THEOLOGY

A Biblical and theological critique of Jonathan Edwards' doctrine of Christian assurance.

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Abstract/Synopsis

This research paper will give a Biblical and theological critique of Jonathan Edwards' doctrine of Christian assurance. The main points at issue are whether assurance is of the essence of faith, as in Reformed theology, or separate from faith, as in Puritan theology. The translation and exegesis of Heb 11:1 is important to this discussion, so also an understanding of justification by faith. The locus of assurance is also important for this discussion, is assurance to be found in justification, sanctification or perseverance? We find that Edwards' doctrine of assurance is unbalanced and inherently dangerous because he replaces the Biblical and Reformed "trinty-centric" objective focus for assurance with a subjective focus on union with God by the Holy Spirit and growing obedience to works and Christian practice. His doctrine should not be followed because it will lead to unhealthy introspection, legalism, works righteousness and a minimization of the foundation in Christ's sacrificial atonement and justification by faith alone, as Jesus said to the thief on the cross, *"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."*

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Rom 8:38-39 - For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 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.

Introduction

Ironically, the doctrine of assurance, a doctrine meant to convey certainty and confidence, has developed slowly. The difficulty lies in its epistemological nature. Assurance is a question of *knowing* - how does one *know* they are saved? An answer must be "trinity-centric", grounded on the promises of God in Scripture, the finished work of Christ and the personal application of these by the Spirit. A fine balance and proper focus must be maintained. Carson's warning is apt to commence this study, 'If you get this doctrine wrong, you may encourage improper introspection, or foster profane impertinence, or confuse backsliding and spurious conversion…But the danger of imbalance is never warrant for reductionism. It is, rather, a call not only to biblical and doctrinal maturity, but also to pastoral sensitivity.'[1] Christian assurance, knowing you are *in* and *kept* by God is not only dogma but also personal, epistemological, existential and circumstantial.[2] It is about an individual confidently living out the Christian faith with a sure and certain knowledge of adoption [Rom. 8:15-16]. The difficulty in critiquing Edwards' view of assurance is that it exists within a historical context. In his context of revivalism, Edwards' sought to draw a line between antinomian experiential enthusiasm and mere outward assent.

> 'There are two sorts of hypocrites: one that are deceived with their outward morality and external religion…and the other…those that are deceived with false discoveries and elevations; who often cry down works, and men's own righteousness, and talk much of free grace; but at the same time make a righteousness of their discoveries…and exalt themselves to heaven with them.'[3]

Edwards saw the great danger in both *legal* and *evangelical* self-deception.[4] In formulating his doctrine of assurance he sought to steer a clear course through these cloudy waters. However our thesis is Edwards' moved away from a Biblical and Reformed understanding of assurance and so he did more to muddy the waters than provide clarity. In this essay we will outline Edwards' doctrine of assurance and critique that doctrine from various Biblical and theological perspectives.

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[1] D. Carson, 'Johannine Perspectives on the Doctrine of Assurance', in *Justification and Christian Assurance* (ed. R. J. Gibson; Adelaide: OpenBook Publishers, 1996) 94-95.

[2] Carson, 'Johannine Perspectives' at 94-95 calls it 'occasional' and 'existential' not theoretical, '…Christian assurance is first of all an existential matter.'

[3] Jonathan Edwards, 'Religious Affections' in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 2. (ed. John E. Smith; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959) 173.

[4] Edwards, 'Affections', 173, his italics.

Limits, Presuppositions and Definitions

This study is limited to the doctrine of assurance exclusively. By assurance we mean the assurance of salvation, a certain and confident *knowledge* (subjective) and *guarantee* (objective) that one is regenerated, justified and of the number of the elect. Because to be *in* and *kept* by God is a personal, individual matter, albeit properly worked out within a community of believers, we assume assurance will also be personal and individual. This study assumes the Calvinist position in regard to the perseverance of the saints; a true believer cannot fall out of salvation and will arrive at glory [Rom 8:30]. Consequently, the apostate was never of the elect. Scriptural warnings do not denigrate assurance, but urge believers on toward safely claiming their inheritance, like road signs along a highway. Given the certainty of perseverance, we presuppose that assurance is possible and appropriate. While an exhaustive work may seek to view assurance from every conceivable angle, the confines of this essay limit our inquiry to a survey of Biblical, historical and systematic theology in order to arrive at an appreciation and critique of Edwards' particular doctrine.[5] We will first survey New Testament theology and then historical theology in order to arrive at Edwards with a firm Biblical foundation and an understanding of the historical development of the doctrine inherited by him.

Biblical Theology

The Foundation of Assurance - Promises of God, Work of Christ

In the NT, the promises of God [eg. Ezek 36; Jer 32; Is 53-66][6] are realized in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Christ all the promises of God are fulfilled [2 Cor. 1:20]. The resurrection itself acts as a means of assurance. Paul says [Acts 17:31], '[God]…has given assurance [πίστιν] to all by raising him from the dead.'[7] In this passage πίστιν is used not as faith but for, 'what can be believed, a state of certainty with regard to belief,

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[5] A doctrine of assurance may be understood as a corollary of many other areas of doctrine or studied only as a question of philosophy of religion or Christian epistemology. It could be regarded as related closely to the doctrines of the knowledge of God, the work of Christ, the application of the work of Christ; the doctrines of election, justification, faith, perseverance, soteriology and pneumatology. P. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, Vol. 3, 1998) at 162-172 deals with the doctrine of assurance exclusively along the epistemological/philosophical route. Other works helpful in this regard are J. W. Sire, *Why Should Anyone Believe Anything At All?*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1994) and C. Stephen Evans, *Philosophy of Religion*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1982).

[6] While a complete or systematic theology is lacking, there are numerous examples of assurance in the OT. M. W. Elliott, 'Assurance' in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (ed. T. D. Alexander and B. S. Rosner; Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000) at 386 says, '…in the OT we do find the idea of a reinforcement of faith which comes from God.'[6] God reassures and strengthens his servants by signs, words and divine intervention [Gen 15:1-6; Ex 4; Josh 1:6-9, 5:13-15]. Many of the Psalms express the confidence of divine refuge and help [Ps. 4:8; 27:1-3, 131, 139, etc] and the idea of standing firm in faith is also found in the Prophets [Is. 7:9; 28:16; Zech 3:6; Hab. 2:4].

[7] Bible quotations are taken from the NRSV unless otherwise stated.

proof, pledge…[God] *has furnished proof*.'[8] The finished work of Christ (died, raised, ascended, interceding) is itself *the proof* of the realisation of God's promises and so is a primary foundation of assurance for the elect [Rom 8:28-39]. Edwards' asserts that assurance is an expectation of Scripture but fails to hold Christ's fulfilment of Scriptural promises as foundational for assurance.

Christ, Faith and Assurance

That Christian assurance is grounded in Christ is clear from texts using πληροφορία - *full assurance, certainty*.[9] Paul links assurance with the knowledge of Christ. He wants Christians, [Col 2:2] '…to have all the riches of full assurance [πληροφορίας] of understanding for full knowledge of God's mystery, of Christ…'.[10] Understanding and knowledge of Christ bring the riches of full assurance. Also, forgiveness by the blood of Jesus gives Christians confidence [παρρησίαν]. Our great high-priest allows us to approach God in full assurance of faith [ν πληροφορί πίστεως], we then hold fast to our confession without wavering [Heb 10:19-23]. Not only is Christ a foundation of confidence, but a likely reading has *assurance* attributed to *faith*.[11] If Christ is a foundation of assurance then faith in Christ is the instrument by which assurance is obtained. The '…reference in Hb 10:22 is to the "full assurance" of the faith which rests on *appropriation* of the atoning work of Jesus the High-priest.'[12] We will argue that Edwards' neglect to maintain any Christocentric focus in his doctrine of assurance is its greatest flaw.

Other uses of πληροφορία suggest assurance is a growing realisation. Epaphras prays [Col 4:12] they '…may stand complete and fully assured [πεπληροφορημένοι] in everything that God wills.' It is a thing belonging to salvation to realise full assurance of hope in patient faith [Heb 6:9-12]. Elsewhere, the gospel comes with full assurance when received through the Holy Spirit [1 Thess. 1:5]. Christ is a foundation of assurance, faith is the instrument of assurance. Assurance may be *gradual* or *growing* but *commences* on receiving the gospel.

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[8] W. Bauer, F. W. Gingrich and F. W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2nd Edition, 1979), 662, their italics. Hereafter *BGD*.

[9] *BGD*, 670.

[10] My translation.

[11] ν πληροφορί πίστεως – faith is in the genitive case, at least used descriptively of assurance, used like an adjective to describe the governing noun, or if assurance is understood as a verbal noun, then it is likely 'faith' is used as an objective genitive, the genitival noun (faith) receives the action of 'assurance', faith has assurance, it is assured faith. Hence 'assurance' is attributed to 'faith' – faith is an *attributed genitive*, see further, D. B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan Publishing House, 1996) 89-90.

[12] G. Delling, 'πληροφορία' in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, trans. G. W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmanns Publishing Company, Volume VI, 1968) 310-311, at 311. My italics. Hereafter, *TDNT*.

Hebrews - Faith and Assurance

On the basis of Heb 11:1, it is often stated that faith and assurance are synonymous.[13] However assurance here [RSV, NRSV, NIV, ESV] is not πληροφορία as might be expected, but πόστασις, a rich theological word not found elsewhere meaning 'assurance'. *BGD* concludes, 'The sense "confidence", "assurance" must be eliminated, since examples of it cannot be found…It cannot, therefore, play a role in Hb 11:1.'[14] Luther first translated πόστασις as 'sure confidence' even though patristic and medieval exegesis understood it in the sense of 1:3 as ousia, 'substance', 'Luther's translation introduced a wholly new element…Faith is now viewed as personal, subjective conviction…Yet there can be no question but that this classical Protestant understanding is untenable.'[15] A preferred translation may be realization [NAB] or reality, giving the sense that faith is the *reality* of things hoped for.[16] Edwards concurs with a translation focusing on faith's objective:

> '"Faith is the *evidence* of things not seen"; that is, it is their being evident. This verse is as much as if he had said, "Faith is the being present of things that are to come, and the being clearly seen of things that are not seen." "The *substance* of things hoped for" might have been translated, "the subsistence," that is, "their now subsisting."'[17]

In practice it appears Edwards' conception of faith is more subjective because he links 'the evidence of things not seen' to actual union with God by the Spirit, rather than objectively to God Himself. However, there may be grounds for this understanding. πόστασις is parallel to λεγχος, translated as *conviction* with a subjective sense [NRSV, NIV, ESV] or *evidence* in an objective sense [NAB, NKJV]. Köster maintains that faith *is* the reality and evidence of what is hoped for and unseen, ie. the transcendent.[18] Faith itself is the reality and evidence of God. However, even if Köster's translation is correct, his exegesis ignores the subjective element inherent in faith. As a gift of God [Eph 2:8] faith becomes exercisable by an individual. Therefore, the subjective and objective elements in Heb 11:1 should not be separated, each is required.[19]

πόστασις denotes the objective reality of God, present in Jesus and possessed in the church as faith.[20] If faith is the objective essence or reality or substance or evidence of what is hoped for, then that objective reality or substance of God propels and solicits subjective faith.[21] Faith then is *a real*

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[13] Heb 11:1a - 'faith is the assurance of things hoped for' - See for example, Ardel B. Caneday and Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001) at 271-272 where Heb 11:1 is used to argue faith and assurance are 'joined indissolubly' and 'coincident'.

[14] *BGD*, 847.

[15] H. Köster, ' πόστασις', *TDNT*, 8:572-589 at 586.

[16] Köster, *TDNT*, 8:587 and also *BGD*, 847.

[17] J. Edwards, *Notes on Scripture*. The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol 15 (Stephen J. Stein, ed.; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998) Entry 107: 81.

[18] Köster, *TDNT*, 8:587.

[19] See further, Caneday and Schreiner, 271-272.

[20] Köster, *TDNT*, 8:587-588.

[21] Contra. W. J. Abraham, 'Faith, Assurance, and Conviction: an Epistemological Commentary on Hebrews 11:1', *Ex Auditu* 19 (2003): 65-75 who gives an exclusively subjective reading to

taste of our union with, or perhaps *inclusion* in God. Faith is initiated by, evidence of and then directed to, the invisible reality of God, historically made visible in the incarnation. Even if πόστασις itself is not assurance, possessing the faith described in Heb 11:1 must *produce* assurance.

In its classical Greek etymology πίστις meant '…"guarantee" which creates the possibility of trust, that which may be relied on, or the assurance of reliability, "assurance."'[22] Each time confidence [παρρησίαν] is found in the NT it is linked with faith or hope in Christ.[23] Hope is closely related to both faith and assurance. While it does seem present in Edwards' later theology, his notes on Heb 6:19 show he believed assurance was linked to faith, inseparably connected with hope:

> '…'tis faith in Christ that is the stability of the soul. Faith is that by which we are built on that strong rock, so that we can't be overthrown; and [faith] is the anchor by which we are held fast, and can't be driven to and fro of wind and storms, and shipwrecked, and lost. That which is here called "hope" is the very same that is elsewhere called "faith"; and saving and justifying faith is often in the New Testament called by the name of hope…That "faith" with the Apostle sometimes signifies the same with "hope" is manifest from his description of it, in the first verse of Hebrews 11…And Heb 3:6…our confidence and our hope seem to be synonymous.'[24]

In conclusion, assurance must be *an element of*, or at least *grow out of*, a true, saving faith and hope in Christ.

Works of Faith and Assurance

βέβαιος – *firm, certain, secure*[25] – usually occurs within an exhortation to good works for the purpose of assurance of faith. Peter exhorts his readers to 'confirm [βεβαίαν] your call and election' [2 Ptr 1:10]. In vv.3-9, God's power is at work, promising participation in the divine nature. Therefore they are to support faith with goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection and love. This ensures their knowledge of Jesus is effective and fruitful and it makes their calling and election βέβαιος, therefore bringing assurance that they won't stumble but will be brought into glory. Failure to grow is the negligence of weak or idle Christians, but with no suggestion of damnation.[26] This is an exhortation to Christian growth based on the bountiful provisions of God, not a demand for meritorious, justification by works. Growth in faith *leads to* assurance. That Peter

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the text saying, 'It is faith rather than evidence that is the assurance…There is not a word here about evidence [sic]; it is faith that is the source of assurance and conviction.'

[22] R. Bultmann, 'πίστις', *TDNT*, 6:174-228 at 177.

[23] Heb 3:6; 10:19, Eph 3:12 and 1 Jn 2:28, 3:21, 4:17, 5:14.

[24] Edwards, *Notes*, Entry 284: 240-241.

[25] *BDG*, 138.

[26] This reading concurs with D. A. Carson, 'Reflections on Christian Assurance'. *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (1992): 1-29 who at 12 says: '…the NT writers nowhere admit an absolute, qualitative disjunction between genuine believers who in their conduct display obedience to the Lord Jesus, and genuine believers who do not. This at least raises the possibility that some forms of Christian assurance might be validly based on observably transformed conduct, without in any way suggesting that such conduct wins or earns or gains salvation.'

teaches the possibility and desirability of assurance is indicated by Edwards, '…he tells us that to neglect these things is the way to doubtfulness about our condition...rather…you may make your calling and election sure.'[27] Faith is never meant to be static. Paul hopes faith would increase [2 Cor 10:15]. James reminds us that faith must be active and is brought to completion by works [Jms 2:22]. As the testimony of Jesus is strengthened [βεβαιώθη] in the church so too Jesus will strengthen [βεβαιώσει] believers [1 Cor 1:6, 8]. Commenting on Phil 2:13 Calvin masterfully asserts a monergistic obedience leading to assurance:

> 'The Papists…pervert this passage so as to shake the assurance of faith…to waver as to confidence of salvation. But [Paul]… everywhere recommends confidence and πληροφορίαν…It is God who calls us and offers us salvation; it is our part to embrace by faith what He gives, and by obedience to respond to His calling. But we have neither from ourselves. Hence we act only when He has prepared as for acting.'[28]

Finally, Heb 3:14 uses βεβαίαν with ποστάσεως.[29] We hold firm to our 'first confidence', or rather the 'beginning of the reality', referring directly to Christ [3:14a] or possibly to 'the hope' of the parallel confidence [3:6].[30] We share in Christ and hold firm to Christ - the πόστασις, the divine reality - by reflecting on Jesus [3:1] with a faithful heart not hardened by sin. Therefore, God is the author of our growth, richly providing everything needed for godliness. Jesus strengthens believers as the gospel is strengthened in the church. As we hold firm to Christ and our hope, we share in Christ. Hence, assurance, already existing in faith, *grows* as we do works of faith.

The Holy Spirit and Assurance

A doctrine of assurance based on Scripture must be "trinity-centric". Assurance is based on the promises of God in Scripture, the finished work of Christ and the indwelling witness of the Holy Spirit. Works will necessarily issue from saving faith but should *not* be considered a *ground* of assurance in order to guard against the self-deception of external, works righteousness and the agony of performance based assurance. It is simplistic of Carson to say, 'The ultimate *ground* of assurance is never more than Jesus himself…'.[31] This minimalist approach denies the importance of the Spirit's

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[27] Edwards, *Notes*, Entry 140: 90.

[28] J. Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, (trans. T. H. L. Parker; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965) 256.

[29] In keeping with the technical understanding of πόστασις the NAB appropriately translates this verse: 'We have become partners of Christ if only we hold the beginning of *the reality firm* until the end'.

[30] Heb 3:14 uses πόστασις rather than the παρρησίαν 'confidence' found in Heb 3:6. Some translations follow the Greek manuscripts which add in Heb 3:6 'firm to the end.' - also using βεβαίαν. However, this is missing in the earliest manuscripts before 4th century and is likely an interpolation from Heb 3:14. See further, B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, (Stuttgart, German Bible Society, 2nd Edition, 1994) 595.

[31] Paul R. House, 'The SBJT Forum: What Are the Biblical and Practical Implications of the Doctrine of Assurance?', *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2 (1998): 64-75, at 67. His italics. Carson does go on to acknowledge, 'There are many rich and subtle elements in the

role, 'The Bible will not allow us to construct a 'one-legged stool' that excludes good works and the witness of the Spirit from assurance. However these should be regarded as 'accessory and inferior' aids to the objective ground of assurance – the finished cross-work of Christ.'[32] Carson's approach possibly confounds justification with assurance and threatens to render the Spirit an unequal member of the trinity. This approach leads to dead orthodoxy, the legal hypocrisy Edwards warned against centuries earlier. Paul puts the matter simply, we are unable to understand or teach spiritual realities without the Spirit [1 Cor 2:11-14]. Assurance is grounded on the finished work of Christ but how is that understood unless applied to the heart and mind by the Holy Spirit? Edwards rightly insists the giving of the Spirit is essential to assurance, 'The Spirit is given in Scripture as the proper evidence of being in Christ…It evidences to 'em their being children of God and begets that trust and assurance that renders 'em incapable of legal principle.'[33]

An exclusively christocentric assurance would fail the test of 2 Cor 13:5. How is it that Jesus is *in you*, to give assurance you are living in the faith? In Romans 8:15-16, when we cry Abba! Father! It is the Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God. In 2 Cor 1:21-22 and Eph 1:13-14, Paul uses a similar σφραγισάμενος (having sealed/you were sealed) - ρραβ να (pledge, deposit, first instalment, guarantee) combination. *BGD* says ρραβ να, '…secures a legal claim to the article in question…a payment which obligates the contracting party to make further payments.'[34] God has purchased us by the blood of Christ and sealed the great exchange by giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment on our eternal inheritance. The indwelling Spirit establishes the salvific promises and cross-work in our hearts providing assurance, '…Paul refers again to the certainty and reliability of the promise and to its establishment…In sealing believers…God has made them His own inviolable possession; the pledge of this is the Spirit of God in the heart…It shows that he is God's possession to the day of redemption.'[35] Together with the promises of Scripture and the finished work of Christ, the sealing of the Spirit *must* be regarded as a *primary ground* of assurance, for how can there be assurance without it?

To be Biblically balanced, a Christian doctrine of assurance must be "trinity-centric". It must emphasis the role of each member of the trinity in establishing assurance in the believer. This is not elevating the indwelling of the Spirit above or beyond the promises of the Father or the work of the Son, but simply recognises that without the Spirit the promises and cross-work will be misunderstood and assurance impossible. Rather than minimising the work of Christ, a "trinity-centric" assurance will ultimately glorify Christ [Jn 16:13-14]. It is the triune God at work in conversion [2 Cor 4:6, 5:17]. Without a personal, subjective, existential, experiential certainty

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doctrine of assurance that have not received so much as a mention here. For instance, the role of the Holy Spirit in our assurance is worthy of careful study and reflection…'.

[32] Carson, 'Johannine Perspectives', 59.

[33] Edwards, *Notes*, Entry 196: 113, 114-115. Citing for support of this premise 1 Cor 2:12, Eph 1:13-14, 4:30; Rom 8:9; 1 John 3:24, 4:13.

[34] *BGD,* 109.

[35] G. Fitzer, 'σφραγις', *TDNT*, 7:939-953, at 949.

of the indwelling of the Spirit a person cannot be a Christian nor have any assurance. This is not to suggest assurance comes subjectively *from us* but rather the Spirit's indwelling, as an element of assurance, must be ontologically *within us* by an objective and monergistic work of God. After the initial sealing at conversion the promises of Scripture are the main ground and continuing means by which the Spirit works assurance in our hearts by faith. This understanding should avoid unhealthy introspection. God supplies us with the Spirit by the hearing of the word in faith. The Spirit should never be divorced from the Word [Gal 5:5, 3:5, 14; Eph 5:18-20]. Christ lives in us by his Spirit, enabling us to live by faith [Gal 2:19b-20; Rom 8:9-11].[36] The initial and continuing role of the Spirit is all part of our union with or *inclusion in* God without which there can be no assurance. This basis of assurance is clearly found in Edwards' writing and is clear from Scripture.[37] We therefore must not relegate the Spirit's role to that of a secondary, 'accessory and inferior' aid. Rather, the role of the Holy Spirit is foundational for a Christian doctrine of assurance.

A Synthesis – 1 John and Assurance

Any Christian doctrine of assurance must wrestle with the teaching of 1 John, a letter written for the express purpose of providing assurance of eternal life [5:13] and so that [1:4] John's joy would be complete, fully assured [πεπληρωμένη]. John brings together both the primary and secondary grounds of assurance. A call to repentance, obedience to the commands of Christ, doing right and love for fellow Christians are the dominant themes of the book.[38] By doing these things they can be *sure* that they know God [2:3, 5; 3:19; 4:13]. The outcome of their good works is repeatedly confidence and certainty that the one doing such works is 'born of God'. Confidence [παρρησίαν] appears four times, each conditional on action, except the last occurrence which is simply confidence in standing in Christ.[39] The primary grounds of assurance are also present, with a clear trinitarian flavour. Abiding in what was taught from the beginning, referring back to the 'word of life' in the prologue, means abiding in the Son and the Father, bringing an assurance of God's *promise* of eternal life [2:24-25 cf 1:2]. The necessity of belief in and confession of Christ is emphasised,[40] the atonement is expressed as an example of God's love [4:9-10]. The indwelling of the Spirit is also clearly present in various forms – anointing, born of God, God's seed and eternal life abiding in them, giving of the Spirit, God abiding in them and testifying by his Spirit, God's testimony in our hearts.[41] For the purpose of a synthesis regarding a 'trinity-centric' doctrine

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[36] This is also clear in Calvin's theology. In *Epistles*, at 43 he says, 'The life therefore which we obtain by faith is not visible to the eye, but is inwardly perceived in the conscience by the power of the Spirit.' And at 96, '…we deny that true faith can be separated from the Spirit of regeneration.'

[37] Ezek 36:26-27; Jer 32:40; Jn 1:12-13, 3:3-8, 7:37-39; 14:16-17; 15:26; 16:13-14; Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 2:11-14; 2 Cor 1:21-22; 4:3-6; Gal 3:2-3, Eph 1:13-14, 4:30, Tit 3:5-7.

[38] Found in various senses in 1 Jn **1**:8-10; **2**:3, 9, 15, 29; **3**:7, 11, 18, 23-24; **4**:7, 11-12, 20-21; **5**:2-3.

[39] 1 Jn 2:28; 3:21; 4:17; 5:14.

[40] 1 Jn 2:23; 3:23; 4:2-3, 9-10, 15; 5:1, 4-5, 10-12.

[41] 1 Jn 2:20, 27; 3:9, 15, 24; 4:4, 13; 5:6, 9-12. Carson, 'Johannine Perspectives' at 73 says, '…the Spirit's work does *not* offer independent assurance to the believer, but is presented as that which ensures specific and certain public results.' (My italics) We agree the indwelling of

of assurance, the key verse is 4:13-14.[42] Edwards understood this verse as meaning the giving of the Spirit is evidence of being in Christ.[43] 1 John focuses on works as a means of assurance but this is firmly set within the primary trinitarian grounds of the prevenient action and promises of the Father, the atoning work of the Son and the indwelling of the Spirit.

Historical Theology

To arrive expediently at Edwards we will briefly sketch how the doctrine of assurance has been expressed or denied in historical theology.

Church Fathers

The First Epistle of Clement (~90AD) uses πληροφορία based on the resurrection and the indwelling Spirit. [44] Tertullian (160~250) also considered the indwelling Spirit as providing assurance [Gal 4:6] although elsewhere he speaks in terms of conduct, 'We ought indeed to walk so holily, and with so entire substantiality of faith, as to be confident and secure in regard of our own conscience.' [45] The church soon grew suspicious of confidence and prescribed continuous works and slow progress. Basil (329-379) writes, '[Paul did not wish us]…to rest in easy security…but every day to attain further progress [Phil 3:13-14]…[and] above all things beware of confidence in yourself, lest you fall from a height of discipline through want of training. It is better to advance a little at a time.'[46] Assurance verified by works became normative.[47]

In Augustine's (354-430) *On Rebuke and Grace*, assurance is impossible lest it engenders pride:

> 'For who of the multitude of believers can presume…that he is of the number of the predestinated? Because it is necessary that in this condition that should be kept hidden; since here we have to beware so much of

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the Spirit should ultimately lead to observable righteous conduct and public confession of Christ but disagree with Carson (also at 74) that the indwelling of the Spirit is not established as an independent 'test'. We suggest that from within 1 John - 3:24, 4:13 and 5:9-12 do establish the indwelling of the Spirit as an independent 'test' of assurance, and this test, as a primary grounds of assurance, is then clearly established in the rest of the NT corpus.

[42] '*By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world.*'

[43] Edwards, *Notes*, Entry 196: 113. The quotation is cited in full already at footnote 33.

[44] Clement of Rome, *The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians* in Early Christian Writings (trans. M. Staniforth; Ringwood, Australia: Penguin Books, 1987), para. 42, at 40 says '…all their doubts [having] been set at rest by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, they set out in the full assurance of the Holy Spirit…'. See also *BGD*, 670.

[45] Tertullian, 'Against Marcion' in V.4 and Tertullian, 'On Female Dress' in II both cited in A. S. Yates, Yates, Arthur S. *The Doctrine of Assurance: With a Special Reference to John Wesley*, (London: The Epworth Press, 1952).

[46] Basil, 'Letter XLII' in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. Vol. VIII, St. Basil: Letters and Select Works. (eds. P. Schaff and H. Wace; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968) 143-144.

[47] Joel R. Beeke, *The Quest For Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors*, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999) at 9-10 explains that the church fathers were concerned with too many other issues.

pride…And such presumption in this condition of trials is not fitting, where there is so great weakness, that security may engender pride.'[48]

There could be no assurance until the end, therefore there was no assurance.[49] In *On the Gift of Perseverance* he says, 'Let not men say, then, that perseverance is given to any one to the end, except when the end itself has come, and he to whom it has been given has been found to have persevered unto the end.'[50] Augustine also considered persevering in pious living as a means of certainty, '[We] call men elected…and God's children, because they are to be so called whom, being regenerated, we see to live piously; but they are then truly what they are called if they shall abide in that…'.[51] Any assured hope can only be placed in God, '…thus as he daily asks for perseverance, he assuredly places the hope of his perseverance not in himself, but in God.'[52]

In advising on assurance of forgiveness, Gregory the Great (540-604) highlights how this doctrine had became lost by the post-Nicene church:

'…thou hast demanded a difficult, nay even an unprofitable thing…because I am unworthy of having a revelation made to me; but unprofitable, because thou oughtest not to become secure about thy sins, except when in the last day of thy life…thou oughtest, ever suspicious and ever fearful, to be afraid of faults, and wash them with daily tears…security is wont to be the mother of carelessness…it must needs be that in the time of this life trembling possess your soul…'.[53]

Aquinas (1225-1274) and the Council of Trent (1545-1563)

The medieval church took a course towards the dangerous currents and rocky waters of, '…*ecclesiastical* (rather than Christological) and *sacramental* (rather than pneumatological) concepts of certainty…[having] devastating effects for a doctrine of personal assurance.'[54] Ritual and superstition defeated assurance, '…where the emphasis falls in the external expression of religion…the need for an inner assurance falls into the background.'[55] Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, denies personal assurance of salvation but affirms the help of persevering grace, '…a person does not

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[48] Augustine, 'Treatise on Rebuke and Grace' in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. Vol. V, St. Augustin: Anti-Pelagian Writings. (eds. P. Schaff; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971) Chapter 40, 488.

[49] Augustine, 'Rebuke and Grace', Ch. 10, 475-476 where he indicates that perseverance is solely a gift of God and see also Ch. 40, 488. Augustine held that Christians could fall away, therefore it appears he considered *personal* assurance detracted from the monergistic activity of God in giving perseverance.

[50] Augustine, 'Treatise on the Gift of Perseverance' in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. V, Ch. 10, 529.

[51] Augustine, 'Rebuke and Grace', Ch. 21, 480.

[52] Augustine, 'Gift of Perseverance', Ch. 46, 544.

[53] Gregory the Great, 'Epistle XXV' in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. Vol. XII, Leo the Great, Gregory the Great, (eds. P. Schaff and H. Wace; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969) 219. He cites texts that talk of serving the Lord in fear - Prov 28:14, Ps. 2:11

[54] Beeke, *Quest*, 12. His italics.

[55] Yates, 157.

hope that he will possess eternal life on his own – that is presumption – but by help of grace; anyone persevering in grace will infallibly reach eternal life.'[56] On hope Aquinas says, '…there is no certitude in hope in this life…in this life we cannot know for sure that we are possessed of grace.'[57] Aquinas concludes, 'Hope does not put its trust primarily in grace already received but in the divine omnipotence or mercy…To anyone having faith, this omnipotence and mercy of God are certainties.'[58] The editorial sweeps aside any suggestion that Aquinas has here asserted assurance, 'What is *not* being asked here is whether or not anyone can be subjectively certain of his own salvation. Apart from a possible private revelation this is impossible, any opinion to the contrary being anathematized at the Council of Trent.'[59] Aquinas confirms this direction, '…presumption, as one kind of sin against the Holy Spirit, is a case of fastening more onto human than divine power.'[60] The misunderstanding is Aquinas' thinking that 'presumption' is based subjectively on human power or evidence. The prevailing Roman Catholic position on assurance may be summarised, '…we trust in God to bring us to eternal life, our hope has a sureness all its own; but this is a sureness of *aspiration*, and not of knowing that, come what may, we shall be saved.'[61] Aspiration is a poor substitute for assurance.

Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564)

The doctrine of assurance was one of Luther's targets in the Reformation's explosion in Biblical theology, 'We must daily more and more endeavour to destroy at the root that pernicious error that man cannot know whether or not he is in a state of grace, by which the whole world is seduced.'[62] Assurance was part of faith, 'Faith is a living and unshakeable confidence, a belief in the grace of God so assured that a man would die a thousand deaths for its sake.'[63] Luther recognised the proper grounds of assurance, '…founded only on the revelation of God's forgiveness as attested to the conscience by the Word of Christ and the Holy Spirit.'[64] For Calvin, assurance is inseparable from and grows with faith, 'This constancy and

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[56] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia: Faith*, (trans. & ed. T. C. O'Brien; London: Blackfriars, 1974, Vol. 31) Qu. 1, Art. 3, 17. The editorial reference, footnote (i) explains that Aquinas understands grace to be preordained to bring someone to eternal life, therefore the focus here is entirely objective. This is a vacuous *present* assurance because the test is reaching eternal life.

[57] Aquinas, *Summa Theologia: Hope*, (trans. And ed. W. J. Hill, London: Blackfriars, 1966, Vol. 33) 18:4, 39.

[58] Aquinas, *Summa: Hope*, 18:4, 41. Here reflecting on Lombard's teaching that, '…*hope is the certain expectation of future beatitude*…' at 18:4, 39.

[59] *Summa: Hope*, Editorial reference, footnote (a), 18:4, 39. His italics. Beeke, *Quest*, 14 says that this views is confirmed in chapter 12-13 of the Decrees of the Council of Trent, where contrary beliefs are also anathematized in Canons 12-16.

[60] Aquinas, *Summa: Hope*, 21:1, 103.

[61] *Summa: Hope*, in Appendix 2, Historical Context: Crisis and Clarification, 131. My italics. See also Appendix 7 – The Certitude of Hope: Its Distinctive Nature for a fuller treatment of the Roman Catholic doctrine of certainty.

[62] Cited in Beeke, *Quest*, 20.

[63] Martin Luther, 'Preface to Romans' in *Martin Luther – Selections From His* Writings, (J. Dillenberger, ed.; New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1961) 23-24.

[64] R. C. Zachman, The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 83.

stability Paul frequently calls πληροφορίαν…it can no more be separated from faith than heat or light from the sun.'[65] In the *Institutes*, Calvin sets out his doctrine of assurance as based on the promises of the Father,[66] confirmed in Christ and by union with and faith in Christ:

> 'Christ...alone is…the anchor of salvation…Christ, then, is the mirror in which…without deception, we may contemplate our election…it is into his body that the Father has decreed to ingraft those whom from eternity he wished to be his…if we are in communion with Christ, we have proof sufficiently clear and strong that we are written in the Book of Life.'[67]

For Calvin, communion with Christ provides assurance and is the result of faith produced by the Spirit, '…the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually binds us to himself.'[68] Calvin's doctrine is "trinity-centric", 'The assurance of faith is ultimately grounded in the trinatarian self-revelation of God.'[69] The foundation remained firm however both Luther and Calvin accepted that works contributed to assurance.[70] Zachman points to the potential problem, '…such a distinction is inherently unstable. The possibility of the testimony of a good conscience founding the assurance of faith cannot in principle be avoided…'.[71] Separate from a trinatarian framework, works become '…a curse instead of a blessing.'[72] As we shall see Edwards took this potential problem and made it a reality.

William Perkins (1558-1602) and John Owen (1560-1622)

Perkins is a casuistical writer, among the first to provide a complete theology of assurance.[73] Perkins set out comprehensive steps of

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[65] Calvin, *Epistles*, 325. Commenting on Col 2:2. See also John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (H. Beveridge, trans., Florida: MacDonald Publishing Company, Undated), Book 3, Chapter 2, especially Section 15, at 292 where Calvin says, 'Very different is that feeling of full assurance (πληροφορία) which the Scriptures uniformly attribute to faith – an assurance which leaves no doubt that the goodness of God is clearly offered to us. This assurance we cannot have without truly perceiving its sweetness, and experiencing it in ourselves…the term *faith* is often used as equivalent to *confidence*.' His italics. From now on will provide book, chapter, section numbers only. For growth in assurance together with growth in faith see 3:2:19.

[66] For example see, Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:2:29-32, 299-302.

[67] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:24:5, 516-517.

[68] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:1:1, 279.

[69] Zachman, 178. See also, Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:13.18 and 3:1; 3:2:23, 35, 38; 3:24. Beeke, *Quest*, at 60 says, '…personal assurance is never divorced from the election of the Father, the redemption of the Son, and the application of the Spirit…' and at 64, '…for Calvin all three members of the Trinity are involved in the believer's assurance of faith. No member of the Trinity detracts from any other. The work of Christ and the Holy Spirit are complementary.'

[70] Based on 2 Ptr 1:10 and 2 Cor 1:12 mainly. For example, Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:6:1, 3:14:18-19 and 3:24:4 and where Calvin regards works as an 'a posteriori', 'secondary support' to assurance. See also, R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979) at 28 where he says Calvin says obedience may confirm our adoption but only as a 'subsidiary, inferior aid' or 'prop to our faith'. Kendall then says, '…Calvin hastens to add that none should…"look to our works for our assurance to be firm."', citing Calvin's Commentary on 1 John.

[71] Zachman, 221, but see 220-223.

[72] Beeke, *Quest*, 71.

[73] Gordon J. Keddie, 'Unfallible Certenty of the Pardon of Sinne and Life Everlasting: the Doctrine of Assurance in the Theology of William Perkins (1558-1602)', *Evangelical Quarterly*

conversion, faith and spiritual progress. He could be read to either have developed or detracted from Calvin's doctrine of assurance by delineating between faith and assurance.[74] Perkins also relied heavily on practical syllogisms to formulate his doctrine.[75] Packer explains, 'In a practical syllogism the major premise would be a moral or spiritual rule; ideally a biblical declaration; the minor premise would be a factual observation; and the conclusion a moral judgment.'[76] Perkins provides an example:

Every one that beleeves is the child of God.
But I doe beleeve.
Therefore I am the child of God.[77]

For Perkins, where the witness of the Spirit was weak or faith had not grown, sanctification became primary.[78] Therefore, the syllogisms were ripe for circularity, misunderstanding and improper introspection, creating '…a self-referential loop – faith was virtually by definition self-validating.'[79]Beeke concedes, 'Perkins's…assurance…emphazised the covenant, secondary grounds…active pursuit…subjective experience, and degrees of faith more than the Reformers…'[80]

Owen's doctrine of assurance is set out in *An Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX*.[81] Owen's holds the "trinity-centric" objective/subjective foundation in balance.[82] Of the machinery of assurance Owen says it: is contained in faith as its seed not essence; comes by the exercise of faith; few believers find it; the duty of believers to labour for it; comes with a fuller communication of the Spirit than ordinary; is our own negligence and sloth to not attain it; provides relief from the despair of sin; encourages duty; evidenced by repentance, sacraments, prayer and worship; requires an experience of

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48 (1976) 230-244, at 235 and 243. Perkins is referred to as the father of Puritanism and largely followed Beza and Zanchius. A 'casuistical writer' is a writer concerned with resolving cases of conscience, diagnosis of religious experience by means of methodical practical divinity. See also Joel R. Beeke, 'William Perkins and His Greatest Case of Conscience: "How a Man May Know Whether He Be the Child of God, or No"'. *Calvin Theological Journal* 41 (2006): 255-277, at 255. Smith (ed), 'Affections' at 65 notes that Edwards quotes from Perkins' *A Discourse Concerning the State of a Christian.* It is therefore likely that Perkins' methods of assurance were known to Edwards.

[74] See the ongoing debate between Beeke *et al* and Kendall, Bell *et al.*

[75] See Keddie, 238-239; Kendall, 70, Beeke, 'William Perkins', 267-271, Beeke, Quest, 83-98 and J. I. Packer, *An Anglican to Remember: William Perkins, Puritan Popularizer*, (London: St Antholin's Lectureship Charity, 1996) 18.

[76] Packer, *An Anglican*, 18.

[77] Keddie, 239 citing Perkins, *Works*, I, 547.

[78] Kendall, 73-74.

[79] M. P. Winship, 'Weak Christians, Backsliders, and Carnal Gospelers: Assurance of Salvation and the Pastoral Origins of Puritan Practical Divinity In the 1580s'. *Church History* 70 (2001): 462-481, at 465.

[80] Beeke, 'William Perkins', 277.

[81] Beeke, *Quest*, 189-200. Smith (ed), 'Affections', at 68-69 notes that Edwards quotes from *Pneumatologia* in judging a work of the Spirit.

[82] Owen, 'An Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX', *Works*, 6:387 says, 'It may…be considered in two ways:-1. For a *doctrinal, objective* discovery of it in its *truth*. 2. An *experimental, subjective* discovery of it in its *power*.' His italics. From Owen, 'Psalm CXXX', *Works*, 6:387 and 6:456-461, 6:470-486, 6:487 his foundation for assurance could be described as: 1. God has promised forgiveness in the new covenant; 2. this is brought forth in Christ and 3. revealed to a sinner in God's power.

regeneration; isn't accompanied by strange phenomena; requires waiting on God; consistent with and necessarily concomitant to delight in obedience, hope, forgiveness and love; casts out fear although is consistent with fear, temptation, doubt and variation.[83] In *Exposition*, Owen warned explicitly against making obedience to works primary for assurance.[84]

In the next century, Edwards would inherit the teaching of the Reformation and the Puritans. With these and other influences upon him, how he formulated the doctrine of assurance is a question to which we must now turn.

<u>Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)</u>

Biographical Sketch, Key Dates and Theological Focus

Jonathan Edwards was born on October 5, 1703. He was the fifth of eleven children and his father was a Puritan minister. Edwards studied theology and philosophy and became a pastor in 1726, succeeding his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, as pastor of the church in Northampton, Massachusetts. Edwards followed the puritan experiential interpretation of Reformed theology, emphasizing God's sovereignty, human depravity, the reality of hell and the necessity of conversion and Christian practice.[85] Edwards was at the centre of the initial revival activities of 1734-1735 leading to the climax of the Great Awakening in the 1740's.[86] He spent much of this period writing to defend the genuineness of the revivals from critics. His books provide commentary on the revivals, attempt to distinguish true conversion and piety from false belief and uphold the revivals as an authentic work of the Holy Spirit.[87] In 1750, Edwards' Northampton church dismissed him after he attempted to impose stricter qualifications for taking sacraments, in an attempt to remove hypocrites and unbelievers from church membership. In late 1757 he became president of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University) but died on March 22, 1758, following complications from a smallpox inoculation.[88]

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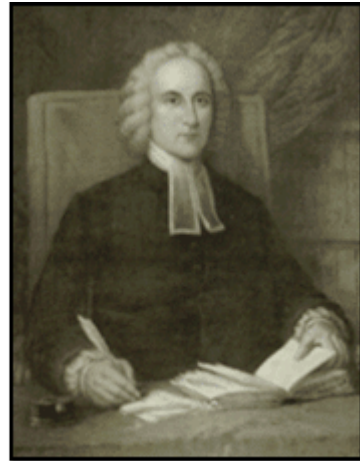
[83] Owen, 'Psalm CXXX', *Works*, 6:413-427, 437, 455-470, 547-553, 563.

[84] Owen, 'Psalm CXXX', *Works*, 6:564-566 where he warns, '*Mix not too much foundation and building work together.*'

[85] No author, 'Jonathan Edwards: Biography'. n.p. Cited 13 November 2007. Online: http://edwards.yale.edu/about-edwards/biography/.

[86] Smith (ed.), 'Affections', 3-4.

[87] Smith, (ed.), 'Affections', 4-5. His major books during this time are *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741), *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival* (1742), *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746), and *The Life of David Brainerd* (1749).

[88] 'Jonathan Edwards: Biography'.

Introduction and Development of Edwards' Doctrine of Assurance

Edwards' earlier works focus on the experience of conversion and the mechanics of union with God through the indwelling of the Spirit, there is less discussion of obedience in Christian practice as an evidence of godliness (eg. *Divine and Supernatural Light*). Christian practice occupies Edwards' attention in later years as it became evident that many of the presumed converts in Northampton had fallen away.[89] As a consequence, Edwards' doctrine of assurance changed focus, '…the backsliders alerted him to the error of identifying as the means of assurance "the inward witness of the Spirit, the feeling of soul-assuring inward experience," he shifts the locus of assurance from immediate experience to persevering Christian practice.'[90] In order to appreciate and critique Edwards' more reasoned doctrine of assurance we will focus on his writing during the years 1730-1746. The development in Edwards' understanding of assurance can be traced by looking at his *Notes on Scripture* together with his theological notebook *The "Miscellanies" 501-832*, compiled 1731-1740.[91] *Affections* (1746) is also relevant as it shows his progression in thought from earlier work[92] and is arguably his fullest treatment of the doctrine of assurance, 'Edward's aim in this treatise was specifically to discriminate between gracious and counterfeit affections in order to establish a firm foundation for personal assurance.'[93] However, Edwards uses "affections" and "assurance" differently and he was perhaps more concerned with rooting out hypocrisy and unbelief than establishing a firm foundation for assurance. Gracious affections may be necessary for assurance but are not the totality of assurance and vice versa. However, most certainly grounds for assurance are invariably linked to signs of gracious affections, especially in the thought and writing of Jonathan Edwards.

Jonathan Edwards' Doctrine of Assurance

Edwards' doctrine of assurance appears to have three foundations with Christian practice being the main foundation. The three foundations are:

1. The promises of God.
2. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and
3. Christian practice.

We will take each in turn in order to establish his doctrine.

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[89] Chamerlain, (ed.), "Miscellanies", 20.

[90] Chamerlain, (ed.), "Miscellanies", 20-21 quoting Edwards, "Miscellanies", No. 800.

[91] Chamerlain, (ed.), "Miscellanies", 1, 18-24.

[92] Chamberlain, (ed.), "Miscellanies", 6-7. Edwards' thought on assurance develops directly from his nineteen unit series on Matthew 25:1-12, the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (1738), through to *Charity and its Fruit* (1739), a twenty-one unit series on 1 Cor. 13. She says, 'In the series on the wise and foolish virgins, Edwards delineates a list of the uncertain and certain signs of grace that anticipates *Religious Affections* at almost every point. In the *Charity* series he continues this theme, although he concentrates on the nature of true Christian practice, the chief sign of grace.'

[93] Ava Chamberlain, 'Self-Deception as a Theological Problem in Jonathan Edwards's "Treatise Concerning Religious Affections"', *Church History* 63 (1994): 541-556, at 546.

1. The promises of God are foundational to assurance.

▪ It is plain from the Old Testament that God's people have assurance:

'…it was a common thing for the saints that we have a history or particular account of in Scripture, to be assured…David, throughout the book of Psalms…speaks without any hesitancy…of God as his God glorying in him as his portion and heritage, his rock and confidence, his shield; salvation, and high tower….'[94]

▪ It is plain from the Gospel of John that God's people have assurance:

'Jesus Christ, in his dying discourse…often declares his special and everlasting love to [the disciples]…and promises them a future participation with him in his glory, in the most absolute manner…to the end that their joy might be full…he did not desire to hold them in the least suspense…it is agreeable to Christ's designs…that there should be sufficient and abundant provision made, that his saints might have full assurance of their future glory.'[95]

▪ It is plain from the Apostle Paul that God's people have assurance:

'Paul, through all his epistles speaks in an assured strain; ever speaking positively of his special relation to Christ, his Lord, and Master, and Redeemer, and his interest in, and expectation of the future reward [Gal. 2:20, Phil. 1:21, 2 Tim. 1:12, 2 Tim. 4:7, 8].'[96]

▪ Assurance is founded on the promises of the covenant of grace.[97]

'…the nature of the covenant of grace, and God's declared ends in the appointment and constitution of things in that covenant, do plainly show it to be God's design to make ample provision for the saints having an assured hope of eternal life…God has confirmed his promises with an oath…that the heirs of the promises might have an undoubting hope and full joy, in an assurance of their future glory. [Heb. 6:17-18,]…in vain is provision made in Jesus Christ…if assurance of freedom from the guilt of sin is not attainable.'[98]

2. The indwelling Holy Spirit is foundational to assurance.

▪ The indwelling and sealing of Spirit provides assurance.

'…having the Spirit…is spoken of as a certain sign that persons shall have the eternal inheritance [2 Cor. 1:29, 5:5, Eph. 1:14] and a having anything of the Spirit is mentioned as a sure sign of being in Christ, 1 John 4:13…being partaker of the divine nature is spoken of as the peculiar

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[94] Edwards, 'Affections', Part 2, chapter 11, page 167-168.
[95] Edwards, 'Affections', 2:11:168.
[96] Edwards, 'Affections', 2:11:168-169.
[97] Edwards, "Micellanies", at no. 774, 425 says, ''…God introduces another better covenant, committed not to [human] strength, but to the strength of one that was mighty and stable, and therefore is a sure and everlasting covenant…God lighted up a divine light in man's soul at the first, but it remained on such a foundation that Satan found means to extinguish it, and therefore, when God lights it up a second time, it is that it may never be extinguished.'
[98] Edwards, 'Affections', 2:11:169.

privilege of the true saints…[2 Pet. 1:4, Heb. 12:10, 1 Cor. 2:14]…through the saving influences of the Spirit…there is a new inward perception or sensation of their minds, entirely different in its nature and kind, from anything that ever their minds were the subjects of before they were sanctified.[99]

- Union with God is an immediate witness bringing assurance but is not 'the greatest sign and clearest evidence'.

'…it be far from being true, that the soul…judges only by an immediate witness without any sign or evidence; *for it judges and is assured by the greatest sign and clearest evidence* [ie. Christian practice]; yet in this case the saint stands in no need of multiplied signs…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.* How can he doubt whether he stands in a childlike relation to God, when he plainly sees a childlike union between God and his soul, and hence does boldly, and as it were naturally and necessarily cry, Abba, Father?'[100]

3. Obedience and works are foundational to assurance.

- Christians are directed to make their calling and election sure because works are the best evidence to us and to others.[101]

'…assurance is not only attainable in some very extraordinary cases, but… all Christians are directed to give all diligence to make their calling and election sure [2 Pet. 1:5-8]. And it is spoken of as a thing very unbecoming Christians…[and] very blamable in them, not to know whether Christ be in them or no [2 Cor. 13:5]…[or] to remain uncertain of the reward [1 Cor. 9:26]…Christians' knowing their interest in the saving benefits of Christianity is a thing ordinarily attainable, because the apostle tells us by what means [1 Cor. 2:12; 1 Jn 2:3, 5, 3:14, 19, 24, 4:13, 5:2, 19].'[102]

- Christian practice is a sure sign and chief evidence of assurance.

'Scripture also speaks of Christian practice as a distinguishing and sure evidence of grace to persons' own consciences [1 Jn 2:3]…that which may give us assurance of our own godliness, 1 John 3:18-19…Heb. 6, speaks of the work and labor of love…as that evidence which tended to give them the highest assurance of hope concerning themselves…Christian practice, doing good works, or keeping Christ's commandments…the Scripture represents…as a sure sign to our own consciences, that we are real Christians. And…this is the chief of all evidences that men can have of their own sincere godliness.'[103]

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[99] Edwards, 'Affections', 3:1:204.
[100] Edwards, 'Affections', 3:1:238-239. My italics.
[101] Edwards, 'Affections', at 3:12:422 says, '…obedience, good works, good fruits, are…given in Scripture as a sure evidence to our own consciences of a true principle of grace…practice is [also] given in Scripture as the main evidence to others of our true Christianity….'.
[102] Edwards, 'Affections', 2:11:169-170.
[103] Edwards, 'Affections', 3:12:420-421.

'Christian practice is the most proper evidence of the gracious sincerity of professors, to themselves and others; and the chief of all the marks of grace, the sign of signs, and evidence of evidences, that which seals and crowns all other signs…There may be several good evidences that a tree is a fig tree; but the highest and most proper evidence of it is, that it actually bears figs.' [104]

- The evidence of practice is consistent with the evidence of sealing.

'The witness or seal of the Spirit…consists in the effect of the Spirit of God on the heart, in the implantation and exercises of grace there, and so consists in experience. And it is also beyond doubt, that *this seal of the Spirit, is the highest kind of evidence of the saints' adoption that ever they obtain.* But in these exercises of grace in practice…God gives witness, and sets to his seal, in the most conspicuous, eminent, and evident manner… Christ commonly gives, by his Spirit, the greatest and most joyful evidences to his saints of their sonship, in those effectual exercises of grace under trials…as is manifest in the full assurance, and unspeakable joys of many of the martyrs [1 Pet. 4:14,, Rom. 5:2-3, 8:15-18, 2 Cor 5:5].'[105]

- We gain assurance by action not examination.

'It is not God's design that men should obtain assurance in any other way, than by mortifying corruption, and increasing in grace, and obtaining the lively exercises of it. And although self-examination be a duty of great use and importance…yet it is not the principal means, by which the saints do get satisfaction of their good estate. Assurance is not to be obtained so much by self-examination, as by action. [Phil 3:12; 1 Cor. 9:26; 2 Pet. 1:5-11]…more by running, than by considering…'[106]

- Assurance from practice is not inconsistent with justification by faith as is a 'sign of grace' not the 'price of grace'.

'…in…holy practice as the main sign of sincerity; there is nothing legal, nothing derogatory to the freedom and sovereignty of gospel grace, nothing in the least clashing with the gospel doctrine of justification by faith alone, without the works of the law, nothing in the least tending to lessen the glory of the Mediator, and our dependence on his righteousness, nothing infringing on the special prerogatives of faith in the affair of our salvation, nothing in any wise detracting from the glory of God and his mercy, or exalting man, or diminishing his dependence and obligation. So that if any are against such an importance of holy practice…it must be only from a senseless aversion to the letters and sound of the word *works*…[and] to the words *holiness*, *godliness*, *grace*, *religion*, *experience*, and even *faith* itself…'[107]

The Machinery of Assurance

With the main pillars of Edwards' doctrine of assurance are various corollaries that contribute to a full appreciation of his doctrine. Assurance

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[104] Edwards, 'Affections', 3:12:443.
[105] Edwards, 'Affections', 3:12:454. My italics.
[106] Edwards, 'Affections', 3:0:195-196.
[107] Edwards, 'Affections', 3:12:455, 458-459. His italics.

requires a faith of dependence and practice, but assurance may be certain at first faith:

> 'No promise of the covenant of grace belongs to any man, until he has first believed in Christ; for it is by faith alone that we become interested in Christ…God's manner is not to bring comfortable texts of Scripture to give men assurance of his love, and that they shall be happy, before they have had a faith of dependence.'[108]

Persevering faith is a 'condition' of salvation but also part of the first act of faith making salvation certain.

> '…salvation has a dependence on perseverance…Faith (on our part) is the great condition of salvation, and it is that *by* which we are justified and saved…[but] The first act of faith gives a title to salvation, because it does virtually trust in God and Christ for perseverance…and so virtually contains perseverance. [Heb. 10:38-39, Rom. 11:20, Jn 15:7, Heb. 3:14, Heb. 5:12]…So that not only the first act of faith, but after-acts of faith, and perseverance in faith, do justify the sinner…although salvation is in itself sure and certain after the first act.'[109]

A believer is deprived of assurance if our theology allows falling from grace.[110] Confidence is not assurance.[111] Assurance cannot be determined in others, '…these are what they can neither feel, nor see, in the heart of another…'.[112] Trials are a means of assurance.[113] Assurance can be minimised, lost or delusional if not upheld by love and a holy life.[114]

> 'It is as impossible…that a holy and Christian hope be kept alive, in its clearness and strength…as it is to keep the light in the room, when the candle is put out; or to maintain the bright sunshine in the air, when the sun is gone down. Distant experiences, when darkened by present prevailing lust and corruption, never keep alive a gracious confidence and assurance; but that sickens and decays upon it…so it is in the heart of a child of God: if divine love decays and falls asleep, and lust prevails, the light and joy of hope go out, and dark fear and doubting arises; and if…divine love prevails and comes into lively exercise, this brings in the brightness of hope, and drives away black lust, and fear with it…and gives full assurance [1 John 4:18].'[115]

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[108] Edwards, 'Affections', 3:1:222. And, Edwards, 'Affections', 3:12:443 says, 'Tis possible that a man may have a good assurance of a state of grace, at his first conversion, before he has had opportunity to gain assurance, by this great evidence [of Christian practice].'

[109] Edwards, "Miscellanies", No. 729, 354-355.

[110] Edwards, "Miscellanies", No. 695, 280.

[111] Edwards, 'Affections', 2:11:170-171

[112] Edwards, 'Affections', 2:12:181.

[113] Edwards, 'Affections', 3:12:431.

[114] Edwards, 'Affections', at 2:11:174 says, '…a true assurance is not upheld, but by the soul's being kept in a holy frame, and Grace maintained in lively exercise. If the actings of grace do much decay…he loses his assurance.'

[115] Edwards, 'Affections', 2:11:178-180.

A Positive Critique of Edwards' Doctrine of Assurance

To be appreciated in Edwards' doctrine of assurance is his clear reliance on Scripture; his concern for authenticity; his concern for a certainty of God's love to shine in and through people; his affirmation that assurance is a Scriptural expectation and his brilliant explanation of the "wax and wane" of assurance due to sin. It is also commendable that Edwards' maintains a necessity for conversion, the 'new inward perception' of union with God, but attempts to balance this with a stress on Christian practice, steering away from the subjectivity and 'unhealthy introspection' of internal self-examination. His bringing together of Spirit and works is a *via media* between the hypocrisy of antinomianism ('senseless aversion') on one hand and phenomenal enthusiasm on the other. A spiritual union with God is required, not as a strange phenomenon but as a 'new inward perception', a perception that compels not outrageous enthusiasm but perseverance in good works. These good works are then the 'greatest sign and clearest evidence' that union with God has actually taken place, so providing assurance. Set within his context of revivalism, witnessing spurious conversion, weak Christians and backsliders, these mediating elements in his doctrine are understandable.

A Negative Critique of Edwards' Doctrine of Assurance

Introductory Summary

The problem is Edwards' treatment of the doctrine of assurance is inconsistent and unbalanced. He dangerously merges perseverance and justification; he seems to minimise, if not completely neglect, the doctrine and meaning of atonement and the continuing role and offices of Christ. He is also contradictory in his treatment of the relation between union with God and Christian practice, as to which is the greatest evidence. Each error has serious implications and while we may learn greatly from his writing, the cumulative effect of his doctrine, as critiqued from biblical and historical theology, would suggest we look elsewhere for a Biblically balanced and sound doctrine of assurance.

Perseverance and Justification

Edwards stumbles over the locus of assurance. Is it in justification, sanctification or perseverance? Edwards follows the Puritans in separating faith and assurance whereas the Reformers held assurance was of the essence of faith. On the Reformers view assurance would be located in justification, at the point of faith in the *ordo salutis*. The Puritans must locate assurance in sanctification, ie. subsequent to faith. Edwards maintains that placing assurance in works is not inconsistent with justification by faith,[116] however he then asserts that assurance comes with both initial and after faith.[117] This circularity leads Edwards to declare, '…not only the first act of faith, but after-acts of faith…do justify the sinner…'[118] Justification becomes dependant on continuing acts of faith. This denies the victory won in

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[116] See at footnote 107.
[117] See at footnote 108 and 109.
[118] Edwards, "Miscellanies", No. 729, 354-355.

atonement, an imputed righteousness of Christ for all time not just at the point of initial faith, and makes justification *conditional* on works rather than being complete in the finished cross-work of Christ. *Affections* compounds this problem because assurance is not based on the work of Christ.[119] Edwards' *Miscellanies* show he holds to imputed righteousness and has some sense that justification is essential to assurance:

> 'Justification consists in imputing righteousness…God ceases to be angry with the sinner for his sin because righteousness is imputed to him.'[120]

> '…all those that are risen with Christ, and have him for their surety, and so are justified in his justification…a believer's justification implies not only a deliverance from the wrath of God, but a *title* to glory [Rom. 6:12, Acts 26:18, Jn 5:24].'[121]

> '[At] conversion, is justified and adopted: he is received as a child and an heir, as a joint heir with Christ. His fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. God is theirs, Christ is theirs, and the Holy Ghost is theirs...The whole tenor of the gospel shows that Christians have actually a full and final *right* made over to them, to spiritual and heavenly blessings.'[122]

However, if Chamberlain is correct and *Affections* is meant to provide 'a firm foundation for personal assurance.',[123] then the finished cross-work of Christ, a clear Biblical and Reformed foundation for assurance is either absent or assumed. Edwards' writing consistently relegates Jesus only to 'Mediator' and loses the Biblical and Reformed focus on the atonement and the *continuing* offices of Christ as Prophet, Priest and King. For Edwards assurance is not based on the objective, monergistic, propitiatory-expiatory sentence of salvation. This is displaced for a synergistic justification by first-faith and after-faith in subsequent Christian practice. Edwards upholds God's sovereignty in conversion but makes assurance dependent on Christian practice, thus watering the very seeds of synergistic Arminianism he fought his life against.

Union With God and Christian Practice

In Edwards' soteriology union with God and Christian practice are dominant and this focus minimises atonement and justification by faith, 'His own analysis of the doctrine of justification, especially his consideration of the relation between justification and perseverance, led him away from

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[119] In *Affections*, "the cross" is only mentioned four times and 50% of those times are seeing the cross in connection with a negative 'image' that is not a true sign of godliness.

[120] Edwards, "Miscellanies", No. 812, 522.

[121] Edwards, "Miscellanies", No. 711, 340. My italics.

[122] Edwards, "Miscellanies", No. 755, 403-404. My italics. In both this and the former quotation Edwards uses the phrase 'a title' and a 'right'. In Common Law such 'a title' or a 'right' still had to be registered to be confirmed, ie. "to be made good." It is possible that Edwards actually believed justification by faith in Christ gave as a mere 'right' or 'title' to salvation that must still be "made good" by a believers persevering faith. In Edwards' thought it appears the taking of this title or right is *conditional* on Christian practice and good works.

[123] Ava Chamberlain, 'Self-Deception as a Theological Problem in Jonathan Edwards's "Treatise Concerning Religious Affections"', *Church History* 63 (1994): 541-556, at 546.

justification as the central organizing concept of his soteriology.'[124] Edwards stumbles over assurance because his salvific foundation is faulty, 'What is real in the union between Christ and his people, is the foundation of what is legal; that is, it is something that is really in them and between them, uniting (them), that is the ground of the suitableness of their being accounted as one by the Judge.'[125] But, the foundation to the indwelling of the Spirit is the legal verdict in the Eternal Court of God of justification by faith in the finished cross-work of Christ, the sacrifice of atonement [Rom 3:21-26]. Christ is the foundation. Edwards order is wrong, what he calls the *legal* is the foundation for what he calls the *real*, for the sending of the Spirit is directly dependant on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ [Jn 7:39; 14:26; 16:7, 14; Rom 8:11].

The implication is Edwards' foundation for his doctrine of assurance is not "trinity-centric" or even Christocentric, but rather union with God and Christian practice. However even here he seems uncertain. On the one hand Christian practice is, '...the sign of signs, and evidence of evidences, that which seals and crowns all other signs...' [126] But then also, '...this seal of the Spirit, is the highest kind of evidence of the saints' adoption that ever they obtain.'[127] He eventually resolves this dilemma not by simply saying there are two foundations but by merging them as one, '...keeping Christ's commands is the highest evidence of a good estate, and yet the witness of the Spirit of adoption or love is the highest evidence: for they are both the same.'[128] Edwards arrives at this conclusion because obedience is not simply a motion of the body but an act of the soul; spirit and mind together, '...the great evidence lies in the inward exercise...that accompanies and issues in imperate acts of the will.'[129] He explains further in *Treatise on Grace*, '...no man has a habit of grace dwelling in him any otherwise than he has the Holy Spirit dwelling in him...and acting in union with his natural faculties...'.[130] The great danger here is that many non-Christians "feel good" about doing acts of charity. If Christian assurance is based on works, what really distinguishes a Christian from a feel good philanthropist?

Edwards may have argued that because *Christian* practice is dependant on the indwelling Spirit, good works become a type of objective test, 'Growth in habits, skills and strengths of the Christian life is at every point a matter of

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[124] Chamberlain, (ed.), "Miscellanies", 37-38.

[125] Edwards, "Miscellanies", No. 568, 105. Chamberlain, (ed.), "Miscellanies" at 39 says, '...the primary focus of Edwards' analysis of the doctrine of justification is not the forensic transaction that occurs by means of justification but the ontological transformation that occurs by means of union with Christ...As the limitations of the doctrine of justification became increasingly evident, a second model of conversion, which operates exclusively on this "real" or ontological level, displaced justification as the central organizing concept of Edwards' soteriology.'

[126] Edwards, 'Affections', 3:12:443. And see also Edwards, "Miscellanies", No. 790, 477 where Edwards says, 'The testimony of our own consciences, with respect to doing good works and living a holy life, is spoken of as that certain sign which especially tends to give good assurance of godliness.'

[127] Edwards, 'Affections', 3:12:454.

[128] Edwards, "Miscellanies", No. 790, 487.

[129] Edwards, "Miscellanies", No.790, 481.

[130] Edwards, *Treatise on Grace*, cited in R. H. Olmsted, 'Staking All on Faith's Object: the Art of Christian Assurance According to Martin Luther and Karl Barth'. *Pro Ecclesia* 10 (2001): 135-158, at 150.

staking all on faith's object.'[131] This is an unconvincing assessment. Except for the promises of assurance in Scripture, at every point of Edwards' doctrine the uncertain Christian is cast upon themselves. Do they have a spiritual union with Christ? Is that evidenced by good works? Bell's critique of Federal theology applies equally to Edwards, 'The emphasis was placed on faith as *our act*, and on sanctification in terms of our conformity to the law, so that our works of sanctification and fruits of holiness appear to us as evidences of our justification, thereby bringing us assurance of our salvation.' [132] No longer is Christ, '…the mirror in which…we may contemplate our election.' [133] Edwards' may be seeking to avoid legal hypocrisy and unhealthy introspection, but it is difficult to perceive how his doctrine would not encourage introverted legalism, hypocrisy and uncertainty, for how could we ever be sure we had "done enough"? Rather the finished and continuing work of Jesus cannot be removed from a doctrine of assurance, [Lk 23:43], *"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."* Edwards' 'pernicious error' is moving away from the Reformed emphasis of assurance being essential to faith with a balanced "trinity-centric" foundation. A movement preceded by the Puritan divines.

Conclusion

We have found from our Biblical and historical survey that a balanced doctrine of assurance must be "trinity-centric", grounded in the Father's promises in Scripture, the work of Christ and the indwelling Spirit. From our research it would also seem best to hold assurance with first faith, although with a recognition that assurance may grow as faith grows in necessary obedience, love and good works. This "trinty-centric" model may be analogous to a children's slide with a ladder of three rungs. We stand in assurance when we hold firm and climb the steps of the Father's promises in Scripture, the work of Christ and the indwelling Spirit. We are enabled to climb by God. However we then go down the slide in faith. Our works are temporal, the slide comes to an end. Therefore, for assurance, we must, enabled by God, continue to return to and take hold of and climb again the equal steps and go down the slide in faith as an aid in strengthening assurance. To avoid internal inconsistency and errors, assurance should only be sort in the *foundational grounds* rather than in its growth. We grow in assurance when we play on the slide, continually up and down. Climbing has us standing again and always on the grounds of assurance, we never leave the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Sliding has us faithfully retaining, enjoying and working to bring forth the growth of assurance. God enables and compels Christians to play and remain on the slide and hence we have assurance. Neglect or cease to play and assurance is lost. Edwards' doctrine of assurance is like the naughty boy climbing up the slide rather than taking the stairs. He confuses the locus of assurance and bases his doctrine in union with God and Christian practice which can only lead to the subjective errors of unhealthy introspection and legalism. Rather, assurance should ultimately be based in objective sources, coming from God. The promises of God in Scripture, the finished work of Christ, the

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[131] Olmsted, 151.

[132] M. Charles Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance*, (Edinburgh: The Handsell Press, 1985) 198 and see 198-202 generally.

[133] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:24:5, 516-517. See at footnote 67. Bell, 199.

indwelling of His Spirit – from these spring the fountain of assurance, the certainty of regeneration producing faith, the certainty of a God transformed life, the certainty and hope of future glory.

Labora-Ut Requiescas
Soli Deo Gloria

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