

HRA Reformation Voice

The Voice of the Heidelberg Reformation Association
August 2009

THIS ISSUE:

ASSURANCE AND FAITH

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

<i>TRUE OR FALSE: ASSURANCE</i> by Howard Sloan.....	2
<i>CAN I HAVE ASSURANCE?</i> by R. Scott Clark.....	5
<i>BOOK REVIEWS</i>	7
<i>NEWS, NOTES, AND PRAYER REQUESTS</i>	8

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Reformation Voice is the bi-monthly publication of the Heidelberg Reformation Association. It is distributed to all members and subscribers free of charge. For subscription information visit hra.witnesstoday.org.

TRUE OR FALSE: ASSURANCE

by Howard Sloan

TRUE OR FALSE: ASSURANCE AND THE
CHRISTIAN
Romans 9:6-9

FALSE ASSURANCE

Walt Chantry is his book Today's Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic? states:

*"As God so plainly reminds us, 'They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God' [Romans 9:8] However much Abraham might declare to Ishmael that he was a beloved son, God would disown him. Modern evangelism is filling the church with Ishmael's. Because of fleshly haste, evangelists produces 'converts' whom they call sons. But God will not own them. He is looking for Isaacs."*¹

Chantry's point is that many today have a false sense of assurance regarding their relationship to God and their eternal destiny. They have been told that they are sons, but have not been declared so by God. Unfortunately, the fear that Chantry has is well founded.

Many today are perishing. They are falsely assured because they have false faith. Their judgment shall be a surprise when they stand before Christ. Jesus speaks about this very case in Matthew 7:21-23:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"

Why will this happen? And how can the believer know true assurance of salvation found in Christ Jesus?

There are clearly those who believe that they are Christians, but are not. They feel their eternal destiny is set because they have been given a false assurance in a false faith. This false assurance has at its root either a faulty method or a flawed message.

A faulty method is one that causes the sinner to "make a decision" for Christ for reasons other than genuine regeneration by the Holy Spirit. Slick salesmanship, a well orchestrated emotional call, pressure from family and friends, and fear can easily lead someone to "come to Christ". But they have not come to Christ, they have gotten caught up in the moment and went along with the crowd or the

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Matthew 7:21

preacher's pitch. They have done what was expected of them at the time. Often their lives following the encounter demonstrate that they were not transformed by Christ. This is also influence by the need to get the sinner to make a decision now before it is too late. Chantry asserts that:

*"Sometimes the honest thing to do is to send inquirers home grieved and counting the cost. The conditions of eternal life are not simply to come forward, confess sin, and ask for forgiveness. Unless a sinner turns from his sin and bows to Jesus the Lord, he cannot have eternal life."*²

A flawed message can be just a damaging, maybe more so. Most of the time, the flaw is that a vital component is left out. Often salvation is presented as "asking Jesus to come into your heart." We may certainly speak of Christ dwelling in our hearts through faith (Ephesians 3:17). But the approach behind asking Jesus to come into our heart can be dangerous. Sometimes Revelation 3:20 is used in this context.

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he

with me.

The first problem with such usage is that Jesus is speak to the church in Laodicea. These are believers. These are words of rebuke, not an warm invitation. Secondly, the passage does not use the word ‘heart.’ Jesus is not knocking at the door of someone’s heart. A better metaphor would be for Jesus to be knocking on the door of the church. The largest problem with this approach is that it gives a call to be friendship with Jesus without a call to discipleship. The sinner is not instructed to count the cost. When Paul speaks of Christ’s dwelling in the heart by faith, he definitely has in mind discipleship as well.

that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Ephesians. 3:16-19)

A flaw that is related to this is preaching faith without preaching repentance. Ernest Reisinger in his book Today’s Evangelism: Its Message and Methods comments on this:

“Repentance is one of the vital elements of the gospel message that is strangely absent from most of the present day evangelism, both personal and mass or public evangelism. This essential ingredient of gospel preaching has slowly, but surely faded from our present-day pulpits. As a result of this missing element, our church rolls are filled with many members who have missed repentance and will perished unless they repent.”³

Scripturally, the call is clear.

Mark 1:15 (ESV)

and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

Luke 24:46-47 (ESV)

and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, [47] and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

Acts 3:19 (ESV)

Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out,

Even though one of the cries of the Reformation was “Sola Fides” or “Faith Alone,” that faith always included repentance. But much of the preaching today focuses on the free gift of salvation, without any discussion of turning from sin and turning to God in Christ Jesus. The preacher focuses on Ephesians 2:8-9

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Without considering the implications of verse ten that require a change in us.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Chantry says to this point that “Today men are properly told to confess their sins and to ask forgiveness. But evangelists and pastors are forgetting to tell sinners to repent.”⁴

A third flaw is telling people that God has a wonderful plan for their life, or that believing in Jesus will make everything better. The truth is that God’s plan for the Christian includes suffering.

Romans 8:17

and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

If we come to Christ under the false pretense that

everything will be great, we have believed a lie. Think of Jesus' words regarding the four soils.

Matthew 13:21 (ESV)

yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.

Endurance of trial seems to be a hallmark of true faith.

One final flaw is a misuse of 1 John 5:13. "*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.*" This verse is pulled out of its context to say that if we "believe" then we can have certain knowledge of our salvation. The hearer is left with the impression that by saying the sinner's prayer they have believed and have full assurance. This is one of the reasons I detest the use of the phrase "Once Saved, Always Saved." The phrase has been tortured and abused to allow for anyone who has said a prayer or walked an aisle to be counted among the secure. That is not the doctrine of the Reformers.

TRUE ASSURANCE.

If there is so many falsely assured of eternal life, how then can we be sure? Is it even possible to have assurance? The answer is Yes.

The first way to assurance is by means of our fruit. Earlier we looked at Matthew 7 to see that not everyone who says "Lord, Lord" is numbered among the redeemed. Just a few verses earlier, Jesus says this:

"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits." (Matthew 7:15-20)

What Jesus says of the false prophets is true of everyone who takes on the name of Christian.

The truth is that we should "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance." (Matthew 3:8) The Heidelberg Catechism tells us "*it is impossible that those who are implanted into Christ by true faith, should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness.*"⁵

John 15:5

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

We must be careful here that we do not preach or teach some form of sinless perfection as the sign of assurance. R. B. Kuiper warns about that in God-Centered Evangelism:

"proof of regeneration is not a life of sinless perfection but rather a deep conviction of sin which causes one to run to Calvary and to kneel at the pierced feet of the Crucified One with the cry 'Wash me, Savior, or I die'; that he who is born again faces a life-long struggle between the old man and the new,"⁶

The Holy Spirit also works assurance in us.

Romans 8:16 (ESV)

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

We can never know assurance unless the Spirit of the Living God works it in our hearts. The first answer of the Heidelberg Catechism speaks of this when it says "*by his Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him.*" But notice that the Spirit's work of assurance is partnered with Spirit-wrought obedience to Christ.

We also gain assurance from understanding that our security comes not from our decision, but from God's sovereignty. John 10:29 reminds us:

My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.

Again Paul's speaks of this in Romans 8:38-39.

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels

nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, [39] nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

When God extends His saving love to the believer, it is never taken away. Our faith may waver. Our obedience from time to time may fail. But God remains steadfast.

So the question must be asked: Are you a spiritual Isaac or a spiritual Ishmael? Are you a true child who has been saved by a true gospel and their by have true assurance? Or have you believed a faulty

gospel and are in need of true assurance?

A final thought goes to all of the pastors who will read this. Take great care in your evangelistic efforts that you are not responsible for creating spiritual Ishmael because of flawed methods and a flawed message.

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CAN I HAVE ASSURANCE?

by R. Scott Clark

Joel asks, “Is it possible for a person to want/desire to know Christ as his/her Savior and not be among the elect?”

Heidelberg Catechism 21. What is true faith?

True faith is not only a certain knowledge whereby I hold for truth all that God has revealed to us in His Word; but also a hearty trust, which the Holy Spirit 3 works in me by the Gospel, that not only to others, but to me also, forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits.

Yes, you and all Christians can and should have assurance. How?

Trust the gospel promises of Christ! “Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

Do you trust in Christ as your righteousness alone? I didn't ask if you trust enough but only if you trust him. When it comes to assurance, faith is a binary operation. It either exists or it doesn't. Full stop. There's no degree or faith, when it comes to justification and assurance.

Does faith grow? Yes, it does, day by day, but that is the fruit of justification not the ground of assurance. Yes, there is a secondary place for reflecting upon fruit. HC 86 does this:

86. Since then we are redeemed from our misery by grace through Christ, without any merit of ours, why should we do good works?

Because Christ, having redeemed us by His blood, also renews us by His Holy Spirit after His own image, that with our whole life we show ourselves thankful to God for His blessing, and also that He be glorified through us; then

also, that we ourselves may be assured of our faith by the fruits thereof; and by our godly walk win also others to Christ.

The fruit of faith strengthens our assurance but it is not the basis of it. The sole basis/ground of assurance is Christ's righteousness for us and his unshakeable

Yes, you and all Christians can and should have assurance. How? Trust the gospel promises of Christ!

promises to us.

To refuse to have assurance on the ground that one is not sufficiently sanctified is a form of unbelief. Stop it. Repent of it. Of course you are not sanctified enough! You're a wretch. Jesus didn't obey and die for nice, sanctified people. He obeyed and died for you and me.

Will your assurance always be perfect and equally strong? No. The Westminster Confession ch 14 (as quoted above) deals with that question brilliantly. Our assurance ebbs and flows. We learn more and more to stop looking at ourselves — just as we learn to stop looking at garbage heaps — and we learn more and

more to look at Christ and his promises.

One writer encouraged us to

Look to the Spirit for guidance and comfort, Romans 8:26-27 . Honestly and earnestly search your heart for the true fruits of the Spirit. And ask yourself, “Do I truly love Jesus?”, for He said “Jesus said unto them, If God were your Father, ye would love me: for I proceeded forth and came from God; neither came I of myself, but he sent me.” – John 8.42.

To which I respond:

If I may take issue with some of the advice here. The question: “Do I truly love Jesus?”

That’s not the gospel. That’s law. The law and our obedience to it is no basis for assurance. Should we love Jesus? Yes. Must we love Jesus? Yes! Will we, by the grace of God, come to love Jesus more truly and fully than we do now? Yes. Do we now love Jesus as we ought? No. Substitute: “Do I love the Lord with all my faculties?” (Matt 22:37-40) The honest answer is no! We’re sinners. We don’t any of us love God as we ought. Thus, to ask, “do I love Jesus?” as part of the ground of justification or assurance is the path to doubt and despair. Our obedience will always ebb and flow. When our obedience is, or at least seems to us, to be at high tide, we will be confident, but as soon as we see ourselves, in the mirror of God’s law, for what we really are, then our assurance will be decimated — as it must be on such a basis.

To find genuine assurance, we start with the objective work of Christ. Secondly, we may ask if we have any fruit. Yes, we look to the Spirit and we ask him to operate, as he has promised to do, through the preaching of the gospel. We should be careful about an overly subjective approach to this question.

The objective work of Christ is the oasis in the desert. But since faith is the means by which Christ’s objective work is appropriated, how can one escape the subjectivity of it?

This definition of faith is too subjective. It’s not my believing that makes faith efficacious. What makes faith, in the act of justification and relative to assurance, efficacious is the object of faith. Christ and his righteousness makes faith what it is: the sole instrument of justification and the sole means

of resting in and receiving Christ and his finished work. Thus, there is nothing, relative to justification or assurance, inherent to faith itself that makes it one thing or another. It either exists or it doesn’t.

For example, Christ’s work is only appropriated to some and in Reformed circles we say those “some” are the elect.

Some believe and some do not. Both of those are in the visible church and most all of those outside the visible church do not believe (there may be some extraordinary case where one is outside the visible church and yet believes).

We don’t decide for whom Christ died or who is elect a priori. We do it after the fact (a posteriori. We never ask, “Am I elect?” or “Did Christ die for me?” We only ask, “Do I believe?” If I believe, it is because I am elect and Christ died for me etc. Never, ever try to guess the secret will and providence and decree of God. It is forbidden in Deut 29:29.

In the works of the Puritans and others, there is a seemingly constant introspection about whether or not one is truly resting in Christ or is it Christ + something else and that the latter are damned because they are not trusting Christ alone.

Yes, but not in the better Reformed writers (whether they were English speaking or not). There were subjectivists on the continent too. So what? What do we confess as churches?

Just because we sin doesn’t mean we’re not justified. We are simultaneously sinners and justified. We’re not Papists. We don’t confess that only the sanctified can be justified. Am I a sinner? Yes! Do I, sola gratia, trust that Christ is my righteousness? Yes.

When it comes to assurance, the equation stops with Christ. Did he finish the work? Is he enough? You will NEVER (yes, I’m yelling) achieve the sanctity you want without first trusting in the sufficiency of the finished work of Christ. Must we die to self? Yes. We must die daily. Does my lack of mortification mean I am not justified? No. It means I’m not yet glorified.

I, too, have never understood how one can be

completely objective. I can look at Christ and his work for sinners and believe that he truly died for the elect and yet doubt that I am one of them. How do you get from looking at Christ to knowing that you are in Christ? It seems like it has to be subjective to some extent.

Faith isn't completely objective. The ground/basis of our justification and of our assurance is completely objective. Faith apprehends that ground: Christ and his righteousness for me. Is faith perfect? No, but it is sufficient. That's why it's the sole instrument. It looks away from self and to Christ.

Faith doesn't do it. Christ does it and we receive his benefits through faith, as defined in HC 21 and WCF 11 and 14.

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Book Review

**The Church's Book of Comfort, edited by Willem Van't Spijker, Reformation Heritage Books 2009.
Reviewed by Sebastian Heck.**

The Church's Book of Comfort is an admirable volume about the Heidelberg Catechism which was written and published nearly 450 years ago. The book was originally written in Dutch and published by *Den Hertog* in the Netherlands in 2005.

First some remarks about the form of the book. RHB is to be congratulated both for translating this book as well as for the wonderful job they have done. The translation, provided by Gerrit Bilkes is good and well readable. Rarely does one remember that this did not originate as an English language publication. Also the binding (hardcover) and the many pictures are well done and contribute to the overall value of the book.

The book is written by Dutch scholars who are both theologically conservative - they all either teach or taught at confessional schools, most of them at the *Theological University of Apeldoorn*, or pastor a confessional Reformed church - and pastoral in

concern. This by itself is to be welcomed because it is a rare combination in Europe these days.

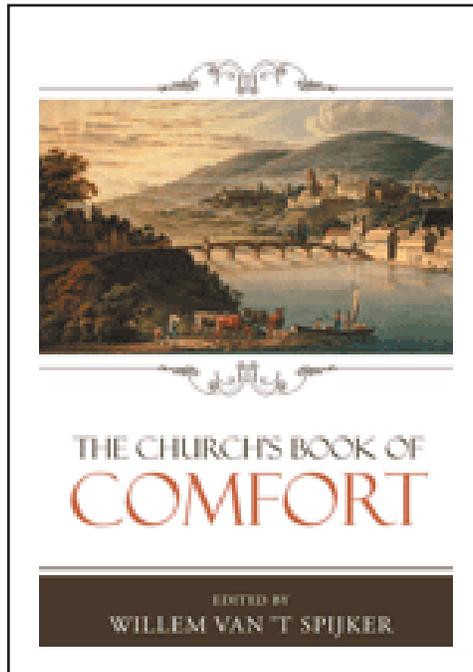
The book starts out with two prefaces by Van't Spijker that are full of gems. In it we find a summary of the goal of the Heidelberg Catechism revealing "to some extent the model of the church pursued by Martin

Bucer and John Calvin, reflecting an inner strength capable of enduring protracted episodes of particular hardship" (p.x).

The main text sets the historical background with an historical chapter on the Reformation in Germany, starting with Luther in 1517 and ending with Melancthon in 1560. In chapter 2, Wim Verboom outlines the developments that led to the composition and publication of the Heidelberg Catechism, including several catechetical precursors.

Verboom concludes that the HC "is altogether Reformed" (p.60), which in many ways is the new consensus on the catechism among scholars.

Christa Boerke furnishes us with a tour-de-force of the people behind the HC, especially the "two crown witnesses", Ursinus and Olevianus. Boerke also reflects most recent scholarship when she writes that Olevianus was involved in the HC in some way, but probably not as an author, but more with the ecclesiastical adoption and propagation of it (in the



Church Order of the Palatinate). She also concludes that the HC is “an epitome of Reformed doctrine” (p.88), even if there is great diversity within it. In his chapter on “The Theology of the Heidelberg Catechism”, Van’t Spijker first reveals the different influences at work in the composition of the HC - Melancthonian, Lutheran, Zwinglian, Calvinian as well as Bezan. Though some have argued that the influence of Bullinger on the Heidelberg theologians (especially Olevianus) and the HC consequently was greater than that of Calvin, Van’t Spijker is well balanced in his evaluation of the material. He provides us with an admirable summary of theological themes in the catechism. I cannot see, however, where in the HC, with its continual emphasis on the objective work of Christ, Van’t Spijker would see “elements that influenced what later would be labelled as Pietism” (p.94).

In the chapter on “The Heidelberg Catechism in the Netherlands”, we have a lot of very illuminating material. However, it is here and in several other places that the editorial team should have seen to it that the chapters do not overlap so much. We have in the book three sections by different authors that treat of the catechism in the schools and we have at least two sections that treat catechetical precursors to

the HC. Thus, the book could have easily been about 30 pages shorter, especially given the fact that this chapter 5 is almost 60 pages long.

A particularly strong chapter is the last chapter, entitled “The Continued Relevance of the Heidelberg Catechism.” In it, Van’t Spijker treats some possible criticisms of the theology of the catechism (e.g. with respect to the latter’s doctrine of the Lord’s Supper). He also asks some penetrating questions with regard to the lasting significance of the HC in the face of later confessional development, e.g in Barmen and Leuenberg. Given the validity of these developments, Van’t Spijker concludes, “the Catechism would contain a number of passages that would have to be discredited today. Not every Reformed believer would go this far without a fight” (p.272). I for one would not.

I highly recommend this book to those who are new to the Reformed faith, to those who simply want to brush up on the history of the Reformed church, but also to our “Westminster Standards”-Presbyterian brothers and sisters who should know something about the (continental) tradition in which their faith and confession are rooted as well.

News, Notes, and Prayer Requests

NEWS AND NOTES

- The theme of the October 2009 edition will be “Sola Fides - Faith Alone” All articles are due by September 1, 2009.
- R. Scott Clark’s lecture on “Calvin as a Theologian of Comfort” is available on the HRA website at <http://hra.witnesstoday.org/ClarkOnCalvin.mp3>.

PRAYER REQUESTS

- Pray for the HRA planning meeting to be held in October in Bedford, PA
- Pray for the opportunity for future Bible conferences and workshops.

Editorial Policy for the Reformation Voice

1. The Executive Committee shall serve at the editorial committee for the Reformation Voice. They shall have the right to select or reject any content for inclusion in the Reformation Voice.
2. Content may be submitted by members, pending members, or members of member churches. The Executive Committee may also solicit the right to (re)print articles from other authors or reviewers whose writings may be of value to the membership of the HRA.

3. In keeping with the purposes of the Association, books reviews in the Reformation Voice shall be reflective of the purposes and standards of the Association.
4. The Reformation Voice shall not be used as a platform to voice views and positions that are particular to a denomination or group. Rather, it should seek to promote those theological positions which are held in common by all who hold to the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort.