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"Unfallible Certenty of the Pardon of Sinne and Life Everlasting"

The Doctrine of Assurance in the Theology of William Perkins (1558-1602)

by Gordon J. Keddie

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INTRODUCTION: STATING THE PROBLEM

The greatest "case of conscience . . . that ever was", according to the Elizabethan Puritan, William Perkins, concerns ". . . how a man may know whether he be a child of God, or no."¹

Modern commentators on the Reformation period have noted the relationship between this question—the subjective assurance of salvation—and the doctrine of predestination, that central theme of Reformation theology. According to Beardslee,

A reason for the Reformed Churches' concern over the doctrine [of predestination, G.K.] can be seen in the age-old quest for religious certainty. Without the assurance of church, sacramental grace or the saints, . . . what assurance was there? If a man's feeble good works could not be re-enforced by the services of the church, then he must be able to put all, literally, into God's hands, or he would really be lost.²

This is echoed by A. Mitchell Hunter, who further points out that Calvin's initial and principal concern, as exemplified in his controversy with Cop, was to establish the notion of absolute certainty, the *certitudo absoluta*, over against the at best conjectural certainty of Romanism.³ Assurance, for the Reformers, was rooted in divine election and the experience of saving faith in Christ, over against the mechanical sacramental grace of Rome. And yet, as will be shown later, the Reformers did not work out, with any consistency, a clear doctrine of assurance. William Cunningham makes the point that, "in accordance with the general course of His [God's] providential procedure," the Reformers, like many placed in difficult

1 William Perkins, *Workes* (London: J. Legatt, 1612, 1613), p. 421.

2 J. W. Beardslee III, *Reformed Dogmatics* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), p. 16.

3 A. Mitchell Hunter, *The Teaching of Calvin* (London: Jas. Clarke & Co., Ltd., 1950), p. 102.

circumstances for the cause of Christ, enjoyed, in general, a fuller assurance of salvation than Christians living in quieter circumstances. Furthermore, such vigorous certainty could often be traced to special circumstances surrounding the conversion experiences of such men.⁴

In the period immediately following the Reformation, therefore, an increasing concern of the emerging Reformed orthodoxy was to be the construction of a theology of assurance to fill a lacuna in the earlier formulation, which just did not adequately explain the range of Christian experience with respect to doubt. One may very well turn Beardslee’s assertion right around, for the post-Reformation period, and say that the desire for a theology of certainty of salvation, *certitudo salutis*, necessarily arose out of the firmly held predestinarianism of the Reformation, and her rejection of the sacramental grace of the papists.

It will be the purpose of this paper to examine the doctrine of assurance as it is found in the writings of William Perkins, who may properly be regarded as a founder of English Puritanism and therefore an important influence in the developments leading to the confessional orthodoxy of the Westminster Assembly of Divines nearly a half-century after his death, and view it in the light of prior formulations, principally that of John Calvin.

I. THE EARLY FORMULATION OF THE DOCTRINE BY JOHN CALVIN

(1) *Calvin’s Doctrine of Assurance.* Calvin speaks, first of all, of the relationship between faith and certainty, pointing out that the hinge upon which faith turns is the experience of the believer, “inwardly embracing God’s promises of mercy.”⁵ The central issue, then, is the *experience* of the presence of *saving faith*. Election is never seen, in Calvin, in a purely deterministic light, in which God—in the words of G. C. Berkouwer, who sees this as a problem in the twentieth century—is viewed as “a frightening idol” of “mechanistic deterministic causality” and Christian experience is reduced to either covering passivity or frantic activism, while waiting some “revelation” of God’s hidden decree for oneself.⁶ For Calvin, as indeed in Scripture, election does not threaten, but rather undergirds, the certainty of salvation. Nevertheless Calvin is sensitive to the very real problem which arises from the “distance”, so to speak,—some would call it a *tension*—between election as the act of God’s (hidden) decree in the counsel of eternity, i.e., the objective act, and the believer’s assurance that he is elect, i.e., the subjective appre-

⁴ W. Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (London: Banner of Truth, 1967, edition of 1862), p. 113.

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), III, 2, 16.

⁶ G. C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 10.

hension. A possible reaction to the concept of election as "far-removed act", says Berkouwer, might be to push it into the background and look *inward* for possible effects of election.⁷

Calvin is prepared to look inward, in a certain sense:

we should indeed seek assurance of [election] from this; for if we try to penetrate God's eternal ordination, that deep abyss will swallow us up. But when God has made plain his ordination to us. we must climb higher, lest the effect overwhelm the cause.⁸

We are not, however, to "refuse to be mindful of election", but

we shall be following the best order if, in seeking the certainty of our election, we cling to those latter signs which are sure attestations of it.⁹

To do otherwise, and attempt to penetrate eternity, is, Calvin adds, Satan's most dangerous temptation to dishearten believers.¹⁰

It must be noted, in the second place, that while Calvin says that the experiences of being transformed into the state of grace, and continuing in it, constitute the "latter signs" of election, he does not appear to expound these "signs" in any detail, as do, for instance, the Puritans and the Westminster Confession of Faith. In point of fact, Calvin propounds a view of faith which seems to contradict his assertions as quoted above.

We shall have a complete definition of faith, if we say that it is a steady and certain knowledge of the divine benevolence towards us, which, being founded on the truth of the gratuitous promise in Christ, is both revealed to our minds and confirmed to our hearts by the Holy Spirit.¹¹

If assurance is of the *essence* of faith, as Calvin appears to suggest here, then what is the role of the "latter signs" of election? Elsewhere, he goes as far as to claim that

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 things on the basis of his generosity [and] . . . lays hold on an undoubted expectation of salvation.¹²

(2) *The necessity for further development.* The problem with Calvin, then, appears to be his doctrine of faith, or, at any rate, the idea that the assured belief that Christ has saved *me* is of the essence of faith itself. This comes out repeatedly in his Commentaries, e.g. on Rom. 8: 16, 34; I Cor. 2: 12; II Cor. 13: 5. It seems, also, that the "latter signs", to which Calvin refers, are, in fact, no more than experiences of the conviction that this is true. It is hard therefore, to see the distinction, if any, between the act of saving faith itself and

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

⁸ *Institutes*, III, 24, 3.

⁹ *Institutes*, III, 24, 4.

¹⁰ *Idem.*

¹¹ *Institutes*, III, 2, 7.

¹² *Institutes*, III, 2, 16.

the so-called “latter signs” posterior to that act. In *essence* both categories encapsulate the full assurance that Christ has saved *me*.

There is, of course, a certain plausibility in all this, particularly when viewed from the perspective of Christian experience. If, as William Cunningham thought, and there can be little doubt that he was correct, the Reformers were, in the main, endowed with peculiar certainty of salvation,¹³ then it is altogether understandable that their theology was indistinct in explaining the nature of doubt and its relation to faith and assurance. They apparently did not experience this as much of a problem themselves! In the process, however, they failed to see the untenable nature of their notion that, to use Robert L. Dabney’s representation of the position,

faith is a divine and spiritual belief that God has pardoned and accepted me.¹⁴

It slipped their notice that this was in breach of a fundamental Scripture principle, *viz.*,

that God requires us to believe nothing which is not true before we believe it, and which may not be propounded to us to be believed, accompanied at the same time with satisfactory evidence of its truth.¹⁵

Thus, assurance that God has saved me is posterior to the act of saving faith, “. . . in the order of nature, if not in time.”¹⁶

There are perhaps two factors which emerge in the post-reformation period and exert some pressure towards the elucidation of this problem.

(a) The first concerns the rising emphasis in the late sixteenth century upon the explanation of Christian experience. There are intimations of this in Reformed theologians contemporaneous with Calvin. Wolfgang Musculus (1497-1563) says,

we may trie ourselves by the same tokens and signes, whereby we do know other, y^t is to say by faith in Christ, and love toward his holy ones, felowes of the same faith y^t we doe possess.¹⁷

These “signes” Musculus describes as benefits following from faith, rather than being of the essence of faith itself.¹⁸ Peter Martyr Vermiglius (1500-1562) approaches the question from the side of the necessity for perseverance:

Everie one of the faithfull beleeveth that he is adopted by God unto his sonne. . . . Howbeit, he which so beleeveth, ought alwaies to be mindful of perseverance, and not to live looselie. . . .¹⁹

¹³ Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 113, cf. *Augsburg Conf.*, Art. IV.

¹⁴ R. L. Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological* (London: Banner of Truth, 1967, ed. of 1890), I, p. 216.

¹⁵ Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

¹⁶ *Idem.*

¹⁷ W. Musculus, *Commonplaces of the Christian Religion*, (London: [Reginald Wolfe], 1563, p. 211 b.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 205a.

¹⁹ Peter Martyr Vermiglius, *Commonplaces* (London: Henrie Denham, 1583), Part 3, 9 (p. 63).

For all that, Vermiglius and other Reformed theologians scrupulously avoid paying much attention to *works* as evidences of faith, and tend rather to rest on Scripture texts which, in the experience of Christ in the soul, tend to the upbuilding of Christian hope in the believer.²⁰ Bucanus (d. 1603), toward the end of the sixteenth century, took a somewhat mediating position: affirming, after the fashion of Calvin, that assurance was of the essence of faith,²¹ but allowing, nonetheless, for "uncertaintie unquietnesse and distruste" in the experience of the elect.²² He then goes on, apparently contradicting his earlier statement, to assert that an "assured feeling of God's love" toward oneself is a benefit of faith.²³

(b) A second factor was the pressure toward increasing systematization of doctrine. In the area of faith and assurance, this involved the construction of a "casuistry" which could adequately deal with the moral theology of Rome rejected by the Reformation. Mediaeval casuistry, according to Breward,

had been written to help priests assess guilt when hearing confessions: But the Reformation had abolished the Mediaeval confession.²⁴

Rome thereafter charged that the Reformation *sola fide* principle was an encouragement to "moral relativism and social chaos."²⁵ A Reformed casuistry, embracing the whole range of ethical-spiritual questions, was to be constructed in the century after the Reformation, to provide for the need among the people for "practical divinity" and, at the same time, to counter Romanist accusations of antinomianism. In this connection William Perkins was to be a leading figure, if not indeed, the founder, in the evolution of English Puritan casuistry. It is the concern of the remainder of this study to examine Perkins' doctrine of assurance—"the greatest [case of conscience, G.K.] that ever was," and show wherein it is an advance upon that of Calvin.

II. THE DOCTRINE OF ASSURANCE IN THE THEOLOGY OF WILLIAM PERKINS

(1) *Background.* William Perkins (1558-1602) was born in Warwickshire, England, but was to spend most of his life in Cambridge in connection with the University. When he died he was buried in

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Part 3, 42-52.

²¹ W. Bucanus, *Institutions of Christian Religion* (London: George Snowdon, 1606), p. 292.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 301.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

²⁴ I. Breward, "William Perkins and the Origins of Puritan Casuistry", in *Faith and a Good Conscience*, papers read at the Puritan and Reformed Studies Conference, 1962 (London, 1963), p. 6.

²⁵ T. F. Merrill, editor, *William Perkins, 1588-1602* (Nieuwkoop: B. de Graaf, 1966), p. x.

that city.²⁶ Following his dramatic conversion from a life of drunkenness and irreligion, he came consciously under influence of his tutors, the “moderate” Puritans Laurence Chaderton and Richard Greenham, and eventually entered the ministry.²⁷

(a) Perkins, as has already been mentioned, is best known for his casuistical writing.²⁸ His work, “The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience” (1606), was widely read and provided a springboard for later works, such as that of Perkins’ pupil, William Ames. Some modern scholars have seen in this intensely practical emphasis the root of the Pietist movement. “In diesem Stück,” writes August Lang, “erweist sich Perkins als der Vater des Pietismus.”²⁹ It would seem to be inadequate to regard Perkins as being solely, or even principally, concerned with the area of “religious individualism” as such.³⁰ Perkins was first and foremost a Calvinist theologian, and his abiding desire was to expound the Holy Scriptures in a sound manner, and, out of that, to apply them to the “life and manners of men in simple and plaine speech.”³¹ Ian Breward likewise over-emphasizes this practical concern when he asserts,

there is more than a hint that Perkins believed assurance to be more important than justification in day to day Christian experience.³²

It goes without saying that one’s conscious awareness of justification is a function of the assurance one possesses, at any given time, that one is indeed justified. This cannot, however, make justification less important than assurance—after all, assurance is simply the conscious experience of being in a justified condition and the desire for assurance is a measure, in some sense, of the importance, in the life of the sinner, with which the knowledge of being justified is invested!

(b) Perkins clearly follows in the tradition and theology of the Calvinistic Reformation. He borrows from his contemporaries, T. Beza (1519-1605) and J. Zanchius (1516-1590), in both method and content.³³ Thus he links predestination to the doctrine of God, rather than to the doctrine of justification, as Calvin did, and he considers the work of Christ in the context of the doctrine of pre-

²⁶ *Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1950), article on “William Perkins.”

²⁷ Merrill, *op. cit.*, p. xiv.

²⁸ See Douglas J. W. Milne, “The Idea of Conscience in Puritan Life and Preaching,” unpublished M. Th. thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pa.

²⁹ August Lang, *Puritanismus und Pietismus* (Ansbach: C. Brugel & Sohn, 1941), p. 127.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 126 (“Der religiöse Individualismus”).

³¹ Quoted in Merrill, *op. cit.*, p. xvi. Cf. I. Breward, editor, *William Perkins* (Appleford, Berkshire, England: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1970), p. 108.

³² Breward, *William Perkins*, p. 88.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

destination.³⁴ His doctrine of assurance also has affinities with that of Beza and Zanchius, and it is doubtless not without significance that short pieces on this subject from these two theologians are appended to his own work.³⁵

Indebtedness to English Reformers is also evident. One short work is expressly stated by Perkins to be drawn from the writings of William Tyndale and John Bradford, both martyred prior to his birth.³⁶ Breward notes that Perkins

stood in the tradition of men like Foxe, Wilcox, Dering and Greenham, who were all noted for their skill in resolving cases of conscience. People came from miles to consult clergy of Greenham's stamp about problems of conscience, and books of letters, written by godly ministers to troubled souls, were starting to appear. . . .³⁷

In the background, also, stand the Reformers, Martin Bucer and Peter Martyr, who taught at Cambridge in the reign of Edward VI and represent the mediating theology of the Strassburg Reformation.³⁸

(2) *Perkins' doctrine of assurance.* In sixteenth-century theologies, assurance is nowhere dealt with as a separate *locus*, but is spread over several *loci*, such as faith, election and perseverance. This is true of Perkins in his strictly theological writings. In "A Golden Chaine" (1590), assurance is found under the heading, "Of the application of Election" while in "The Foundations of the Christian Religion" (1590), a short catechetical work, it is found in answers to questions on faith.³⁹

The major portion of Perkins' *Workes* is devoted to practical writings and it is there that his doctrine of assurance is set forth in detail; something hardly surprising in view of the fact that assurance of salvation is the central question in his theology of the conscience.⁴⁰ A comprehensive picture can, therefore, only be obtained by examining assurance in its relation to the areas of faith, election and

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

³⁵ William Perkins, *Workes* I, pp. 114-116, "An Excellent Treatise of comforting such, as are troubled about their predestination: Taken out of the second answer of M. Beza to D. Andreas in the act of their Colloque at Mompelgart, &c." and *Workes*, I, p. 429-439, "A Brief Discourse," by Zanchius.

³⁶ Breward, *op. cit.*, p. 94. Cf. W. S. Barker II, "John Bradford's Writings: an Example of English Reformation Piety," unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Vanderbilt University, 1970; and G. Duffield, editor, *The Works of William Tyndale* (Appleford, Berkshire, England: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1964).

³⁷ Breward, "William Perkins and the Origin of Puritan Casuistry," *Faith and a Good Conscience*, p. 8.

³⁸ Breward, *William Perkins*, p. 18.

³⁹ *Workes*, I, pp. 6, 112.

⁴⁰ Lang, *op. cit.*, p. 126: "Die eben erwähnte Zentralfrage ist die nach dem Eintritt der Erwählungsgewissheit."

conscience, including within the last the subject of perseverance.

(a) *Faith and assurance*. In contrast to Calvin, Perkins distinguishes between an assurance which is of the *essence* of faith—called in later Reformed theology “assurance of faith”, or “objective assurance”⁴¹—and that assurance which is grounded upon the *effects* of faith in the sanctified life of the believer.

The “least measure of faith”, says Perkins, is when a man “by reason of the littleness of his faith, dothe not yet feel the assurance of the forgiveness of his sinnes” but is nevertheless persuaded that they are forgivable and so, “with his heart prays to God to pardon them.”⁴²

On the other hand, “full assurance” comes with the “greatest measure of faith” prior to which the sinner has become “well practised in repentance” and had “divers experiences of God’s love to him in Christ.”⁴³

Assurance intrinsic to faith

In an appropriately entitled tract, “A Graine of Mustard Seede”, Perkins expounds the assurance intrinsic to true faith.

Justifying faith in regard to his nature is alwaies one and the same, and the essential propertie thereof, is, to apprehend Christ with his benefits, and to assure the very conscience thereof. And therefore without some apprehension and assurance, there can be no justification or salvation in them that for age are able to beleve. Yet there be certaine degrees and measures of true faith. . . .⁴⁴

Beyond this Perkins really says very little on this assurance—the great weight of his writing concerns the *certitudo absoluta* which grows out of “signes” in Christian experience.

In “The Estate of Man in this Life”,⁴⁵ in a full exposition of the doctrine, the term “assurance” is used specifically in the second sense—

. . . when the elect are perswaded in their hearts by the Holy Ghost of the forgiveness of their own sinnes and of God’s infinite mercie towards them in Jesus Christ.⁴⁶

The former type of assurance, although not denominated “assurance” here, seems to be summed up in three “beginnings and seedes” of faith, “or at least signes and effects thereof”:

Firstly, “as perswasion that a man’s own sins are pardonable” [although this may not be faith but a preparation for it];

⁴¹ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1964), p. 507.

⁴² *Workes*, I, p. 6.

⁴³ *Idem*.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 641.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 362-381.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 363.

Secondly, a "desire of the favour and mercie of God," and

Thirdly, prayer for the forgiveness of sins, "with great sighes and groans" which come, not from the flesh, "but only from the Spirit."⁴⁷

This, at best, yields a partial and tentative assurance, although it is an *assurance* and *not a discouragement* to seeking a deeper consciousness of God's grace. Yet, it must not be forgotten that,

No Christian attaines to this full assurance at the first, but in some continuance of time, after that for a long space he hath kept a good conscience before God, and before men.⁴⁸

Such full assurance—the fruit of faith and union with Christ—involves the apprehension in the experience of the benefits of faith, namely justification, adoption and sanctification.⁴⁹

Assurance not intrinsic to faith but arising from the apprehension of the benefits of faith

Basic to this assurance is the *feeling* of the movements of the Holy Spirit in the heart and conscience.

Aside from believing the "outward" benefits of *justification* as revealed in Scripture—viz., reconciliation, pardon of sin and imputation of Christ's righteousness—there are the "inward" benefits which constitute assurance of justification—peace of conscience, awareness of God's favour, spiritual joy and the feeling of love toward God.⁵⁰

The assurance of *adoption* comes with the testimony of a "heart and conscience sanctified by the sprinkling of the blood of Christ" and that of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8: 16). Perkins comments wistfully,

Indeede this testimonie is weak in most men and can scarce bee perceived because most Christians, though they be old in respect of yeres, yet generally they are babes in Christ.⁵¹

Under *sanctification* Perkins lists further "signes" tending to build up assurance; those of the *mind*, spiritual wisdom and understanding, and those of the *affections*, zeal for God's glory, fear of God, hatred of sin and joy in contemplating the return of Christ.⁵²

The practical syllogism

All these *feelings*—if they are true—come ultimately from the testimony of God's Spirit in applying the Word. This

is not done by any extraordinary revelation, or *enthusiasme*, . . . but by an application of the Gospell in the form of a practical syllogisme. . . .⁵³

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 366.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 368 f.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 369; cf. *Workes*, II, pp. 18-21.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 371.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

The *sylogismus practicus* is simply the believer’s deduction of his state before God from experience of the Word and Spirit, in their ministry to his heart and conscience. It implies dependence upon the *promises* of the Word of God, since these form the major premises in the various forms of the syllogism, and also recognizes the weakness and faithlessness of the believer over against the God who is faithful to His own promises.⁵⁴ Assurance, says Perkins, is

by tittle and tittle conceived in a form of reasoning or practical syllogisme framed in the mind by the Holy Ghost. . . .⁵⁵

Several examples are given by Perkins, but one will suffice to illustrate his method,

Every one that beleeves is the child of God.

But I doe beleewe.

Therefore I am the child of God.⁵⁶

Infallible Certainty

A property of conscience, according to Perkins, is “an infallible certenty of the pardon of sinne.”⁵⁷ He rejects the other alternative, held by Rome, that subjective assurance could, at best, only be conjectural, i.e., “morall certenty . . . grounded upon likelihoodes.”⁵⁸ Perkins’ strong Calvinism, with its insistence on the absolute certainty of God’s decree, with its promises towards the elect, and the belief that Christ’s atoning work, as their Surety, actually accomplished redemption for them, could only lead to notion that assurance should be infallible in the believer, as it is given to him by God.⁵⁹

That which the Spirit of God doth first of all testifie in the heart and conscience of any man, and then afterward fully confirme; is to be beleevd of the same man as unfallibly certain: but the Spirit of God first of all doth testifie to some men, namely true beleevers, that they are the sonnes of God: and afterward confirms the same unto them. Therefore men are unfallibly to beleewe their owne adoption.⁶⁰

In this “Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience” Perkins expounds Romans 8: 16, Psalm 15, I John, II Tim. 2: 19 and II Peter 1: 10 in support of this view. “He that hath communion or fellowship with God”, he writes, “may be undoubtedly assured of his salvation” (I John 1: 3, 4, 7, 9, 21; 3: 24).⁶¹

The notion of an *infallible* assurance is not, of course, new with Perkins—it is the teaching of Calvinistic orthodoxy in general from Calvin’s day. It is the doctrine of the Westminster Confession of

⁵⁴ L. Berkhof, *The Doctrine of Assurance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1928), pp. 54-57.

⁵⁵ *Workes*, I, p. 547.

⁵⁶ *Idem*.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 540.

⁵⁸ *Idem*.

⁵⁹ Cf. “A Reformed Catholike”, *Workes*, I, pp. 562 f.

⁶⁰ *Workes*, I, p. 540.

⁶¹ *Workes*, II, p. 20.

Faith, XVIII,II, and found expression in the theology of Turretin whose *Theological Institutes* was the standard textbook for Presbyterian divinity students for nearly two centuries.⁶²

(b) *Election and assurance.* When one considers one's state before God in the light of the doctrine of election, Perkins finds, with Calvin and Beza,⁶³ two possible approaches: one, an ascent to heaven to "search the counsell of God", and the other a descent into the heart "to goe up ourselves, as it were by Jacob's ladder, to God's eternall counsell."⁶⁴ The former approach is "not to be attempted", for only the latter is feasible, for thereby we are taught by "signes and testimonies in ourselves."⁶⁵ This then, is an added reason for the kind of self-examination which Perkins has already advocated.

Election itself is a source of encouragement

The knowledge of the doctrine of election itself, is a great encouragement to the people of God, for as Zanchius says, in the "Brief Discourse" appended (by Perkins?) to Perkins' "A Case of Conscience, the Greatest that ever was":⁶⁶

Only the elect, and all of them, not only truly may be, but also are in that time which God hath appointed to them in this life, indeed assured of their election to eternal life in Christ.⁶⁷

Zanchius adds the consideration that predestination to an *end*, necessarily implies predestination to the *means* to that end, and so, "by reason of the certainty of their election" it is "necessary that they should be traced through those means which tend to the same end."⁶⁸ He goes on to list some thirteen "means".⁶⁹

Therefore this doctrine we must hold, that predestination to eternall life doth not take away the means of obtaining it but rather establish them. And therefore both these principles are true, namely that the elect to life cannot perish: & unless a man believe in Christ & persevere in this faith working by love, he shall perish.⁷⁰

⁶² F. Turretin, *Institutes*, loc. XV, XVII, vi. G. M. Giger (transl.), "Selections from François Turretini's *Theological Institutes*," mimeo, with a preface by John H. Gerstner, 1965.

⁶³ *Workes*, I, p. 114 f., "An Excellent Treatise of comforting such as are troubled about their predestination, & c.," by M. Beza.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

⁶⁵ *Idem.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 421 f., "A Brief Discourse . . ." by [J.] Zanchius.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 429.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 435.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 437. The thirteen means are; Christ Himself, effectual calling to Christ, faith, justification, regeneration and sanctification, love of righteousness and detestation of sin, care to good works, calling upon God, repentance for daily slips, desire that Christ come, true patience, endurance to the last, perseverance in the faith.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 438.

These *media electionis*, therefore, are productive of “marks of election”, summed up by Perkins as “the testimony of the Spirit and the works of sanctification.”⁷¹ Here again is the ground of the “practical or analytical syllogism” insisted upon, records Heppe, by “all Reformed dogmaticians.”⁷² Having been assured that one’s faith is genuine, one may go on to become certain that one is therefore elect. It is one and the same thing of course.

Perkins warns against the misuse of election. One must never peremptorily adjudge oneself, or another, to be reprobate, for election is of grace. Election also teaches that believers are to fight “doubting and diffidence” concerning their salvation, because election does not depend on works, but is immutable. Men are to be humbled before God as they contemplate divine election.⁷³

(c) *Conscience and assurance.* The conscience is, for Perkins, the fulcrum upon which assurance balances. Full certainty is declared to be a “property” of conscience.⁷⁴ Upon the regenerated conscience the ministry of the Word and Spirit “imprints” a deeper certainty as the believer puts himself in the way of the means of grace. The “principal instrument” is the ministry of the Gospel,⁷⁵ while the sacraments also are a means of laying hold by faith on the promises of God.⁷⁶

What then is the role of the conscience? Here it must be remembered that, for Perkins, the human spirit—“our spirit” in Romans 8: 16—is the complex of “heart and conscience”. The conscience, therefore, has as its principal role that of testifying to a man that he is a child of God. In this way one may have peace of conscience in the knowledge that one is invested with the righteousness of Christ.⁷⁷

In his exposition of Romans 8: 16, Perkins goes beyond Calvin in making a clear distinction of the relative roles of the testimony of the Holy Spirit and that of “our spirit”. Calvin viewed the testimony of the Holy Spirit as a witness *to* the human spirit.⁷⁸ Perkins, on the other hand, sees the testimony of the Holy Spirit as being *with* the human spirit. As He indwells the believer, the Holy Spirit, in conjunction with the means of grace, works in his life the effects and fruits of justification. This is apprehended in the consciousness

71 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

72 H. Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, transl. G. T. Thomson (London: Geo. Allen & Unwin, 1950), p. 176.

73 *Workes*, I, p. 114.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 540.

75 *Ibid.*, p. 543.

76 *Ibid.*, p. 548.

77 *Idem.*

78 J. Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and Thessalonians*, tr. by R. Mackenzie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), p. 170.

of the believer. Meanwhile the regenerated heart and conscience itself testifies to its own renewed state and the sanctified life of the believer—the feeling of inward corruption, displeasure with one's sinfulness, deepening hatred for sin, grieving over offending God, seeking to avoid occasions of sin, desiring to sin no more, praying to God for grace and endeavouring to do one's duty under the Gospel.⁷⁹ There are, then, two witnesses; "our spirit" and the Holy Spirit. Since the former, according to Perkins, is so "weak", God gives us His "to be a fellow-witness."⁸⁰ This is the view distinctly set forth later in the seventeenth century in the Westminster Confession of Faith, XVIII, II, where the "Spirit of adoption" is said to witness "with our spirits that we are the children of God."⁸¹ Later Reformed commentators have consistently expounded this understanding, with the proviso that the testimony of the Spirit is not construed as "direct propositional revelation."⁸² A further point must be noted. Although the believer discerns his own weakness and sinfulness, yet these very weaknesses, rather than plunging him into despair, become, in a certain sense, comforts to him, even as he grieves over them. God, says Perkins, is concerned with "not so much . . . the quantity of his graces as the truth of them," as He looks upon His own.⁸³ Sins themselves, of course, grant no assurance of salvation, but it is the grace of Christ evident in the experience of discerning and grieving over one's failings that stirs up a lively certainty.

There remains one aspect of assurance to which allusion must very briefly be made—that of perseverance. The possession of true assurance is one side of active perseverance in the faith. A living and continuing profession of Christ can only be productive of assurance.⁸⁴

III. CONCLUSION

What, then, is the significance of William Perkins for the formulation of a Reformed doctrine of assurance of salvation?

In the first place, it is clear that while Perkins follows most decidedly in the line of Calvin in his general theological position, his doctrine of assurance is quite different from that of the great Reformer. Calvin, as has been shown, conceived of assurance as belonging to the essence of saving faith. Perkins, following Beza and other sixteenth-century divines after Calvin, distinguished

⁷⁹ *Workes*, II, p. 19.

⁸⁰ *Workes*, I, p. 369.

⁸¹ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, XVIII, II (Inverness: Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1970).

⁸² Cf. Commentaries on Romans (8: 16), by C. Hodge, p. 267; J. Murray, p. 297; W. G. T. Shedd, p. 248.

⁸³ *Workes*, I, p. 386.

⁸⁴ *Heppe, op. cit.*, p. 585.

an assurance of the essence of faith, from the infallible certainty born of a fruitful and lengthy Christian experience. So great is this emphasis upon the experience of the believer, over a period of time, as productive of assurance, that it seems, at times, that Perkins comes exceedingly close to divesting the initial exercise of faith of any *real* assurance.

Secondly, it is clear that Perkins was not original in his exposition of assurance, although it can be said that, in the process of laying the foundation for his casuistical thought, he is among the first to give a comprehensive treatment of assurance. This is certainly the case for English Puritanism—although here he has borrowed from Bradford and others—if not for Continental theology.

Thirdly, in answer to the suggestion, made by Breward,⁸⁵ that Perkins’ theology of assurance is more *feeling*-centred than that of his Continental contemporaries, it must be said that this, along with attempts in other quarters to make Perkins the father of Pietism, is not supported by the evidence. On the one hand, Beza, for instance, in the essay appended to Perkins’ own writing, exhibits a lively experiential concern in recounting a method of dealing with doubters. On the other hand, there can be few who expound and defend Calvinistic orthodoxy as vigorously as Perkins. The emphasis on *experience*, which some construe as an incipient pietism, is analysed in terms of a syllogistic approach in which the minor premise, in each case, is based upon a feeling or conviction concerning the subject’s own condition.

“Believers in Christ will be saved;

I believe in Christ; *ergo* I will be saved.”

Against the background of Perkins’ strict Calvinism, it seems to be unwarranted to view him as *feeling*-centred; he balances the subjective self-conscious reflection with rigorous exposition of the objective aspect of the Word and doctrine.

Fourthly,—and this is related to the foregoing subject—the notion that a strong emphasis upon the practical syllogism involves a shift away from the *sola fide* principle must be rejected, certainly in the case of Perkins. Berkouwer has, as noted above, thought of this as a problem in the present century,⁸⁶ in that the syllogism can be used almost rationalistically to deduce election from (outward?) effects of sanctification. Perkins goes deeper than Berkouwer’s subjects appear to do, for the Puritan is always Christo-centric; the foundation is built of the promises of God and the object is to know the love of Christ in all fulness. The Bible is not used as a “moral

⁸⁵ Breward, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

⁸⁶ Berkouwer, *op. cit.*, p. 306; cf. p. 280.

text-book", as if one simply, even crassly, looks for correspondences between its precepts and one's actions and rests there in some assurance. Breward properly notes that in Perkins, the Holy Spirit, as the enabler in all exercises of faith, is central and further points out the emphasis on *conscience itself*, rather than hard-and-fast rules in every case.⁸⁷

Finally, although it is beyond the scope of this paper to expound the matter in detail, even a cursory examination of the Westminster Confession must show the close approximation of its statement of the doctrine of assurance to that—in much less concise terms—of Perkins a half-century before. All that is in the Confession is already in Perkins—it is in him that we see perhaps the first formulation in English theology of what was to become Presbyterian orthodoxy in centuries to come.

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⁸⁷ Breward, *Faith and a Good Conscience*, p. 12.