

DOES ASSURANCE BELONG TO THE ESSENCE OF FAITH? CALVIN AND THE CALVINISTS

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The contemporary church stands in great need of refocusing on the doctrine of assurance if the desirable fruit of Christian living is to abound. A relevant issue in church history centers in whether or not the Calvinists differed from Calvin himself regarding the relationship between faith and assurance. The difference between the two was quantitative and methodological, not qualitative or substantial. Calvin himself distinguished between the definition of faith and the reality of faith in the believer's experience. Alexander Comrie, a representative of the Dutch Second Reformation, held essentially the same position as Calvin in mediating between the view that assurance is the fruit of faith and the view that assurance is inseparable from faith. He and some other Calvinists differ from Calvin in holding to a two-tier approach to the consciousness of assurance. So Calvin and the Calvinists furnish the church with a model to follow that is greatly needed today.

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Today many infer that the doctrine of personal assurance—that is, the certainty of one's own salvation—is no longer relevant since nearly all Christians possess assurance in an ample degree. On the contrary, it is probably true that the doctrine of assurance has particular relevance, because today's Christians live in a day of minimal, not maximal, assurance.

Scripture, the Reformers, and post-Reformation men repeatedly

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offer the reminder that personal assurance of salvation is recognizable by its fruits: a close life of fellowship with God; a tender, filial relationship marked with childlike obedience; a thirsting after God and spiritual exercises that extol Him; a longing to glorify Him by the fulfillment of the Great Commission. Where assurance abounds, mission-mindedness prevails. Assured believers pray for and anticipate revival, view heaven as their home, and long for the Second Advent of Christ and their translation to glory (2 Tim 4:6-8).

Assurance, like salvation, is double-sided. It is the summit of intimacy by which the believer both knows Christ and knows he is known by Him. Assurance is not a self-given persuasion, but a Spirit-applied certainty which moves the Christian Godward through Christ.

Today these God-glorifying fruits are often seriously lacking. The desire to fellowship with God, the sense of the reality of heaven, the relish for God's glory, and intercession for revival all fall short of a former day. Whenever the church's emphasis on earthly good dominates the conviction that she is traveling through this world on her way to God and glory, assurance is at a low ebb (Hebrews 11).

Today the church needs to realize again that one important reason the doctrine of saving faith is of central importance to the Christian is because faith is the seed-bed of every kind and degree of personal assurance. This includes assurance that flows from each exercise of faith, from the application of God's promises to the believer, from inward evidences of grace, and from the witness of the Holy Spirit.

This question of the relationship between faith and assurance became a cardinal point in Reformation and particularly in post-Reformation theology: does assurance—that is, certainty of one's own salvation—belong to the essence of faith? More practically, is it possible to have faith without assurance? If so, does not faith lose its vitality, and assurance, its normalcy?

In dealing with these faith/assurance questions, the Reformation and post-Reformation theologians struggled against Roman Catholicism's assertion that no forms of assurance commonly belonged to Christians. But they so struggled largely because their supreme goal was allegiance to Scripture and its authority. At root, they were wrestling with biblical data, exegesis, and hermeneutics. Both testaments display a formidable tension: vital faith and some kind of normal assurance (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:16-22), conjoined with the possibility of lacking assurance (Psalms 38, 73, 88; 2 Pet 1:10).

The central concern in the discussion of faith/assurance questions in Reformation and post-Reformation writing a concern which sorely needs resurfacing today was the outworking of this scriptural tension in a pastoral context. In a meticulous augmentation of early Reformation doctrine, post-Reformed divines affirmed that certain kinds of assurance involve more than an objective resting on the promises of God in Christ. Specifically, they taught that when properly set in a scriptural, Christocentric, and Trinitarian context, the syllogisms² and the witness of the Spirit have a valid place in the believer's assurance valid, that is, as secondary grounds of assurance that do not usurp the primary ground that consists of the promises of God.

However, in dealing with questions on the relationship between faith and assurance, Reformation and post-Reformation theologians *appear* to differ considerably. Whereas the early Reformers held that assurance is part and parcel with faith, post-Reformation divines felt free to distinguish assurance from faith as witnessed by chap. 18 of the Westminster Confession. Scholarship has compounded this apparent difference by regarding it as a substantive, even an antithetical, distinction. At least two schools of interpretive thought have evolved.

The first and oldest group, spearheaded by William Cunningham, and supported by Robert Dabney, Charles Hodge, John

²A syllogism is a conclusion drawn from an action. The basic form of the syllogism when it pertains to salvation is as follows: Major premise: Those only who do 'x' are saved. Minor premise: But by the grace of God I do 'x'. Conclusion: Therefore I am saved. Many post-Reformation divines taught that two very closely related, yet distinct, syllogisms could be used to fortify assurance the practical syllogism (*syllogismus practicus*) and the mystical syllogism (*syllogismus mysticus*).

The practical syllogism was based largely on the believer's sanctification and good works as evidenced in practical daily life. Hence, major premise: According to Scripture, only those who possess saving faith will receive the Spirit's testimony that their lives manifest fruits of sanctification and good works. Minor premise: I cannot deny that by God's grace I have received the Spirit's testimony that I manifest fruits of sanctification and good works. Conclusion: I may be assured that I possess saving faith.

The mystical syllogism was based largely on the believer's internal exercises and progress in the steps of grace. Major premise: According to Scripture, only those who possess saving faith will experience the Spirit's testimony confirming inward grace and godliness, such that self will decrease and Christ will increase. Minor premise: I cannot deny that by the grace of God I experience the Spirit's testimony confirming inward grace and godliness such that self decreases and Christ increases. Conclusion: I may be assured that I possess saving faith.

Macleod, and others, views the post-Reformation distinction between faith and assurance as a positive outworking of early Reformation principles. This Calvinistic school regards the Reformers as leaving the faith/assurance question in embryonic form for maturation under their pastoral successors. The difference between the Reformers and the post-Reformation men is substantial and developmental, but not antithetical.³

The bulk of current scholarship, however, no longer views the post-Reformation struggle to develop a detailed doctrine of assurance as a faithful outworking of early Reformation principles. Rather, post-Reformation agonizings to develop a doctrine of assurance have been more recently regarded as antithetical to the simplicity of the early Reformers' insistence on the inseparability of faith and assurance. It is argued that the Reformers, and Calvin in particular, allowed no room for the practical syllogism and similar supposedly non-Christological devices as aids for defining or gaining subjective assurance. Rather, they argue, assurance must be realized exclusively through resting on the objective promises of God in Christ Jesus. With notable exceptions,⁴ the post-Reformers are viewed as having injected a cold

³A definitive essay by William Cunningham, "The Reformers and the Doctrine of Assurance" (1856), first published in the *British and Foreign Evangelical Review* (October, 1856), has been regarded as prototypical for conservative Reformed scholarship. Cunningham argues that the Reformers embraced "exaggerated views and statements on personal assurance" as essential for every believer for two prime reasons: "First, their own personal experience as converted and believing men," in which they were graced with a large degree of assurance to parallel their "difficult and arduous labours in the cause of Christ." Secondly, Cunningham claims that "the ground taken by the Romanists in arguing against them" on the normativity of assurance stirred the Reformers to place an exaggerated accent on assurance as decisive (reprinted as Essay III in *The Reformers and Theology of the Reformation* [Edinburgh: Clark, 1862] 113, 116, 118).

⁴During the 1970's a fresh reevaluation of Protestant orthodoxy along more traditional lines was initiated by the following major works: Jill Raitt, *The Eucharistic Theology of Theodore Beza: Development of the Reformed Doctrine* (Chambersburg, PA: American Academy of Religion, 1972); John Patrick Donnelly, *Calvinism and Scholasticism in Vermigli's Doctrine of Man and Grace* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976); John S. Bray, *Theodore Beza's Doctrine of Predestination* (Nieuwkoop: B. De Graaf, 1975); Olivier Fatio, *Méthode et théologie: Lambert Daneau et les débuts de la scholastique réformée* (Genève: Droz, 1976); Marvin W. Anderson, *Peter Martyr: A Reformer in Exile (1542-1562)* (Nieuwkoop: B. De Graaf, 1975); W. Robert Godfrey, "Tensions within International Calvinism: The Debate on the Atonement at the Synod of Dordt, 1618-1619" (PhD dissertation, Stanford University, 1974).

systematic scholasticism into the doctrines of faith and assurance, thereby supplanting the pastoral tone of the Reformers.

In various contexts Basil Hall, Robert T. Kendall and others represent this contemporary school of thought.⁵ According to that more recent scholarly consensus, Theodore Beza and William Perkins are regarded as the culprits who packed and pushed the post-Reformation doctrine of assurance down the slope of experimental subjectivity until it snowballed into the Westminster Assembly's

In the 1980's, interest in this fresh reappraisal has been sparked especially by Richard A. Muller who has ably shown that late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed documents did not support the theory of a "predestinarian metaphysic" which smothered the biblicism of the first-generation Reformers. Rather, Muller argues that although the theologians of the post-Reformation period used a scholastic methodology to clarify the Reformed theological system, they remained in essential agreement with the first generation of Reformed thought in content. According to Muller, post-Reformation orthodoxy often disagreed with the content of medieval scholasticism, but advantageously used its organizational structure. Hence in post-Reformation scholastic orthodoxy, "scholastic" refers to the method of theology utilized, "orthodoxy" to the content and doctrinal intention. Though Reformed scholastic orthodoxy stands in some methodological discontinuity with Calvin, it retains strong affinity with Reformation teaching; indeed, the Reformation is incomplete without its confessional and theological codification (*Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988]; *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* [vols. 1-2; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987-1994]. Volume 3 is forthcoming.)

For support of Muller's basic reappraisal, but with unique emphases, cf. Donald W. Sinnema, "The Issue of Reprobation at the Synod of Dort (1618-19) in Light of the History of This Doctrine" (PhD dissertation, University of St. Michael's College, 1985); Martin I. Klauber, "The Context and Development of the Views of Jean-Alphonse Turretini (1671-1737) on Religious Authority" (PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1987); Stephen R. Spencer, "Reformed Scholasticism in Medieval Perspective: Thomas Aquinas and Francis Turretini on the Incarnation" (PhD dissertation, Michigan State University, 1988); Joel R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991).

⁵Basil Hall, "Calvin against the Calvinists," in *John Calvin* (ed. by G. E. Duffield; Appleford: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1966) 19-37; R. T. Kendall, "Living the Christian Life in the Teaching of William Perkins and His Followers," in *Living the Christian Life* (London: The Westminster Conference, 1974) 45-60; *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); "The Puritan Modification of Calvin's Theology," in *John Calvin* (ed. by W. Stanford Reid; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 199-214. Scholars with convictions similar to one or more of the theses of Hall and Kendall include Brian Armstrong, Karl Barth, John Beardslee, M. Charles Bell, Ernst Bizer, James Daane, Johannes Dantine, Edward Dowey, Otto Gründler, Philip Holtrop, Walter Kickel, Donald McKim, Philip McNair, Jürgen Moltmann, Charles Munson, Wilhelm Niesel, Norman Pettit, Pontien Polman, Jack Rogers, Holmes Rolston III, and Hans Emil Weber.

betrayal of Calvinism via an "apparently unquestioned acceptance of a distinction between faith and assurance, for 'Faith' was one heading in the Confession, and 'Certainty of Salvation' another."⁶ According to Kendall, the Westminster theology of the 1640's represents a *qualitative* departure from authentic Calvinism in a variety of doctrines connected with assurance, including the decrees of God, the covenant of grace, sanctification, atonement, repentance, and the role of the human will in soteriology.

Though Cunningham is far more historically accurate than Kendall, even he is not altogether correct. Neither has reached the heart of the issue. Both, particularly Kendall, exaggerate the different emphases involved. With regard to the faith/assurance question in Calvin and Calvinism, the theories of qualitative departure (Kendall) or of non-antithetical yet substantial discrepancy (Cunningham), are both erroneous.

The discrepancy between Calvin and Calvinism on faith and assurance was largely *quantitative* and *methodological*. In other words, it was a matter of emphasis and method, rather than *qualitative* or *substantial*. The present writer has shown elsewhere that these quantitative differences stem largely from a newly evolving emphasis in the pastoral context of the post-Reformation period.⁷ Second and third generation Protestant pastors often felt compelled to augment and clarify the magisterial Reformers' doctrine of assurance because of their conviction that numerous parishioners were taking God's saving grace for granted.

In this article the aim is to show through a comparison of John Calvin (1509-1564) and a typical Dutch Second Reformation divine, Alexander Comrie (1706-1774), that notwithstanding different emphases on the question of personal assurance of faith, both Calvin *and* the Calvinists were fundamentally of one mind on assurance. The focus is on Calvin because he has rightly been called *the* theologian of the sixteenth-century Reformation who wrote extensively on faith, and on Comrie because he represents the mature age of post-Reformation thinking and devoted all his major works to the doctrine of faith.

JOHN CALVIN (1509-1564)

⁶Kendall, "Puritan Modification" 214.

⁷Beeke, *Assurance of Faith* 21, 33-34, 78-79, 83, 86-87, 112 ff., 143, 157, 167-68, 174 ff., 185 ff., 282, 283, 312, 316, 328-29, 345-49, 365-76. Cf. Richard Lovelace, "Evangelicalism: Recovering a Tradition of Spiritual Depth," *The Reformed Journal* 40/7 (September 1990) 21.

Nature and Definition of Faith

Calvin's doctrine of assurance both reaffirmed the basic tenets of Luther and Zwingli and disclosed particular emphases of his own. As with Luther and Zwingli, faith is never merely assent (*assensus*) for Calvin, but always involves both knowledge (*cognitio*) and confidence or trust (*fiducia*). Calvin emphatically affirms that knowledge and confidence are saving dimensions of the life of faith rather than mere notional matters. Faith is not historical knowledge plus saving assent as Beza would later teach,⁸ but a saving and certain knowledge conjoined with a saving and assured trust.⁹

Knowledge for Calvin is foundational to faith. This knowledge rests upon *the Word of God*; hence assurance must be sought in the Word¹⁰ and flows *out of* the Word.¹¹ Faith always says "amen" to the Scriptures.¹²

Hence faith is also inseparable from *Christ and God's promises*, for the sum and substance of the written Word is the living Word, Jesus Christ, in whom all God's promises are "yea and amen."¹³ True faith receives Christ, the one clothed in the gospel and graciously offered by the Father.¹⁴ Calvin makes much of the promises of God as the ground of assurance, because these promises depend on the very nature of that God who cannot lie rather than on any works performed by sinners.¹⁵ Moreover, since faith takes its character from the promise on which it rests, faith takes to itself the infallible stamp of God's very Word, and so possesses assurance in its very nature. Assurance,

⁸*Theodori Bezae Vezelii Volumen primum (-tertium) Tractationum Theologicarum* (2nd ed.; Genevae: apud Eustathium Vignon, 1582) 1:678, 3:405.

⁹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [hereafter: Inst.] (ed. by John T. McNeill, trans. by F. L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) Book 3, chap. 3, sec. 14. (Hereafter the format, Inst. 3.3.14, will be used.) For Calvin's Latin works, see *Opera quae supersunt omnia* (ed. by Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, and Eduardus Reuss, vols. 29-87 in Corpus Reformatorum; Brunsvigae: C. A. Schwetschke et filium, 1863-1900). (Hereafter:

CO)¹⁰*Calvin's Commentaries* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), on Matt 8:13. (Hereafter:

Commentary)

¹¹Commentary (on John 4:22).

¹²Cf. Exalto, *De Zekerheid des Geloofs bij Calvijn* 24.

¹³Commentary (on Gen 15:6; Luke 2:21).

¹⁴Inst. 3.2.32.

¹⁵Inst. 3.2.29, 41; *Commentary* (on Acts 2:39).

confidence, certainty, trust—all belong to the essence of faith.

This assured and assuring faith is the gift and work of *the Holy Spirit granted to the elect*. The Spirit persuades the elect sinner of the reliability of God's promise in Christ and grants faith to embrace that Word.¹⁶

Thus, for Calvin assuring faith joins indissolubly with *saving knowledge, the Scriptures, Jesus Christ, God's promises, the work of the Holy Spirit, and election*. In a word, God Himself is the assurance of the elect. Assurance is gratuitously founded upon God; apart from God's grace, a sinner cannot experience it in any way.¹⁷

Consequently, Calvin's formal definition of faith reads like this:

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.¹⁸

In this definition, Calvin argues that faith involves something more than fully believing the undoubted promise of God *objectively*; it also contains personal, *subjective* assurance in the sense that in believing God's promise to sinners, the true believer recognizes and celebrates that God is gracious and benevolent to him in particular.

¹⁶Inst. 3.2.16.

¹⁷*Commentary* (on Rom 8:16; 1 Pet 1:4; Heb 4:10).

¹⁸Inst. 3.2.7. Michael Eaton points out that in Calvin's formal definition of faith passivity is stressed. "Faith is not doing anything; it is seeing something, it is recognition, knowledge, certainty and a firm conviction" (*Baptism with the Spirit. The Teaching of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones* [Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1989] 43). Though faith's passivity is implicit in this particular definition, such statements are frequently used to set the stage for a radical discontinuity between Calvin and the Puritans of the Westminster Confession who stressed the activity of faith. E.g., Kendall asserts that the nature of faith can be subsumed under two categories—one that is intellectualistic and passive having to do with knowledge; the other, voluntaristic and active having to do with the will. Having adopted this simplistic dichotomy, Kendall declares Calvin to be an intellectualist and Beza a voluntarist, which in turn leads to the Westminster Confession's alleged crypto-Arminianism (*Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* 3, 19-20, 34).

In reality, Calvin stressed both the passivity (when divine sovereignty, initial regeneration, and/or justification were in view) and activity of faith (when sanctification and/or the believer's responsibility were being emphasized). Cf. Robert Letham, "Saving Faith and Assurance in Reformed Theology: Zwingli to the Synod of Dort" (PhD dissertation, University of Aberdeen, 1979) 2:70-71n.

From a definition of faith that embraces assurance, Calvin logically concludes that anyone who "believes" but lacks the conviction that he is saved by God is not a true believer after all:

No man is a believer, I say, except he who, leaning upon the assurance of his salvation, confidently triumphs over the devil and death. . . . We cannot otherwise well comprehend the goodness of God unless we gather it from the fruit of great assurance.¹⁹

It is this kind of statement that evokes the charge of "incautiousness" leveled against Calvin by William Cunningham and Robert Dabney.²⁰ A culling of Calvin's *Institutes*, commentaries and sermons, however, also presents a formidable array of qualifying statements of an equally intense nature.

Calvin often repeats these themes, intermingled with a lofty doctrine of faith: unbelief dies hard; assurance is often contested by doubt; severe temptations, wrestlings, and strife are normative; Satan and the remnants of remaining flesh assault faith; trust in God is hedged about with fear.²¹

Clearly Calvin allows for varying degrees of faith and assurance. He often speaks of such concepts as "infancy of faith," "beginnings of faith," and "weak faith."²² He asserts assurance to be proportional to faith's development.²³ Regeneration, sanctification, repentance, faith, and assurance are all progressive.²⁴

In a remarkable exposition of John 20:3, Calvin seems to contradict his assertion that believers know themselves to be such when he testifies that the disciples had faith without being aware of it as they approached the empty tomb:

There being so little faith, or rather almost no faith, both in the disciples and in the women, it is astonishing that they had so great zeal; and, indeed, it is not possible that religious feelings led them to seek Christ.

¹⁹Inst. 3.2.16.

²⁰Cunningham, *Reformers* 119 ff.; Robert Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological* (reprint; London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967) 1:216 ff., and *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972) 702, 709.

²¹Inst. 3.2.7; *Commentary* (on Matt 8:25; Luke 2:40).

²²Cf. particularly Inst. 3.2.17-21; *Commentary* (on Gal 4:6).

²³Inst. 3.2.33 ff.

²⁴Inst. 3.2.14; *Commentary* (on John 2:11; 1 John 5:13).

Some seed of faith, therefore, remained in their hearts, but quenched for a time, so that they were not aware of having what they had. Thus the Spirit of God often works in the elect in a secret manner. In short, we must believe that there was some concealed root, from which we see fruit produced.²⁵

This leads to a consideration of the nucleus of the faith-assurance dilemma in Calvin: how can Calvin interweave assertions of faith as definable in terms of full assurance while allowing for some possibility of faith lacking conscious assurance? Here lies a set of apparent contradictions. Assurance is free from doubt, yet not always so. It does not hesitate, yet can hesitate. It contains security, but may be beset with anxiety. The faithful have firm assurance, yet waver and tremble.

Making Sense of Apparent Contradictions

How are these paradoxes resolved?²⁶ There are at least four principles out of which Calvin operates in addressing this complex issue. Each of these assists in making sense out of apparent contradictions.

1. *Faith and experience.* Calvin finds it necessary to distinguish between *the definition of faith* and *the reality of the believer's experience*. This sheds considerable light on the dilemma. After expounding faith as embracing "great assurance," Calvin addresses this tension as follows:

Still, someone will say: "Believers *experience* something far different: In recognizing the grace of God toward themselves they are not only tried by disquiet, which often comes upon them, but they are repeatedly shaken by gravest terrors. For so violent are the temptations that trouble their minds as not to seem quite compatible with that certainty of faith." Accordingly, we shall have to solve this difficulty if we wish the above-

²⁵Ibid., 18:250, emphasis added; cf. Inst. 3.2.12.

²⁶Is Cunningham right in asserting that "Calvin never contradicted himself so plainly and palpably as this [when] in immediate connection with the definition given from him of saving faith, he had made statements, with respect to the condition of the mind that may exist in believers, which cannot well be reconciled with the formal definition" (*Reformers* 120)? Cf. Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982) 25-26; Cornelis Graafland, *De zekerheid van het geloof: Een onderzoek naar de geloofbeschouwing van enige vertegenwoordigers van reformatie en nadere reformatie* (Wageningen: H. Veenman & Zonen, 1961) 21-22n.

stated doctrine to stand. Surely, while we teach that faith ought to be certain and assured, we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt, or any assurance that is not assailed.²⁷

This quotation, and more of like nature (most notably when dealing with sacramental strengthening of faith²⁸), indicate that although Calvin is anxious to keep faith and assurance in close proximity by definition, he also recognizes that in actual experience the Christian gradually grows into a more full faith in God's promises.

2. *Flesh versus spirit.* There is a second, interwoven principle by which Calvin aids in grasping his "ought to"/"is" tension in faith, namely, *flesh versus spirit*.²⁹ Christians experience this spirit-flesh tension so acutely because the presence of the Holy Spirit has instigated and maintains it.³⁰ The many paradoxes that permeate experiential faith (e.g., Romans 7:14-25 in the classical Reformed interpretation) find their resolution in this tension: "So then with the mind [spirit] I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin" (v. 25).³¹

In Calvin, the "sure consolation" of the spirit is side-by-side with "the imperfection" of the flesh, for these are the two principles the believer finds within himself. Since the final victory of the spirit over the flesh is an eschatological hope in Christ, the Christian finds himself in perpetual struggle in this life. The principle of "spirit" fills him "with delight in recognizing the divine goodness"³² even as the principle of flesh activates his natural proneness to unbelief.³³ "Daily struggles of conscience" beset him as long as the "vestiges of the flesh"

²⁷Cf. Inst. 3.2.16-17, emphasis added.

²⁸Inst. 4.14.7.

²⁹Inst. 3.2.17-18.

³⁰Cf. Victor A. Shepherd, *The Nature and Function of Faith in the Theology of John Calvin* (Macon: Mercer University, 1983) 24-28.

³¹Hence Calvin can write, "Nothing prevents believers from being afraid and at the same time possessing the surest consolation. . . . Fear and faith [can] dwell in the same mind. . . . Surely this is so: We *ought* not to separate Christ from ourselves or ourselves from him. Rather we *ought* to hold fast bravely with both hands to that fellowship by which he has bound himself to us" (Inst. 3.2.24, emphasis added).

³²Inst. 3.2.18.

³³Inst. 3.2.20.

remain.³⁴

In short, Calvin teaches that from *the spirit* of faith arise hope, joy, assurance; from *the flesh*, fear, doubt, disillusionment. Though these two principles may operate simultaneously, Calvin maintains that imperfection and doubt are attributable only to the flesh, not to faith. The works of the flesh often attend faith, but do not mix with it. The true believer may lose many spiritual "battles" along the pathway of life, but he shall not lose the ultimate "war" against the flesh. Prayer and the sacraments assist the spirit of faith in gaining the ultimate victory.

3. *Germ of faith versus consciousness of faith.* Despite the tensions between definition and experience, spirit and flesh, Calvin is able to maintain that faith and assurance are not mingled with unbelief so as to result in mere probability rather than certainty.³⁵ Calvin escapes the Roman Catholic conclusion of mere probability by teaching that the smallest germ of faith contains assurance in its very essence, even when the believer is not always able to grasp this assurance because of weakness in being conscious of his faith.³⁶

Consequently, though the Christian is tossed about with doubt and perplexity when faith is not in practical exercise, the seed of faith which the Spirit has planted cannot perish. Precisely because it is the *Spirit's* seed, faith contains and retains the element of assurance. The *sense* or *feeling* of assurance increases and decreases in proportion to the rise and decline of faith's exercises, but *the seed of faith* itself can never change or fluctuate. Thus, assurance is normal, but varies in degree and constancy relative to the believer's consciousness. In responding to weak assurance, according to Calvin, the pastor should not deny the organic tie between faith and assurance, but should urge the pursuit of stronger faith through the use of the means of grace.

4. *Trinitarian framework.* Finally, through a broad sweeping principle, namely, a *Trinitarian framework* for the doctrines of faith and assurance, Calvin intends to spur forward those inclined to doubt. The *election* of the Father must prevail over the works of Satan. The *righteousness* of the Son must prevail over the sinfulness of the believer.

³⁴ *Commentary* (on John 13:9).

³⁵ Cf. Graafland, *Zekerheid van het geloof* 31n.

³⁶ Inst. 3.2.19-21. Also, in 3.2.19 Calvin states that even a little radiance of God's light is sufficient to grant "firm assurance."

The *assuring witness* of the Spirit must prevail over the soul's infirmities. In this manner assured faith must and shall conquer the doubt of unbelief.

For Calvin, a complex set of means establish assurance, not the least of which is *the Father's election and preservation* in Christ. Hence Calvin can write that "predestination duly considered does not shake faith, but rather affords the best confirmation of it,"³⁷ especially when viewed in the context of the believer's daily calling to live by assured faith:

The firmness of our election is joined to our calling [and] is another means of establishing our assurance. For all whom [Christ] receives, the Father is said to have entrusted and committed to Him to keep to eternal life.³⁸

Such undergirding of salvation's certainty by election is possible only in a Christocentric context for Calvin; hence his constant accent on Christ as the mirror of election "wherein we must, and without self-deception may, contemplate our own election."³⁹ Election turns the believer's eyes from the despairing hopelessness of his inability to meet any conditions of salvation to focus on the certainty of Jesus Christ as God's pledge of gratuitous love and mercy.⁴⁰ Through union with Christ "the assurance of salvation becomes real and effective as the assurance of election."⁴¹ Consequently, Christians ought not to think of Christ as "standing afar off, and not dwelling in us."⁴² In this Christological manner Calvin seeks to reduce the "distance" between election as God's decretal, eternal, and hidden act, which is objective from the believer's subjective apprehension of assurance that he is elect. For Calvin, election does not raise the question of assurance; rather, election *answers* it. In Christ the believer

³⁷Inst. 3.24.9.

³⁸Inst. 3.24.6.

³⁹Inst. 3.24.5; cf. John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (reprint; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973) 47, and his sermon on "The Doctrine of Election," in *Sermons from Job* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952) 41 ff.; CO 8:318-321; 9:757.

⁴⁰Cf. William Chalker, "Calvin and Some Seventeenth Century English Calvinists" (PhD dissertation, Duke University, 1961) 66.

⁴¹Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* (London: Butterworth, 1956) 196. Cf. Inst. 3.1.1; Shepherd, *Nature and Function of Faith* 51.

⁴²Inst. 3.2.24.

"sees" his election; in the gospel, he "hears" of his election.

For Calvin, however, there is much that resembles faith that lacks a saving character. For example, he speaks of "unformed faith," "implicit faith," "the preparation of faith," "temporary faith," "an illusion of faith," "a false show of faith," "shadow-types of faith," "transitory faith," faith "under a cloak of hypocrisy," and a "momentary awareness of grace."⁴³ Self-deceit is a real possibility. In fact, the reprobate often feel nearly identical to the elect with regard to faith: "There is a great likeness and affinity between God's elect and those who are given a transitory faith."⁴⁴ Consequently, self-examination is essential: "Let us learn to examine ourselves, and to search whether those interior marks by which God distinguishes his children from strangers belong to us, viz., the living root of piety and faith."⁴⁵

Even in self-examination, however, Calvin maintains a Christological emphasis. People must descend into their conscience to examine whether they are placing their trust in Christ alone, because this is the fruit of experience grounded in the Scriptures. "If you contemplate yourself [apart from Christ, the Word, and the Spirit], that is sure damnation."⁴⁶

Thus, Calvin's line of reasoning proceeds like this: (1) The purpose of election embraces salvation. (2) The elect are not chosen for anything in themselves, but only in Christ. (3) Since the elect are in Christ, the assurance of their election and salvation can never be found in themselves apart from Christ, nor in the Father apart from Christ.

⁴³Inst. 3.2.3, 5, 10-11. For Calvin on temporary faith, see David Foxgrover, "'Temporary Faith' and the Certainty of Salvation," *CTJ* 15 (1980):220-32; A. N. S. Lane, "Calvin's Doctrine of Assurance," *VE* 11 (1979):45-46. On temporary and unformed faith, see Exalto, *De Zekerheid des Geloofs bij Calvijn* 15-20, 27-30.

⁴⁴Inst. 3.2.11.

⁴⁵*Commentary* (on Ezek 13:9). David Foxgrover has shown with scores of quotations that Calvin firmly believed in the necessity of self-examination and in searching the conscience. Calvin has related the need for self-examination to a great variety of topics: knowledge of God and ourselves, judgment, repentance, confession, affliction, the Lord's Supper, providence, duty, the kingdom of God, etc. ("John Calvin's Understanding of Conscience" 312 ff.). Cf. J. P. Pelkonen, "The Teaching of John Calvin on the Nature and Function of the Conscience," *LQ* 21 (1969):24-88.

⁴⁶Inst. 3.2.24. Many scholars underscore the latter emphasis in Calvin, but neglect the former, leaving the impression that he is against all searching self-examination. E.g., see Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism* 26.

(4) Rather, their assurance is to be had in Christ; hence vital communion with Him is the basis of assurance.⁴⁷ But the questions remain: how do the elect achieve this vital communion? How does such communion impart assurance?

Calvin's answer is pneumatological: the *Holy Spirit* applies Christ and His benefits to the hearts and lives of guilty, elect sinners, through which they are assured that Christ belongs to them and they to Him by saving faith.⁴⁸ The Spirit especially confirms within them the reliability of God's promises in Christ.

Calvin advocates a cardinal and pervasive role for the Holy Spirit in the application of redemption. As personal comforter, seal, earnest, testimony, security, and anointing, the Holy Spirit bears witness to the believer's gracious adoption.⁴⁹ *To distinguish the reprobate from the elect*, the Holy Spirit must subjectively seal an objective reliance upon God's promises as the primary ground for assurance. The reprobate may claim God's promises without experiencing the "feeling" (*sensus*) or "consciousness" of those promises.⁵⁰

When distinguishing the elect from the reprobate, Calvin feels compelled to speak more about what the Spirit does *in us* than what Christ does *for us*, for in the subjective aspect the line of demarcation is sharper. He speaks much of inward experience, of feeling, of enlightenment, of perception, even of "violent emotion."⁵¹ Though aware of the dangers of excessive introspection and subjectivity, Calvin also recognizes that the promises of God are sufficient for the

⁴⁷See Inst. 3.24.5.

⁴⁸*Commentary* (on Rom 8:16).

⁴⁹*Commentary* (on 2 Cor 1:21-22). Cf. Inst. 3.2.11, 34, 41; *Commentary* (on John 7:37-39; Acts 2:4; 3:8; 5:32; 13:48; 16:14; 23:11; Rom 8:15-17; 1 Cor 2:10-13; Gal 3:2; 4:6; Eph 1:13-14; 4:30. For Calvin, the "enlightening and sealing work of the Spirit in our heart and understanding also belongs to the essence of faith, hence also to the assurance of faith" (Graafland, "'Waarheid in het Binnenste': Geloofszekerheid bij Calvijn en de Nadere Reformatie," in *Een Vaste Burcht* [ed. by K. Exalto; Kampen: Kok, 1989] 58).

⁵⁰Calvin teaches that the Spirit often does work in the reprobate albeit in an inferior manner. Their minds may be momentarily "illuminated" so that they may seem to have a "beginning of faith"; nevertheless, they "never receive anything but a confused awareness of grace" (Inst. 3.2.11).

⁵¹"Too few scholars have been willing to recognize the intensely experiential nature of Calvin's doctrine of faith" (M. Charles Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance* [Edinburgh: Handsel, 1985] 20).

believer only when the Spirit brings them within the scope and experience of faith.⁵²

By insisting that the Spirit's primary mode of bringing assurance is to direct the believer to embrace the promises of God in Christ, Calvin rejects any confidence being placed in the believer as he is in himself. Nevertheless, Calvin does not deny that a *subordinate means* to bolster assurance is through the Spirit as He works within the believer to bear fruit in good works and various marks of grace. Specifically, the Holy Spirit may assure the believer that he is not a reprobate or temporary believer by revealing to him that he possesses "signs which are sure attestations"⁵³ of faith, such as "divine calling, illumination by Christ's Spirit, communion with Christ, receiving Christ by faith, the embracing of Christ, perseverance of the faith, the avoidance of self-confidence, and fear."⁵⁴ Though never foundational, this secondary support is highly beneficial for the "further establishment" of assurance.⁵⁵

Thus, Calvin does not present a denial of the practical syllogism so much as "a warning against its misuse and misinterpretation."⁵⁶ The real issue at stake in the practical syllogism is not its presence in the thought of Calvin and the Calvinists, but the form it takes within their systems and the message it implies for both doctrine and life. For Calvin the practical syllogism must be in the context of great hallmarks of the Reformation: Scripture alone,⁵⁷ faith alone, Christ alone, and the glory of God alone. Break one of these principles in teaching the practical syllogism, and the whole concept becomes a curse instead of a blessing. At best, works serve as an adjunct to faith in Christ. The practical syllogism may never replace the promises of God as the primary ground of assurance; it must always retain a secondary confirming role. Otherwise, uncertainty will replace certainty. Most major roots of later Calvinistic teaching on faith and assurance thus evidence their presence in Calvin.⁵⁸

ALEXANDER COMRIE (1706-1774)

⁵²Inst. 3.1.1.

⁵³Inst. 3.24.4.

⁵⁴Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists* 28.

⁵⁵*Commentary* (on 2 Pet 1:10); cf. *CO* 55:450.

⁵⁶Muller, *Christ and the Decree* 25.

⁵⁷Inst. 3.2.28-29.

⁵⁸Francois Wendel, *Calvin* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963) 276.

Alexander Comrie⁵⁹ was one of the last bright lights of the so-called Dutch Second Reformation (a poor translation of the term, *Nadere Reformatie*, which most literally means "further Reformation").⁶⁰ As a reaction to cold rationalism which had evolved in some circles of orthodoxy, the Dutch Second Reformation aimed to apply Reformed truth to daily life and experience.⁶¹

A native of Scotland, Comrie was converted under the preaching and catechizing of the Erskine brothers, Ebenezer (1680-1754) and Ralph (1685-1752).⁶² After receiving an excellent education,⁶³ he was ordained in a Reformed Dutch church at

⁵⁹For biographical information on Comrie, see *The ABC of Faith* (trans. and intro. by J. Marcus Banfield; Ossett, W. Yorks: Zoar, 1978) 1-15; C. Graafland, "Alexander Comrie," in *De Nadere Reformatie: Beschrijving van haar voornaamste vertegenwoordigers* (ed. by T. Brienen, et al.; 's-Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1986) 315-48; Abraham Kuyper, "Alexander Comrie: His Life and Work in Holland," *Catholic Presbyterian* 7 (1882):20-29, 192-201, 278-84; Geoffrey Thomas, "Alexander Comrie: Contender for the Faith," *Banner of Truth* 65-66 (Feb/Mar 1969):4-8, 29-35; W. Van Gorsel, *De Ijver Zijn Huis: De Nadere Reformatie en haar belangrijkste vertegenwoordigers* (n.p.: Pieters-Groede, 1981) 108-115; A. Vergunst, "Dr. Alexander Comrie," *De Saambinder* 51 (1973):#25, 2; #27, 2; #29, 1; #31, 3; #32, 2, and "Comrie on Faith," *Insight Into* (June 1983) 3-7.

Two dissertations have been published on Comrie: Anthonia Gerrit Honig, *Alexander Comrie* (Utrecht: H. Honig, 1892), which includes an extensive account of his life, 1-182, and J. H. R. Verboom, *Dr. Alexander Comrie, predikant van Woubrugge* (Utrecht: De Banier, 1964), which includes a history of his congregation as well.

⁶⁰For difficulties with the term, *Nadere Reformatie*, as well as the parallels of this movement to English Puritanism and German Pietism, see Beeke, *Assurance of Faith* 383-87.

⁶¹A variety of emphases developed among Dutch Second Reformation leaders, however, as to how this goal could best be achieved. Some, like Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676) and Comrie, attempted to coalesce scholastic thinking and godly living on the foundation of the sixteenth-century Reformation; others, such as the Teellincks (Eewout, 1571-1629; Willem, 1579-1629) and the à Brakels (Theodorus, 1608-1669; Wilhelmus, 1635-1711), placed prime emphasis on pietistic inclinations.

⁶²The Erskine brothers were among the most prominent "Marrow Men" in the so-called Marrow Controversy which agitated the Church of Scotland in the early eighteenth century on law and gospel issues related to assurance of faith and the offer of grace (see note 84 below).

⁶³Comrie had to relinquish his studies temporarily at twenty years of age, however, due to economic hardship. Subsequently, he traveled to the Low Countries and matriculated at Groningen University as a student of divinity in order to sit under two champions of Reformed theology, Anthonias Driessen and Cornelius van Velsen. In 1733 he transferred from

Woubrugge, where his thirty-eight-year ministry pioneered a spiritual movement that spread throughout a large portion of the Netherlands.⁶⁴ Throughout his Woubrugge years, Comrie wrote extensively on the doctrine of saving faith and its relationship to justification.⁶⁵ It was especially his contributions to the doctrine of saving faith that gained him renown both among his peers and the "pious" throughout the Netherlands.⁶⁶

In mid-eighteenth-century Holland, the crux of theological debate both within and beyond the boundaries of Reformed thought centered around a scrupulous elucidation of Protestantism's initial tenet—justification by faith alone, and most particularly around the cardinal question, does assurance belong to the essence of faith? Comrie's role in this debate was a critical one—not only because he was a prolific writer on it, but especially because he aimed to play a mediating role which identifies him strikingly with Calvin in several respects.

On one side of the debate were Wilhelmus à Brakel, Jacob Groenewegen, and the German, Friedrich Lampe. These divines

Groningen to Leiden in order to study philosophy under W. J. 's-Gravesande, who had the greatest single influence over him of any of his teachers. After a year at Leiden he received his Doctorate in Philosophy on October 5, 1734 with a dissertation entitled *De Moralitatis Fundamento et Natura Virtutis*—an in-depth study of Rene Descartes, largely critical.

⁶⁴The last twenty months of his life, he spent in Gouda as pastoral supply. It was there that he died and was buried in December 1774. Cf. Verboom, *Dr. Alexander Comrie, predikant van Woubrugge* 176-80.

⁶⁵The following major works of Comrie are abbreviated as follows: *HC = Stellige en Praktikale Verklaringe van den Heidelbergschen Catechismus* (Amsterdam: N. Byl, 1753; reprint; Barneveld: G. J. van Horssen, 1976); *LR = Verzameling van Leerredenen* (Leiden: Johannes Hasebroek, 1749); *EZG = Verhandeling van eenige Eigenschappen des Zaligmakenden Geloofs* (Leiden: Johannes Hasebroek, 1744)—his *magnum opus*, unfortunately translated only piecemeal into English; *Brief = Brief over de Rechtvaardigmakinge des Zondaars door de onmiddelyke Toerekening der Borggerechtigheit van Christus* (Amsterdam: N. Byl, 1761). Two major works not abbreviated are *A. B. C. dess Geloofs* (Sneek: F. Holtkamp, 1860), and *Examen van het Ontwerp van Tolerantie* (Amsterdam: N. Byl, 1753-59).

⁶⁶Hence the focus will be on Comrie in this article rather than on other Dutch theologians, such as Wilhelmus à Brakel or Petrus van Mastricht, who may have been more renowned as practical theologians, but who did not probe the doctrines of faith and assurance as deeply as did Comrie.

argued that assurance must be regarded as a fruit of faith. They regarded hungering and thirsting after Christ as belonging to what the Dutch called "refuge-taking" faith, as distinct from "assured" faith. They deemed refuge-taking faith to be of the essence of faith, and assured faith, of the fruit of faith. They were sure that the attachment of assurance to faith was pastorally injurious because it discouraged "beginners in grace" by causing them to think that their lack of assurance meant that they were as yet unregenerate.

On the other side were Theodore van der Groe and Theodore van Thuyne who maintained that assurance is inseparable from faith. They argued that Calvin maintained that one who lacks assurance of personal salvation lacks saving faith. Moreover, they were insistent on pointing out that the view of à Brakel and Lampe left open a potentially dangerous pastoral condition. Convicted sinners who were hungering for Christ might be encouraged to build their salvation on their hunger without ever receiving Christ with an assured faith.

Comrie argued that both positions contained salvageable elements which could be combined in a right understanding of Calvin. Like Calvin, Comrie maintained that assurance certainly belongs to the essence of faith, but also that the faith of Christians did not always *actively* confirm their personal salvation in Christ.⁶⁷ The dilemma of assurance being both of the essence of faith and yet distinguishable from it, Comrie believed he could best address through a number of theological distinctions, two of which are the following:

The "Habit" (habitus) and "Act" (actus) of Faith

The paramount distinction in Comrie's thought, *habitus* and *actus*, served as the foundation and organizing principle of his doctrine of faith. This distinction was by no means novel,⁶⁸ but did receive fresh treatment at his hands. Comrie believed that a prime cause of

⁶⁷Gerrit H. Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980-83) 2:404.

⁶⁸Originally a Thomistic notion, several Reformers with scholastic tendencies found it helpful for distinguishing "faith as an infused habit" and "faith as an act arising out of the infused habit" (Zacharias Ursinus, *Opera theologica* [Heidelbergae: Impensis Iona Rosae, 1612] 3:210; Hieronymus Zanchius, *Clariss. Viri D. Hier Zanchii Omnium operum theologorum* [Genevae: Samuelis Crispini, 1619] 4:241-42). Among the Puritans the *habitus-actus* distinction served largely pastoral ends (cf. Edward Reynolds, *Three Treatises of The Vanity of the Creature. The Sinfulness of Sinne. The Life of Christ* [London: R. B. for Rob. Boftocke and George Badger, 1642] 508).

the disharmony on faith among the Dutch Second Reformation theologians was the widespread failure to make this distinction: (1) faith as an "in-wrought *habitus*" coinciding with regeneration; and (2) faith in its various activities (hence, *actus*). The Holy Spirit enables the true believer to perform the acts of faith only when the habit of faith is brought into exercise. By the habit of faith Comrie intends the principle, capacity, ability, and faculty of faith.⁶⁹ By the acts of faith, he means those activities—saving knowledge, saving assent, and saving confidence—that flow forth from the habit of faith.⁷⁰ Thus, the habit of faith is the new quality infused into the soul by God, whereas the acts of faith are its positive exercises, which make faith a practical reality.

Comrie underscored the habit of faith as the accent of historic Protestantism, defining faith as follows:

By faith we understand the habit or principle, which God the Holy Spirit has poured into the hearts of the elect, together with the new nature as its first and most important element, by which they attain out of Christ and passing into them from Christ, the ability to receive all the impressions which the Divine Word makes upon this faculty, and accordingly, to be itself active.⁷¹

From this definition and its subsequent exposition, Comrie brings several salient emphases to the fore:

(1) By placing emphasis on the Spirit-wrought implantation of faith (*habitus*), he seeks to avoid esteeming a particular act of faith so highly (such as "accepting" or "closing with" Christ) that the act itself appears to obtain some degree of justifying power—if not theologically, at least practically. For whenever faith *as an act* justifies us, Comrie argues, justification is of works and of man, rather than of grace and of God.⁷² For Comrie, this danger alone is sufficient reason to regard the habit of faith as foundational and to reject à Brakel's emphasis on the act of faith.

(2) By accenting the habit of faith, therefore, Comrie purposes to exalt divine grace as the sole cause of faith. It is the sole prerogative of the Holy Spirit to implant this habit of faith in the souls of the elect

⁶⁹Trans. by Henri de Vries in Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1900) 393. (Cf. *HC*, Lord's Day 7.)

⁷⁰*HC* 429.

⁷¹Personal translation from Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:404; taken from *HC* 428-29.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 429-30.

who altogether lack such spiritual ability, being spiritually dead.⁷³ In this implanting of faith, the spiritually dead sinner is utterly passive. With this implanting, he is incorporated, ingrafted into Jesus Christ. From this implanting, he will necessarily become active in exercising faith.⁷⁴

(3) Comrie parallels a primary emphasis on the habit of faith and a secondary emphasis on the acts of faith with his perception of faith's *union with Christ*. Like Calvin, Comrie taught that the ingrafting into Christ is primary (*het primaire*), for it is through this ingrafting that the believer receives all Christ's benefits (*het secundaire*).⁷⁵ Christ as Benefactor takes priority over His benefits; His Person is greater than His gifts. Indeed, it is faith's union with Christ that confirms the benefits as being genuine.

(4) By accentuating the habit of faith, Comrie also retains absolute dependence on the grace of God in the acts of faith. Though the Spirit-wrought grace of faith (*habitus*) is perfect and abides in the soul in which it is implanted, the activity of faith (*actus*) is not always equally strong, for it has no power to act in and of itself, but must be acted upon by the same Spirit who implants the *habitus*.⁷⁶

Like Calvin, Comrie advocates that all true spiritual exercises flow from a Trinitarian and scriptural framework. Acts of faith flow from the Father's good pleasure through Christ, are activated by the Spirit of Christ, and are inseparable from the Word of God.⁷⁷ Contrary to P. J. Kromigst's objection that Comrie separates the Spirit too much from the Word, at every instance he seems eager to maintain a most intimate Word-Spirit connection.⁷⁸ Comrie writes,

The infused propensity of faith can never be exercised (*ad actum*) except that by the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit in and by means of

⁷³Ibid., 381.

⁷⁴Ibid., 383.

⁷⁵Ibid., 377.

⁷⁶Through this distinction, therefore, Comrie could uphold the following tension: "There is no doubt in faith, as there is no darkness in the light of the sun; but the believer is subject to many doubts, since his faith is not always predominant" (Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:404).

⁷⁷HC 433-34.

⁷⁸Johannes DeBoer rejects Kromigst's thesis (*De Verzegeling met de Heilige Geest volgens de opvatting van de Nadere Reformatie* [Rotterdam: Bronder, 1968] 194-99), and conclusively states: "[In Comrie] the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Word. He speaks in, with, and by the Word." Cf. P. J. Kromigst, "Het geloof," *Troffel en Zwaard* 1 (1903):104.

the promise it first receives the gift of divine grace passively, and then becomes active subsequent to and by means of this.⁷⁹

But the means whereby the Spirit accomplishes both this *habitus* and *actus* of faith is the Word of God and those allied channels appointed by God that are Word-centered.⁸⁰

Thus, Comrie never brings the Spirit to the foreground at the expense of the Word.⁸¹ Rather, he maintains the inseparability of the decree of the Father, the union with the Son in His righteousness, the application of the Spirit, and the means of the Word.⁸² In short, if the habit of faith is implanted by the Spirit, the acts of faith must come to fruition through the Word, though such activities may frequently come forth as a slow and gradual process.⁸³

(5) Finally, by distinguishing between the faculty and the act of faith, Comrie was able to preserve his Calvinism from the seeds of neonomianism.⁸⁴ Comrie was well aware of the fact that Calvinism

⁷⁹LR 2:72.

⁸⁰"Faith gradually attains to its perfection from being less to being more, from being weaker to being stronger. And thus all the means of grace the Word, prayer, the preaching of the Word, the sacraments, and the gatherings of the saints function as means, by the cooperation (*medewerkinge*) of the Holy Spirit, to build us up in the faith" (HC 429-30).

⁸¹DeBoer, *De Verzegeling met de Heilige Geest* 199.

⁸²HC 438.

⁸³The pastoral overtones implicit here are clearly evident in Comrie's correspondence with Rev. J. Verster in the last months of the Woubrugge pastor's life. G. H. Leurdijk shows how Comrie used his habitus-actus distinction to comfort his brother who had been in spiritual darkness for eleven years ("Alexander Comrie: 'Een vaderlijke vriend,'" *De Saambinder* 61 [1983]:3-4 [3 Feb], 2-3 [10 Feb]).

⁸⁴Between 1717-1723 the Church of Scotland was disturbed by a controversy between evangelicals, known as "Marrow Men" (the most renowned being Thomas Boston, and Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine) and the so-called Moderates or Neonomians, over the relationship between law and gospel. When Boston and the Erskines had reprinted *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (probably authored by an Edward Fisher), which maintained an immediate free offer of salvation by looking to Christ in faith, the opposition (i.e., the majority of the church leaders led by Principal James Haddow) rejected *The Marrow* as dangerous teaching. They leaned toward teaching that the gospel is a "new law" (*neonomos*), which demands that the conditions of faith and repentance must be met before the gospel can be freely offered.

Being an avowed disciple of the Marrow Men, Comrie was particularly sensitive to

was often prone to relapse into neonomianism, jeopardizing the concept of justification by faith alone.

The Direct (directus) and Reflex (reflectus) Acts of Faith

When addressing the question of how the elect are gradually brought to full assurance of faith, Comrie makes considerable use of the direct and reflex acts of faith (*directe en reflexive geloofsdaden*), and appeals to the Westminster Confession of Faith, chap. 18.2 for support.⁸⁵ From this definition of assurance, Comrie affirms assurance founded upon "the divine truth of the promises" as illustrative of the *direct* act of faith, while assurance founded upon the "inward evidences of graces" and the "testimony of the Spirit" results from *reflexive* acts of faith.⁸⁶

The direct act of faith, according to Comrie, involved an immediate apprehension of the entire revelation of God as sworn truth, though it more specifically addressed itself to the gospel promises, particularly those that encouraged sinners with the promise they would not be cast out if they came to Christ. Comrie felt no difficulty in advocating "a `direct' assurance of faith, an assurance which solely derives its liberty without anything being

neonomian tendencies. When some of his contemporaries stressed the acts of faith while neglecting the *habitus*, and thus seemed to imply that man *first* must repent and believe and that God rewards these acts with acquittal, Comrie viewed this as a dangerous kind of nomism.

By placing initiatory emphasis on *habitus* as the Spirit's infusion, and his accompanying Trinitarian framework for faith's definition, Comrie aimed to underscore the Westminster Confession of Faith's emphases as well as to preserve the Reformed conception of justification from collapsing into such neonomian tendencies for generations to come. For both the Westminster standards and Comrie, *all* acts of faith flow out of the Spirit's implantation; hence, the acts themselves, contrary to Kendall, cannot be voluntaristic. Indeed, not even such confessional terms as "assent" should be so interpreted. Cf. "Calvin and Westminster," *Bulwark* 2 (May-June, 1980):15-16.

⁸⁵In this direct-reflexive distinction Comrie was following the footsteps of such well-known theologians as William Ames (*Marrow of Theology* [trans. from the 3rd Latin ed., ed. by John E. Eusden; Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1968] 27:16); Johannes Maccovius (*Loci communes theologici*, editio postrema, Opera & Studio Nicolai Arnoldi [Amstelodami: apud Ludovicum & Danielem Elzevirios, 1658] 765); Petrus van Mastricht (*Beschouwende en praktikale Godgeleerdheit* [Rotterdam: Van Pelt, 1749] I, 1, 25); Brakel (*Redelijke Godsdienst* 34:27); and Turretin ("The Theological Institutes," trans. by George M. Giger [ms., Princeton Seminary, 1954] 437-38). Comrie stressed more strongly than these writers, however, the Spirit's central role in the reflexive act.

⁸⁶LR on Heb 10:22; EZG 345-46.

intermediate from the gospel promise while prayerfully looking unto Jesus."⁸⁷ The certainty resulting from this direct believing in God's promises influences an entire array of soul activities, by which the needy hunger and thirst after the righteousness of Christ.⁸⁸ The Holy Spirit grants such direct acts by an increasing realization of need until the elect are brought to embrace Christ in His fullness.⁸⁹ When this occurs, the sealing work of the Spirit experientially applies the promises of God to the believer's heart as his own through the sealing work of the Spirit.⁹⁰

Thus, the direct act of faith is occupied with the object presented to it, the promises of the gospel in Christ, and the reflexive act, being of a different nature, is concerned with looking back on the direct act "which assures the soul of personally being a partaker of Christ."⁹¹ This reflexive act of faith is the gift of the Holy Spirit also, and must be ratified by His inward testimony.⁹²

Comrie's distinctions relative to assurance have as the primary goal the leading of true believers to make their calling and election sure by being directed more outside of self to the unconditional grace of God in Jesus Christ. His secondary goals include mediating contemporary Reformed debate, teaching the believer how the Holy Spirit works savingly in his life, and encouraging the struggling believer to press forward for greater degrees of assurance. Through these distinctions and goals, Comrie protects himself from two errors: (1) the error of à Brakel, who states that assurance does not belong to the essence of faith, but is only a fruit of faith,⁹³ and (2) the error of van

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ *EZG* 214 where Comrie lists seven activities.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 247-48.

⁹⁰ "In the promise of the gospel, God the Holy Spirit attests to the divine childhood of the soul, assuring and convincing her of the same. He does so by His own divine and immediate voice, announcing to, speaking within, and impressing upon the soul that she is a child of God by His immediate operation, upon the promise of the gospel. He simultaneously gives her so much liberty and assurance in her heart by faith, that she with full trust and being assured within her soul can and may call God my Father" (*LR* 78-79).

⁹¹ Ibid., 249.

⁹² *EZG* 251; *LR* 78 ff. Cf. DeBoer, *De Verzegeling* 185.

⁹³ The dangers Comrie saw in the Brakelian view were not primarily theological, but pastoral: (1) this doctrine would be prone to influence seeking souls to rest in their seeking, i. e., short of Christ Himself; and (2) it would remove the weight of Peter's injunction to the believer to make his calling and election sure (2 Pet 1:10). Cf. Brakel, *Redelijke Godsdienst*

Thuyne who teaches that an assured confidence of faith is essential to be a partaker of saving faith.⁹⁴ Mediating between these schools of thought, Comrie, like Calvin, maintains that assurance certainly belongs to the essence of faith, but that this assurance may not always be grasped by Christians. In sum, Comrie's position is basically this: the seed of assurance is already present in refuge-taking faith, albeit largely dormant, but the goal of the believer must be to grow in the consciousness of what he already possesses in principle, in order to attain in due season to full assurance in Christ. At every point—whether as seed, or in the growth of assurance, or as full assurance—all assurance is the sovereign gift of the Spirit.

CONCLUSIONS

After a consideration in some detail of the views of John Calvin and Alexander Comrie (as a representative Calvinist) on faith and assurance, it is now possible to draw several conclusions:

First, radical discontinuity between Calvin and the Calvinists with regard to the relationship between faith and assurance, must be rejected. For, despite varying emphases, Calvin and the Calvinists merge at this juncture: *Assurance may be possessed without being known*. That is, the notion that assurance belongs in essence to every believer though he may not always feel the sense of it, is a bridge which unites the two varying emphases qualitatively.⁹⁵ Consequently, when Calvin defines faith in terms that embrace assurance, he is not directly contradicting the Westminster Confession's distinction between faith and assurance, for Calvin and the Confession do not have the same concern in view! Calvin is specifically defining what faith is in its assuring character; the Confession's chapter 18 is specifically describing what assurance is as a self-conscious, experimental phenomenon.⁹⁶

Secondly, the concepts of faith which Calvin and most

984-1002.

⁹⁴VanderGroe in particular was severely attacked by Groenewegen for supporting van Thuyne on this score, and subsequently came to adopt Comrie's mediating position as the only tenable one (cf. *ibid.*, 882 ff.).

⁹⁵Cf. Peter Lewis cited in Errol Hulse, *The Believer's Experience* 128-29. Cf. *Commentary* (on John 20:3).

⁹⁶Cf. Sinclair Ferguson, "The Westminster Conference, 1976," *Banner of Truth* 168 (1977):20.

Calvinists (including Comrie) present, embrace both assurance in the essence of faith and full assurance of faith, without demanding that the believer be able to feel assurance consciously at all times. It is this combination within a single definition that many Calvin scholars, including William Cunningham, have overlooked. Cunningham posits that the only way to remove contradiction from Calvin is to proceed "upon the assumption that the definition was intended not so much to state what was essential to true faith and always found in it, as to describe what true faith is, or includes, in its most perfect condition and its highest exercise."⁹⁷ But for Calvin and most Calvinists assurance is both essential for faith and is contained in all its exercises, regardless of the believer's consciousness of his assurance.

Thirdly, Calvin does differ from Comrie and some Calvinists (including Comrie) by rejecting a two-tier approach to the consciousness of assurance which was frequently distinguished in Puritanism as "faith in exercise" versus "full assurance of faith," and even more commonly denominated by the Dutch Second Reformation divines as "refuge-taking faith" (*toevluchtnemend geloof*) and "assured faith" (*verzekerd geloof*). On this aspect of assurance as realized through a conscious step-up in the life of faith, Calvin differed from some of his followers, although he sympathized with the notion of steps in the knowledge of faith.⁹⁸

Fourthly, though Cunningham may be right in asserting that Calvin had not worked out all the details of the faith/assurance relationship, he, Robert Dabney, and Charles Hodge⁹⁹ certainly go too far in depicting his doctrine as contradictory to or ignorant of the issues that would surface in the post-Reformation era. Though the spiritual milieu of the post-Reformation would vary considerably from the sixteenth-century Reformation, Calvin's stress on assurance throughout his *Institutes*, commentaries, and sermons proves that the issue of personal assurance was very much alive in his generation as well. His ongoing emphasis on "this is how to come to assurance," "this is the kind of assurance we have," and "this is where our

⁹⁷ *Reformers* 120.

⁹⁸ *Zekerheid van het geloof* 40-41.

⁹⁹ Cunningham, *Reformers* 120. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* 702: "The proof is so obvious that Calvin is obliged to modify the assertions of which we have seen specimens, to include these cases [i.e., of those who frequently lack assurance], until he has virtually retracted his doctrine"! Cf. his *Discussions* 1:216; Charles Hodge on 2 Cor 13:5, *Exposition of 1 and 2 Corinthians* (reprint; Wilmington, Del.: Sovereign Grace, 1972) 367.

assurance rests,"¹⁰⁰ etc., shows that he was speaking to a contemporary situation in which numerous parishioners possessed a scant degree of assurance. Calvin addressed individuals newly delivered from the bondage of Rome which had taught that it was heretical for the typical layman to claim assurance. By teaching that assurance ought to be normative, though unbelief "will not die easily," Calvin's goal was to establish and encourage assurance in the church on solid biblical grounds.

Such was also the goal of Comrie and the vast majority of the post-Reformation Calvinists both in English Puritanism and the Dutch Second Reformation. The terminology developed, the exposition of entire treatises on assurance, the pastoral overtones of compassion for the weak in faith, the pressing admonitions and invitations to grow in faith, the dissecting of temporary faith and other false forms of faith—all of this and much more underscores that these parallel movements relished vital communion with God in Christ. By raising the secondary grounds of assurance to a "mainline" from the "sideline" they occupied in Calvin's thought, the post-Reformers were for fresh pastoral reasons, as Cornelis Graafland asserts, enlarging the "pores" Calvin had opened already in allowing "signs which are sure attestations" of faith.¹⁰¹ These theologians microscopically examined personal, spiritual experience precisely because they were eager to trace the hand of God Triune working in their lives in order to return all glory to the electing Father, redeeming Son, and applying Spirit. Without qualitatively departing from Calvin's teachings on faith and assurance, Calvinistic pastors labored to lead their flocks into a full enjoyment and assurance of the believer's saving union with Jesus

¹⁰⁰Inst. 3.2.22.

¹⁰¹Graafland faults the Second Reformation divines for allowing the subjective line of assurance to "overrule" the objective, but recognizes that this accentuation of subjective assurance was an outgrowth of combatting various forms of pseudo-faith. He asserts that when subjective assurance is prominent as in the Second Reformation, assurance itself becomes problematical and is prone to be viewed as a scarce entity belonging to the quintessence rather than the essence of faith. The post-Reformers, Graafland concludes, "end where Calvin begins" ("Waarheid in het Binnenste," 69 ff.).

Though Graafland's presentation is largely accurate, he overstates his conclusions, since the post-Reformers still retained the priority of the promises of God. He neglects to point out that the post-Reformers made more use of the secondary grounds of assurance than Calvin in order to validate that the promises of God were intended particularly for the believer. Though Graafland asserts that the post-Reformers remain relatively close to Calvin notwithstanding their varying emphases, they are still closer than he is willing to admit.

Christ.

In such an epoch of church history, Calvin and the Calvinists have set before the contemporary church the model needed today: right and rich doctrinal thinking coupled with and leading to sanctified and vibrant living. Today the church is undergoing a crisis of confidence and authority, and therefore of assurance. A renewal of assurance, individual and collective assurance, is a great desideratum. If such assurance were more widely experienced, the church's vitality would be renewed and she would live in all spheres of life "in the strength of the Lord God" (Ps 71:16) for the cause of Christ and the gospel.