

CHAPTER XVIII.

OF ASSURANCE OF GRACE AND SALVATION.

Section I.—Although hypocrites, and other unregenerate men, may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions: of being in the favour of God and estate of salvation; which hope of theirs shall perish: yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavouring to walk in all good conscience before him, may in this life be certainly assured that they are in a state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God: which hope shall never make them ashamed.

Section II.—This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probably persuasion, grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith, founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God; which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.

EXPOSITION.

By the "assurance of grace and salvation," treated of in his chapter, is meant the believers assurance that he is "in the state of grace," and has a personal interest in the salvation of Christ. The statements on this subject are directed against certain errors of the Church of Rome, and of the Arminians. The Church of Rome denies that it is possible for any man in this life to attain more than a conjectural and probable persuasion of salvation, except by extraordinary revelation; and they build some of the most gainful parts of their traffic upon that perpetual doubt and uncertainty, with respect to their final salvation, in which they keep their votaries, and which they profess in some degree to remove by the prayers of the Church, the merits of saints and martyrs, and the absolution which the priests pronounce in the name of God. The Arminians, in consistency with their denial of the certainty of the saints final perseverance, hold that it is not possible for any man to attain a greater certainty of salvation than this, that, if he shall persevere in the faith to the end, he shall be saved.

1. In opposition to these errors, our Confession teaches, that the saints, without any special or immediate revelation, in the due use of ordinary means, may attain, not merely a conjectural or probable persuasion, but a certain assurance of their being in a state of grace, and of their final salvation. This is confirmed by such considerations as the following:—1. In the Scriptures, Christians are enjoined to examine themselves, and give all diligence to attain this assurance. The Apostle Paul exhorts the Corinthians to "examine themselves whether they be in the

faith," and speaks of it as an argument of something very blameable in them, not to know whether Jesus Christ be in them or not.—2. Cor. xiii. 5. The Apostle Peter directs all Christians to "give all diligence to make their calling and election sure", not to others, but to themselves; and informs them how they may do this.—2 Pet. i. 5-11. The exhortation is addressed to them that have "obtained precious faith through the righteousness of God, even our Saviour Jesus Christ;" they are directed to "add to their faith, virtue; and to virtue, knowledge," &c.; and they are informed, that by so doing, they would attain a certain assurance of their calling, and election, and have a certain admission into the everlasting kingdom of God in heaven. This direction is of the same nature with the exhortation of the Apostle Paul to the Hebrews (vi. 11) "We desire that everyone of you do show the same diligence, to the full assurance of hope unto the end." These exhortations make it manifest, that Christian have the means, without any special revelation, of assuring themselves of their present piety and future safety. 2. The Scriptures exhibit many marks or characters of genuine believers, by which they may be certainly assured that they have believed to the saving of their souls. "Hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments." "Whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected; hereby know we that we are in him."—1 John ii. 3, 5. "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren." "Hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him."—1 John iii. 14,19. The scope of the whole of that Epistle is, to propose such sure marks to believers, by which they may "know that they have eternal life."—1 John v. 13. 3. We have many examples of the attainment of this assurance, in the history of the personal experience of the saints. The saints described in Scripture were in the habit of expressing their assurance of salvation. "As for me," said David, "I will behold thy face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness."—Ps. xvii. 15. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."—Ps. xxiii. 6. "Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory."—Ps. lxxiii. 24. Job, too, in the midst of his accumulated afflictions, spoke the language of assurance: "I know that my Redeemer liveth," &c.—Job xix. 20. The experience of New Testament believers is still more plainly expressed. The Apostle Paul may serve as an example. These are his triumphant assertions in behalf of all the saints: "We are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."—Rom. viii. 37-39; see also, 2 Cor. v. 1. Upon another occasion he declares his assurance that he had believed in Christ, and his full persuasion of his future felicity: "I know whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day."—2 Tim. i. 12. So confident was he that, when "absent from the body," he should be present with the Lord", that he expresses his willingness, nay, his ardent desire, in consequence of his assurance, to be released from the body, that he might immediately enter upon the heavenly enjoyment: "I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight,

I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day."—2 Tim. iv. 6-8; see also 2 Cor. v. 8; Phil. i. 23. These examples must be sufficient to establish the general principle, that an assurance of salvation is in this life attainable by believers.

2. This assurance is "founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, and the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God." It is not founded upon any of these things singly, but upon all of them combined. The promises of salvation in the Word furnish us with the distinguishing characters of true Christians, and infallibly assure us, that all in whom these characters are found shall be saved. The inward evidences of grace assure us that we possess these characters; and we are then warranted to draw the conclusion, that we are now in a gracious state, and "shall be saved with an everlasting salvation." "Assurance is generally attained by a sort of sacred syllogism, or reasoning in this manner:—Whosoever believeth in the Lord Jesus Christ is in a state of grace, and shall be saved.—Acts xvi. 31; Rom. ix. 33. But I believe in him; therefore, I am in a state of grace, and shall be saved. So long as we believe the Scriptures of truth, the first of these propositions cannot be called in question. All the difficulty respects the second, viz., Whether we truly believe in Christ. For it cannot be denied, that a man may think himself to be something when he is nothing, and so deceive himself.—Gal. vi. 3. As little can it, that the mental eyes may be holden, as sometimes the bodily have (Luke xxiv. 15); and in such a case, even he that feareth the Lord must walk in darkness (Isa. i. 10); not knowing that he is in Christ, though he certainly is. It is not sufficient that the man is conscious of certain acts, as of faith, repentance, love to God and all his saints. In order to reach the heights of holy assurance, he must be satisfied as to the specific nature of these acts, that they are unfeigned, and not hypocritical. But how he can attain to this, without the assistance of the Holy Spirit, is inconceivable. He who gave him faith and repentance, must also make him know the things which are freely given him of God.—1 Cor. ii. 12. As the sun cannot be seen but by his own light, neither can we know, but by the Spirit, that we have the Spirit."

Some have taught, that every man who believes in Christ must be immediately conscious that he does so; and that this consciousness is the first evidence which a man has that he is in a justified state. Our Confession is altogether silent concerning this evidence; or rather, it plainly indicates, that this consciousness is by no means an inseparable concomitant of true faith. This consciousness is the same thing that many theological writers have termed "the reflex act of faith." By this they meant a consciousness of the direct act of faith, or a knowledge that one has believed, arising from reflection. Now, by declaring that the "assurance of grace and salvation" is not essential to faith, our Confession teaches that a person may believe in Christ, and may be justified by his faith, before he attain the assurance that he is in a justified state; or, in other words, he may believe in Christ, and not be immediately conscious that he has truly believed to the saving of his soul. Faith admits of different degrees, and the evidence of it will be proportioned to its strength. When large communications of the Spirit are given, by means of which

faith becomes very strong, then it may carry along with it the most convincing evidence of its truth. Doubtless the faith of many of the saints recorded in Scripture, as of Abraham, the centurion, and the woman of Canaan, was such as left no room to doubt of it. But this will not warrant us to assert, that every believer must be instantly conscious of his believing in Christ, and that his faith is unfeigned. "If faith consisted merely in an assent of the understanding to the truth of a proposition, on perceiving the evidence on which it rests, there could be no doubt of the person being conscious or certain of it; but if the heart be in any sense the proper seat of saving faith, more uncertainty will attend the evidence arising from consciousness. If no opposite dispositions to God and to the way of salvation by grace existed in the soul, the matter would be very easy; but that is not the case. The heart, in regeneration, is not altogether delivered from the deceit occasioned by sin; so that it constantly attempts to deceive and mislead the soul. There is not one gracious spiritual disposition or exercise of the heart but may be, in some degree, counterfeited by the mere working of natural principles; and the remaining deceit of the heart may so operate as to render it very difficult for the believer to discriminate the one from the other. Many morally serious persons are deceived in this way, mistaking those affections which they sometimes feel, and which are excited by various causes, for the work of grace. It must, indeed, be past a doubt, that the saving operations of the Spirit must produce very different effects on the soul from any other cause whatever; and, therefore, his work may certainly be discriminated from every other. Still, however, considerable difficulty will remain where faith is weak. Nor can it be otherwise, while there is in the believer's members a law warring against the law in his mind; and while the flesh lusts against the Spirit, preventing him from doing the things that he would. Nor is the inference fairly drawn from the case of the primitive Christians, who seemed to have no hesitation about the truth of their faith, and declared readily that they believed. Much larger measures of grace seem then to have been given, and given to all, than are given in general, and since that time."

There can be no question in regard to the reality of the witnessing of the Spirit; for an inspired apostle expressly declares: "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God."—Rom. viii. 16. There are different opinions, however, in regard to the manner in which the Spirit gives this testimony. Some have thought that the Spirit witnesses the believer's adoption by inward revelation, or by way of immediate suggestion. "The Spirit," says one, "by himself, witnesses in a distinct way from that which is by water and blood, by shedding abroad the love of God upon the heart in a soul-ravishing way." "This is evident," it is added, "from the experience of the saints. Many of them have been brought to assurance in this immediate way; and not merely by reflection upon marks, and signs, and qualifications within, which is the Spirit's witnessing by water or sanctification." The greater part of divines, however, concur in the opinion, that the Spirit witnesses by means of his operations, or by the effects produced by him in the hearts of believers. They reject the idea of an immediate testimony, and hold that the work of the Spirit is the testimony which he gives, assuring believers of their adoption and consequent safety. President Edwards speaks very decidedly and strongly against the opinion, that the Spirit witnesses

by way of immediate suggestion or revelation, and declares that many mischiefs have arisen from this false and delusive notion. "What has misled many," says he, "in their notion of that influence of the Spirit of God we are speaking of, is the word witness, its being called the witness of the Spirit. Hence they have taken it, not to be any effect or work of the Spirit upon the heart, giving evidence from whence men may argue that they are the children of God; but an inward immediate suggestion, as though God inwardly spoke to the man, and testified to him, and told him that he was his child, by a kind of secret voice, or impression: not observing the manner in which the word witness or testimony, is often used in the New Testament; where such terms often signify, not only a mere declaring and asserting a thing to be true, but holding forth evidence from whence a thing may be argued and proved to be true. Thus (Heb. ii. 4), God is said to bear witness, with signs and wonders, and divers miracles and gifts of the Holy Ghost. Now these miracles, here spoken of, are called God's witness, not because they are of the nature of assertions, but evidences and proofs. So also Acts xiv. 3, John v. 36, x. 25. So the water and the blood are said to bear witness (1 John v. 8), not that they spoke or asserted anything, but they were proofs and evidences." "Indeed the apostle, when in that (Rom. viii. 16), he speaks of the Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are the children of God, does sufficiently explain himself, if his words were but attended to. What is here expressed is connected with the two preceding verses, as resulting from what the apostle had there said, as every reader may see. The three verses together are thus: 'For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God; for ye have not received the Spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father: the Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.' 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." More recent authors take the same view of this subject, and it is satisfactory to find such harmony among the most eminent theological writers upon a point so interesting. "The Spirit bears testimony to the sonship of believers," says Dr Dick, "when he brings to light, by his operations upon their souls, the evidences of their adoption; and thus makes their relation to God as manifest as if he assured them of it with an audible voice." "There is one very obvious way", says Dr Chalmers, "in which the Spirit may bear witness with our spirit that we are the children of God; or in which, according to the translation of many, the Spirit may bear witness to, or attest to our spirit that we are God's children. It is he who worketh a work of grace in our souls, and that work may become manifest to our own consciences. We may read the lineaments of our own renovated character, and it may be regarded as an exercise of our own spirit, that by which we become acquainted with the new features or the new characteristics that have been formed upon ourselves. And we may, furthermore, read in the Bible, what be the Scripture marks of the new creature; and as all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, this is one way in which a joint testimony may be made out between God's Spirit and our spirit upon the subject; or in which a communication may be made to pass

from the one to the other, so that they both shall concur in one and the same sentence—that we are indeed God’s children. The part that the Spirit of God hath had in this matter is, that he both graves upon us the lineaments of a living epistle of Christ Jesus, find tells us in the epistle of a written revelation what these lineaments are. The part which our own spirit has is, that, with the eye of consciousness, we read what is in ourselves; and, with the eye of the understanding, we read what is in the Book of God’s testimony. And upon our perceiving that such as the marks of grace which we find to be within, so are the marks of grace which we observe in the description of that Word without that the Spirit hath indicted, we arrive at the conclusion, that we are born of God. But what is more, it is the work of the Spirit to make one see more clearly in both of these directions, to open one’s eyes both that he might behold the things contained in the Bible with brighter manifestation, and, also that he might behold the things which lie deeply, and to most, undiscoverable, hidden in the arcane of their own hearts.”

“I could not, without making my own doctrine outstrip my own experience, vouch for any other intimation of the Spirit of God than that which he gives in the act of making the Word of God clear unto you, and the state of your own heart clear unto you. From the one you draw what are its promises—from the other, what are your own personal characteristics; and the application of the first to the second may conduct to a most legitimate argument, that you personally are one of the saved—and that not a tardy or elaborate argument either, but with an evidence quick and powerful as the light of intuition.”

Section III.—This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith but that a true believer may wait long and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it: yet, being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto. And therefore it is the duty of everyone to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure; that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance: so far is it from inclining men to looseness.

Section IV.—True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as, by negligence in preserving of it; by falling into some special sin, which woundeth the conscience, and grieveth the Spirit; by some sudden or vehement temptation; by God’s withdrawing the light of his countenance and suffering even such as fear him to walk in darkness and to have no light: yet are they never utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the

Spirit, this assurance may in due time be revived, and by the which, in the meantime, they are supported from utter despair.

EXPOSITION.

That the assurance that one is in a gracious state does not lifelong to the essence of faith, requires no proof. This assurance arises from the perception of the fruits and evidences of faith; and it is manifest that faith must exist before its evidences can be discerned. All faith is founded on testimony; but there is no testimony in the Scriptures declaring to any man that he is in a state of grace; this, therefore, cannot be object of faith. This kind of assurance, as has been already shown; is ordinarily obtained by reflection, or lay a process of reasoning. But, although the assurance described in this chapter is not essential to faith, yet there is an assurance which belongs to the essence of faith, and this our Confession recognises in the chapter which treats of saving faith. It makes the principal acts of saving faith to consist in "accepting, receiving, and resting" on Christ for salvation; and it is impossible for one to rest on Christ for salvation without believing or trusting that he shall be saved by him. Whoever rests upon a person for doing a certain thing in his favour, must have a persuasion' or assurance, that he will do that thing for him. Indeed, assurance is so essential to faith, that without it there can be no faith, human or divine. To believe a report, is to be persuaded or assured of the truth of the report; to believe a promise, is to be persuaded or assured that the promiser will do as he has said. In like manner, to believe in Christ for salvation, is to be persuaded or assured that we shall be saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That assurance which is essential to faith, is generally termed the assurance of faith; and the assurance of grace and salvation is termed the assurance of sense. By some the former is called an *objective*, and the latter a *subjective* assurance. There is a marked distinction between them; the former having for its object the faithfulness of God in the gospel testimony; whereas the latter has for its object the existence of a gracious work in the soul. The former arises from a single view of what is contained in the Word of God; the latter, from a combined view of his Word without us and of his work within us. The former is an assurance that God is presently giving Christ, with his salvation to us, in the free offer and -promise of the gospel; the latter is an assurance that Christ and his salvation are already ours in real possession and enjoyment. That is inseparable from saving faith; this is both separable, and often actually separated, from the exercise of true faith.

There are two extremes in reference to this subject, which ought to be avoided. The one is, that there is no assurance in the direct act of faith, and that assurance can only be derived from the marks and evidences of a gracious state; the other is, that the assurance of personal salvation is so essential to saving faith, that no one can be a genuine believer who has any doubts of his own salvation. We apprehend, on the one hand, that while the assurance which arises from marks and evidences of a gracious state does not belong to the essence of faith, yet there is an assurance in the direct act of faith, founded upon nothing about the person himself, but solely upon the Word of God; and, on the other hand, that though there is

an assurance essential to faith, yet the believe may be often perplexed with doubts and fears concerning his personal salvation, because there is still much unbelief, and other corruptions, remaining in him, and these frequently prevail against him.

It will be sufficient briefly to state the other truths contained in these sections.

1. As the assurance of their gracious state is attainable by believers, in the due use of ordinary means, so it is their duty to give diligence, and use their utmost endeavours to obtain it. This is incumbent upon them by the command of God, and it is necessary to their own comfort, though not to their safety.

2. This assurance is not the attainment of all believers; and, after it has been enjoyed, it may be weakened, and even lost for a season. It is liable to be shaken by bodily infirmity, by their own negligence, by temptation, by that visitation of God which the Scriptures call his hiding his face from his people, and by occasional transgression.

3. Although believers may forfeit their assurance, yet they are never entirely destitute of gracious habits and dispositions, nor left to sink into utter despair; and their assurance may, by the operation of the Spirit, be in due time revived.

4. This assurance, instead of encouraging believers to indulge in sin, excites them to the vigorous pursuit of holiness. Such as boast of their assurance, and yet can deliberately practise known sin, are only vain pretenders. True assurance cannot be attained or preserved without close walking with God in all his commandments and ordinances blameless. We must judge of the tendency of the assurance of salvation by what the apostles of our Lord have said concerning it; and they uniformly improve it as a motive to holiness.—Rom. xiii. 11-14; 1 Cor. xv. 58; 1 John iii. 2, 3.