

**The Reformation vs. the Puritans on Faith and Assurance,**  
with Special Reference to John Calvin, John Owen, the Marrow Brethren, and Jonathan  
Edwards.<sup>1</sup>

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**Introduction.**

The purpose of this essay is to show that there are profound differences between the doctrine of faith and assurance in the Reformation era and the doctrines of faith and assurance which held sway in later Puritan thinking. While I will make some reference to Luther, Lutheranism, and various Reformed confessions and catechisms, I mainly compare John Calvin, John Owen, the Marrow Brethren, and Jonathan Edwards. Calvin makes assurance of the essence of faith; the early Owen does also, but the later Owen argues against the early Reformed view; the Marrow Brethren recover and defend Calvin's theology from the sorts of arguments that the later Owen brings against it; Edwards seems completely unaware of the early Reformed view. When Edwards discusses the view that assurance is of the essence of faith, he not only argues against it in

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a very rough and really incomplete draft (9/9/09). The footnotes and citation are in dreadful disarray. For those looking to skim, read the introduction, my evaluation of Owen, and the section on the Marrow Brethren—I think these are the most important and original parts. The rest is chiefly of historical interest. I warmly welcome all critique and feedback as this is a work in progress: nisasser@yahoo.com.

similar fashion to the later Owen, but he also argues that it is the doctrine of hypocritical pretenders to Christian faith. I do not pretend to give a defense of which view is biblical and therefore correct; this essay will include no exegesis. However, I will argue that Owen's arguments against the early Reformed doctrine fail. The counterarguments of the Marrow Brethren are successful. Furthermore, my section on Calvin is meant to show that his doctrine of assurance ramifies his entire view of the Christian life. To reject it, as the Puritans did, entails a rejection of vast swaths of Calvin's work.

All parties agree that the biblical gospel contains a command for all people everywhere to believe in Christ. This command—the free offer of the gospel—is also the warrant or grounds of faith; it permits and obliges all people, saved or unsaved, elect or reprobate, to trust in Christ. The Reformation tradition differs from the majority Puritan tradition however as to exactly what it is that the gospel warrants all people to believe. What proposition constitutes the object of justifying faith? What is the essence of justifying faith? The Reformation consensus is that justifying faith involves a belief in one's own salvation through Jesus Christ. In other words, the biblical gospel warrants all people to believe that “Christ and his benefits are mine.”

Puritans such as (the later) John Owen raised two objections to this definition of faith. First, experience makes plain that some true Christians at times do not believe that they are Christians; they do not believe that Christ and his benefits are really theirs. If such people still possess saving faith, yet do not believe in their own salvation through Christ, then personal assurance must not be essential to saving faith. Secondly, the later Owen objects that people cannot be commanded to believe in something (their own possession of Christ and his benefits) before it is even true. Lost sinners do not yet possess Christ and so they cannot be commanded to believe that they do. However, justifying faith is something which all people are commanded to exercise. Therefore, the faith which the gospel universally commands and warrants must not include a belief in one's own salvation through Christ.

The Puritan counterarguments to Calvin's position miss the point on both counts. As to the Christian experience of doubt, Calvin is well aware of it. He argues that while the Christian's subjective confidence may wax very low (so low as to be imperceptible even to themselves), the content and object of their faith remains constant: the doubting Christian still believes, though weakly, that “I am certainly saved through Jesus Christ.” Owen thinks that the doubting Christian believes merely that “I am possibly or probably saved through Christ.” Owen confuses the subjective strength of faith with the content of faith and the objective certainty and probability of one's possession of Christ. Owen uses the term “assurance” equivocally to refer both to faith's *strength* and to its *content*. This equivocation, I will argue, actually makes it hard for Owen can maintain that full assurance is even possible.

As to the second Puritan argument against Calvin's view, the Marrow Brethren point out that the command to believe in one's own possession of Christ is not based on the fact that the recipients of the command already do possess him. On the Reformation view, Scripture does not command all men to believe that they are *already* saved through Christ, but to believe that they are *now* saved through Christ. The proposition becomes true at the same moment as the sinner believes it. So there is no obvious contradiction involved.

If, as the Puritans maintain, the biblical gospel does not universally warrant the exercise of a belief in one's own salvation through Christ, how is assurance to be obtained? The Puritan answer is, through a reflex act of faith, or the so-called practical syllogism. The sinner first savingly believes in Christ in a general way: he delights and believes in the way of salvation through Jesus Christ, and believes it is possible for him to be saved in this way. At this point the sinner is justified but does not yet know it. Second, the believer observes in himself the fruits of regeneration: faith, love to God, or any other distinctively Christian graces and affections. Third, he infers that since he possesses graces and affections which are unique to true believers, he must be a true believer, and therefore is actually saved through Christ. The tricky part is the self-identification of Christian graces in the second step. Given the self-deceptive character of the fallen human heart, the elusive and capricious character of internal affections, and the near impossibility of distinguishing true believers from pretenders, many have found this a difficult way in which to get and keep assurance.

The Reformation view was that it was no way to get assurance at all. The cultivation of any Christian graces must flow from an assurance previously obtained on the basis of the biblical warrant alone, not introspection. Observation of the Spirit's work in one's life is indeed salutary and strengthens assurance, but cannot provide the foundation for it.

These two views of faith and assurance are very different, and the differences are of great importance for the Christian life. It makes a great difference for the Christian life whether we are pursuing sanctification in order to get and retain assurance, or because we have it already. It makes a great deal of difference whether assurance is based on Scripture promises alone, or ultimately on self-examination. It makes a great deal of difference for evangelism whether we offer damned sinners the assurance of eternal life, or the possibility of acquiring assurance of eternal life.

I have chosen to focus on the figures I have for two reasons. First, they are historically important and influential figures in their own right, and so make excellent case studies. Second, they represent nicely a historical trajectory from the consensus of the sixteenth century, to the shift in the middle of the seventeenth century, to the condemnation of the Reformation view in the eighteenth century. The Marrow Brethren, after all, were condemned for their doctrines by the Church of Scotland. Jonathan Edwards (unwittingly) pronounces the old Reformation view the doctrine of reprobates.

For whatever reason, the historical evolution of Reformed thinking on assurance is not well-known or understood among laypeople. I seriously doubt that anything I will say has not appeared already in scholarly literature, many times over. Nevertheless, I know of no popular writings that make these matters clear. On the contrary, the differences between the Reformation view and the Puritan view are very often blurred over, ignored, or minimized. They are assimilated to one another in order to maintain the appearance of historical uniformity in the Reformed tradition. This is understandable in one sense. It is painful to think that any of our Reformed heroes may have greatly erred in a fundamental article of practical Christian theology. And yet, no matter which view you think is right, it is clear that the other is wrong in some very important respects.

### **The Reformation doctrine before Calvin.**

Luther urges that true faith whereby one applies the gospel to oneself believes with Paul that "the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me." He comments on the

words “for me” in Galatians 2:20:

Who is this “me”? It is I, an accursed and damned sinner, who was so beloved by the Son of God that He gave Himself for me... Now these words, “who loved me,” are filled with faith. Anyone who can speak this brief pronoun “me” in faith and apply it to himself as Paul did, will, like Paul, be the best of debaters against the Law... I am revived by this “giving” of the Son of God into death, and I apply it to myself. This applying is the true power of faith... Therefore read these words “me” and “for me” with great emphasis, and accustom yourself to accepting this “me” with a sure faith and applying it to yourself. Do not doubt that you belong to the number of those who speak this “me.”<sup>2</sup>

The Augsburg Confession (1530) unambiguously affirms that justifying faith is

It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, *when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us* [italics mine].<sup>3</sup>

We begin by teaching that our works cannot reconcile us with God or obtain grace for us, for this happens only through faith, that is, *when we believe that our sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake*, who alone is the mediator who reconciles the Father [italics mine].<sup>4</sup>

Historical faith is distinguished from saving faith just by the addition of the first person personal pronoun. Historical faith is the belief that God forgives sinners for Christ’s sake, while saving faith is the belief that God forgives *me* for Christ’s sake.

Instruction is also given among us to show that the faith here spoken of is not that possessed by the devil and the ungodly, who also believe the history of Christ’s suffering and his resurrection from the dead, but we mean such true faith as believes that we receive grace and forgiveness of sin through Christ... Augustine also reminds us that we should understand the word “faith” in the Scriptures to mean confidence in God, assurance that God is gracious to us, and not merely such a knowledge of historical events as the devil also possesses.<sup>5</sup>

Luther’s Smaller Catechism is intended to be taught to everyone in the household. The catechizer is supposed to read the second article of the Apostles’ Creed, concerning redemption, and then ask the catechumen “What does this mean?” The catechumen answers:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, delivered me and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with silver and gold but with his holy and

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<sup>2</sup> *Lectures on Galatians, 1535 in Luther’s Works*, vol. 26, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), pp. 176, 177, 179.

<sup>3</sup> Augsburg Confession, Article IV, “Justification” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Article XX, “Faith and Good Works,” p. 42.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44, 45.

precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death, in order that I may be his, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as he is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to eternity. This is most certainly true.<sup>6</sup>

The Tetrapolitan Confession of 1530 was the work of Martin Bucer and his associates Wolfgang Capito and Caspar Heidio.<sup>7</sup> Regeneration is attributed to the Spirit of adoption, and the first act of justifying faith which immediately follows is a calling upon God as Father:

...since “the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God,” as St. Paul says (I Cor. 2:14), he causes a beam of his light to arise at the same time in the darkness of our heart, so that now we may believe his Gospel preached, being persuaded of the truth thereof by his Spirit from above, and then, relying upon the testimony of this Spirit, may call upon him with filial confidence and say, “Abba, Father,” obtaining thereby sure salvation, according to the saying: “Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” (Tetrapolitan Confession, Chapter III, “Of Justification and Faith,” p. 58)

The Confession goes on to say that we only love God and do good works when, by faith in the gospel, we believe that we are the beloved and adopted children of God. Justifying faith works through love just because justifying faith believes that it personally possesses Christ and all his benefits:

“we are sure that no man can be justified or saved except he supremely love and most earnestly imitate God...But no one can love God above all things, and worthily imitate him, but he who indeed knows him and expects all good things from him. Therefore, we cannot be otherwise justified—i.e., become righteous as well as saved (for righteousness is even our salvation)—than by being endued chiefly with faith, whereby, believing the Gospel, and therefore being persuaded that God has adopted us as his children, and that he will ever bestow his paternal kindness upon us, we wholly depend upon his pleasure.” (ibid., Chapter IV, Of Good Works, Proceeding Out of Faith Through Love, p.58-9).

Guillaume Farel<sup>8</sup> writes in the Lausanne Articles of 1536 that “Holy Scripture names the Church of God all who believe that they are received by the blood of Jesus Christ alone...”<sup>9</sup>

### **Calvin on Faith and Assurance.**

#### **Introduction.**

While Word—or, Christ clothed in the promises—is the exclusive objective ground and warrant of faith, the Spirit is the cause of our subjective act of faith. Faith embraces Jesus Christ and all of the benefits of his atoning death and resurrection. Faith appropriates and applies to itself forgiveness, reconciliation, Christ’s righteousness, adoption, and sanctification. The believer applies and appropriates these benefits by believing that they belong to him as free gifts, offered in the gospel. To believe the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 345.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur C. Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 52.

<sup>8</sup> Cochrane 112.

<sup>9</sup> Article III: Cochrane 115.

biblical gospel is to believe that Christ and his benefits are ours—that is, that we ourselves are justified, adopted, and forgiven for Christ’s sake. Christ and his benefits are communicated to us by mystical union with the Holy Spirit.

Crucially for Calvin’s doctrine of faith, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of adoption. The Spirit causes faith in the hearts of believers *just by* bearing witness to their hearts that they are God’s adopted children who have free access to him through Jesus Christ. The witness of the Spirit is not an extra-biblical message, superadded to the gospel message contained in Scripture: this is what Calvin means by insisting that the Spirit and the Word can never be separated. Rather, the Spirit causes us to believe in the biblical message, and this message offers us reconciliation, justification, and adoption as a free gift in Jesus Christ. All those and only those with the witness of the Spirit—the Spirit of adoption as sons—are able to sincerely and confidently call upon God as their very Father and approach him with bold access in prayer. This calling upon God as Father is the first and essential exercise of genuine faith. Calling upon God as Father entails that we are the beneficiaries of the reconciling work of Christ and that we are therefore his adopted children. Without this belief, no one can ever call upon God at all, or offer any real prayer, or repent of their sins.

**Saving faith: the witness of the Spirit of adoption causes believers to call on God as their Father through Jesus Christ.**

Book 3, Chapter Two of the *Institutes* is a nothing but an extended defense and development of the doctrine that saving faith is nothing but personal assurance. His official definition of faith comes at the end of a section in which he explains that no man can bring himself to sincerely call upon God unless he believes that God is reconciled to him for Christ’s sake (3.2.7). Calvin concludes:

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>10</sup>

Already it is clear from the passages just quoted that for Calvin, justifying faith means *calling upon God as our reconciled Father*. The basis or warrant of this faith is the gospel, and its cause is the Holy Spirit.

The testimony of the Spirit assures the believer of his personal interest in the atoning sacrifice of Christ:

“There is good reason for the repeated mention of the ‘testimony of the Spirit,’ a testimony we feel engraved like a seal upon our hearts, with the result that it seals the cleansing and sacrifice of Christ” (3.1.1; 538).

Calvin frequently appeals to Romans 5:5 to show why no one can believe God’s fatherly love without the Spirit:

“Likewise, he asks ‘the grace of ... Christ and the love of God’ for believers, at the same time coupling it with ‘participation in the...Spirit’ [II Cor. 13:14], *without which no one can taste either the fatherly favor of God or the beneficence of Christ*; just as he also says in another passage, ‘The love of God has been

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<sup>10</sup> 3.2.7, p. 551. The context leaves no doubt that the divine benevolence Calvin speaks of is God’s *saving* grace, not merely his common grace and love towards mankind.

poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us' [Rom. 5:5, cf. Vg.]” (3.1.2; 539, emphasis mine).

Similarly, Calvin appeals to Rom. 8:15 and Gal. 4:6 to show that the witness of the Spirit of adoption is the necessary and sufficient condition of true prayer, in which we call upon God as our very own Father:

“First, he is called the ‘spirit of adoption’ because he is the witness to us of the free benevolence of God with which God the Father has embraced us in his beloved only-begotten Son to become a Father to us; and he encourages us to have trust in prayer. In fact, he supplies the very words so that we may fearlessly cry, ‘Abba, Father!’ [Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6]” (3.1.3; 540).

We obtain salvation “when we know that God is our merciful Father, because of reconciliation effected through Christ [II Cor. 5:18-19], and that Christ has been given to us as righteousness, sanctification, and life. By this knowledge...do we obtain entry into the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>11</sup>

Howsoever the unregenerate may possess a pseudo-faith and even taste some of the goodness of God, the difference between their experience and that of the regenerate is that they are “without the Spirit of adoption” (3.2.11; 555). The faith of the unregenerate is “transitory” (555). The unregenerate have only “a confused awareness of grace, so that they grasp a shadow rather than the firm body of it”; they believe the gospel “confusedly and not distinctly”; they are illumined “with a momentary awareness of his grace, which afterward vanishes” (555-6). The faith of the regenerate is distinct from the pseudo-faith of the unregenerate because it is borne out of the witness of the Spirit of adoption. Only the saints sincerely, confidently, and permanently call on God as their Father.

“...only in the elect does that confidence flourish which Paul extols, that they loudly proclaim Abba, Father [Gal. 4:6; cf. Rom. 8:15]. Therefore, as God regenerates only the elect with incorruptible seed forever [I Peter 1:23] so that the seed of life sown in their hearts may never perish, thus he firmly seals the gift of his adoption in them that it may be steady and sure...For the Spirit, strictly speaking, seals forgiveness of sins in the elect alone, so that they apply it by special faith to their own use” (3.2.11; 555).

Without the Spirit, people are not able to truly believe in God’s grace. It is the Spirit’s pledge of God’s love, forgiveness, and adoption that causes the difference between true and feigned love for God:

“But as a persuasion of God’s fatherly love is not deeply rooted in the reprobate, so do they not perfectly reciprocate his love as sons, but behave like hirelings. ...And surely that saying of Paul’s is confined to the elect: “The love of God has been shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us” [Rom. 5:5, cf. Vg], that is, the love that generates the above-mentioned confidence that we can call upon him [cf. Gal 4:6]” (3.2.12; 557).

Calvin concludes 3.2.13 by again linking true faith with calling on God as Father:

“But now we ask, of what sort is that faith which distinguishes the children of God from the unbelievers, by which we call upon God as Father, by which we cross over from death into life, and by which Christ, eternal salvation, and life dwells in us? I believe that I have briefly and clearly explained the force and nature of that faith” (559).

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<sup>11</sup> 3.2.2, p. 345.

**The Spirit of adoption: Rom. 5:5, 8:15-16, Gal. 4:6.**

In his commentary on Romans 5:5 Calvin writes that “this knowledge of divine love towards us is instilled into our hearts to the Spirit of God; for the good things which God has prepared for his servants are hid from the ears and the eyes and the minds of men, and the Spirit alone is he who can reveal them. And the word *diffused*, is very emphatical; for it means that the revelation of divine love towards us is so abounding that it fills our hearts; and being thus spread through every part of them, it not only mitigates sorrow in adversities, but also, like a sweet seasoning, it renders tribulations to be loved by us.”

Calvin goes on to argue against the interpretation given by Augustine, which stresses the foundational role which the good works of the regenerate play in providing evidence for their salvation. Augustine mistakenly interprets Paul as meaning “that we courageously bear adversities, and are thus confirmed in our hope, because we, having been regenerated by the Spirit, do love God. It is indeed a pious sentiment, but not what Paul means: for love is not to be taken here in an active but a passive sense. *And certain it is, that no other thing is taught by Paul than that the true fountain of all love is, when the faithful are convinced that they are loved by God, and that they are not slightly touched with this conviction, but have their souls thoroughly imbued with it*” (italics mine). The believer’s love to God cannot be the foundation of their assurance of his love to them. On the contrary, assurance of God’s love to the believer is the fountain the believer’s love back to God.

In his commentary on Romans 8:15 Calvin writes “Hence, as there is the spirit of bondage under the law, which oppresses the conscience with fear; so under the gospel there is the spirit of adoption, which exhilarates our souls by bearing a testimony as to our salvation.” In Calvin’s commentary on Rom. 8:16 he powerfully argues that until the Spirit of adoption assures us that we are God’s beloved children, we cannot pray; and without prayer, there is no evidence of our faith at all. Hence, the reflex act of faith is ruled out altogether as a possible basis of initial assurance:

“But Paul means, that the Spirit of God gives us such a testimony, that when he is our guide and teacher, our spirit is made assured of the adoption of God: for our mind of its own self, without the preceding testimony of the Spirit, could not convey to us this assurance. There is also here an explanation of the former verse; for when the Spirit testifies to us, that we are the children of God, he at the same time pours into our hearts such confidence, that we venture to call God our Father. And doubtless, since the confidence of the heart alone opens our mouth, except the Spirit testifies to our heart respecting the paternal love of God, our tongues would be dumb, so that they could utter no prayers. For we must ever hold fast this principle, — that we do not rightly pray to God, unless we are surely persuaded in our hearts, that he is our Father, when we so call him with our lips. To this there is a corresponding part, — that our faith has no true evidence, except we call upon God. It is not then without reason that Paul, bringing us to this test, shows that it then only appears how truly any one believes, when they who have embraced the promise of grace, exercise themselves in prayers.”

Just as striking is that Calvin goes on to argue against the notion all we have is probabilistic “moral conjecture” of our salvation, rather than Spirit-wrought certainty:

“But there is here a striking refutation of the vain notions of the Sophists respecting moral conjecture, which is nothing else but uncertainty and anxiety of mind; nay, rather vacillation and delusion. There is also an answer given here to their objection, for they ask, “How can a man fully know the will of God?” This certainly is not within the reach of man, but it is the testimony of God’s Spirit; and this subject he treats more at large in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, from which we may derive a fuller explanation of a passage. Let this truth then stand sure, — that no one can be called a son of God, who does not know himself to be such; and this is called knowledge by John, in order to set forth its certainty. (1 John 5:19, 20.)”

In his commentary on Gal. 4:6 Calvin again emphasizes that all true faith is borne out of the Spirit’s witness to our adoption and to God’s fatherly love for us. The unregenerate may feign but can never sincerely and confidently believe that God is their reconciled Father.

In venturing, he says, to call God your Father, you have the advice and direction of the Spirit of Christ; therefore it is certain that you are the sons of God. This agrees with what is elsewhere taught by him, that the Spirit is the earnest and pledge of our adoption, and gives to us a well-founded belief that God regards us with a father’s love. [He cites 2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5].

Calvin anticipates the worry here that he has not adequately guarded against the possibility of false assurance. His rebuttal is that false assurance is impossible, since the unregenerate cannot attain assurance at all:

But it will be objected, do not wicked men, too, carry their rashness so far as to proclaim that God is their Father? Do they not frequently, with greater confidence than others, utter their false boasts? I reply, Paul’s language does not relate to idle boasting, or to the proud opinion of himself which any man may entertain, but to the testimony of a pious conscience which accompanies the new birth. This argument can have no weight but in the case of believers, for ungodly men have no experience of this certainty; as our Lord himself declares. “The Spirit of truth,” says he, “whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him.” (John 14:17.) This is implied in Paul’s words, *God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts*. It is not what the persons themselves, in the foolish judgment of the flesh, may venture to believe, but what God declares in their hearts by his Spirit.

He further argues that by nature men do not believe in the grace of God towards them. Only Christians are capable of believing that God is their reconciled Father. Therefore, when the Roman Catholic church advocates uncertainty of salvation, it reflects its essentially unregenerate character:

...where this pledge of the Divine love towards us is wanting, there is assuredly no faith. Hence it is evident what sort of Christianity belongs to Popery, since any man who says, that he has the Spirit of God, is charged by them with impious presumption. Neither the Spirit of God, nor certainty, belongs to their notion of faith. This single tenet held by them is a remarkable proof that, in all the schools of the Papists, the devil, the father of unbelief, reigns. I acknowledge, indeed, that the scholastic divines, when they enjoin upon the consciences of men the agitation of perpetual doubt, are in perfect agreement with what the natural feelings of

mankind would dictate. It is the more necessary to fix in our minds this doctrine of Paul, that no man is a Christian who has not learned, by the teaching of the Holy Spirit, to call God his Father.

### **Union with Christ.**

Calvin's discussion of union with Christ seems to indicate that he conceives of the saving faith as *believing that Christ and his benefits are ours*—not merely potentially or conditionally, but actually. Calvin opens his discussion of “The way in which we receive the grace of Christ: What benefits come to us from it, and what effects follow” with the following:

“First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us. . . . It is true that we obtain this by faith. Yet since we see that not all indiscriminately embrace that communion with Christ which is offered through the gospel, reason teaches us to climb higher and to examine into the secret energy of the Spirit, by which we come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits” (3.1.1; 537).

For Calvin, it seems, Christ becomes ours by faith—that is, by our believing that he dwells within us. This just is how we embrace communion with him. It is the act which the secret energy of the Spirit causes, and which Scripture warrants. This follows from what has been said already about the Spirit of adoption, but consider Calvin's language of union elsewhere:

“As has already been clearly explained, until our minds become intent upon the Spirit, Christ, so to speak, lies idle because we coldly contemplate him as outside ourselves—indeed, far from us” (3.1.3; 541).

Here Calvin urges us not to “*contemplate*” Christ as outside of ourselves. By implication, he wants us to exercise saving faith just by believing that Christ is our possession. We obtain salvation “when we know that God is our merciful Father, because of reconciliation effected through Christ [II Cor. 5:18-19], and that Christ has been given to us as righteousness, sanctification, and life” (3.2.2; 545). We obtain salvation, that is, by believing that Christ has been given *to us* as righteousness, sanctification and life. Now it is clear that Calvin does not mean simply that we obtain salvation by believing that Christ has been given that we might possibly be saved, on condition of our faith. The mere belief that salvation is possible gives me no boldness to call upon God as my Father in particular; it gives me no reason to think that I am or will be reconciled to God. Calvin is at constant war with this comfortless notion of faith, which he does not recognize as faith at all:

Also, there are very many who so conceive God's mercy that they receive almost no consolation from it. They are constrain with miserable anxiety at the same time as they are in doubt whether he will be merciful to them because they confine that very kindness of which they seem utterly persuaded within too narrow limits. For among themselves they ponder that it is indeed great and abundant, shed upon many, available and ready for all; but that it is uncertain whether it will even come to them, or rather, whether they will come to it. This reasoning, when it

stops in mid-course, is only half. Therefore, it does not so much strengthen the spirit in secure tranquility as trouble it with uneasy doubting. But there is a far different feeling of full assurance that in the Scriptures is always attributed to faith. It is this which puts beyond doubt God's goodness clearly manifested for us [Col. 2:2; I Thess. 1:5; cf. Heb. 6:11 and 10:22]. But that cannot happen without our truly feeling its sweetness and experiencing it in ourselves. For this reason, the apostle derives confidence [*fiduciam*] from faith, and from confidence, in turn, boldness. For he states: "Through Christ we have boldness and access with confidence which is through faith in him" [Eph. 3:12 p., cf. Vg.]. By these words he obviously shows that there is no right faith except when we dare with tranquil hearts to stand in God's sight. This boldness arises only out of a sure confidence in divine benevolence and salvation. This is so true that the word "faith" is very often used for confidence. (3.2.15; 561).

Immediately following this passage, Calvin urges us that faith embraces Christ and his benefits just by believing that these are possessed within us:

Here, indeed, is the chief hinge on which faith turns: that we do not regard the promises of mercy that God offers us as true only outside ourselves, but not at all in us; rather we make them ours by inwardly embracing them (3.2.16; 561).

Calvin later combats "half-papists" who "make an assurance mingled with unbelief" (3.2.24; 569-70). The half-papists teach that we always alternate between hope and fear: although there is complete salvation in Christ, when we contemplate ourselves there is always reason for fear. Calvin combats this wavering by asserting that "we ought...to think of Christ" as "dwelling in us."

As if we ought to think of Christ, standing afar off and not rather dwelling in us! For we await salvation from him not because he appears to us afar off, but because he makes us, ingrafted into his body, participants not only in all his benefits but also in himself... 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..." (3.2.24; 570).

The implication of this passage is that we separate Christ from ourselves by thinking of him as standing afar off. We hold fast to him with both hands by thinking of him as dwelling in us. In other words, the faith that possesses Christ believes that Christ is its possession. Calvin has no notion of faith which merely believes that Christ makes salvation possible or generally available. The believer's faith—the faith which everyone ought to exercise—believes in its own union with Jesus Christ and possession of all his benefits. His commentary on Gal. 2:20 also strongly suggests this interpretation, which seems to me to be in the same spirit as Luther's commentary on the same verse:

The words *for me*, are very emphatic. It will not be enough for any man to contemplate Christ as having died for the salvation of the world, unless he has experienced the consequences of this death, and is enabled to claim it as his own.<sup>12</sup>

**Piety, repentance, love for God, and sanctification are impossible without assurance.**

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<sup>12</sup> *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, translated by William Pringle, originally printed Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin Translation Society; reprinted (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005). Commentary on Galatians, p. 76.

The reason that faith is never bare assent but always coupled with piety is that faith is an assurance that God is our reconciled Father; this assurance causes us call upon and draw near to him as such. This point emerges in Calvin's argument against the Roman Catholic distinction between formed and unformed faith.<sup>13</sup> According to this Roman doctrine, people can have faith without piety or the fear of God; they can believe what is necessary for salvation without having their hearts truly affected. Calvin's response is this: "As if the Holy Spirit, by illuminating our hearts unto faith, were not the witness to us of our adoption!" (3.2.8; 551). Calvin's argument is that real faith is a work of the Holy Spirit, who also makes us pious. But faith can only make us pious if it is assurance, because piety presupposes the knowledge that God is a favorable Father, Calvin explains at the very outset of the *Institutes*. Describing "the pious mind," he writes:

Because it is persuaded that he is good and merciful, it reposes in him with perfect trust, and doubts not that in his loving-kindness a remedy will be provided for all its ills. Because it acknowledges him as Lord and Father, the pious mind also deems it meet and right to observe his authority in all things, reverence his majesty, and take care to advance his glory, and obey his commandments.<sup>14</sup>

Calvin teaches that faith causes us to love him. Love for God does not precede an assured faith and hope in salvation.

But how can the mind be aroused to taste the divine goodness without at the same time being wholly kindled to love God in return? For truly, that abundant sweetness which God has stored up for those who fear him cannot be known without at the same time powerfully moving us. And once anyone has been moved by it, it utterly ravishes him and draws him to itself. Therefore, it is no wonder if a perverse and wicked heart never experiences that emotion by which, borne up to heaven itself, we are admitted to the most hidden treasures of God and to the most hallowed precincts of his Kingdom, which should not be defiled by the entrance of an impure heart.

For the teaching of the Schoolmen, that love is prior to faith and hope, is mere madness; for it is faith alone that first engenders love in us" (3.2.41, 589).

Calvin's treatment of repentance (which he calls "regeneration" and which includes the entire change of life which we might refer to as sanctification) follows his treatment of faith, and for good reasons. For Calvin, repentance must have its foundation in faith—that is, in personal assurance.

Yet, when we refer the origin of repentance to faith we do not imagine some space of time during which it brings it to birth; but we mean to show that a man cannot apply himself seriously to repentance without knowing himself to belong to God. But no one is truly persuaded that he belongs to God unless he has first recognized God's grace... Secondly, I say that, according to the statement of the psalm: 'There is propitiation with thee... that thou mayest be feared' [Ps. 130:4, Comm.], no one will ever reverence God but him who trusts that God is propitious to him. No one will gird himself willingly to observe the law but him who will be persuaded that God is pleased by his obedience (3.3.2, 594).

### **Faith and Doubt in the Believer's Life.**

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<sup>13</sup> *Institutes* 3.2.8-13; 551-9.

<sup>14</sup> *Institutes* 1.2.2; 42.

Calvin of course recognizes the obvious fact that genuine Christians doubt their salvation. In fact, he gives several sections of his chapter on faith to considering the believer's battle with doubt (3.2.17-21). His consideration of doubt directly follows the section in which he proclaims

Briefly, he alone is truly a believer who, convinced by a firm conviction that God is a kindly and well-disposed Father toward him, promises himself all thing on the basis of his generosity; who, relying upon the promises of divine benevolence toward him, lays hold on an undoubted expectation of salvation.<sup>15</sup>

Against this backdrop, Calvin opens 3.2.17:

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."

In the sections which follow Calvin fully acknowledges that unbelief and doubt beset the true believer their whole lives long. Like David, believers are often virtually despairing of the grace of God—but never entirely: "...the root of faith can never be torn from the godly breast, but clings so fast to the inmost parts that, however faith seems to be shaken or to bend this way or that, its light is never so extinguished or snuffed out that it does not at least lurk as it were beneath the ashes" (3.2.21; 567).

My own formalized reconstruction of Calvin's doctrine of faith and doubt is as follows. Calvin conceives of the believer as simultaneously holding two contradictory beliefs:

- (1) I am redeemed and adopted in Jesus Christ.
- (2) I am not redeemed but under God's wrath.

Both beliefs coexist with varying degrees of confidence until death, when (2) is completely removed. The Spirit strengthens our confidence in (1) and weakens our confidence in (2), while the flesh strengthens our confidence in (2) and weakens our confidence in (1). The unbeliever, by contrast, does not believe (1) at all. It is only possible to hold (1) at all when the Spirit of adoption causes us to do so on the basis of Scripture. However, at times the believer's degree of confidence in (1) may be so small compared with his degree of confidence in (2) that when others question him about the estate of his soul, or he questions himself on the subject, he reports (2). Nonetheless, he still holds (1), and his belief in (1) is manifested by the fact that he continues to pray, fight his unbelief, and strive to obey God—none of which is possible in the complete absence of (1).

A proleptic contrast with the later Owen is instructive. Owen assumes that anyone who reports (2) to themselves or others simply does not believe (1) at all. Therefore, since many Christians clearly report (2) both to themselves and others, it follows that many Christians do not believe (1). Therefore, since Christians can have saving faith without believing (1), (1) must not be the essential content of saving faith. Instead, the essence of saving faith lies simply in the belief that

- (3) Because of the glorious way of salvation through Jesus Christ, it is possible for me to be redeemed.

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<sup>15</sup> 3.2.16; 562.

On this account, personal assurance (the belief that I am actually redeemed) is obtained by way of a further inference from another belief:

(4) I possess the distinguishing graces and affections of a regenerate child of God.

(5) Therefore, I actually am redeemed and adopted in Jesus Christ.

As we will see later, Owen gives us no argument against Calvin's view of faith and doubt, nor does he give any argument for his own opposing view. Owen does not even attempt to explicate, reconstruct, or engage with Calvin's view. He simply assumes that the older Reformed divines failed to see the obvious implications of the fact that Christians doubt their own salvation.

### **I John: The role of works in assurance.**

A number of passages in 1 John strongly suggest, *prima facie*, that assurance of salvation is based upon self-examination and observation of our own sanctification. Because this interpretation seems so natural, it is all the more striking that Calvin emphatically rejects it. While he allows that observation of our own good works may help strengthen an already-existent assurance, he insists that personal assurance can never be based *in the first place* upon our works. Faith finds a completely sufficient basis for personal assurance in the word of the gospel.

Consider Calvin's comments on 1 John 2:3, "And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments."

"But we are not hence to conclude that faith recumbs on works; for though every one receives a testimony to his faith from his works, yet it does not follow that it is founded on them, since they are added as an evidence. Then the certainty of faith depends on the grace of Christ alone..."

Keeping in mind that for Calvin, personal assurance is of the essence of faith, his meaning is clear: works can provide an additional evidence of our faith which strengthens assurance, but cannot provide the foundation of our assurance.

In commenting on 1 John 3:14 ("We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren"), Calvin is glad to acknowledge the evidential value of love for the brethren: "He commends love to us by a remarkable eulogy, because it is an evidence of a transition from death to life. It hence follows that if we love the brethren we are blessed, but that we are miserable if we hate them" (217). He then spends a paragraph arguing against the (Roman) interpretation that love is the *cause* of our transition from death to life (217-18). Next he spends a paragraph arguing against the more plausible interpretation that love is the *basis of our confidence* that we have passed from death to life:

The argument would be more plausible, were it said that love makes us more certain of life: then confidence as to salvation would recumb on works. But the answer to this is obvious; for though faith is confirmed by all the graces of God as aids, yet it ceases not to have its foundation in the mercy of God only. As for instance, when we enjoy the light, we are certain that the sun shines; if the sun shines on the place in which we are, we have a clearer view of it; but yet when the visible rays do not come to us, we are satisfied that the sun diffuses its brightness for our benefit. So when faith is founded on Christ, some things may happen to assist it, still it rests on Christ's grace alone. (218).

The sunlight metaphor is not altogether perspicuous to me, but the main point is undeniable. Calvin's opponent thinks that brotherly love renders it more probable that we are saved; it increases certainty of our salvation. Calvin thinks that the mercy of God alone is the sole foundation on which faith (for Calvin, interchangeable with personal assurance and certainty) rests. The graces of God such as brotherly love are confirmatory aids of faith, but only of a faith/assurance whose sure foundation is Christ's grace alone. Works are neither necessary nor sufficient for faith/assurance/certainty.

Calvin makes the same point in commenting on 3:19: love for our neighbor is an evidence of our regeneration, but only plays a secondary confirmatory role.

“But we must ever remember, that we have not from love the knowledge which the Apostle mentions, as though we were to seek from it the certainty of salvation. And doubtless we know not otherwise that we are the children of God, than as he seals his free adoption on our hearts by his own Spirit, and as we receive by faith the sure pledge of it offered in Christ. Then love is accessory or an inferior aid, a prop to our faith, not a foundation in which it rests.

“Why then does the Apostle say, *We shall assure our hearts before God*? He reminds us in these words, that faith does not exist without a good conscience; not that assurance arises from it or depends on it, but that then only we are really and not falsely assured of our union with God, when by the efficacy of his Holy Spirit he manifests himself in our love. For it is ever meet and proper to consider what the Apostle handles; for as he condemns a feigned and false profession of faith, he says that a genuine assurance before God we cannot have, except his Spirit produces in us the fruit of love. Nevertheless, though a good conscience cannot be separated from faith, yet no one should hence conclude that we must look to our works in order that our assurance may be certain” (on 1 John 3:19; 221-22).

The bulk of this passage simply provides further confirmation for the role of works I have already elucidated. But some remarks on Calvin's view of hypocrisy are in order here.

“False assurance” is false *not* because the hypocrite is genuinely certain of his salvation but without good grounds or reasons for that certainty. Calvin's view of faith implies that everyone has grounds and warrant to believe that they are saved through Jesus Christ. Rather, the “false assurance” of the hypocrite is false because the hypocrite is not genuinely certain of his salvation at all, but only pretends to be. The hypocrite fails to truly believe what he has good grounds to believe. Calvin is at pains to point out that just because love is inseparable from assurance does not mean that love is the grounds of assurance. It is not as though Calvin advises the hypocrite to suspend his assurance until he has observed in himself the Spirit-wrought love which is its grounds. On the contrary, Calvin exhorts the hypocrite to exercise *faith*—to believe that God is his Father through Jesus Christ—and this faith will bring forth love. But those without the Spirit are incapable of sincerely believing that they are saved through Jesus Christ. Only those who have “the living root of faith... carry a testimony of their own adoption firmly fixed in their hearts” (Comm. On 1 John 2:19; 192).

It is worth pointing out that Calvin explicitly affirms limited atonement. Consider his commentary on 1 John 2:2 (“He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”).

Here a question may be raised, how have the sins of the whole world been expiated? I pass by the dotages of the fanatics, who under this pretence extend

salvation to all the reprobate, and therefore to Satan himself. Such a monstrous thing deserves no refutation. They who seek to avoid this absurdity, have said that Christ suffered sufficiently for the whole world, but efficiently only for the elect. Though then I allow that what has been said is true, yet I deny that it is suitable to this passage; for the design of John was no other than to make this benefit common to the whole Church. Then under the word *all* or whole, he does not include the reprobate, but designates those who should believe as well as those who were then scattered through various parts of the world. For then is really made evident, as it is meet, the grace of Christ, when it is declared to be the only true salvation of the world. (p. 173).

I am told that many people deny or at least question whether Calvin believed in particular redemption. Famously, R.T. Kendall is supposed to deny that Calvin holds this doctrine, and he blames the loss of Calvin's doctrine of faith/assurance on the Puritan espousal of limited atonement. Long before Kendall, the opponents of the *Marrow of Modern Divinity* argued that if assurance is the essence of faith, and the warrant of faith is universal, then the atonement must be unlimited; they concluded that since limited atonement is true, assurance cannot be essential to saving faith.<sup>16</sup> Later we will discuss the Marrow Brethren's argument that limited atonement is logically compatible with Calvin's doctrine of assurance. For now, we simply note that this passage from Calvin shows that he held to limited atonement as well as his doctrine of assurance. In any case it should be clear that limited atonement was not a Puritan innovation. As this passage shows, limited atonement was a medieval doctrine which Calvin simply adopted as sound. For further discussion of this debate, see Roger Nicole's article.<sup>17</sup>

### **Trent Anathematizes and Calvin Defends assurance as essential to saving faith.**

The Reformation consensus that personal appropriation and assurance are of the first and essential act of justifying faith was so clear that the Council of Trent singled it out for criticism:

But although it is necessary to believe that sins neither are remitted, nor have ever been remitted, except freely by the Divine mercy through Christ, it is not to be said to any one boasting a confidence and certainty of the forgiveness of his sins, that his sins are forgiven, or have been forgiven; seeing this vain confidence, totally remote from piety, may exist in heretics and schismatics, nay, in our time does exist, and is extolled with great hostility to the Catholic Church. Neither is it to be asserted that it becomes those who are truly justified to determine with themselves, without any kind of doubt, that they are truly justified, and that no man is absolved from sin and justified, save he who assuredly believes that he is acquitted and justified, and that acquittal and justification are obtained by this faith alone; as if any one who does not believe this were doubting the promise of God and the efficacy of the death and resurrection of Christ. For as no pious man ought to doubt of the mercy of God, the merit of Christ, and the virtue and efficacy of the sacraments, so every one, while he beholds his own weakness and disinclination, may be in fear and dread respecting his own gracious state; seeing

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<sup>16</sup> Lachman, "Marrow Controversy."

<sup>17</sup> Available at <http://www.apuritansmind.com/Arminianism/NicoleRogerCalvinsLimitedAtonement.htm>

that no man can know with a certainty of faith, as to which there can be no lurking error, that he has obtained the grace of God.<sup>18</sup>

And in the canons corresponding to this decree, the council anathematizes the view:

XIII. Whosoever shall say that for any man to obtain the remission of sins, it is necessary to believe for a certainty and without any hesitancy, as to his own weakness and disinclination that his sins are forgiven, let him be anathema.

XIV. Whosoever shall say that a man is absolved from his sins, or justified by the mere circumstance of believing for a certainty that he is absolved or justified, or that no man is truly justified save he who believes that he is justified, and that acquittal and absolution are accomplished by faith alone, let him be anathema.<sup>19</sup>

Trent's basic point is that a faith in the sufficiency of the work of Christ to save sinners does not give any grounds for a person to believe that they themselves are one of the beneficiaries of the work of Christ. In order to conclude that I personally am in a "gracious state," I must look for evidence of that fact within myself. For the Roman Catholic, the works which provide evidence for salvation are works which (congruently) merit that salvation. The Protestant doctrine of justification excludes the notion that works can merit salvation in any sense. However, many Puritans taught that inwrought graces are the indispensable *evidence* of salvation. Unlike Trent, the Puritans seem to have always insisted that full (not merely probable) assurance is nevertheless possible. It is perhaps debatable whether a full assurance of salvation really is possible on this view, either theoretically or practically.

In John Calvin's reply to this passage in the Council of Trent, he concedes none of its points, but passionately owns and defends the anathematized views as his own, without any qualification.<sup>20</sup> "They acknowledge that sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, except freely," writes Calvin, "but leaving it in suspense to whom and when they are forgiven, they rob all consciences of calm placid confidence."<sup>21</sup> This confidence and certainty of personal salvation is just what is expressed in Ps. 32 and Rom. 5; it is the basis of the boldness with which we have access to the Father (Eph. 3:12), and the certainty of Rom. 8:37. By undermining this confidence in personal salvation, "they overthrow all true prayer to God, when they keep pious minds suspended by fear which alone shuts the door of access against us."<sup>22</sup> This knowledge that we are children of God (which for Calvin is synonymous with justifying faith), arises from the Spirit of adoption which is given to every believer and which makes them call on God as Abba, Father (Rom. 8:15).<sup>23</sup> This is the testimony of the Holy Spirit, given only and to all the regenerate.<sup>24</sup>

Calvin and Trent both agree that all men are warranted and obliged to exercise faith, but for Trent the faith which all are obliged to exercise is simply faith that the work of Christ makes forgiveness possible. For Calvin, the faith which all are obliged to exercise is a faith that our own sins are actually forgiven for Christ's sake. Calvin inveighs against

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<sup>18</sup> "Acts of the Council of Trent, 6<sup>th</sup> session, decree X," in *Tracts and Treatises of John Calvin*, vol. 3, translated by Henry Beveridge (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), pp. 97-98.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>20</sup> "Antidote to the Sixth Session of the Council of Trent," in *ibid.*, pp. 125-7, 154-5.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 125.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 125.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 126.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 126-7

the Tridentine assertion that we are obliged only to believe in the general sufficiency of the work of Christ, but not that we are particularly its beneficiaries:

They think, however, that they ingeniously obviate all objections when they recommend a general persuasion of the grace of Christ. They prohibit any doubt as to the efficacy of Christ's death. But where do they wish it to be placed? In the air so as to be only in confused imagination. For they allow none to apply grace to themselves with the firm assurance of faith, as if we had to no purpose received such promises as these... Surely, if they admit that by faith we apprehend what God offers to us, Christ is not set before me and others, merely that we may believe him to have been the Redeemer of Abraham, but that every one may appropriate the salvation which he procured. And how improper is it to assert that "no man can know with certainty of faith that he has obtained the grace of God." Paul and John recognize none as the children of God but those who know it. Of what knowledge can we understand them to speak, but that which they have learned by the teaching of the Holy Spirit... But if Paul, when he exhorts the Corinthians to prove themselves whether they be in the faith, (2 Cor. xiii. 5,) pronounces all reprobate who do not know Christ dwelling in them, why should I hesitate to pronounce them twice reprobate, who, not allowing the Church to enter on any such proof, abolish all certainty concerning the grace of God?<sup>25</sup>

### **The Heidelberg Catechism (1563).**

The Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 suffused with a Calvinistic doctrine of faith and assurance. This doctrine is most explicitly affirmed in the answer to Question 21, "What is true faith?"

A. It is not only a certain knowledge by which I accept as true all that God has revealed to us in his Word, but also a wholehearted trust which the Holy Spirit creates in me through the gospel, that, not only to others, but to me also God has given the forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation, out of sheer grace solely for the sake of Christ's saving work (p. 308).

Zacharias Ursinus, co-author of the catechism, explicates this answer in his commentary on it:

"Justifying or saving faith differs, therefore, from the other kinds of faith, because it alone is that assured confidence by which we apply unto ourselves the merit of Christ, which is done when we firmly believe that the righteousness of Christ is granted and imputed unto us, so that we are accounted just in the sight of God" (p. 110-111).

### **John Owen on Faith and Assurance.**

#### **Introduction.**

While the Owen of 1645 substantially reproduces Calvin's doctrine of faith and assurance, the Owen of 1677 self-consciously repudiates it for two reasons. First, Christian experience shows that true believers can doubt their own salvation. Hence, assurance cannot be of the essence of faith. Second, Owen denies that the gospel contains a universal warrant or command for sinners to believe that they are saved through Christ. Rather, the gospel contains a universal warrant for sinners to believe that it is possible for

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 127.

them to be saved through Christ. He says that it violates the “order of nature” to command men to believe that they are saved, before they actually are saved. Owen argues that after this first faith is exercised, it will produce the Christian graces which lead to assurance. Faith in the possibility of my salvation through Christ produces spiritual fruit which then constitutes the evidence of my regeneration, and allows me to infer that I do in fact belong to Christ.

We might note briefly that between Owen’s early and late positions the Westminster Standards were published (1646). The Westminster Standards explicitly deny that assurance is of the essence of faith (e.g. Larger Catechism 80-81). The Standards emphasize that it is possible for a true Christian to lack assurance. They neither affirm nor deny whether the Scripture provides a universal warrant for an assured faith. While they emphasize the evidential role of Christian graces in obtaining assurance, they neither affirm nor deny the possibility of a direct assurance based purely on the gospel offer.

**The Early Owen: *Two Short Catechisms* (1645).** David Lachman points out that Owen’s 1645 *Two Short Catechisms*, advocates the position of the first Reformers that assurance is of the essence of justifying faith (Lachman 17n4).

Q. What is a justifying faith? A. A gracious resting upon the free promises of God, in Jesus Christ for mercy, with a firm persuasion of heart, that God is a reconciled Father unto is in the Son of His love; 1 Tim. 1:16, John 8:15, 19:25, Rom. 4:5, Heb. 4:16, Rom. 8:38, 39, Gal. 2:20, 2 Cor. 5:20, 21.<sup>26</sup>

Q. What then is our justification, or righteousness before God? A. The gracious act of God, imputing the righteousness of Christ to a believing sinner, and for that speaking peace unto his conscience, in the pardon of his sin, pronouncing him to be just, and accepted before him; Gen. 15:6, Acts 13:38-9, Luke 18:14, Rom. 3:24, 26, 28, 4:4-8, Gal. 2:16.<sup>27</sup>

In the first question and answer, Owen makes belief that one is reconciled to and adopted by God through Jesus Christ essential to justifying faith. In the latter question, he makes the giving of assurance (“speaking peace unto his conscience”) essential to God’s divine act of justification. This doctrine is in complete accord with the consensus of the Reformation.

**The Late Owen: *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (1677).**

For whatever reason, Owen abandoned his early view at some point. In *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith*, Owen rejects the idea that “the pardon of our sins, in particular” is the object of justifying faith; consequently, he denies that “fiducial trust”, or a personal application of the grace of God in Christ, is of the essence of justifying faith (83-4).

So some have said that it is the pardon of our sins, in particular, that is the object of justifying faith;--faith, therefore, they make to be a full persuasion of the forgiveness of our sins through the mediation of Christ; or, that what Christ did and suffered as our mediator, he did it for us in particular: and a particular

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<sup>26</sup>26 “The Greater Catechism,” in *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 5, edited by Thomas Russell (London: Richard Baynes, 1826), 29. I apologize for referencing this obscure old edition—it was all they had at my library. The catechisms are of course included in the Banner of Truth edition of Owen’s works.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

application of especial mercy unto our own souls and consciences is hereby made the essence of faith; or, to believe that our own sins are forgiven seems hereby to be the first and most proper act of justifying faith (83-4).

Owen now begins to give his first objection to the Reformation doctrine. If assurance is essential to saving faith, then anyone who doubts his own salvation is unregenerate—and this is surely outrageous. Every Christian knows by a cursory examination of their own spiritual experience that he or she has had moments of doubt:

Hence it would follow, that whosoever doth not believe, or hath not a firm persuasion of the forgiveness of his own sins in particular, hath no saving faith,-- is no true believer; which is by no means to be admitted. And if any have been or are of this opinion, I fear that they were, in the asserting of it, neglective of their own experience;... (84)

Owen now suggests that those who advocate the Reformation doctrine have confused, in their own experience, the *essence* of faith (which does not include personal assurance) with the proper and usual goal and outcome of faith (which is personal assurance).

...or, it may be, rather, that they knew not how, in their *experience*, all the other actings of faith, wherein its *essence* doth consist, were included in this persuasion, which in an especial manner they aimed at: whereof we shall speak afterward. And there is no doubt unto me, but that this which they propose, faith is suited unto, aimeth at, and doth ordinarily effect in true believers, who improve it, and grow in its exercise in due manner. (84).

Owen makes no secret of the fact that the position he is rejecting is the position of the Reformers, and gives an admirable description of it:

Many great divines, at the first Reformation, did (as the Lutherans generally yet do) thus make the mercy of God in Christ, and thereby the forgiveness of their own sins, to be the proper object of justifying faith, as such;--whose essence, therefore, they placed in a *fiducial* trust in the grace of God by Christ declared in the promises, with a certain unwavering application of them unto ourselves. (84)

He proceeds to discuss why the Reformers argued for this position, and how it is that he can disagree with it while remaining fully sympathetic with what he takes to be their fundamental intentions. Owen heartily agrees that everyone ought to endeavor to attain this fiducial trust and personal assurance which the Reformers preached; he simply thinks that saving faith can exist without it. The Reformers, he explains, confused the essence of faith with “the *highest acting* of it” because of their battle with Rome (84). Rome taught that fiducial trust and assurance could only be attained by good works and sacraments. When it became clear that men’s consciences could not obtain peace and assurance in this way, the Roman Catholic church “made it a part of their doctrine, that *the belief of the pardon of our own sins, and assurance of the love of God in Christ*, were false and pernicious” (85).

Hence the principal controversy in this matter, which the reformed divines had with those of the church of Rome, was this,--*Whether there be, according unto and by the gospel, a state of rest and assured peace with God to be attained in this life?* (85)

The Reformers were so intent upon arguing that such assurance was possible and natural for Christians, that they went too far and made assurance the essence of faith (85). Now

Owen reverts to his previous argument against the Reformers: surely there are real Christians who doubt their own salvation? Owen thinks that Reformers never meant to deny this fact:

But yet, withal, I never read any of them (I know not what others have done) who affirmed that every true and sincere believer always had a *full assurance of the especial love of God in Christ*, or of the pardon of his own sins;--though they plead that this the Scripture requires of them in the way of duty, and that this they ought to aim at the attainment of. (85)

So Owen thinks that his position is a refinement of the Reformation position which is fully in keeping with the driving concerns of the Reformation. Owen agrees that Scripture requires everyone to get assurance, while also conceding that true Christians sometimes lack it.

Owen has another argument against the doctrine that fiducial trust is essential to justifying faith. He briefly presages this argument when he asks what it is that distinguishes hypocritical false faith from genuine saving faith (95-6). The reason why merely nominal Christians are guilty of unbelief is *not* that they lack “an *especial fiduciary application* of the promises of the gospel unto themselves, and the belief of the pardon of their own sins in particular: for this is not proposed unto them in the preaching of the gospel, as that which they are first to believe, and there may be a believing unto righteousness where this is not attained, Isa. 1. 10” (96). Owen has added a new point to his argument against the Reformers. Not only is it possible for true believers to lack assurance of personal pardon, but strictly speaking the preaching of the gospel does not even *propose* this to lost sinners at all. The preached gospel does not directly give sinners a warrant and command to believe that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake. For a sinner to believe in their own pardon directly is therefore presumptuous and lacking a basis in the Word.

Owen makes this point again in his positive exposition of the essence of justifying faith (102). According to Owen, trust is essential to justifying faith. Many divines, says Owen, make “special mercy” the peculiar object of trust. Owen finds this acceptable if by “special mercy” we simply mean to distinguish this mercy from “common mercy.” But if by “special mercy” we mean “the *pardon of our own sins* in particular, the especial mercy of God unto our souls,” then Owen (again) denies that this is the object of the trust which is essential to justifying faith (102).

That this is the object of justifying faith, that a man is bound to believe this in order of nature antecedent unto his justification, I do deny; neither yet do I know of any testimony or safe experience whereby it may be confirmed (102).

Owen again denies that the command to repent and believe the gospel includes the command to believe in one’s own interest in Jesus Christ. The preaching of the gospel does not render human beings universally “bound to believe this.” There seems to be a logical argument for this position compacted into the phrase “in order of nature antecedent unto his justification.” I suggest that Owen has something like this in mind:

- (1) The preaching of the gospel includes the command for all people to exercise faith in Christ.
- (2) If a belief in one’s own justification is essential to faith in Christ, then all people are commanded to believe that they are justified through Christ.
- (3) But the sinners to whom the gospel is addressed are not yet justified.

(4) Therefore, they cannot be commanded to believe that they are justified before they actually are.

(5) Therefore, the preaching of the gospel does not include this command, and belief in one's own pardon is not essential to the response of faith which the gospel demands.

Premise (4) is the crucial point in this reconstruction of Owen's argument. A preacher cannot tell lost sinners, "Believe that your sins are forgiven through the blood of Jesus," because those sinners are not yet forgiven. They cannot be commanded to believe something which is not true. Owen's gospel preacher says to lost sinners, "Believe that God *can* forgive even you through the blood of Jesus." This proposition—that Christ has made my salvation possible—is the proper object of justifying faith for Owen. The key point is that people cannot be commanded to believe something before it is the case. People must first exercise justifying faith and *be justified* before they can have a reason or obligation to believe that they are justified.

David Lachman underestimates the difference between Owen and the Reformers on this point. Lachman says that Owen's denial that

"a man is bound to believe in order of nature antecedent to his justification the pardon of his own sins in particular...is neither agreeing nor disagreeing with earlier Reformed Divines, who spoke of saving faith as including a belief that our sins in particular will be pardoned as we exercise saving faith. Owen sets up the question differently and so gets an answer tangential to that given earlier" (18).

Lachman's interpretation is implausible from the outset, for he is charging Owen with significant blunder. In this passage, Owen intends to give the central reasons why he cannot agree with the doctrine of the Reformation divines. But Lachman thinks that Owen has simply misunderstood them and, in spite of himself, basically agrees with them.

In fact, Lachman has not captured the nuance of the two positions. The Reformers spoke of saving faith as including a belief that our sins in particular *are* justified. Lachman says that the Reformers spoke of saving faith as including a belief that we *will be* justified—i.e., justifying faith includes the belief that "I will be justified if/when I believe on Christ." But note that this conditional belief ("If I believe, then I will be justified") leaves it entirely undetermined as to whether I actually do believe and am justified. If justifying faith includes only the belief in this conditional statement, "If I believe, I will be justified," then in order to pass from faith to assurance I need to examine myself so as to determine whether in fact I believe and meet the condition. This is Owen's position, but it is not the position of the Reformers. The Reformers actually taught that the gospel obliges all people everywhere, all unjustified sinners, to believe that they are justified and forgiven for Christ's sake.<sup>28</sup>

Positively, Owen defines justifying faith as "*the heart's approbation of the way of justification and salvation of sinners by Jesus Christ proposed in the gospel, as proceeding from the grace, wisdom, and love of God, with its acquiescency therein as*

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<sup>28</sup> We will return to this point in the discussion of the *Marrow of Modern Divinity*. For now, note simply that the Reformers did not command unjustified people to believe that they are already justified before they believe in Christ. Rather, they taught that unjustified people are commanded to believe that they are justified through the blood of Christ because in the instant that they so believe, it will be true. Believing in their own possession of Christ is the instrumental cause of their receiving Christ.

unto its own concernment and condition” (93). This approbation includes four elements: 1) “a *sincere renunciation* of all other ways and means for the attaining of righteousness, life and salvation” (100). 2) “[T]he *will’s consent*, whereby the soul betakes itself cordially and sincerely, as unto all its expectation of pardon of sin and righteousness before God, unto the way of salvation proposed in the gospel” (101). This is receiving or coming to or believing in Christ (100). 3) “An *acquiescency of the heart* in God, as the author and principal cause of the way of salvation prepared, as acting in a way of sovereign grace and mercy towards sinners” (101). 4) and 5) “*Trust in God*” (101).

Owen explains this fourth element, trust in God, at some length. “This trust” “is that act of it [faith] which *composeth* the soul, and brings it unto all the rest it can attain” (101). “...[W]ithout some act of trust, the soul must lie under actual despair; which is utterly inconsistent with faith, or the choice and approbation of the way of salvation before described” (101). Owen’s emphasis on the fact that saving faith includes some measure of rest or peace or relief from utter despair seems to be an attempt to salvage some of the Reformation doctrine of assurance. Owen wants faith to provide a positive spiritual motive for sanctification and good works, a reason to draw near to God and obey him. Faith plays this role in the theology of Calvin because it is an assurance of God’s fatherly love, forgiveness, and acceptance of our whole person through Jesus Christ. For Owen, faith is a belief that Christ has made my salvation possible, and since that is much preferable to the impossibility of salvation, faith is supposed to provide a degree of comfort and encouragement.

We have already discussed what “trust” entails for Owen. Quite pointedly, the object of trust is not a belief in my own personal pardon. The beliefs that God pardons and loves us in Christ “are rather fruits or effects of faith, as under exercise and improvement, than of the essence of it, as it is the instrument in our justification” (102). Owen is clear that “the especial object of this trust, so far as it belongs unto the nature of that faith whereby we are justified, is ‘God in Christ reconciling the world unto himself’” (101). Nothing about the believer’s own reconciliation to God through Christ is implied. Owen can describe the object of trust as “special mercy,” but he means the existence of special (as opposed to common) mercy, not one’s own possession of it (102). Hence, when Owen off-handedly concedes that “Whether this trust or confidence shall be esteemed of the *essence* of faith, or as that which, on the first fruit and working of it, we are found in exercise of, we need not positively determine,” he is emphatically *not* suddenly leaving open the possibility that some degree of personal assurance is in the essence of justifying faith. Trust involves a sense of rest, composure, and peace with God which dispels despair (101). However, this trust is not a trust that Christ actually saves the believer, but a trust that the work of Christ makes the believer’s salvation possible. The positive emotional responses involved in trust are elicited by the believer’s knowledge of the mere possibility that at some point he could be saved.

Joel Beeke wrongly suggests on the basis of this passage on trust that Owen leaves room for a low degree of *assurance* in the essence of saving faith (210). Beeke’s (2-page) discussion of *The Doctrine of Justification* completely misses the point of Owen’s discussion of trust. The “trust” which Owen is talking about pointedly does not involve any degree assurance of one’s own salvation. It is meaningless to talk about *any* degree of assurance which does not involve one’s own actual salvation. Owen is talking about a “trust” that one’s salvation is possible through Jesus Christ. But if that sort of trust is

rightly described as “assurance,” then the Council of Trent has a robust doctrine of assurance as well, for Trent emphatically insists that we should believe that Christ makes our salvation possible. To say it another way, Owen’s justifying faith does not include even the lowest degree of confidence in the proposition that “My sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake.” Owen’s whole point is that the gospel does not command or warrant sinners to believe this (directly). Rather, justifying faith includes at least some degree of *comfort* arising from belief in the proposition that “It is possible for my sins to be forgiven for Christ’s sake.” This comfort arising from the possibility of salvation motivates progressive sanctification, and it is by reflecting on one’s own sanctification that personal assurance is appropriately derived. So faith should lead to assurance, but it does not include any degree of assurance. In fact, the highest conceivable degree of confidence in the proposition that “It is possible for my sins to be forgiven for Christ’s sake” does not afford any actual personal assurance. It is only by identifying the work of the Spirit in our lives that we obtain evidence of our own personal salvation.

Owen’s Gospel Grounds and Evidences of the Faith of God’s Elect bears out the interpretation of justifying faith presented above. In the course of a discussion of saving faith, he describes how it keeps the soul from despairing (417). The source of despair, according to Owen, is unbelief in the *possibility* of salvation—that is, an unbelief that Christ and his cross are *able* “to reconcile the glory of God and [the despairing person’s] salvation” (417). But as long as faith clings to the fact that the cross has made this reconciliation possible, “although [the soul] cannot attain any comfortable assurance of an especial interest in it, yet it cannot but love, honour, value, and cleave unto this way, adoring the wisdom and grace of God in it; which is an act and evidence of saving faith” (417). This is the manner in which “trust” provides a degree of rest and peace for the soul. Furthermore, this general faith keeps the soul in a state of kindness toward God, and “will stir up all graces unto a due exercise, and diligent performance of all duties, whereby it may obtain a refreshing sense of a personal interest in it” (418). But Owen leaves no doubt that the first assurance of personal pardon comes after justification, not in it or even with it:

“Faith is not an especial assurance of a man’s own justification and salvation by Christ; that it will produce, but not until another step or two in its progress be over: but faith is a satisfactory persuasion that the way of God proposed in the gospel is fitted, suited, and able to save the soul in the particular that doth believe,—not only that it is a blessed way to save sinners in general, but that it is such a way to save him in particular” (419).

In short, Owen conceives of a general faith in the possibility of personal salvation as the source of a believer’s first spiritual comforts. This faith both evidences the believer’s regeneration and is exercised in the performance of duties. A faith in or sense of personal pardon should follow in due time and due order.

Calvin would simply deny that what Owen calls “trust” can actually afford any rest or comfort at all.

Also, there are very many who so conceive God’s mercy that they receive almost no consolation from it. . . For among themselves they ponder that it is indeed great and abundant, shed upon many, available and ready for all; but that it is uncertain whether it will even come to them, or rather, whether they will come to it. This reasoning, when it stops in mid-course, is only half. Therefore, it does not

so much strengthen the spirit in secure tranquility as trouble it with uneasy doubting. But there is a far different feeling of full assurance that in the Scriptures is always attributed to faith.<sup>29</sup>

### **Evaluation of Owen's Arguments.**

The word "assurance" is often used ambiguously to refer either to the *degree* or *content* of saving faith. On the one hand, "assurance" can refer to a maximal degree of confidence that some proposition is true. In this sense, I have assurance that the sun will rise tomorrow or that I will win the lottery tomorrow simply if my belief in these propositions is as strong as any belief could possibly be. On the other hand, "assurance" is also used to refer to the *content* of a belief, regardless of the strength with which I hold it. For example, if I believe that "It will probably rain tomorrow," I lack assurance that it will rain; but if I believe that "It will certainly rain tomorrow," I have assurance that it will rain.

Equivocation about the meaning of "assurance" riddles the theological literature on this subject. When Calvin asserts that assurance is of the essence of faith, he is referring to the content of faith, not its degree. Saving faith is the belief that

(A1) Christ and his righteousness are mine.

Calvin wishes to contrast this view of the content of saving faith with the Roman Catholic assertion that a well-founded belief in (A1) is not possible in this life. Rather, short of sheer unfounded presumption or a special revelation from God, the most a Christian can reasonably believe in this life is

(A2) Christ and his righteousness are possibly or probably mine.

Calvin is far from asserting that our subjective degree of confidence in (A1) is maximal. He is well aware that the Christian's degree of confidence in (A1) may wax so low that the Christian may not even recognize that he believes (A1) anymore. Nevertheless, no matter how low the Christian's subjective degree of confidence in (A1), it is decidedly (A1) and not (A2) that the Christian holds.

The later Owen makes no distinction between degrees of confidence and the content of faith. For Owen, weakly believing that (A1) "My sins are certainly forgiven" is the same as strongly believing that (A2) "My sins are possibly or probably forgiven." So Owen concludes that because real believers sometimes only very weakly believe (A1), this is the same as if they did not really believe (A1) at all but only believe (A2). Thus, the Reformers should give up the notion that (A1) is essential to saving faith.

Let us spell this out in some more detail. Owen notes that some Christians lack assurance, and adds that all the Reformers acknowledge this fact. He concludes from the phenomena of Christian doubt that assurance is not of the essence of faith. What could Owen mean here?

1) Owen could mean that some Christians have a very weak belief that "My sins are forgiven through Jesus Christ." But this does not count against the Reformation position at all: it *is* the Reformation position.

2) So Owen must mean that some Christians do not at all believe that "My sins are forgiven through Jesus Christ." This would contradict the Reformation position, for it would mean that a belief in one's own pardon is not essential to justifying faith.

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<sup>29</sup> 3.2.15; 561.

Owen simply appeals to Christian experience in support of this position (#2). Owen thinks that some true believers introspect and do not find within themselves a belief in their own pardon or salvation. Calvin could simply reply that these genuine saints are wrong about their own hearts: they actually do believe in their own pardon, but their faith is so weak as to be imperceptible even to themselves. Owen himself would certainly concede that the introspecting believer may not perceive faith (as Owen himself defines it) within himself. Calvin and Owen both agree that introspection is a fallible guide to our true beliefs. So the fact that introspecting saints sometimes do not detect faith (as Calvin defines it) within themselves proves nothing. Introspecting saints sometimes do not detect faith (as Owen defines it) within themselves either. So this objection seems weak.

**3)** Owen could be denying that there is a difference between the strength of my belief and the content of my belief. As we noted before, he could be arguing that a weak belief that I am certainly saved is equivalent to a strong belief that I am only probably saved.

But if Owen really intends to conflate propositional attitudes with propositional contents, then the attainment of full assurance is impossible in this life. If a less-than-maximal degree of belief that “My sins are forgiven” is equivalent to a maximal degree of belief that “My sins are probably forgiven,” then full assurance must be a maximal degree of belief that “My sins are forgiven.” However, according to the Reformers, it is impossible to achieve a maximal degree of faith in this life. The flesh—indwelling sin—always causes us to doubt God’s grace to some degree. Unless Owen wants to argue that the Christian can attain a faith which is unmixed with any degree of doubt in this life, he will have to concede that full assurance is unattainable. The Puritans certainly did not want to concede this point to Trent. Calvin’s distinction between belief-strength and belief-content allows him to maintain that Christians have assurance even as they struggle with doubt. All in all, it seems to me that Owen equivocates on the meaning of “assurance,” conflating the notions of subjective confidence and objective probability, out of confusion rather than considered, self-conscious conviction.

Furthermore, it seems that the reflex act of faith cannot provide any more than a probabilistic basis for personal assurance, similarly to the Roman Catholic position. Here is how the Puritans propose that we obtain assurance.

(P1) If I have faith (or any other evidences of regeneration), I am certainly saved.

(P2) I certainly have faith, etc.

(P3) Therefore, I am saved.

(P1) is guaranteed by Scripture so is not probabilistically qualified. However, the only way to know (P2) is by an act of introspection. If it turns out that it is only probable that I have faith, I cannot arrive at (P3). Instead, the syllogism will run as follows:

(P1a) If I have faith, then I am saved.

(P2a) I probably have faith.

(P3a) Therefore, I am probably saved.

(P3a) is not the full assurance that the Puritans want; it is the “moral conjecture” which the Roman Catholic church advocates as the best we can do in this life. The only way to get to (P3), however, is to get (P2): certainty about one’s own spiritual condition. But it is not at all clear how a person who, for all they know at the outset, is still unregenerate may obtain an infallible knowledge of the fruits of the Spirit in their own lives.

### ***The Marrow of Modern Divinity and its Defenders on Faith and Assurance***

*The Marrow of Modern Divinity* was a work of “popular divinity” “[w]ritten by Edward Fisher, an English Presbyterian barber-surgeon” in 1645 (“Marrow Controversy”). It is written in the form of a dialogue between an orthodox evangelist, a legalist, an antinomian, and a would-be convert who listens to them all. The work borrows freely from Puritan and Reformed works, and also quotes heavily from Luther’s commentary on Galatians. The book became the center of controversy in the Church of Scotland in 1718-1723. It was condemned by the General Assembly after its orthodoxy was impugned, but was famously defended by Thomas Boston and Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine. In 1726 Boston re-published it with copious footnotes which drew on earlier Reformation theology to show its historical orthodoxy. I will argue that Boston’s 1726 *Marrow* simply presents the theology of the Reformation and of Calvin. The fact that it came under widespread attack shows, as Lachman notes, “the extent of the changes which had occurred in Reformed thought over the previous century.” The 1726 *Marrow* presents some valuable updated defenses of the Reformation orthodoxy against the developments of the 1600’s.

The basic point is that the *Marrow* makes personal assurance of the essence of justifying faith. The Marrow Brethren elaborate Calvin’s doctrines to show how faith appropriates Christ, his benefits, and his atoning work. They further demonstrate that the Reformation view of faith does not entail that a believer is already justified before believing, nor does it entail a universal atonement. With Calvin they affirm that love to God and all Christian graces flow from assurance and cannot precede it. With Calvin they affirm that true believers can doubt and even deny their own salvation, while yet a seed of assurance remains within them, imperceptible but effectual. They elaborate Calvin’s view of the secondary and confirmatory role of good works in strengthening assurance, although the *Marrow* warns against basing our first assurance on an inference from good works.

#### ***1. Justifying Faith.***

In the Marrow, true receiving and believing in Christ is indistinguishable from receiving and believing in Christ and his benefits *as one’s own possession*. Thus, Evangelista urges Neophytus, as his first act of faith and in order to salvation, to “to know and believe that Christ hath done all for him” (116). In his footnote, Boston asserts that “particular application to oneself” is what distinguishes the assent of devils from true faith.<sup>30</sup> To receive Christ, and to apprehend him by faith in the promise, to “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ”, is to “be verily persuaded in your heart that Jesus Christ is yours, and that you shall have life and salvation by him; that whatsoever Christ did for the redemption of mankind he did it for you.”<sup>31</sup> The special nature of saving faith lies in the fact that it is “an appropriating persuasion, or special application to oneself,” and most especially in “an appropriating persuasion of Christ being yours” (118n4).

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<sup>30</sup> *Marrow* 117. As pointed out earlier, Ursinus asserts the same thing.

<sup>31</sup> *Marrow* 118. Note that, as in Calvin, believing that Christ is yours is the act whereby he becomes yours. Furthermore, as in Calvin, it is not the *sufficiency* of the atonement which is the distinguishing feature of justifying faith but its *efficiency* in saving the believer. Justifying faith is the belief that Christ died for me (cf. Calvin and Luther’s commentaries on Gal. 2:20).

Boston outlines three parts of this single appropriating persuasion. First, the soul believes that Christ is its own possession. “[T]he ground and warrant” of the preached universal invitation to particularly apply Christ and his benefits is the “authentic gospel offer,” whereby “Christ is ours before we believe; not that we have a saving interest in him, or are in a state of grace, but that we have a common interest in him...so that it is lawful and warrantable for us...to take possession of Christ and his salvation” (119).

In receiving Christ by faith, Boston argues, one receives (secondly in order of logic, implicit in the reception of Christ) his benefits, namely, “life and salvation,” holiness and happiness, justification and sanctification (120). Since the act of faith whereby these benefits are obtained is the same self-conscious possessing whereby Christ is obtained, belief in personal pardon is necessarily included in justifying faith. Evangelista can go so far as to say that “*first of all*, God’s favour is apprehended, and remission of sins believed” (146, italics mine). Boston’s note explains that the object of faith is not, “that they are pardoned already; but that...God doth pardon his sin in the present time” (146n2). This cannot be otherwise, since “remission of sin is a part of that salvation which faith receives and rests on Christ for” (146n2).

In a footnote, Boston defends the “ancient Protestant doctrine” in which “one’s justification was made the object of one’s belief” (193). Both Roman Catholics and Antinomians, Boston points out, agree with each other against the Reformed that a faith of special mercy (i.e., a belief in one’s own justification) can only be true or well-grounded if one is antecedently justified. The Roman Catholic concludes that justifying faith cannot have one’s own justification for its object, and the Antinomian concludes to eternal justification. Boston vindicates “the true doctrine of faith”, quoting extensively from Wendeline:

“By the faith of special mercy, as it goeth before justification, a man doth not believe that his sins are forgiven him already, before the act of believing...But that he shall have forgiveness of sins; in the very act of justification, he believes his sins are forgiven him, and so receives forgiveness; after justification, he believes the past application” (193).

Boston confesses that this position has “grown almost quite out of ken with unlearned readers” (193).

Last in the logical order of the object of justifying faith, Boston argues, is a belief in one’s personal interest in the work of Christ (120). Boston is careful to point out that “This comes in the last place,” in order to fend off accusations either that one’s own election can be known or believed upon apart from faith in Christ, or that the atonement had a universal extent (120).

Boston’s defense of this point seems to me to meet Owen’s objection from the “order of nature” (at least, if I interpreted him rightly on this point). In fact, it does look as if Owen’s argument against the old Reformation definition of faith is the exact same as the one used by the Roman Catholics and Antinomians.

In the Marrow controversy, the *Marrow*’s definition of justifying faith, including as it did personal application of Christ and the benefits of his atoning work, provoked extensive debate about its implications for the extent of the atonement (Lachman 9). The topic is treated again at length in the “Queries agreed unto by the commission of the General Assembly, and put to those ministers who gave in a representation and petition against the 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> acts of Assembly 1720, with the answers given by these ministers

to the said queries.”<sup>32</sup> The seventh query asks “Is knowledge, belief, and persuasion, that Christ died for me, and that he is mine, and that whatever he did and suffered, he did and suffered for me, the direct act of faith, whereby a sinner is united to Christ, interested in him, instated in God’s covenant of grace? Or, is that knowledge a persuasion included in the very essence of that justifying act of faith?”<sup>33</sup> The query is clearly directed at the definition of saving faith noted above. The *Marrow* states that to “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ” is to “be verily persuaded in your heart that Jesus Christ is yours, and that you shall have life and salvation by him; that whatsoever Christ did for the redemption of mankind he did it for you.”<sup>34</sup>

In answering this question, the Marrow Brethren first point out that the view cannot be condemned without condemning the Reformation, since it was the consensus view of the Reformation.<sup>35</sup> Second, they note that the definition of saving faith is taken from John Rogers of Dedham, a Reformed pastor of unquestioned orthodoxy.<sup>36</sup> They later appeal for further historical support to the magisterial Reformers, many later Protestant scholastic divines, the confessions of the Reformed churches of many nations, and especially to the Heidelberg Catechism.<sup>37</sup> They point out that their view of faith is the one anathematized by the Council of Trent, and the view which the Reformers defended ferociously.<sup>38</sup>

The answer then turns to an analysis of the three objects of justifying faith comprised in the disputed definition: (1) Christ, (2) his benefits (life and salvation), and (3) the cross-work whereby he obtained the benefits. First, the warrant for believing that Christ is mine is the biblical gospel command to believe on and receive Christ.<sup>39</sup> Christ is universally offered so that anyone may and ought “to take possession of him and his salvation by faith.”<sup>40</sup> No one, however, will believe and obey the gospel command until compelled by the Holy Spirit.

Secondly the Marrow Brethren turn to the benefits contained in Christ, which they summarize as “life and salvation.” They mean by these sanctification and justification, and they intend to insist that these are inseparable. Calvin’s theology lies just below the surface of this point. Consider his famous formulation of it in the *Institutes*:

Although we may distinguish them [imputed righteousness and sanctification],

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<sup>32</sup> Included as an appendix in my copy of of Boston’s 1726 edition of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, pp. 344-370.

<sup>33</sup> *Marrow* 358.

<sup>34</sup> *Marrow* 118. Note that, as in Calvin, believing that Christ is yours is the act whereby he becomes yours. Furthermore, as in Calvin, it is not the *sufficiency* of the atonement which is the distinguishing feature of justifying faith but its *efficiency* in saving the believer. Justifying faith is the belief that Christ died for me (cf. Calvin and Luther’s commentaries on Gal. 2:20).

<sup>35</sup> *Marrow* 358.

<sup>36</sup> *Marrow* 358-9.

<sup>37</sup> *Marrow* 360-1. I am not sure whether every theologian and confession they appeal to really supports their position, but probably most do. As an example of dubious supports, they call Turretin to their side, but I can find no affirmation that assurance is of the essence of faith in Turretin. He seems solidly committed to assurance via the reflex act of faith. Furthermore, their appeal to the Westminster Standards is untenable, although important to the Marrow Brethren in the context of their ecclesiastical debate.

<sup>38</sup> *Marrow* 361.

<sup>39</sup> *Marrow* 359.

<sup>40</sup> *Marrow* 359.

Christ contains both of them inseparably in himself. Do you wish, then, to attain righteousness in Christ? You must first possess Christ; but you cannot possess him without being made partaker in his sanctification, because he cannot be divided into pieces [I Cor. 1:13].<sup>41</sup>

Note too that Calvin says “You must first possess Christ” before possessing his righteousness and sanctification. Obviously the order here is not temporal but logical. It is just this logical order which the Marrow Brethren are emphasizing in their definition of justifying faith. If we are warranted in believing that Christ is ours, then we are by the same token warranted in believing that salvation is ours in him: “for it is not possible to conceive a soul resting on Christ for salvation, without a persuasion that it shall have life and salvation by him...”<sup>42</sup>

The third part of justifying faith is a belief in one’s interest in the work of Christ. Here the Marrow Brethren claim to be following the example of Gal. 2:20 where Paul affirms that he lives by faith in the Son of God “who loved me and gave himself for me.” This aspect of justifying faith logically follows from a belief in our possession of Christ and his benefits: “...and coming in last place, we think none will question but whosoever believes, in the manner before explained, may and ought to believe this in the like measure and in the same order. And it is certain, all who receive and rest on Christ for salvation, believe it, if not explicitly, yet virtually and really.”<sup>43</sup>

The basic point which the Marrow Brethren make is that these cannot be separated. We cannot possess Christ without possessing his benefits, nor his benefits without possessing an interest in his sacrifice. Implicit in the reception of Christ is the reception of his benefits which come to us only through the cross. If we are warranted in believing that Christ is ours, then by implication we are warranted in believing that his righteousness is ours and that it is ours just because he died for us in particular. However, faith does not logically begin with the conviction that I am one of those for whom Christ died, for this is the same as it beginning with the thought that I am one of the elect. As Calvin says, Christ is the mirror of our election; we should never try to determine directly whether we are elect, but we should believe we are elect only insofar as we believe we are in Christ. Finally, we should stress that this ordering of the objects of justifying faith does not represent a *temporal* order but only a logical one. It is not as though sinners must believe these successively.

The Marrow Brethren all affirmed limited atonement.<sup>44</sup> Their definition of saving faith does not commit them to universal atonement any more than it commits them to universal justification. They do affirm that all men are warranted and commanded to believe that Christ is theirs, but they do not affirm that Christ is in fact already the possession of all men. Similarly, they affirm that all men are warranted and commanded to believe that Christ died for them, but this command is not premised on the fact that Christ has actually died for all men. The command to believe is not based on the antecedent truth of the propositions which are to be believed. However, no one who sincerely believes that Christ and his righteousness and his cross-work are their own possession, will ever believe this falsely. For believing is the instrumental cause of

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<sup>41</sup> 3.16.1; 798.

<sup>42</sup> *Marrow* 360.

<sup>43</sup> *Marrow* 360.

<sup>44</sup> With the exception of James Hog (“The Marrow Controversy”).

receiving Christ and his righteousness, and only those for whom Christ has actually died will ever come to believe that did die for them.

The Marrow Brethren sum all this up by insisting that confidence, or trust in Jesus Christ, as our Saviour, and the free grace and mercy of God in him as crucified, offered to us in the gospel for salvation, (including justification, sanctification, and future glory,) upon the ground and security of the divine faithfulness plighted in the gospel promise; and upon the warrant of the divine call and command to believe in the name of the Son of God; or, which is the same, in other words, a persuasion of life and salvation, from the free love and mercy of God, in and through Jesus Christ, a crucified Saviour offered to us, upon the security and warrant aforesaid, is the very direct, uniting, justifying, and appropriating act of faith, whereby the convinced sinner becomes possessed of Christ and his saving benefits...taking this always along, as supposed, that all is set home and wrought by the Holy Spirit, who brings Christ, his righteousness, salvation, and whole fullness, nigh to us in the promise and offer of the gospel;...enabling to a measure of confident application, and taking home of all to ourselves freely, without money and without price.<sup>45</sup>

## **2. *The Believer's Doubts.***

The Marrow Brethren fully acknowledge that faith, in its first exercise and throughout the believer's life, is sometimes so weak that the believer is afraid to affirm his own salvation, and even may go so far as to deny it:

...the sinner has not always, at his first closing with Christ, nor afterwards, such a clear, steady, and full persuasion that Christ is his, that his sins are forgiven, and that he eventually shall be saved, as that he dare profess the same to others, or even positively assert it within himself; yet, upon the first saving manifestation of Christ to him, such a persuasion and humble confidence is begotten, as is real and relieving, and particular as to himself and his own salvation, and which works a proportionable hope as to the issue; though, through the humbling impressions he has of himself and his own guilt at the time, the awe of God's majesty, justice, and holiness on his spirit, and his indistinct knowledge of the doctrine of the gospel, with the grounds and warrants of believing therein contained, he fears to express it directly and particularly of himself.<sup>46</sup>

The Marrow Brethren proceed to substantially reproduce Calvin's doctrine of the believer's battle with doubt, even picking up his metaphor of the embers of faith beneath the ashes.<sup>47</sup> Sometimes other Christians can discern saving faith in a true believer who cannot recognize it in himself:

Yea, not only may a believer have this persuasion [justifying faith] and not know it for the time,...but he, being under the power of temptation and confusion of mind, may resolutely deny he has any such persuasion or conscience; while it is evident to others at the same time, by its effects, that he really has it...<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> *Marrow* 362.

<sup>46</sup> *Marrow* 364.

<sup>47</sup> *Marrow* 364.

<sup>48</sup> *Marrow* 364-5.

### 3. *Evidences of True Faith.*

Personal assurance is not only of the essence of justifying faith, but it is also the only conceivable motive for evangelical repentance and obedience. Evangelista explains that “it is impossible we should ever love God, till by faith we know ourselves loved of God” (144). Boston’s extensive footnote on this point explains that without personal assurance, a man cannot help but infer that God is his wrathful enemy, and thus man will necessarily hate God (145n1). Without assurance of personal reconciliation with God, a man slavishly fears God. This slavish fear is utterly incompatible with true love to God. Evangelista explains that it is only when by faith a man knows himself loved of God that he in turn loves God as his good Father, and this love produces true repentance and all evangelical obedience (144-6). “So that, first of all, God’s favour is apprehended, and remission of sins believed; then upon that cometh alteration of life and conversation” (146). Boston’s notes on this comment correctly demonstrate that it has the support of Calvin and early Reformed confessions.

According to the *Marrow*, personal assurance must antecede and motivate all other graces that might count as evidence. The *Marrow* posits something of an evidential spiral by which a believer may use self-examination to move from a low degree of personal assurance (possibly so low as to be initially imperceptible to the believer himself) to the full assurance of faith (187-190, including Boston’s notes). If good works do not flow ultimately from a conscience cleared by faith (i.e., some degree of assurance of personal pardon through Christ), they are no marks of grace. It is clear that the role which the *Marrow* assigns to works in strengthening assurance is substantially the same as Calvin’s doctrine. The Marrow Brethren elaborate the role of works in strengthening pre-existing assurance in their answer to Query VII.<sup>49</sup>

The *Marrow* even suggests that basing assurance primarily and fundamentally on apparent evidences of grace is dangerous and deceitful. Fundamental reliance on the reflex act of faith seems to be what Evangelista opposes when he warns that

...if any man pitch upon the sign, without the thing signified by the sign [‘Namely, Christ in the heart’—Boston’s note], that is, if he pitch upon his graces (or gifts rather) and duties, and conclude assurance from them, as they are in him, and come from him, without having reference to Jesus Christ, as the root and fountain of them; then they are deceitful marks and signs...<sup>50</sup>

The “reference to Jesus Christ, as the root and fountain” of signs of grace is surely the Christian’s faith that Christ is in his heart, united with him.

Evangelista similarly argues that if Neophytus should ever find himself without any outward evidences of true faith, he should pursue personal assurance not by “forcing and constraining yourself to yield obedience to God’s commandments, to the end you may so get an evidence of faith again, or a ground to lay your believing, that you have believed, upon” (239). Instead, Neophytus should stop reasoning about the truth or falsity of his faith and, as when he first believed, get personal assurance in and by looking straight to Christ clothed in the promise (240). This fresh personal appropriation of Christ will then bring forth the fruit of obedience, “whereby you shall recover your evidence” (240, 240n1).

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<sup>49</sup> *Marrow* 365-6.

<sup>50</sup> Fisher 187.

### **Jonathan Edwards.**

For Edwards as for Owen, Scripture contains no universal warrant for an assured faith. Edwards uses an argument seen previously in Owen, that people can have no warrant to believe they are justified before they actually are. The only way to obtain assurance is by observing in oneself a disinterested love for God. Love for God must therefore precede any assurance of salvation. Love for God which is based fundamentally on assurance is self-interested and carnal. In fact, those whose first love for God is based on a belief in their own salvation are not genuine Christians. Thus, while Owen respectfully parts ways with the Reformers' doctrine of assurance, Edwards condemns it as false religion.

### ***The Religious Affections (1746).***

Edwards rejects the notion that justifying faith includes a belief in one's own pardon.

Those that thus insist on persons living by faith, when they have no experience, and are in very bad frames, are also very absurd in their notions of faith. What they mean by faith is, believing that they are in a good estate. . . . But what Bible do they learn this notion of faith out of, that it is a man's confidently believing that he is in a good estate?\* If this be faith, the Pharisees had faith in an eminent degree, some of whom, Christ teaches, committed the unpardonable sin against the Holy Ghost. The Scripture represents faith as that by which men are brought into a good estate; and therefore it cannot be the same thing as believing that they are already in a good estate. To suppose that faith consists in believing that they are in a good estate, is in affect the same thing as to suppose that faith consists in a person's believing that he has faith, in believing that he believes.<sup>51</sup>

Edwards thinks that if assurance is the essence of saving faith, the sinner is supposed to believe that he is *already* saved prior to believing. We have already seen Boston's counterargument to this misrepresentation of the Reformation view. An assured justifying faith believes "My sins *are now* forgiven for Christ's sake," not "My sins *have already been* forgiven before I believed." Edwards' footnote refers to a passage from *Stoddard's Nature of Saving Conversion* to similar effect: "Men do not know that they are godly by believing that they are godly. . . . It is not revealed in the Word, and the Spirit of God doth not testify it to particular persons."<sup>52</sup>

Personal assurance, therefore, can only be obtained on the basis of the evidence of salvation which we observe in ourselves: "Persons cannot be said to forsake Christ, and live on their experiences of the exercises of grace, merely because they take them and use them as evidences of grace; for there are not other evidences that they can or ought to take."<sup>53</sup>

Edwards is at great pains to oppose mystics who think that they have received an immediate message or impression from God that they themselves are his children.<sup>54</sup> Such immediate impressions may or may not be accompanied with Scriptural texts; in either case, they are unfounded. Edwards' opponents here should not be confused with the Reformers. These mystics base their assurance on their experience of an immediate impression, not on biblical gospel promises, even though gospel texts may happen to

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<sup>51</sup> *The Religious Affections* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1961). First published in 1746. P. 106.

<sup>52</sup> *Religious Affections* 106.

<sup>53</sup> *Religious Affections* 109.

<sup>54</sup> *Religious Affections* 146ff.

accompany their experiences. However, in the course of refuting his mystical opponents, he also inadvertently opposes the doctrine of the Reformers on many points. Edwards clearly thinks that Scripture does not give any basis for direct, immediate assurance apart from the evidential role of works. The only kind of assurance which is not based on introspection and self-examination is mystical and self-deceived.

Edwards' mystics receive purported impressions that they are *already saved*:

The first comfort of many persons, and what they call their conversion, is after this manner: after awakening and terrors, some comfortable sweet promise comes suddenly and wonderfully to their minds... from hence they take their first encouragement to trust in God and Christ, because they think that God, by some Scripture so brought, has now already revealed to them that He loves them, and has already promised them eternal life.

This of course is not the Reformation doctrine. A brief review of Boston's clarification of the tenses involved in saving faith makes this clear. But Edwards thinks that the only way to avoid grounding faith in a person's antecedent justification is to separate faith from personal assurance:

But this [see previous quote] is very absurd, for every one with common knowledge of the principles of religion knows that it is God's manner to reveal His love to men, and their interest in the promises, after they have believed, and not before, because they must first believe before they have any interest in the promises to be revealed. The Spirit of God is a Spirit of truth and not of lies: He does not bring Scriptures to men's minds, to reveal to them that they have an interest in God's favour and promises when they have none, having not yet believed: which would be the case, if God's bringing texts of Scripture to men's minds, to reveal to them that their sins were forgiven, or that it was God's pleasure to give them the kingdom, or anything of that nature, went before, and was the foundation of their first faith.<sup>55</sup>

Edwards continues to make this same point at length. He the point is based on a misunderstanding. The *Marrow* doctrine is not that Scripture reveals to sinners that they are saved before they actually believe. The *Marrow* doctrine is that Scripture tells sinners that if they embrace Jesus Christ by believing that Christ and his benefits are their own possession, that belief will be true in the instant that it is exercised. Assurance is warranted by Scripture and essential to saving faith, but is not based on a direct revelation that one is already, prior to faith, saved.

Edwards footnotes Solomon Stoddard and Thomas Shepard in defense of the thesis that "God's manner is not to bring comfortable texts of Scripture to give men assurance of his love and of future happiness, before they have had a faith of dependence."<sup>56</sup>

Edwards' way of phrasing this thesis makes plain that his specific opponents are those who advocate a mystical direct assurance of faith which is not based on the plain meaning of Scripture. Nevertheless, he combats the mystics by denying that assurance is of the essence of faith in any sense, and his quoted authorities do the same:

...God never gives a faith of assurance before he gives a faith of dependence; for he never manifests His love until men are in a state of favour and reconciliation,

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<sup>55</sup> *Religious Affections* 149-50.

<sup>56</sup> *Religious Affections* 150.

which is by faith of dependence...God's method is, first to make the soul accept of the offers of grace, and then to manifest his good estate unto him...<sup>57</sup>

Thomas Shepard pointedly denies Calvin's doctrine of the witness of the Spirit as the cause of justifying faith:

The testimony of the Spirit does not make a man more a Christian, but only evidenceth it; as it is the nature of a witness not to make a thing to be true, but to clear and evidence it...the witness of the Spirit makes not the first difference [between true believers and hypocrites]: for first a man is a believer and in Christ, and justified, called and sanctified, before the Spirit does witness to it; else the Spirit should witness to an untruth and lie.<sup>58</sup>

Edwards explains what Paul means by the witness of the Spirit in Rom. 8:16.

Here, what the apostle says, if we take it together, plainly shows that what he has respect to, when he speaks of the Spirit's giving us witness or evidence that we are God's children, is His dwelling in us, and leading us, as a spirit of adoption, or spirit of a child, disposing us to behave towards God as to a father. This is the witness or evidence which the apostle speaks of that we are children, that we have the spirit of children, or spirit of adoption. And what is that but the spirit of love?<sup>59</sup>

The Spirit makes us love God, and this love to God provides evidence of our adoption, from which we may infer that we are his children. So love to God can and in fact must exist prior to assurance. Awareness of our own love to God is the basis of our assurance. Love "gives us clear evidence of our union to God as His children, and so casts out fear."<sup>60</sup>

Edwards bases assurance on our self-awareness of our love to God, which may seem an unstable foundation for Christian assurance. But he makes very strong statements about our ability to perceive our own love to God, seeming even to suggest that we cannot fail to perceive it:

And though the sight of his [the saint's] relative union with God, and his being in His favour, is not without a medium, because he sees it by that medium, viz., his love, yet his sight of the union of his heart to God is immediate. Love, the bond of union, is seen intuitively: the saint sees and feels plainly the union between his soul and God; it is so strong and lively that he cannot doubt of it. And hence he is assured that he is a child.<sup>61</sup>

In the next section, Edwards continues to argue against the mystics whose personal assurance is based not on an inference from their disinterested love to God, but on a sudden impression of their own salvation. Edwards now argues against these mystics that any affections towards God which arise from immediate assurance are rooted in carnal self-love. Edwards' point however does not merely mitigate against the mystics, but also against the Reformation view that a belief in God's love to us in particular is the cause of all Christian graces and love to God. The title of the section makes clear Edwards' basic point: "*The primary ground of gracious affections is the transcendently excellent and*

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<sup>57</sup> Stoddard's *Guide to Christ*, quoted in *Religious Affections* 150.

<sup>58</sup> *The Parable of the Ten Virgins*, 141, 224, quoted in *Religious Affections* 150.

<sup>59</sup> *Religious Affections* 163.

<sup>60</sup> *Religious Affections* 164.

<sup>61</sup> *Religious Affections* 164.

*amiable nature of divine things as they are in themselves; and not any conceived relation they bear to self, or self-interest.*"<sup>62</sup> Edwards argues that "the primary reason" why the true saint loves God and Christ and Scripture is for their own sake "and not any supposed interest that he has in them, or any conceived benefit that he has received from them, or shall receive from them."<sup>63</sup>

Edwards warns that only if a belief in one's own salvation is the foundation of one's love and affections to God, that love is spurious and that assurance is deceptive. "Again, a very high affection towards God may, and often does, arise in men from an opinion of the favour and love of God to them, as the first foundation of their love to him," but this is only because "selfish proud man naturally calls that lovely that greatly contributes to his interest, and gratifies his ambition."<sup>64</sup>

But the exercises of true and holy love in the saints arise in another way. They do not first see that God loves them, and then see that He is lovely, but they first see that God is lovely, and that Christ is excellent and glorious, and their hearts are first captivated with this view, and the exercises of their love are wont from time to time to begin here, and to arise primarily from these views; and then, consequentially, they see God's love, and great favour to them. The saint's affections begin with God; and self-love has a hand in these affections consequentially and secondarily only. On the contrary, false affections begin with self, and an acknowledgment of an excellency in God, and an affectedness with it, is only consequential and dependent. In the love of the true saint God is the lowest foundation; the love of the excellency of His nature is the foundation of all the affections which come afterwards, wherein self-love is concerned as a handmaid: but the hypocrite lays himself at the bottom of all, as the first foundation, and lays on God as the superstructure; and even his acknowledgement of God's glory itself depends on his regard to his private interest.<sup>65</sup>

Edwards continues to develop this basic point at length. John Gerstner, summarizing Edwards' view of conversion, states that the replacement of self-interest with love for God and his glory is the beginning of Christian faith: "If men actually do become professing Christians from principles of fear and self-interest alone, they are not true Christians" (64-5). William Breitenbach has noted that by 1758 Edwards had laid down "most of the important New Divinity principles," such as the principles that

"...The gracious affections of the heart consist in disinterested love to God for his intrinsic amiableness. Any conversions based on self-love are counterfeit... Love to God precedes faith in the order of justification, or, put another way, *the first act of justifying faith is love, not belief or assurance*... Evangelical repentance—a cordial and willing consent to the beauty of the law that damns sinners—precedes pardon" (191).

Breitenbach's assertions go beyond the theses for which I have given direct textual support but I think they accurately represent the tenor of Edwards' theology.

### **Edwards' Accounts of Brainerd's Spiritual Life and His Own.**

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<sup>62</sup> *Religious Affections* 165.

<sup>63</sup> *Religious Affections* 166.

<sup>64</sup> *Religious Affections* 171.

<sup>65</sup> *Religious Affections* 172.

Edwards' interpretation of his own spiritual life matches up precisely with his doctrine of disinterested (unassured) justifying faith:

The sweetest joys and delights I have experienced, have not been those that have arisen from a hope of my own good estate; but in a direct view of the glorious things of the gospel. When I enjoy this sweetness, it seems to carry me above the thoughts of my own estate; it seems, at such times, a loss that I cannot bear, to take off my eye from the glorious, pleasant object I behold without me, to turn my eye in upon myself, and my own good estate.<sup>66</sup>

Edwards also heartily endorses many aspects of Brainerd's conversion and Christian life, and takes them as somewhat paradigmatic of true religion. George Marsden says:

The missionary, in Edwards' account, had all the traits of the model Christian. The *Life of Brainerd*, seen in this larger framework, is *Religious Affections* in the form of a spiritual biography.

It might also be seen in part as a spiritual autobiography. Although the substance of the volume is edited diaries, it is often difficult to distinguish between author and editor.<sup>67</sup>

#### *Brainerd's Journal.*

Brainerd's account of the moment of his conversion perfectly coheres with the Edwardsian vision of justifying faith. Note especially the italicized portion at the end of the first paragraph below:

Having been thus endeavoring to pray—though, as I thought, very stupid and senseless—for near half an hour, then, as I was walking in a dark thick grove, *unspeakable glory* seemed to open to the view and apprehension of my soul. I do not mean any external brightness, for I saw no such thing...but it was a new inward apprehension or view that I had of *God*, such as I never had before, nor any thing which had the least resemblance of it. I stood still, wondered, and admired! I knew that I never had seen before any thing comparable to it for excellency and beauty; it was widely different from all the conceptions that ever I had of God, or things divine...it appeared to be *divine glory*. My soul *rejoiced with joy unspeakable*, to see such a God, such a glorious Divine Being; and I was inwardly pleased and satisfied that he should be *God over all* for ever and ever. My soul was so captivated and delighted with the excellency, loveliness, greatness, and other perfections of God, that I was even swallowed up in him; at least to that degree, that *I had no thought (as I remember) at first about my own salvation, and scarce reflected there was such a creature as myself...*[italics mine]

Thus God, I trust, brought me to a hearty disposition to *exalt him*, and set him on the throne, and principally and ultimately to aim at his honour and glory, as King of the universe.<sup>68</sup>

In language reminiscent of Owen, the object of Brainerd's faith was not his own pardon but the glorious "way of salvation" through Jesus Christ.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> I:xlvi

<sup>67</sup> 331.

<sup>68</sup> 319.

<sup>69</sup> 319.

Edwards makes a great deal of the disinterested character of Brainerd's first faith in his "Some Reflections and Observations on the preceding Memoirs, etc., of the Rev. David Brainerd."

His first discovery of God or Christ, at his conversion, was not any strong idea of any external glory or brightness, or majesty and beauty of countenance, or pleasant voice; nor was it any supposed immediate manifestation of God's love to *him* in particular; nor any imagination of Christ's smiling face, arms open, or words immediately spoken to him, as by name, revealing Christ's love to *him*; either words of Scripture, or any other. But it was a manifestation of God's glory, and the beauty of his nature, as supremely excellent in itself; powerfully drawing, and sweetly captivating his heart; bringing him to a hearty desire to exalt God, set him on the throne, and give him supreme honour and glory, as the King and Sovereign of the universe: and also a new sense of the infinite wisdom, suitableness, and excellency of the way of salvation by Christ; powerfully engaging his whole soul to embrace this way of salvation, and to delight in it. His first faith did not consist in believing that Christ loved him, and died for him, in particular. His first comfort was not from any secret suggestion of God's eternal love to him, or that God was reconciled to him, or intended great mercy for him; by any such texts as these, "Son, be of good cheer, thy sins are forgiven thee. Fear not, I am thy God," &c. or in any such way. On the contrary, when God's glory was first discovered to him, it was without any thought of salvation as his own.<sup>70</sup>

Edwards is obviously stressing the themes of the *Religious Affections*. As in *Religious Affections*, Edwards' primary target are those whose first assurance is not based on Scripture. Nonetheless, what he argues is that assurance cannot be part of our first and justifying faith. Justifying faith is a delight in the glory of Christ without reference to our own interest in his saving work.

Edwards goes on to defend the position that firm assurance can (and indeed must) be based upon the reflex act of faith—an inference from the discovery of the evidences of regeneration (disinterested love to God) in our own hearts. Brainerd derived assurance in this way through his whole Christian life, and even unto death:

Nor do I find any one instance in all the records he has left of his own life, from beginning to end, of joy excited from a supposed *immediate* witness of the Spirit; or inward immediate suggestion, that his state was surely good, that God loved him with an everlasting love, that Christ died for him in particular, and that heaven was his; either with or without a text of Scripture... But the way he was satisfied of his own good estate, even to the entire abolishing of all fear, was by feeling within himself the lively actings of a holy temper and heavenly disposition, the vigorous exercises of that divine love which casteth out fear. This was the way he had full satisfaction soon after his conversion; (see his diary on October 18, and 19, 1740;) and we find no other way of satisfaction throughout his whole life afterwards: and this he abundantly declared to be the way, the only way, that he had complete satisfaction, when he looked death in the face, in its near approaches.

Some of the pretenders to an *immediate* witness by suggestion, and defenders of it, with an assuming confidence would bear us in hand, that there is no full

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<sup>70</sup> 448.

assurance without it; and that the way of being satisfied by signs, and arguing an interest in Christ from sanctification, if it will keep men quiet in life and health, yet will never do when they come to *die*.<sup>71</sup>

But Edwards rejoins that when Brainerd died, he declared

that this his consolation and good hope through grace, arose wholly from the *evidence* he had of his good estate, by what he found of his sanctification, or the exercise of a holy heavenly temper of mind, supreme love to God, &c. and not in the least from any *immediate* witness by suggestion. Yea, he declares that at these very times he saw the awful *delusion* of that confidence which is built on such a foundation, as well as of the whole of that religion which it usually springs from, or at least is the attendant of; and that his soul abhorred those delusions: and he continued in this mind, often expressing it with much solemnity, even till death.<sup>72</sup>

Of course, it is not only the mystics that Edwards/Brainerd feared whose religion is built on the foundation of assurance, but also the religion of the Reformation.

Edwards/Brainerd seems very skeptical of the authenticity of this sort of religion.

Edwards stresses that Brainerd's religion—his whole love and service to God—was not founded on personal assurance (though it gave rise to this) but upon disinterested adoration of God's glory in Christ. By implication, he disparages the assurance-based religion of the Reformation.

Mr. Brainerd's religion was not *selfish* and *mercenary*: his love to God was primarily and principally for the supreme excellency of his *own nature*, and not built on a preconceived notion that God loved *him*, had received *him* into favour, and had done great things *for him*, or promised great things *to him*. His joy was joy in *God*, and not in *himself*. But what was the spring of this strong and abiding consolation? Not so much the consideration of the sure grounds he had to think that his state was good, that God had delivered him from hell, and that heaven was *his*; or any thoughts concerning his own distinguished happy and exalted circumstances, as a high favourite of Heaven: but the sweet meditations and entertaining views he had of divine things *without himself*; the affecting considerations and lively ideas of God's infinite glory, his unchangeable blessedness, his sovereignty and universal dominion; together with the sweet exercises of love to God, giving himself up to him, abasing himself before him, denying himself before him, depending upon him, acting for his glory, diligently serving him; and the pleasing prospects or hopes he had of a future advancement of the kingdom of God.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> 448.

<sup>72</sup> 448.

<sup>73</sup> 448-9.