

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH XVIII

(Readings: 2 Peter 1:1-11; Psalm 88)

Why, How, & Where We Grow Confident in Faith

There is a denomination in the Netherlands called the Gereformeerde Gemeente. They are also known as the “black stocking” church because of the strictness of their lifestyle. So they have quite a number of rules their members are expected to follow. One of those rules says that if you join from another denomination, even if you’ve professed the same biblically reformed faith there, you have to profess your faith over again.

Interestingly, for all those rules they have which show they have the true faith there are not many of them confident of that faith. When it comes, for example, to a Lord’s Supper celebration, out of a congregation of three or four hundred only three or four might actually go to the table. You see, they are the only ones who have had an experience of their faith. Out of all those there they alone can say they know the Lord in a special way. According to how they see 1st Corinthians 11, the huge majority there in looking at their lives don’t believe they’re worthy to participate.

And that shows up in their whole lives. They will say to you that they can’t be sure about their faith in Jesus Christ.

This Chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith is about that being “sure”. There’s a believing confidence here.

Why You Can be Sure

An assurance we begin noting in Article 1 with two things. This is why our first aspect is entitled, **WHY YOU CAN BE SURE**. You see, this is about the privilege of assurance.

But first of all Article 1 begins with telling us what it is not, because we have to see that salvation isn’t about what we achieve but what we receive. The Confession says that “hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favour of God, and estate of salvation.”

The trouble is that they’re usually found in the Church. And not only are they in church but they also try to drag others in the church with them. We see that with that denomination in the Netherlands.

So what are you meant to look for here?

Well, he’s someone who’s fooling himself. Like the Pharisee Jesus describes in Luke 18 the verses 10 till 14. He thought that all was well with his soul. He was quite proud about how he wasn’t like other men. He even pointed out one of those others - the tax collector also standing in the temple to pray.

You know who they are. They are those who make a big show about what they have on the outside - they even preach you have to have lots of material wealth - to prove what you are on the inside. They’ve got it all back-to-front.

What they believe actually keeps showing them that they don’t actually believe. Because with any one of them there cannot be a time when they are experiencing or doing enough. And then it all falls into a heap.

A minister was once reading some passages about trusting God to a woman. She said to him, “Well, I am trying to believe.” “Trying to believe whom”, asked the minister. “It is God who has spoken in His Word. Are you saying you’re trying to believe Him?”

Straight-away she saw the light. She exclaimed, “Oh, I didn’t realise what I was saying. Yes, I do believe what God has declared.” At last her heart found rest.

Dear friend, is your faith sure? Do you truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love Him in sincerity, endeavouring to walk in good conscience before Him? Then take Him at His word!

You see, true believers are actually doing a terrible thing by not being confident. It’s ingratitude. It slaps God in the face. I mean, doesn’t the apostle John say in his first letter chapter 2 verse 3, “We know that we come to know him if we obey his commands.”

Ah, that’s where some would argue, though. They say, “You have to obey his commands.”

They’ve got a point. So how can you be sure that you’re doing that?

Well, let me answer by not looking to what you think you need to have in this relationship. That’s what this is about! Like a woman thinking about getting married, you will have your doubts. So a good question to put to that woman is, “Can you live without him, though?”

You see, could you ever live without God? Can you imagine not believing in Jesus and not loving Him and not going to church and not reading His word and not praying - ever!

Then you’ve got your answer. Because those passages in Scripture about examining to see if you’re in the faith make you see what Christ’s already done!

How You Are So Sure

And so we come from seeing WHY YOU CAN BE SURE to realising HOW YOU ARE SO SURE. This is what Article 2 brings out.

Let me illustrate this. There were two Germans who wanted to climb the Matterhorn, one of the highest mountains in Switzerland. They hired three guides and began the steep and treacherous ascent. They roped themselves together in this order: guide, traveller, guide, traveller, guide.

They’d only gone up a little way when the last man lost his footing. He was held up by the other four, because each had a toehold in the niches they had cut in the ice.

But then the next man slipped and pulled down the two above him. The only one to hold on was the first guide, who had driven a spike deep into the ice. Because he held on, all the men beneath him regained their footing.

You know, I’m like one of those men who slipped. But, thank God, I’m bound in a living partnership to Christ. Because He stands I will never perish!

This is what Article 2 speaks of with the “infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation”. It is God who has spoken in His Word. So assurance is based on God’s own word. But it also comes through what’s now in us and the One who always convicts us.

Mind you, this assurance is never separate from God’s Word. Some believe that when Romans 8 verse 16 says that the Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children the apostle is speaking about an experience apart from Scripture. But how can it? The Spirit and the Word always go together. Therefore that assurance that we are the children of God comes not from the Holy Spirit alone but from a joint witness effected by the Holy Spirit and from our word being agreement with His Word. That’s what we realise in us. 1st John 2 verse 5 says that “if anyone obeys his word, God’s love is truly made complete in him.”

The purpose of this first letter of John is actually to tackle those who were teaching that you had to have a certain experience. It was confronting an early form of gnosticism. That’s why at its end in chapter 5 verse 13 the apostle says, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.”

Where You Find It's Sure

Are you still wondering, though? Not quite convinced? Let's move then on to a third consideration. Let's see WHERE YOU FIND IT'S SURE.

Here is where Article 3 might seem to take a different direction from the first two articles. It's almost like there are two types of assurance. Well, there are actually two types of assurance. But they're not both here in this Chapter, for there's a difference between faith in Jesus Christ and faith that we truly have faith in Jesus Christ. Without the one we cannot be saved and without the other, we can be saved - even though it is very important.

The first type of assurance we heard about in Chapter 14. Here we have the second type of assurance.

That puts a different light on things, doesn't it? If you have that lack of assurance it must either be because you don't believe at all or because, though you do believe, you don't always feel you do. Now I don't think you're going to say to me you don't believe at all. You wouldn't be in this church now otherwise. And you certainly wouldn't be opening up God's Word in your home and applying His principles in your everyday life, because you do those things. And you couldn't see yourself not doing them. That's means you are producing fruit. It's the fruit of assurance.

Think about this: You are brought up as a child in a loving home. You receive all the basic essentials of life. You're shown much love and you're told you're loved. So what do you do? You love! You want assurance that you're part of that family? Then be part of that family!

But, really, how many of us go into great angst about being part of our families? Do you wonder how you're sure you're part of your family? Have you been in a terrible depression as to your place at home?

It's only if things are not right at home that there's insecurity. Otherwise as we do our part in the family we know that's where we belong. In the same way, when Article 3 speaks about making your calling and election sure it's talking about showing you're part of God's family. That's what we read of in 2nd Peter 1. They are qualities that make us effective and productive.

But we also read there that if we don't have them we have forgotten we have been cleansed from our past sins. And that means you're definitely not sure!

The story is told of when a Rear Admiral was explaining to his superior why he had failed to take his ships into an enemy harbour so that it would be destroyed. The superior officer listened to him giving all his reasons why he didn't do it. After the Rear Admiral had finished his report the commander said, "Admiral, there is one explanation which you haven't given." "What is that?" asked the Rear Admiral. "This: You didn't believe that you could do it." And this is the lack of confidence which hasn't only meant failure in physical warfare but also in the spiritual struggle.

This bring us to a second aspect of WHERE YOU FIND IT'S SURE. Because it's not only what you see, as Article 3 puts it, but it's also with when you don't see. And so we come to Article 4, because Article 4 acknowledges the war. It tells us that this assurance, which is the assurance that we truly have faith in Jesus Christ, can fluctuate. If assurance is a fruit it can be shaken.

First of all Article 4 tells us that falling into sin would affect us this way. It describes this as "negligence in preserving of it", "falling into some special sin which woundeth the conscience and grieveth the Spirit", and "some sudden and vehement temptation."

We see such a case in the life of David. In Psalm 51 he expresses how the adultery with Bathsheba affected his assurance. This is what he cries in the verses 8, 12 and 14: "Let me hear joy and

gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.”

And isn't that true of you, too? When you've got caught up in sin you became quite apart from God. And the longer it went on, the harder it got. Much as you blustered your way through life then your heart was far from sure. You even showed it in your life.

Then Article 4 tells us that it may be God Himself who puts us through a particular situation. It describes it as God's withdrawing of His countenance.

This is what we see with Job. While he was not sinning against God he yet felt that lack of assurance in God. In chapter 29, the verses 2 till 5, he says, “How I long for the months gone by, for the days when God watched over me, when his lamp shone upon my head and by his light I walked through darkness! Oh, for the days when I was in my prime, when God's intimate friendship blessed my house, when the Almighty was still with me and my children were around.”

Charles Spurgeon went through much the same. Ill-health took a big toll out of him. He too pleaded with his Heavenly Father when he felt so much that God's face had been hidden from him. But Spurgeon also echoed the words of Job as he endured his struggle. He wrote, “Faith mastered it by laying hold upon God in His own revealed character - that character in which in our darkest hour, we are best able to appreciate Him...We can still say “Our Father,” and when it is very dark, and we are very weak, our childlike appeal can go up, “Father, help me! Father, rescue me!”

Notice how he ends looking up. That's exactly what Job declared in chapter 19, the verses 25 till 27. He cried out, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes - I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!”

This is indeed how the Confession ends here. It affirms that despite whatever we might go through God's not letting us go! And as soon as we're able to continue in our walk with Him we'll know it was always Him!

There was once a lawyer who settled in a new town. He completely immersed himself in his legal work. Sometimes he was seen walking in the evening. He walked alone. And he walked with his head hanging down and looking quite distressed.

One day he confessed to an artist who had a studio in the town that he had made one sad and terrible mistake in his life. The artist said nothing.

Weeks later he invited this depressed lawyer to come in and see a portrait he had just finished. He told him it was his masterpiece.

Well, that man was surprised and pleased that the artist wanted his thoughts on it. But when he went into the studio to look at it who was the subject but he himself! Only in the painting he now stood erect, with his shoulders thrown back and his head up. There was ambition, desire, and hope written on his face.

Reflecting on it for a few moments, the man said, “If he sees that in me, then I can see it. If he thinks I can be that, then I can be that man. And what's more - I will be that man!”

Friend - you are that man! You are that woman! Despite whatever this world, or Satan, or your own flesh throws against you, you are going to stand tall. You have the confidence that God has done it for you in Jesus Christ. And they're going to see it!