinguished Essays*, ed. G. E. Duffield, trans. G. S. R. Cox and P. G. Rix, Courtenay Studies in Reformation Theology 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1966), 19–37; and Brian Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth Century France* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969). For critical assessments of this approach, see Richard A. Muller, "Calvin and the 'Calvinists': Assessing Continuities and Discontinuities between the Reformation and Orthodoxy," Part 1, *Calvin Theological Journal* 30/2 (1995): 345–75, and Part 2, *Calvin Theological Journal* 31/1 (1996): 125–60; Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3–8; Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1988), esp. 175–82; Paul Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982); Carl R. Trueman, "Calvin and Calvinism," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 225–44; Cornelis P. Venema, "The Assurance of Salvation in *The Canons of Dort: A Commemorative Essay*" (Part 1), *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 29 (2018): 23–46; and idem, "The Assurance of Salvation in *The Canons of Dort*" (Part 2), *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 30 (2019): 23–48.

7. For a compelling treatment of the continuities and discontinuities of the Reformed tradition on the use of the "practical syllogism," see Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 244–76. Muller observes that, although Calvin never expressly spoke of a "practical syllogism," it is present in Calvin's theology in an embryonic and subordinate form. I will have occasion in what follows to define more precisely what is meant by this "practical syllogism."

8. I use the language, "outward good works and inward affections," to express the distinction that later Reformed theology drew between the "practical" and "mystical" syllogisms. The former considers those good works that outwardly express and confirm true faith. The latter considers those inward exercises (love, peace, joy, etc.) that express and confirm true faith. For a classical definition of these syllogisms, see Anthony Burgess, *Spiritual Refining* (London: printed by Jo. Streater, 1658), 72–77.

attention that is usually given to the way assurance is based upon the gospel promises in Christ or the role of good works in confirming the genuineness of faith.<sup>9</sup> The Spirit's work with respect to assurance is generally affirmed, but the *relation* between the testimony of the Spirit and a believer's faith in the gospel Word, the primary basis of assurance, is often unclear. Similarly, the *order* and *connection* between the Spirit's work and the fruits of true faith in good works are explained in a diversity of ways. Even the specific question as to whether the Spirit's work is an *objective* ground for the assurance of salvation, as is generally acknowledged with respect to the gospel promise, is answered differently by Reformed writers. Most often, the testimony of the Holy Spirit, like the confirmation of true faith by the works it produces, is regarded as a *subjective* or experiential ground for assurance. But Reformed theologians who regard the Spirit's testimony subjectively or experientially differ considerably in their interpretation of those biblical passages that speak of the testimony of the Holy Spirit, as well as passages that speak of the Spirit as an "earnest" or "seal" of our redemption.

In light of the diversity of views regarding the Spirit's role in granting believers assurance of their salvation, my primary purpose in this article is to offer an interpretation of the Scripture's teaching on this topic. In order to provide a background for the interpretation of the most important biblical passages on the topic, however, I will begin with a relatively brief review of several of the most important Reformed confessional statements regarding the Spirit's role in granting assurance to believers. I will then identify three distinct ways in which Reformed theologians have understood the testimony of the Holy Spirit within the boundaries of the Reformed confessional consensus on the topic. The most important part of my treatment of this topic will be a biblical-theological study of those scriptural passages that address the Spirit's work in granting believers assurance of their salvation. Upon the basis of an examination of these passages, I will conclude with several observations regarding the implications of these passages for our understanding of the Spirit's role in assurance.

## 1. The Holy Spirit and Assurance in the Reformed Confessions

Before considering the diversity of opinion among Reformed theologians regarding the work of the Spirit in granting assurance to believers, it is important to recognize that the Reformed confessions express a common conviction that the Spirit's testimony to our adoption is a significant basis for such assurance. Though the confessions do not offer an expansive treatment of the Spirit's testimony, they expressly identify this witness as an essential ground for the confidence believers may have of God's favor toward them in Christ.

The likeliest explanation for the absence of any extended explanation in the confessions respecting the Spirit's testimony is twofold. In the first place, as consensus

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9. Jonathan Master's study of the doctrine of assurance after the Westminster confession offers a helpful treatment of debates regarding the Spirit's testimony among Puritan theologians in the period after the Westminster Assembly. However, he observes that the discussion of the doctrine of assurance at the Westminster Assembly was relatively brief and did not include any significant elaboration regarding the nature and importance of the testimony of the Holy Spirit (*A Question of Consensus*, 70–79).

documents, the confessions deliberately seek to leave room for different views of the Spirit's testimony within the framework of a consensus that it constitutes a substantial ground for assurance.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps more significantly, the reticence of the authors of the confessions to specify the exact nature of this testimony represents an acknowledgment that the working of the Spirit always remains somewhat inscrutable and elusive to our understanding. The reticence of the confessions on this point should not surprise us, considering the general nature of the person and the work of the Holy Spirit. In our Lord's well-known discourse on the new birth in John 3, we are reminded that the work of the Spirit is elusive and inscrutable: "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (v. 8). The Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, enables us to share in all the benefits of Christ's saving work as Mediator. But the manner of the Spirit's work in doing so is difficult to describe clearly and simply.

### 1.1. The Heidelberg Catechism

The Heidelberg Catechism (HC) does not expressly distinguish the testimony of the Holy Spirit as a distinct ground for a believer's assurance of salvation. Therefore, it might seem inappropriate to begin our review of the Reformed confessions on this subject with the HC. However, I start with the HC because it is a relatively early confessional statement of the Reformed churches, and it affirms in robust terms that assurance belongs to true faith as it is produced by the Holy Spirit working through the gospel Word.

According to the HC, true faith is defined as including a "firm confidence *which the Holy Spirit works in my heart by the gospel*, that not only to others, but to me also, remission of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation, are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits" (Q & A 21, emphasis mine). The HC affirms that believers are brought to faith and embrace the gospel promise in Christ by the work of the Spirit. The Spirit grants faith and, in so doing, assures believers that the promises of God's grace in Christ are a reliable basis for their confidence of God's favor. Though the HC does not explicitly speak of a testimony of the Spirit to our adoption by grace, it speaks of a work of the Spirit that goes beyond a general attestation of the truth of the gospel promises in Christ. Consistent with the HC's use of personal language throughout, the Spirit works by the Word in a manner that gives assurance that these promises are *embraced as promises to me*. The comfort of believers is not an abstract or impersonal acknowledgment of the truth of the gospel. Rather, the Spirit works with the Word in such a manner as to give personal assurance of salvation. By stressing the instrumentality of the Word in granting this assurance, the Catechism embraces a common Reformation theme that the work of the Spirit ordinarily *does not occur apart from the Word* or the proclamation of the promise of the gospel.

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10. Master, *A Question of Consensus*, 43–79. Master maintains that the WCF "did not achieve . . . a final settlement on all the important pastoral issues related to assurance. In fact, its consensus statements in this regard actually opened the door for greater expansions to come."

One much-discussed feature of the HC's teaching on the assurance of salvation is found in the opening question and answer in its third main part, which deals with the issue of the Christian life of gratitude. The first question and answer raises the topic of the necessity of good works. Since believers are saved "by grace alone, through Christ," the improper inference might be drawn that such works are superfluous. In its answer to this question, the HC appeals to the scriptural teaching that Christ not only redeems us by his blood but "also renews us by His Holy Spirit after His own image, that with our whole life we may show ourselves thankful to God for His benefits" (A 86). Because the Spirit of Christ sanctifies believers and renews them after Christ's image, the good works that are invariably produced by faith enable believers to be assured in themselves of the genuineness of their faith. Thus, a proper role may be ascribed to good works in confirming believers in their faith. But this role does not stand alone. It does not take priority over the more basic work of the Holy Spirit in assuring believers of their salvation. Already in the first question and answer of the HC, the role of the Spirit in granting assurance by the Word is distinguished (without being separated) from the role of the Spirit in making believers heartily ready and willing to live for God's glory.<sup>11</sup>

## 1.2. The Canons of Dort

Although the HC does not expressly identify the testimony of the Holy Spirit as a distinct basis for a believer's assurance of salvation, the Canons of Dort (CD) do so quite specifically in their treatment of the topic.<sup>12</sup> In the Fifth Main of Doctrine ("The Perseverance of the Saints"), the Canons of Dort address the "ground" for the assurance believers may have regarding their salvation and perseverance by God's preserving grace in the way of faith:

Accordingly, this assurance [of salvation and the perseverance of true believers in faith] does not derive from some private revelation beyond or outside of the Word, but from faith in the promises of God which he has very plentifully revealed in his Word for our comfort, from the testimony of *the Holy Spirit testifying with our spirit that we are God's children and heirs* (Rom 8:16–17), and finally from a serious and holy pursuit of a clear conscience and of good works. (Art. 10)

Clearly, in this articulation of the ground for a believer's assurance of salvation and perseverance, the CD distinguish, in a particular order, three bases for assurance. The first and primary basis is found in the promises of God's grace in Christ. The second basis is the "testimony of the Holy Spirit." The third basis is the evidence of the genuineness of faith in its fruits. When believers see in themselves the fruits of faith,

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11. The first question and answer concludes with the confession that Christ "by His Holy Spirit . . . also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto Him."

12. For a comprehensive treatment of the CD's handling of the topic of assurance, see Cornelis P. Venema, "The Assurance of Salvation in *The Canons of Dort*" (Part 2), 23–48.

a sincere “pursuit of a clear conscience and of good works,” they are assured by the tell-tale marks of the Spirit’s renewing and sanctifying presence in their lives.

Several observations need to be made regarding this article within the broader framework of the teaching of the CD.

First, the ordering of these three grounds is significant. In an earlier article in the Fifth Main Point of Doctrine, the “certainty” of the believer’s preservation in faith and salvation is deeply rooted in the gracious and merciful work of the triune God revealed in the gospel Word. Left to themselves, believers would undoubtedly fail to continue in faith, fall away from God, and lose their salvation. But “with respect to God,” this

cannot possibly happen, since his plan cannot be changed, his promise cannot fail, the calling according to his purpose cannot be revoked, the merit of Christ as well as his interceding and preserving cannot be nullified, and the sealing of the Holy Spirit can neither be invalidated nor wiped out. (Art. 8)

Following the common view of the Reformers in the sixteenth century, the CD rest a believer’s confidence in God’s grace upon the sure foundation of God’s never-failing purpose in Christ.

Second, the second ground identified in the CD for the assurance of salvation is the testimony of the Holy Spirit that we are God’s children. Little is said about the nature of this testimony and its relation to the previous and subsequent grounds for assurance. But the inclusion of the Spirit’s testimony is likewise a consensus feature of early and later Reformed orthodoxy. As arguably the most catholic of all the Reformed confessions, the CD follow the precedent of Calvin and most Reformed theologians of the period by including the Spirit’s witness as a basis for assurance. By the use of the ordinary means of grace (proclamation of the gospel and the use of the sacraments) that are made effectual to us by the Spirit’s operation, believers are able to be assured of their salvation.<sup>13</sup>

And third, when the CD add that assurance is also derived from a consideration of the good works that true faith produces in believers, they use the language “and finally” (*denique*). Without denying the proper role of this ground, the use of this language suggests that it is clearly subordinate to and inseparable from the grounds that are prior to it.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, earlier in the First Main Head of Doctrine (“Divine Election and Reprobation”), the CD cite the “unmistakable fruits of election” in the

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13. The Fifth Main Head of Doctrine, Art. 14, “God’s Use of Means in Perseverance”: “And, just as it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the proclamation of the gospel, so he preserves, continues, and completes his work by the hearing and reading of the gospel, by meditation on it, by its exhortations, threats, and promises, and also by the use of the sacraments.” This emphasis upon the Spirit’s use of means in granting believers assurance is consistent with the CD’s emphasis upon the Spirit’s use of means in granting believers regeneration and conversion (see The Third and Fourth Main Points of Doctrine, “Human Corruption, Conversion to God, and the Way it Occurs,” Art. 17).

14. Robert Letham, “Dort and Its Controversies,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 30 (2019): 18. “Here the force of the *denique* should be realized. Sanctification supports assurance only when assurance is already grounded elsewhere, on the promise of God and the work of the Spirit.”

life of believers as a basis for assuring believers of their election. At that point, no mention is made of the gospel promise or the witness of the Holy Spirit. However, in the section of the CD that deals most extensively and directly with the topic of assurance, these fruits are mentioned again but in an order that clarifies the relative and subordinate role they play in assurance. That they are mentioned earlier and again at this point in the CD is in part due to the desire of the authors to fend off the common Arminian complaint that the Reformed doctrine of assurance tends to encourage indolence and indifference regarding good works.<sup>15</sup> A significant burden of the CD in the Fifth Main Point of Doctrine is to show that God's grace and promise in Christ are a true incentive and stimulus to godliness and obedience. For this reason, the description of the cultivation of assurance by believers in this concluding part of the Canons exhibits a pastoral awareness that believers often struggle with doubts, fall into temptations, and need to make appropriate use of the means of grace to grow in the assurance of their salvation. The role of good works in confirming believers in the faith is also a warning against a false presumption of salvation in the life of those who are carelessly indifferent to their life and conduct.

### 1.3. The Westminster Confession of Faith

The third and last confession that expresses the consensus of Reformed theology on the subject of assurance is the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF). Written only thirty years after the CD, the WCF codifies the theology of the English-speaking, especially Scottish Presbyterian churches. Much ink has been spilled on the question of whether the WCF's treatment of assurance is consistent with early Reformed theology, especially Calvin and the Heidelberg Catechism. Usually, this question focuses on whether or not assurance belongs to the "essence" of true faith.<sup>16</sup> However, that is not the question I wish to address in this article. For our purpose, it is enough to observe that the chapter on assurance in the WCF is relatively brief and reflects a view almost identical to that of the Canons of Dort.<sup>17</sup>

When the WCF identifies the grounds for the believer's assurance in Chapter 18, it identifies the same three grounds we found in the CD. The similarity between these two great consensus statements of the Reformed faith on the topic of assurance is remarkable. The only difference between the WCF's statement and that of the CD is the sequence in which these grounds are stated. Whereas the CD list the testimony of

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15. For a summary of this Arminian objection to the Reformed view of predestination in relation to assurance, see Cornelis P. Venema, "The Assurance of Salvation in *The Canons of Dort*" (Part 1), 26–36.

16. See Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, & Gospel Assurance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 185–94. Ferguson offers a concise and persuasive case for considerable harmony between the earlier view of Calvin and the WCF's view of assurance. In this respect, he belongs to those interpreters who see greater continuity than discontinuity on assurance in the Reformed theological tradition.

17. For a description of the Westminster Assembly's relatively brief engagement with the topic of assurance, see Master, *A Question of Consensus*, 57–66. Master's description is largely based upon Chad Van Dixhoorn's *Reforming the Reformation: Theological Debate at the Westminster assembly, 1643–1652* (PhD diss., Cambridge University 2004), 6:331–50.

the Holy Spirit before the presence of good works that are the marks of true faith, the WCF lists the Spirit's testimony after these marks.

For our purpose, the first two articles of Chapter 18, "Of Assurance of Grace and Salvation," are of the greatest importance. The first article distinguishes a false assurance or carnal presumption from true or proper assurance. The second article then defines genuine assurance and identifies the foundation upon which it is built.

1. Although hypocrites and other regenerate 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.

2. This certainty is not a 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.

Several observations may be made regarding these articles in Chapter 18.

First, it is remarkable how similar the WCF's treatment of assurance is to that of the CD. The distinction between false or presumptuous assurance and true assurance is present in both confessions. Both confessions warn against a carnal assurance belied by the absence of a true and living faith active in good works. The WCF identifies the same three bases for assurance and its cultivation as the CD. Both confessions clearly prioritize "the divine truth of the promises of salvation" as the pre-eminent foundation for assurance. It is quite unlikely that the WCF would speak of the possibility of an "infallible assurance" were it not founded principally upon a foundation that was likewise infallible. Neither confession treats any of these three grounds as independent and sufficient in themselves (or in isolation) to warrant such assurance. Even the recognition in Chapter 18 that such infallible assurance does "not so belong to true" faith as to be immune from all doubt and temptation is not materially different than what is found in the CD.

Second, unlike the CD, which were formulated in such a way as to answer the Arminian or Remonstrant complaint that the Reformed doctrine of election undermines assurance and encourages false security, the WCF simply articulates the consensus opinion of Reformed theology at the time of its writing. The historical record of the Westminster Assembly suggests minimal discussion or debate about the topic of assurance, as represented in Article 18. Despite significant differences among the Westminster divines regarding the three grounds for assurance, these differences were not debated at the Assembly and did not find expression in the Confession itself.

Third, perhaps the one notable difference between the two confessions is the reversal of the sequence of the second and third grounds for assurance. Whether this

represents a movement in the direction of granting greater weight to the role of good works in cultivating assurance may be debated. Still, there is nothing in the historical record that shows that this was a motivation at the Assembly. Later developments in Puritan theology may exhibit this tendency, but the WCF's statement on assurance only sets boundary markers for a consensus view within which differences of opinion may be expressed.

The last observation I would make about the WCF's statement on assurance is that it sheds no more light upon the nature of the Holy Spirit's testimony as a ground for assurance than the CD. The Spirit's testimony is affirmed as a distinct and vital ground for assurance, but we are not told much about wherein it consists. This holds true as well for the inclusion of the Spirit's role as an "earnest" and "seal" of the believer's salvation.

## 2. Differing Views Regarding the Testimony of the Holy Spirit

The Reformed confessions express the consensus opinion of Reformed theology that believers derive assurance of salvation from the Holy Spirit's work in testifying to their adoption and as an earnest and seal of their inheritance. However, they do not offer an extensive explanation of the nature of this testimony. Little is said about how the Spirit's testimony is related to the promise of God's grace in Christ, the primary ground for assurance, or how it is related to the role of good works in attesting the veracity of a believer's profession. The likeliest explanation for the confessions' reticence on these questions is that considerable diversity existed within the Reformed tradition at the time of their writing.<sup>18</sup> Diverse views on these questions certainly existed among the divines who authored the WCF. In the aftermath of the Westminster Assembly, these differences were vigorously debated among Puritan theologians who were present at the Assembly. These debates were especially pronounced in the Scottish Presbyterian tradition, the Marrow Controversy being the most celebrated example.<sup>19</sup> While the participants in these debates adhered to the consensus opinion outlined in the WCF, they advanced varying views on the nature of the Spirit's role in granting believers assurance of their salvation.

An extensive consideration of these debates in later Reformed orthodoxy lies outside the parameters of this essay. For our purpose, it will be sufficient to briefly

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18. Joel Beeke, *Knowing and Growing in Assurance of Faith* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2017), 107: "No doubt one reason the assembly did not detail more specifically the Spirit's role in assurance was to allow for the freedom of the Spirit. A second reason was that the assembly wanted to allow freedom of conscience to those who differed about the finer details of the Spirit's testimony." Master offers a similar explanation, see *A Question of Consensus*, 61.

19. For detailed treatments of these debates, see Beeke, *The Quest for Assurance*, 111–268; idem, *Knowing and Growing*, 107–20; and Master, *A Question of Consensus*, 81–170.

identify three typical opinions set forth by Puritan authors at the Westminster Assembly.<sup>20</sup>

### 2.1. The Holy Spirit's Testimony Merely Confirms the Testimony of Our Works

The first view of the Spirit's testimony, represented in the writings of Anthony Burgess, tends to subordinate or merge it into the second ground listed in WCF 18.2, "the inward evidence of those graces" that belong to true faith.<sup>21</sup> Speaking of Burgess's understanding of the testimony of the Spirit, Joel Beeke observes that "the Spirit's testimony coincides with assurance gleaned from the evidences of grace, which he identifies as evidences of sanctification or fruits of holiness."<sup>22</sup> In this view, the conscience of believers is assured of salvation through a rigorous examination of their life and conduct. In effect, the testimony of the Spirit is not a distinct or additional ground for assurance alongside the evident fruits of true faith that believers discern in themselves.

Burgess, who actively participated in the Westminster Assembly's discussion of the topic of assurance, set forth his views on assurance in a two-volume work, *Spiritual Refining: Or a Treatise on Grace and Assurance*. The main burden of Burgess's treatment of assurance in this work is that believers attain assurance by examining their life and conduct and discerning the evidence of the Spirit's work of salvation in them. Most of his attention is given to identifying the marks of sanctification that can be used syllogistically or discursively to cultivate assurance. As Jonathan Master summarizes Burgess's argument in this work,

In essence, Burgess's reasoning could be summarized by this simple syllogism: *Major Premise*: Those who are regenerate evidence particular characteristics. *Minor Premise*: I evidence those same characteristics. *Conclusion*: I am regenerate. . . . The substance of his treatise is necessarily focused on how to fill in the major premise of this syllogism—that is, what particular characteristics of sanctification prove, when present, that an individual is saved.<sup>23</sup>

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20. Though the description of these three views in what follows is mine, I am roughly following Beeke's distinction between them in his popular study of the topic of assurance. See *Knowing and Growing*, 107–20.

21. Although there seems to be no evidence in the record that explains the WCF's re-ordering of the three grounds for assurance, placing the inward evidence of true faith before the testimony of the Holy Spirit (rather than before, as in the CD), it is possible that this order was more congenial to a greater emphasis upon the "subjective" and "experiential" grounds for assurance. This is certainly true in the first view of the Spirit's testimony held by some of the Westminster divines.

22. Beeke, *Knowing and Growing*, 109.

23. Master, *A Question of Consensus*, 134.

Consistent with this approach, Burgess interprets the testimony of the Spirit in Romans 8:15–16 as a confirmation of the evidences of true faith that are discernible in a believer’s life:

The meaning [of Rom. 5:15–16] is that the Spirit of God bears witness to us with those gifts and graces that are the fruit of the Spirit. Thus the apostle speaks not of such an immediate testimony . . . but mediately by and with our spirits, which be the only author of this assurance, yet it is in an ordinary way made evident by the fruits of the Spirit.<sup>24</sup>

Based upon this and other statements of Burgess, Beeke argues that he represents the view of those Puritans who regarded there to be “only one secondary ground of assurance: the evidences of grace, co-witnessed with our spirits by the Spirit of God.”<sup>25</sup> The role of the Spirit’s testimony is merely confirmatory of what is already able to be derived from the believer’s subjective experience of the fruits of faith.

## 2.2. The Holy Spirit’s Testimony is Distinct from the Testimony of Our Good Works

Unlike the first view, the second view argues for a sharper distinction between the Spirit’s testimony and the inward evidence of the fruits of true faith. This second view was the majority opinion among the Westminster divines and Puritan theologians in the period after the Westminster Assembly. That the authors of the CD place it before the third ground suggests that this was their prevalent opinion as well.

According to those who hold this second view, a distinction must be drawn between the Spirit’s witnessing *with* the spirit of the believer through the inward evidence of the fruits of faith and the Spirit’s witnessing *to* the spirit of the believers with a direct or immediate application of the Word. Appealing to the apostle Paul’s teaching in Romans 8:15–16, advocates of the second view claim that verse 15 refers to a believer’s confidence in approaching the Father upon the basis of their experience of the fruits of grace. In contrast, verse 16 refers to the Spirit himself speaking to the believer through the Word so as to assure him or her of the grace of adoption. While those who espoused this view differed on the relative value of these two grounds for assurance, they were convinced that the witness of the Spirit was a ground for assurance that must be clearly distinguished from the believer’s discernment of the evidence of God’s grace at work in them. Since this testimony of the Spirit occurs only occasionally in the experience of believers, those who placed more value upon good works as a basis for assurance argued that this was a more accessible and ordinary means to cultivate assurance. Even Anthony Burgess, who virtually denied any distinct

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24. *Spiritual Refining*, 49.

25. *Knowing and Growing*, 110. Beeke notes that the Westminster divines, Jeremiah Burroughs and George Gillespie, advocated a similar position, *Knowing and Growing*, 109. He cites the following as evidence: Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Saints Happiness, together with the several steps leading thereunto, Delivered in Divers Lectures on the Beatitudes*, repr. ed. (Beaver Falls, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1988), 196; George Gillespie, *A Treatise of Miscellany Questions* (Edinburgh: Gedeon Lithgow, for George Swintuun, 1649), 105–9.

role to the Spirit's testimony, noted that "Some divines do not deny the possibility of God's immediate testimony, but they conclude that the ordinary and safe way is to look for the testimony which is evident in the effects and fruits of God's Spirit."<sup>26</sup>

### 2.3. The Holy Spirit's Testimony is an Exceptional Ground for Full Assurance (Thomas Goodwin)

In some ways, the third view of the Holy Spirit's testimony is a subset of the second view. Among those Puritans who affirmed the testimony of the Spirit as a distinct ground of assurance, at least one notable and influential figure, Thomas Goodwin, viewed this witness to be not only occasional but also exceptional in its value as a ground for obtaining full assurance. Goodwin affirmed the general consensus that existed among the Puritans: full assurance does not belong to the essence of true faith but, as its fruit, may be attained and cultivated upon the basis of its proper grounds: the promise of the gospel, the inward evidence of good works, and the testimony of the Holy Spirit. However, Goodwin differed from many who held to this consensus by viewing the Spirit's testimony as an exceptional ground given to *some* believers *after* their conversion but not to others. The distinct testimony of the Spirit is also exceptional in that it grants a higher level of full assurance than is obtained through a discernment of the good works of believers.<sup>27</sup>

In Goodwin's treatment of the grounds of assurance, a clear distinction is drawn between a *discursive* ground that appeals to the evidence of sanctification in the lives of believers and an *intuitive* ground that appeals to the direct testimony of the Holy Spirit to believers:

The difference [the discursive and intuitive grounds] may be expressed by way of similitude, by the several ways of assurance of God's love. Look what difference there is between that way, when we know God's love to us but by signs only: this is knowing and gathering his love *ex alio*, by effect, collecting it from another thing, and so is but discursive; as when the cause is known by the effects, though the Spirit secretly joins a testimony in the conclusion; and that other which comes from an immediate light of the Spirit's sealing up that light, and the taste of it, and revealing God's heart and mind in itself towards us.<sup>28</sup>

Unlike Burgess and other Puritans, who focused primarily upon the evidence of the work of God's grace in a believer's life, Goodwin regarded the direct or immediate testimony of the Holy Spirit to be a distinct and superior basis for the assurance of salvation. Believers who attain to full assurance of their salvation do so ultimately upon the basis of the Spirit's testimony to them that they are God's adopted children.

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26. *Spiritual Refining*, 52.

27. For an extended exposition of Goodwin's views on assurance, see Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance*, 245–68; and Master, *A Question of Consensus*, 141–70.

28. *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, ed. John C. Miller, 12 vols. (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1861–1867; repr. ed.; Eureka, CA: Tanski Publications, 1996), 7:66.

In addition to affirming the superiority of the Spirit's testimony as a ground for assurance, Goodwin also associated it with the "sealing" of the Holy Spirit in Ephesians 1:13–14. In Goodwin's interpretation of this passage, the "sealing" of the Holy Spirit is exceptional in that it occurs after conversion and is granted only to some believers. In short, for Goodwin, the testimony of the Holy Spirit is not only a distinct ground for assurance but a ground that surpasses that of good works. Only some believers enjoy the benefit of the testimony and sealing of the Holy Spirit after their conversion, and this accounts for their complete and undiminished confidence of God's favor toward them.

### 3. The Scripture's Teaching Regarding the Holy Spirit's Role in Assurance

In the light of my summary of the Reformed confessions' treatment of the role of the Holy Spirit in the assurance of salvation, as well as the diversity of opinion regarding the nature of the Spirit's witness, the remainder of this article will consider several scriptural passages that have traditionally been adduced in support of this role. These passages can be distinguished into three types: 1) passages that expressly speak of the "testimony" of the Holy Spirit to the grace of adoption; 2) passages that describe the Holy Spirit as an "earnest" or "downpayment" of a believer's inheritance in Christ; and 3) passages that speak of the "sealing" of the Holy Spirit. Though I will aim to exposit these passages in their original context, I will engage them with a view to their implications for a general understanding of the Spirit's work in granting believers assurance of their salvation.

#### 3.1. The Testimony of the Holy Spirit

The traditional language in the confessions regarding the "testimony of the Holy Spirit" is based upon Romans 8:15–17: "For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him." In a parallel and likely earlier passage, the apostle Paul makes a similar statement: "And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God" (Gal. 4:6–7). The role of the Spirit in a believer's assurance of adoption by grace is clearly affirmed in both of these passages, which provide the scriptural basis for the affirmation of the Reformed confessions.

#### **Romans 8:15–16**

οὐ γὰρ ἐλάβετε πνεῦμα δουλείας πάλιν εἰς φόβον ἀλλὰ ἐλάβετε πνεῦμα υἰοθεσίας ἐν ᾧ κράζομεν· ἀββα ὁ πατήρ. αὐτὸ τὸ πνεῦμα συμμαρτυρεῖ τῷ πνεύματι ἡμῶν ὅτι ἐσμὲν τέκνα θεοῦ. εἰ δὲ τέκνα, καὶ κληρονόμοι· κληρονόμοι μὲν θεοῦ, συγκληρονόμοι δὲ Χριστοῦ, εἴτερ συμπάσχομεν ἵνα καὶ συνδοξασθῶμεν.

The first of these passages constitutes the principal scriptural warrant for the inclusion of the testimony of the Holy Spirit as a distinct basis for assurance. Within the argument of the epistle to the Romans, this passage belongs to a section that focuses broadly upon the believer's new life in union and communion with Christ. Throughout chapter 8, the apostle Paul provides a comprehensive description of the work of the Holy Spirit who enables believers to "walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (v. 4; ὀφειλέται ἔσμεν οὐ τῇ σαρκὶ τοῦ κατὰ σάρκα ζῆν). Whereas the opening verses of this chapter emphasize "life" in the Spirit, verses 15–16 lie at the heart of a section that focuses upon the theme of "sonship" or "adoption."<sup>29</sup> All those "led by the Spirit of God are sons of God" (v. 14). Within the framework of his emphasis upon the role of the Spirit in the Christian life, particularly the Spirit's leading believers to live in accordance with their status as sons or children of God, the apostle Paul introduces the topic of the Spirit's testimony to our adoption as a kind of parenthesis. Consistent with the general theme throughout chapter 8 that believers may be confident that they are no longer under condemnation (v. 1) and are unable to be separated from God's love (vv. 31–39), verses 15–16 celebrate the joyful assurance believers have by virtue of the Spirit's testimony.

The burden of verse 15 is that there is a sharp antithesis between the "spirit of slavery" (πνεῦμα δουλείας) and the "Spirit of adoption" (πνεῦμα υιοθεσίας). Believers have not received the former but the latter spirit. Though some interpreters suggest that these two "spirits" refer to two inner attitudes or dispositions that humans may have in relation to God, it seems clear that the "Spirit of adoption" refers to the Holy Spirit.<sup>30</sup> Since the believer's sonship is associated with the Holy Spirit in the preceding verse and likewise in verse 23 of chapter 8, the "Spirit of adoption" refers to the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the "spirit of slavery" elsewhere in Paul's epistles is associated with the circumstance of being "under the law" in the sense of being liable to its condemnation and enslavement (cf. Rom. 7:14; Gal. 4:1–7). By contrast, believers who are now in union with Christ by faith and led by his Spirit are not slaves but sons. They enjoy the confidence that they are no longer under condemnation and death but live out of the freedom of the gospel promise of acceptance in Christ.<sup>31</sup>

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29. Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 2nd ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 518–19: "If 'life' is the ruling idea in vv. 1–13, being 'sons' (v. 14; see 'sonship/adoption' in v. 15) or 'children' (vv. 16–17) of God dominates vv. 14–17. The way these verses focus on this concept justifies their being treated as a separate unit of thought."

30. Modern English translations, including the ESV, represent this view by capitalizing "Spirit." Moo also notes that the parallel to Romans 8:15 in Galatians 4:6 supports this view: "But, in light of the manifest connection between the Holy Spirit and the believer's sonship in v. 14 and v. 23—not to mention Gal 4:6: 'God sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts'—the 'Spirit of adoption' must refer to the Holy Spirit" (*The Letter to the Romans*, 522).

31. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 424: "This makes it unlikely that 'spirit of slavery' refers directly to the Holy Spirit. Paul may, then, refer to the human spirit, enslaved to sin; but more likely he uses the word rhetorically, as a hypothetical antithesis to the 'Spirit of adoption': 'the Spirit that you have received is *not* a 'spirit of bondage' but a Spirit of adoption.'" For a similar interpretation see Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Moises Silva, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 424.

For our purpose, what is most striking in verse 15 is the emphasis upon how the Spirit of adoption grants believers the comfort and confidence that they are indeed children of God. When believers receive the Spirit of adoption as sons, they are enabled by the Spirit to cry “Abba, Father” (αββα ὁ πατήρ).<sup>32</sup> Most interpreters rightly ascribe this heartfelt confidence that believers have in addressing God as their “Father” to the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in them. The language of their cry bears an unmistakable analogy to the language of Jesus Christ himself in expressing his relation to the Father. As those who are in union and communion with Christ, believers enjoy a relationship with the Father that includes a shared sense of the privileges that belong to those who are his children.<sup>33</sup> Through their fellowship with Christ by the Spirit, believers may address and confidently approach God as their Father, assured that he will deal with them as befits those who are his beloved children. They enjoy the grace of adoption by being made members of God’s family and partakers of the rights and privileges of children.<sup>34</sup>

In verse 16, the apostle Paul expressly turns to the testimony or witness of the Spirit that assures believers of their adoption and status as children of God: “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” We become aware of our adoption and assured of its privileges because the Spirit himself testifies together with our spirit. The verb used in this verse, “to witness with” (συνμαρτυρεῖ), has occasioned debate as to whether Paul is saying the Spirit witnesses “to” or “with” our spirit. In the former or “intensive” sense of the verb, the Spirit’s witness predominates so that the believer’s cry, “Abba! Father!” is not a distinct witness but an awareness that is produced by the Spirit’s witness to them. John R. W. Stott well represents this view:

[I]s it really possible in experience to distinguish between the Holy Spirit and our human spirit? More important, would not these two witnesses be inappropriately matched? Surely “we cannot stand alongside the Holy Spirit and give testimony”? For “what standing has our spirit in *this* matter? Of itself it surely has no right at all to testify to our being sons of God.” In this

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32. Unlike most English translations and commentators, the NRSV attaches these words (“Abba! Father!”) at the close of verse 15 to verse 16: “When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness.” However, this translation does not do justice to the language preceding this cry, “by or in whom” (ἐν ᾧ). Through the instrumentality of the Spirit, believers become aware of and express their filial relationship to the Father.

33. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 525: “In crying out ‘Abba, Father,’ the believer not only gives voice to his or her consciousness of belonging to God as his child but also to having a status comparable to that of Jesus himself. The Aramaic *abba* was the term Jesus used in addressing his Father, and its preservation in the Greek Gospel of Mark (14:36) and in the Greek-speaking Pauline churches attests to the fact that it was remembered and treasured as distinctive and meaningful.”

34. On the significance of Paul’s usage of the language of “adoption,” see John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959, 1965), 296–97.

case the prefix *syn* is simply intensive, and Paul meant that the Holy Spirit bears a strong inward witness *to* our spirit that we are God's children.<sup>35</sup>

In the second and more likely understanding of this verb, emphasis is placed upon the prefix to the verb, "the Spirit witnesses *with*." It is argued that the witness of the Spirit occurs in conjunction, or conjointly, with the witness of our spirits. The Spirit's witness supports and confirms our consciousness of adoption in Christ. There is, accordingly, an affirmation of a *double* or *twofold* witness in Romans 8:15–16. This double witness on the part of the Holy Spirit and our spirit is supported by an important difference in the language of Romans 8:15–16 and Galatians 4:6. In Romans 8:15–16, the apostle Paul ascribes the cry, "Abba! Father," to the believer who expresses thereby an assurance of his or her adoption by grace. However, in Galatians 4:6, it is the Holy Spirit who cries out for and in us, "Abba! Father!" The same testimony is expressed in both cases, but in one it is the believer who cries out, and in the other it is the Holy Spirit who cries out in the believer. It is also supported by the use of this verb in Romans 2:15 and 9:1, both of which retain the force of the prefixed "with."<sup>36</sup> On this understanding, the likely background for this double witness lies in the scriptural teaching that, in a court of law or a matter requiring determination of the truthfulness of testimony given, two witnesses are required (Deut. 17:6; 19:5; cf. 1 Tim. 5:19). Just as two witnesses in a court of law settle the truth of a matter that is disputed, so our adoption by God's grace in Christ is settled by the witness of the Holy Spirit with our spirit.<sup>37</sup>

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35. *Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 234. This view has a long history and many proponents, including the Reformers John Calvin and Martin Luther. Among more recent writers who take this view, see C. E. B. Cranfeld, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975–1979), 1:403; and Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 317. The quotations in Stott's comments are taken from the commentaries on Romans by Leon Morris and C. E. B. Cranfeld respectively.

36. Like the first view, this view has many (especially more recent) proponents. See, e.g., Schreiner, *Romans*, 426; Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 525n1036; Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 297; and Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 207–9. Murray's comments on the Spirit's witness are helpful: "It is a witness given *to* us as distinct from the witness given *by* us. The witness thus given is to the effect that 'we are children of God'. We are not to construe this witness of the Spirit as consisting in a direct propositional revelation to the effect, 'Thou art a child of God'. It is to us indeed the witness is given and it is 'to our spirit', but there are many respects in which this witness is borne. Particularly is it made manifest in sealing to the hearts of believers the promises which are theirs as heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ," *The Epistle to the Romans*, 297–8.

37. John Owen argues that the Spirit's testimony, in a manner of speaking, settles the case for the believer's assurance of salvation: "Perhaps its own witness [the believer's], from its faith, sanctification, former experience, keeps up the plea with some life and comfort; but the work is not done, the conquest is not fully obtained, until the Spirit, who worketh freely and effectually, when and how he will, comes in with his testimony also; clothing his power with a word of promise, he makes all concerned to attend unto him and puts an end to the controversy," *The Works of John Owen*, repr. ed. in 16 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976 [1850–1853]), 2:242.

While it seems evident that Romans 8:15–16 affirms a double witness to our adoption, the first view nonetheless makes an important point regarding the *relation* that obtains between the Spirit's witness and the witness of our spirits. Interpreters of this passage who insist that this witness is *to* our spirits and not a witness *with* our spirits are properly motivated by a desire to resist the idea that the Spirit's testimony *merely corroborates* the witness borne by our spirits. Rather than viewing the Spirit's testimony as simply confirmatory of a testimony independently borne by our spirits, they correctly recognize that the Spirit's witness must *take precedence* over the witness of our spirits, producing in its recipients a conscious awareness of their adoption. On this interpretation, the witness of our spirits to adoption is not a constitutive basis for our assurance of adoption but a reflexive acknowledgment that answers to the more pre-eminent and sure witness of the Holy Spirit.<sup>38</sup>

Accordingly, though it is proper to speak of a *double witness* to our adoption based on the verb used in Romans 8:16, it is crucial to recognize both the *inseparability* and the *relative value* of the respective witness of the Spirit and our spirit. These two witnesses occur in tandem and are intimately conjoined, yet the witness of the Spirit is more basic and of the greatest significance. Unless and until the Holy Spirit testifies to our adoption as God's children in Christ, our assurance of salvation would rest uneasily upon the uncertain and tenuous ground of our experience of God's grace. Just as the apostle Paul teaches that the confession, "Jesus is Lord," can only be made "in the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3), so it would be impossible for any believer to confidently embrace their adoption in Christ by faith unless the Holy Spirit moved them to do so. The cry, "Abba! Father!" can only be uttered *in the Spirit*. Thus, whenever believers seek to come to the full assurance of their adoption, they may not rest their confidence solely or firstly upon the testimony of their conscience apart from the Spirit's work in drawing them to embrace the gospel promise in Christ and confirming them in their adoption.

To understand the witness of the Holy Spirit, as it is represented in Romans 8:15–16, it is always necessary to remember that the work of the Holy Spirit is ordinarily tethered to the *gospel Word and its promise*, which the confessions identify as the pre-eminent basis for assurance. As the Reformers insisted in the sixteenth century, the Holy Spirit's principal work on behalf of the Father and the Son who send him is to bear testimony to Christ. This is a central feature of Jesus's teaching in the Gospel of John. In John 14:15–18, Jesus promises his disciples that he will ask the Father to send the Holy Spirit as "another Helper, even the Spirit of truth" to be with them so that they will not be left "as orphans" (an allusion to their adoption into God's family). The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in Jesus's name, will teach them "all things" and bring to their remembrance "all that I have said to you" (John 14:26). In John 16, Jesus repeats this promise regarding the Spirit: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he

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38. John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and Thessalonians*, in *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, ed. David W. Torrance & Thomas F. Torrance (repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970 [1960]), 8:170: "Paul means that the Spirit of God affords us such a testimony that our spirit is assured of the adoption of God, when He is our Guide and Teacher. Our mind would not of its own accord convey this assurance to us, *unless the testimony of the Spirit preceded it*" (emphasis mine).

will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (vv. 12–14).

In the light of this general teaching of Scripture, we should understand the witness of the Holy Spirit in Romans 8:15–16 in line with the Heidelberg Catechism. The witness of the Spirit belongs to the powerful, life-giving operation of the Spirit that accompanies the ministry of the gospel, working in the hearts of believers to give them a firm confidence “that not only to others, but to me also, remission of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation, are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ’s merits” (Q & A 21). Rather than viewing the witness of the Spirit as an “exceptional” or “occasional” experience that *some* believers enjoy, this witness is the ordinary and normal way whereby the Spirit moves believers to embrace the gospel promise in Christ.

### Galatians 4:4–6

ὅτε δὲ ἦλθεν τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου, ἐξαπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ, γενόμενον ἐκ γυναικός, γενόμενον ὑπὸ νόμον, ἵνα τοὺς ὑπὸ νόμον ἐξαγοράσῃ, ἵνα τὴν υἰοθεσίαν ἀπολάβωμεν. Ὅτι δὲ ἐστε υἱοί, ἐξαπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ εἰς τὰς καρδίας ἡμῶν κρᾶζον ἀββα ὁ πατήρ.

The second passage in Paul’s epistles that speaks of the Spirit’s testimony to the adoption of believers is Galatians 4:4–6. In this passage, which has received far less attention than Romans 8:15–16, the apostle Paul affirms the same fundamental truth that believers are no longer slaves but have received “adoption as sons” on account of the redeeming work of Christ. Because believers are the adopted sons or children of God, heirs to the promise to Abraham, “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal. 4:6). Just as was true in Romans 8, the Spirit’s testimony to the believer’s adoption as God’s child includes the assurance that they will receive the inheritance that rightfully belongs to them through union with Christ.<sup>39</sup>

What distinguishes this passage from Romans 8:15–16 is that the cry, “Abba! Father,” is ascribed directly to the Spirit himself. In Romans 8:15, this cry expresses the believer’s own awareness of his or her adoption. However, in Galatians 4:6, this cry is expressed by the Spirit himself, who is received by all believers who, through

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39. The closing language, “because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts,” should not be interpreted to mean that believers come to receive the Spirit on the basis of their prior status of sonship. Such a reading, which posits a sequence (temporal or logical) between a prior sonship and a subsequent reception of the Spirit, would be inconsistent with the sequence in Romans 8:14–17, where being led by the Spirit is coincident with being sons of God. Cf. Douglas Moo, *Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 269: “Paul wants to associate the status of sonship with the gift of the Spirit, but claiming that Paul teaches a strict temporal or logical sequence between them would be overreading this text and others ... The ‘sequence’ of sonship and Spirit in various texts in Paul is thus probably dictated more by rhetorical than theological concerns.”

union with Christ, become heirs to the promise to Abraham (cf. Gal. 3:22).<sup>40</sup> All believers in Christ, whether Jews or Gentiles, enjoy the privilege of adoption into God's family and receive confirmation and assurance of this by the indwelling presence of Christ's Spirit. The fact that the witness or testimony of the Spirit is both unique and distinct from our consequent awareness of adoption in Galatians 4:6 only lends further weight to the argument that it takes precedence over and undergirds, whatever awareness believers may express when they confidently address God as their heavenly Father. This is captured well by John R. W. Stott in his comments on this verse:

So the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, witnessing to our sonship and prompting our prayers, is the precious privilege of all God's children. It is *because you are sons* (6) that God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts. No other qualification is needed. There is no need to recite some formula, or strive after some experience, or fulfill some extra condition. Paul says to us clearly *if we are God's children*, and *because we are God's children*, God has sent his Spirit into our hearts. And the way he assures us of our sonship is not by some spectacular gift or sign but by the quiet inward witness of the Spirit as we pray.<sup>41</sup>

### 3.2. The Holy Spirit as an "Earnest" of the believer's inheritance

In addition to the scriptural teaching regarding the witness of the Holy Spirit, it is significant to note that both the WCF and the CD also appeal to two further, closely related descriptions of the Holy Spirit's work that are relevant to the assurance of salvation. The importance of these two features of the Spirit's work in relation to assurance is often inadequately acknowledged or, in some cases, improperly interpreted. Interestingly, like the two passages we have considered thus far (Rom. 8:14–17 and Gal. 4:4–6), these passages draw an inseparable connection between the themes of the believer's adoption in Christ into God's family and the inheritance that this adoption secures or guarantees.

The first of these descriptions represents the Spirit's presence and indwelling of believers who are united to Christ as an "earnest," "deposit," or "downpayment" (ἀρραβῶν) upon their inheritance in him. The apostle Paul uses this expression on three occasions. In 2 Corinthians 1:22, Paul observes that God, who establishes believers in union with Christ, has "put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee" (ὁ καὶ σφραγισάμενος ἡμᾶς καὶ δοὺς τὸν ἀρραβῶνα τοῦ πνεύματος ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ἡμῶν). Later, in the same epistle, the confidence that believers may have regarding their mortal bodies being "swallowed up by life" is

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40. Moo rightly observes that, although the cry "Abba! Father!" in this passage is ascribed to the Holy Spirit, "Paul undoubtedly thinks of the Spirit crying out through our own voices" (ibid., 270).

41. *The Message of Galatians*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1968), 81. For a similar viewpoint, see David A. DeSilva, *The Letter to the Galatians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 358.

closely linked to the fact that God “has given us the Spirit as a guarantee” (ὁ δὸς ἡμῖν τὸν ἄρραβῶνα τοῦ πνεύματος). And in Ephesians 1:13–14, the Holy Spirit with whom believers are “sealed” is described as “the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it” (ὁ ἐστὶν ἄρραβὸν τῆς κληρονομίας ἡμῶν, εἰς ἀπολύτρωσιν τῆς περιποιήσεως (v. 14).

The basic idea in these and related passages is that believers, through union with Christ, are granted the Spirit as a kind of downpayment in kind of that new-creation life that will be theirs in full at the end of this present age. All the benefits believers enjoy in union with Christ are theirs by virtue of the Spirit’s presence. These benefits belong to the fullness of life that is the inheritance of every believer. Though we enjoy them already, we do not enjoy them in their fullness and completeness. On analogy to the “first fruits” of a harvest that is not yet completed, the Spirit is given to the church, and all true believers as a sure pledge that the work Christ has begun in us will be brought to completion at Christ’s coming (cf. Rom. 8:23; Phil. 1:6). The teaching of these passages can only be rightly understood within the broad framework of New Testament soteriology and eschatology. What believers are granted already by the life-giving Spirit of Christ is a promissory of what they will receive in the fullness of life within the order of the new creation. As Richard Gaffin remarks, “These terms—‘first fruits,’ the initial portion of a harvest, and ‘deposit’ on a full amount—are calculated to express both the partial nature of our present possession of the Spirit and equally the organic connection, the integral tie, there is between this present partial possession and its future fullness at Christ’s return.”<sup>42</sup>

The significance of the Spirit as an “earnest” or “first fruits” of our redemption for the subject of assurance cannot be exaggerated. Any definition of the assurance of salvation that does not affirm the certainty of a believer’s perseverance in faith to the end falls short of the biblical understanding of God’s promises in Christ. To be sure of my salvation for a season is not the same as to be sure that my inheritance in Christ will be kept for me, even as I am kept for it (1 Pet. 1:4). Embedded in the teaching that the Holy Spirit indwells believers as an “earnest” of their salvation is the idea of a glorious future that I have already entered in part and will someday enjoy in full. As our Lord promises his disciples, the Holy Spirit whom he will send will abide with them forever (John 14:16). Their membership in the family of God through adoption is not a temporary arrangement. It *guarantees* the certainty of their future inheritance in fellowship with Christ.

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42. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *In the Fullness of Time: An Introduction to the Biblical Theology of Acts and Paul* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway 2022), 139. Cf. Geerhardus Vos, “The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Conception of the Spirit,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 103. When considering Romans 8:15–16, it is noteworthy that in Romans 8:23 Paul speaks of believers, “who have the firstfruits of the Spirit,” as those who are waiting for “adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” Consistent with New Testament eschatology, believers presently (already) enjoy blessings in part that belong to a future (not yet) in which they will be enjoyed in full measure.

### 3.3. The Holy Spirit as the “Seal” of the believer’s inheritance

Ἐν ᾧ καὶ ὑμεῖς ἀκούσαντες τὸν λόγον τῆς ἀληθείας, τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς σωτηρίας ὑμῶν, ἐν ᾧ καὶ πιστεύσαντες ἐσφραγίσθητε τῷ πνεύματι τῆς ἐπαγγελίας τῷ ἁγίῳ, ὃ ἐστὶν ἄρραβὼν τῆς κληρονομίας ἡμῶν, εἰς ἀπολύτρωσιν τῆς περιποιήσεως, εἰς ἔπαινον τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ. (Eph. 1:13–14)

The second of these descriptions represents the Spirit’s presence and indwelling of believers as a “seal” of their inheritance in Christ. The key passage is Ephesians 1:13–14: “In him [Christ] you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, *were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit*, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.”

The idea expressed by the language, “sealed in the Holy Spirit” (ἐσφραγίσθητε τῷ πνεύματι), is intimately linked to that of the Holy Spirit as an “earnest,” “deposit,” or “guarantee” of our inheritance in Christ. They are corollaries. If the Holy Spirit assures and certifies the fullness of our inheritance in Christ, he also “seals” to us all that belongs to our redemption. The role of a seal is well-known. For example, by means of a seal, we certify and authenticate the words we have written in a letter. A document that bears an official seal or stamp of approval, including perhaps that of a notary, is the sort of document you can present to someone and expect them to acknowledge its authenticity. So also, when believers hear the word of truth and embrace it by faith, they simultaneously are sealed by the Holy Spirit, whose presence assures them of their salvation. Because all believers who embrace the gospel are sealed by the Holy Spirit, the apostle Paul can declare in Ephesians 4:30 that when they fall into or continue in sinful disobedience, they “grieve the Holy Spirit” by whom they were “sealed for the day of redemption. This passage, like its parallel in Ephesians 1:13–14, clearly assumes that the Holy Spirit has sealed *all* believers. It militates against any view that the sealing of the Spirit is an exceptional work, occurring only in the case of *some* believers at some time subsequent to their conversion.

As noted previously, some Reformed theologians argue that this “sealing” of the Holy Spirit is only true for some believers, but not all. According to these interpreters, the “sealing” of the Holy Spirit is an experience that some believers enjoy after conversion that grants them a direct assurance of salvation. However, many believers do not receive this sealing of the Spirit and hence do not enjoy the same measure of assurance. This was the position of Thomas Goodwin, an influential Puritan divine in an earlier period.<sup>43</sup> But it was also a position recommended more recently by the well-known Welsh preacher Martin Lloyd Jones.<sup>44</sup> Lloyd-Jones argued that the participle used by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 1:13 (“having believed”) describes an action that takes place sometime before what is described in the main verb (“you were

43. *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, w:242.

44. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 8:5–17: The Sons of God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1972), 311–14. Lloyd-Jones devotes nearly two hundred pages to Romans 8:5–17, most of them adducing personal reports of spiritual experiences that purportedly confirmed the assurance of salvation through the sealing work of the Holy Spirit.

sealed”). In this reading of the passage, the sealing work of the Spirit is not a work that all believers receive, but only some who thereby enjoy a greater measure of full assurance of their salvation.

However, those who hold that the sealing of the Holy Spirit is an exceptional reality that some believers, but not others, receive after they come to faith do so upon a mistaken reading of Ephesians 1:13–14. There are three problems with this reading. First, the aorist participle, “having believed,” modifies the aorist verb as an “attendant circumstance.”<sup>45</sup> The sealing of the Spirit does not take place *after* believers come to faith, but at the time they believe. Second, the Spirit himself is the seal, and he is given to all believers who are united to Christ by faith. All believers who benefit from Christ’s saving work receive the Spirit as a guarantee of their inheritance.<sup>46</sup> Within the context of Ephesians 1, the sealing of the Spirit is one of many blessings that *all* believers enjoy in Christ. These blessings include their adoption, sanctification, redemption, and reception of the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of their inheritance (Eph. 1:5–14; cf. 1 Cor. 12:13). And third, this view has some serious and far-reaching implications that are out of accord with the Scripture’s teaching. For example, it encourages a spiritual “elitism” in which some believers, but not all, have a post-conversion blessing that places them on a higher plane of Christian experience. It also makes the assurance of salvation a rare and exceptional feature of the Christian experience.<sup>47</sup> On this view, most believers never attain full assurance because they have not received the sealing of the Spirit.

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45. For treatments of the use of the aorist participle as an “attendant circumstance” to the action of the main verb, see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 641–2; and Albert Rijksbaron, *The Syntax and Semantics of the Verb in Classical Greek*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 125. Among the central features of a participle that is an “attendant circumstance,” Wallace identifies three, each of which is found in Ephesians 1:13–14:1) the participle is in the Aorist tense; 2) the participle comes before the verb; and 3) the aorist participle with an aorist verb is frequently an attendant circumstance or even more frequently functions adverbially. The ESV, like many modern translations, captures this well with the translation, “In him you also, when you heard the word of truth . . . and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (emphasis mine).

46. S. M. Baugh, *Ephesians*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 97; “The phrase ‘you were sealed *with* the Spirit’ (τῷ πνεύματι) rather than ‘*by* the Spirit’ (which would be expressed as ὑπὸ τοῦ πνεύματος), in which the Spirit would be the agent of the sealing, expresses the idea that God the Father (v. 3a)—who is the subject of the central verbs in vv. 3–14—has performed the sealing and that the Spirit is himself the seal (see also 4:30).”

47. Robert Letham, *The Holy Spirit* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2023), 248: “In practice, the interpretation creates a spiritual elite of those who have received ‘the blessing.’ Paul would then have written to the church in Ephesians 1 intending to say that ‘you were all chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, all of you were foreordained to adoption in Christ, all of you were redeemed by the blood of Christ, all of you are heirs to a great inheritance, and some—probably a few of you—were sealed by the Holy Spirit.’”

#### 4. Concluding Observations

In light of our review of the principal biblical passages that ascribe a role to the Spirit in assuring believers of their salvation, there are several concluding observations to be made.

First, the passages we have considered clearly support the historic consensus of the Reformed confessions that the Holy Spirit's ministry constitutes a distinctive and important basis for the assurance believers may have regarding their salvation. Even though there is some diversity of opinion among Reformed theologians regarding the role of the Spirit in granting such assurance, the confessions have an indisputable scriptural basis for ascribing such a role to the Spirit. Though the manner of the Holy Spirit's work may be elusive and challenging to comprehend, the Spirit's ministry through the gospel grants believers heartfelt confidence that all the rich promises in Christ—the forgiveness of sins, acceptance into God's favor, and adoption by grace—truly are given to them.

Second, while the Reformed confessions commonly ascribe a role to the Spirit in assuring believers of their salvation, they do not uniformly provide as robust an account of the Spirit's role in assurance as we have found in the Scriptures. The pre-eminent importance of the Spirit's role in assuring believers of their salvation is most clearly acknowledged in the HC. However, when the CD and the WCF affirm the testimony and sealing of the Spirit as a distinct ground for assurance, they say little about the relation of this testimony to the first and principal ground of assurance, the promises of the gospel. Whereas the CD list the testimony and sealing of the Spirit as a second basis for assurance after the promises of the gospel, the WCF places the "inward evidences" or "graces" in the life of a believer before the testimony and sealing of the Spirit. Within the framework of a broad consensus regarding the assurance of salvation, room is left for a diversity of opinion regarding the relative importance of the Spirit's testimony in distinction from the gospel promises and the evident fruits of true faith in a believer's experience. For this reason, Reformed theologians have considerable freedom to advance diverse opinions on the significance of the Spirit's ministry in assuring believers of their salvation.

Third, the biblical passages that ascribe a role to the Spirit in the assurance of salvation warrant a more unified view of the three grounds for assurance. In such a view, the promises of the gospel and the testimony and sealing of the Holy Spirit are distinct yet inseparable grounds for the believer's assurance of salvation. Since the Spirit works "with" and through the Word of the gospel to produce faith, the testimony of the Holy Spirit should not be construed as a kind of "extra-scriptural" word that is added to the gospel promise. The Spirit acts in the name and on behalf of Christ, bearing witness to Christ and sealing the promise upon the hearts of those who believe. Rather than viewing the testimony of the Spirit as a "subjective" or "experiential" ground of assurance, we should consider the Spirit's testimony as an objective basis and ground for the believer's assurance of salvation. When believers cry out to God, "Abba! Father," they do so by virtue of the fact that the Spirit of adoption is given to them. While the subjective or experiential ground of assurance plays a legitimate and indispensable role in the cultivation of assurance, it must be subordinated to the prior and more fundamental grounds of the infallible truth of the gospel Word of promise

and the Spirit's moving believers to embrace it. Assurance of salvation may not be primarily based upon the uncertain testimony of the fruits of faith. The soil that produces the assurance of salvation is the gospel's promise and the Spirit's testimony, accompanied by the confirmation of the genuineness of faith in its fruits. Though the assurance of salvation is undoubtedly experienced by believers in greater or lesser degree, it always rests most fundamentally upon the grounds of the gospel promise and the Spirit's testimony to our hearts that this promise is given not only to others but also to me.

Most importantly, the scriptural passages that speak of the testimony and sealing of the Spirit are incompatible with at least two of the three views found among some adherents to the WCF. The view that the Spirit's testimony merely confirms the testimony of our works does not do justice to the distinctness of the Spirit's testimony. Such a view elevates unduly the role of an appeal to the fruits of faith in order to give believers confidence before God. More seriously, it reverses the relation between the Spirit's testimony and sealing and the testimony of the believer to their adoption. The testimony of the Spirit of adoption and our spirit may be a double testimony, but the relation between them is asymmetrical. The Holy Spirit authors the components of true faith and these include a heartfelt assurance of the grace of adoption in Christ. Likewise, any view of the Spirit's distinct witness and sealing that regards it as an unusual or exceptional experience militates against the scriptural teaching that all believers ordinarily and normatively enjoy the blessing of adoption into God's family through Christ. The Spirit whom Christ gives to the church and its members is an earnest of their full inheritance in Christ. This is not true for a select few believers but for all believers in Christ.

Such a view of the Spirit's role in granting believers assurance of salvation is not incompatible with the fact that believers struggle to obtain assurance at various times and for different reasons in the course of their lives. Nor is it inconsistent with an acknowledgment that professing believers need to examine themselves to see whether their faith is genuine (2 Cor. 13:5; cf. 1 Cor. 11:28). When professing believers fall into serious sins that offend God, they grieve the Holy Spirit and "sometimes lose the awareness of grace for a time—until, after they have returned to the way by genuine repentance, God's fatherly face again shines upon them."<sup>48</sup> While such circumstances, trials, and temptations undoubtedly occur in the life of believers, they should not be allowed to diminish the joyful truth that Christ has imparted to us, the Spirit of adoption, in order to assure us of our salvation and the forgiveness that is in Christ. The scriptural testimony regarding the work of the Spirit in assuring believers of their salvation does not permit the idea that the assurance of salvation should be viewed as a rare jewel in the life of believers. A ministry of the gospel that tends to leave believers in a state of perpetual uncertainty regarding their salvation fails to do justice to the scriptural teaching regarding the Spirit's witness and sealing. Indeed, doubting God's favor toward us in Christ and continuous wavering in our confidence in God's forgiving grace may well grieve the Holy Spirit as much as any form of sinful disobedience.

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48. CD, "The Fifth Main Point of Doctrine," Art. 5.