

## Letter of response to Ed Hoekstra

Dewey Engelsma

Dear Mr. Hoekstra,

From a certain perspective, my answer could be very brief. Assurance of salvation belongs to salvation itself, which is by faith alone. Therefore, to say that we enjoy assurance of our salvation by working is to say we are saved by faith and works. When we speak of our justification, namely that we are declared righteous before God, this also includes the assurance of our justification. God does not save objectively and then withhold the subjective knowledge of that justification and make it dependent or conditioned upon the response of man. It was the Arminians who taught that assurance comes by man's working. The Synod of Dordt rejected this when it wrote in Head One, Rejection of Errors 7: "The Synod rejects the errors of those who teach that there is in this life no fruit and no *consciousness* of the unchangeable election to glory, nor any *certainty*, except that which depends on a changeable and uncertain condition." When a man is saved through faith in Jesus Christ, he is "sealed with that holy Spirit of promise" (Eph. 1:13). That "sealing" is the assurance of his salvation through the work of the Holy Spirit. That a man is assured when he is given the gift of faith is proven by Romans 5:1: "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Objectively and subjectively (in the consciousness of the believer), justification is by faith alone, in Christ alone, by grace alone.

Your question deals with a statement made by synod, found on page 69 of the *Acts of Synod*, having to do with our assurance of salvation. We have to look at the context where that quotation appears. Synod was responding to a sermon on the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 23. This Lord's Day is found in the section titled, "Of Man's Deliverance" (L.D. 5–31). The

question and answer deals with our justification (“How art thou righteous before God?”). The sermon in question taught that some aspect of our justification (in this case our assurance) is based on our good works. Lord’s Day 23 does speak of works, but only negatively. Our consciences accuse us that we have “grossly” violated all of the good commandments of God and have kept none of them. Maybe the thought then arises in us that if we work harder, maybe next week we will be better, and things will be better for us. The Catechism points out that we are “still inclined to all evil.” There is absolutely no hope for us if we look to our works for any aspect of our justification, including our assurance of justification. The Lord’s Day makes this abundantly clear.

This Lord’s Day does provide us the answer, however, as synod pointed out. It is not only possible, but the reality, that the child of God will have assurance of his salvation. Sinners though we are, it is “as if I never had had nor committed any sin.” And even more than that, it is “as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ has accomplished for me.” This is a staggering truth! Brother, it’s like we had never committed any sin, and as if we have done all that Christ has done! How can that be true when we know ourselves the way we do? It is true because of faith, and more specifically, because of the one we are united to by faith, namely Jesus Christ (Belgic Confession, Art. 23). All of this is true only because of Jesus Christ. As to works, to this point in the Catechism they only serve to condemn us.

Lord’s Day 23 of the Heidelberg Catechism teaches justification by faith *alone*. That is why synod had to teach what it did in the section you quote. To say that our works contribute to our assurance in any way would be to compromise the truth of justification by faith alone.

Let’s look to another Lord’s Day in this section dealing with our deliverance. Lord’s Day 7, Q&A 21 asks the question, “What is true faith?” The answer is clear and simple. True faith is

not only knowledge but assured confidence. Assurance! Faith *is* assurance! God, not only to others, but to me also has given “remission of sin, everlasting righteousness, and salvation.” Where does a treatment of assurance belong? It belongs to true faith, to our deliverance from sin and death, which all find their source in Jesus Christ. When a child of God is given faith so he believes in Jesus Christ, he is given assurance of that salvation, as we have seen in Romans 5:1: “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” God loves us from eternity, and he will see to it that we *know* his love, by faith in Jesus Christ.

It is in light of this truth that synod asked the rhetorical question, “How could works help add to that assurance?” (*Acts*, 69). That question is appropriate, even demanded in the circumstances. After hearing everything that God has done for us in Jesus Christ, am I now going to bring my filthy rags (my righteousnesses, according to Isaiah 64:6) before the throne of God and demand something of him in return? To say there is something that I have to do yet to receive any aspect of my salvation, including to receive assurance, would be to say that Christ’s work was not sufficient, which would be a “gross blasphemy” (BC, Art. 22).

We receive all of the gifts of salvation—including assurance—through faith alone in Christ alone.

The Canons teach the same in Head 5, Article 9, where we read that believers “may and do obtain assurance according to the measure of their *faith*.” Faith and assurance are of the same essence, and to try to separate them is to corrupt a proper understanding of faith itself. In the very next article this is reinforced when it teaches us that this assurance “springs from *faith* in God’s promises” (Canons, 5/10). How is it that someone loses a sense of God’s favor for a time and begins to doubt? Their “enormous sins” have interrupted the “exercise of faith” (Canons, 5/5). What restores this assurance? Is it working harder? Performing more and better good works?

Maybe even repenting and turning from our sins will accomplish this? As necessary as turning and repenting are, the solution is to again turn to the Mediator in faith so that we “may again experience the favor of a reconciled God” (Canons, 5/7).

The Lord’s Day you quote, L.D. 33, belongs to the final section, “Of Thankfulness.”

This is important all by itself. We have left the section that teaches us how it is that we receive anything from God, including escape from punishment (L.D. 5), satisfaction for sin (L.D. 6), restoration of righteousness, life, and assurance (L.D. 7), our salvation (L.D. 11), the favor of God (L.D. 15), heavenly graces (L.D. 19), and so much more. Now we are in the section that teaches us what we give to God. The receiving is over, and we move now into needed instruction on what the child of God does with the knowledge from the previous section.

The answer is again simple and clear—do good works “so we may testify by the whole of our conduct our gratitude to God for His blessings” (L.D. 32). In Christ, we are new creatures! Live out of that new life! The fruits that inevitably flow from a true and living faith do not obtain or merit anything with God, including our assurance. They are fruit and only fruit.

What then of your quotations from Ursinus and Hoeksema that seem to imply, if not state, that our assurance is dependent, at least in some way, upon our good works?

The meditation of Hoeksema to which you draw our attention is explaining 2 Peter 1:10.<sup>1</sup> “Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall.” The space does not permit me to go into a detailed explanation of this text, but I do draw your attention to the fact that throughout the meditation

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<sup>1</sup> Herman Hoeksema, *Communion with God*, ed. David J. Engelsma (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2011), 260–266

Hoeksema speaks of our good works that testify to our faith as *fruits*: “Only by bearing constantly the fruit of our calling”; “they are constant fruits of your calling”; and he speaks of a life that is “barren of the fruits of grace” (265, 266).

Also, Hoeksema immediately at the beginning of the meditation, writing about the “unspeakably joyous certainty of mind and heart,” writes that it is “not because of works.”<sup>2</sup> He goes on to say our election includes “the blessed confidence that your own personal part” is with those who are elected to eternal glory. Because Hoeksema includes our “blessed confidence” as part of our election, will we then suggest that Hoeksema would have our works play a role in our election? Hoeksema is carefully and beautifully calling us to be diligent in our Christian life, always laboring to bear fruit (and it is labor, because of our old man which hates the beautiful fruit of good works), which fruit is itself an evidence of the new life of Christ in us.

John Calvin’s explanation of the text in his commentary is helpful: “purity of life is not improperly called the evidence and proof of election, by which the faithful may not only testify to others that they are the children of God, but also confirm themselves in this confidence, in such a manner, however, *that they fix their solid foundation on something else*” (emphasis mine).<sup>3</sup>

Good works can and do provide evidence of our *faith*, as L.D. 32 teaches (“assured in himself of his faith”). There is a confirming aspect to our good works, as there is a confirming aspect to the apple hanging off the apple tree. We can look at those good works, and they can provide us evidence that we have faith. If these good works are absent, we do well to question the liveliness of our faith in Jesus Christ (or even the existence of our faith), because faith will

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 260

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries* Volume XXII, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 377

always produce good works. Indeed, it is what we were created unto (Rom. 7:6; Eph. 2:10; Titus 2:14). A faith that produces no good works is no faith at all (James 2:17).

Our good works are fruit, and only fruit, that proceed from true faith and are done out of gratitude. The answer to the Catechism's question on good works points this out: "also, that every one may be assured in himself of his faith *by the fruits thereof*" (L.D. 32). But as to the assurance of our *salvation*, let us never put that weight upon our sin-tainted works.

I contend that this is the view of Ursinus as well, which explains his language in the section you quoted. Later, Ursinus disavows the fact that our working might in any way earn or merit with God (and to say that our assurance is dependent on our working is to say that that working merits with God). Ursinus himself points out the danger of looking to our works (or the law) to obtain any aspect of our justification. When a believer hears the commands of the law as being something he must do for salvation, the words of Deuteronomy 27:26 terrify him. "Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them."<sup>4</sup> Hearing that, according to Ursinus, believers would then "consider their own imperfection, [and] their conscience tells them that they can never perform all these things, so that they are continually led to cherish doubts, and to live in dread of the curse of the law." "What then?!" the believer cries out in anguish. Ursinus replies with the balm of Gilead: "Faith, however, imparts sure and solid comfort to the conscience, because it grounds itself in the promise of God, which cannot disappoint the soul. 'The inheritance is of faith, that it might be by grace, to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed.' (Rom. 4:16)."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1954), 487

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 487

As to Hoeksema, there is a better place to find his teaching on assurance than in his meditation on 2 Peter 1:10, as beautiful as that is. We should look to his explanation of Romans 5:1 (“Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”). He provides a lovely definition of assurance: “This means that if we place ourselves before God with our whole being, in the consciousness of who and what He is, then there is no fear in our heart.”<sup>6</sup> He goes on to say that when someone has faith, he has assurance, fully and completely. “The same faith by which we are justified carries with it this peace because it brings to us the consciousness of the peace of God towards us. By this faith I lay hold on the peace that is in God’s heart towards me.”<sup>7</sup> How do we obtain this peace? “Our justification by faith is the objective basis of this peace. Subjectively, justification by faith is the way to this peace.”<sup>8</sup>

That is why Synod 2018 *had* to say what it did—it was defending nothing less than justification by faith alone. How is the righteousness of Christ imputed to us? It is by faith alone. How are we made partakers of all of the benefits of salvation, including assurance? It is by faith alone. Recognizing that I now repeat myself from my October editorial, it is not faith itself that provides all of these benefits, but it is merely the instrument. How do I have assurance of my salvation? Don’t look to yourself; look to the object of your faith, Jesus Christ, as Hoeksema himself teaches: “That is, as long as I look only at Christ, there is an undisturbed consciousness in my soul that I am righteous. The moment I look at myself, this consciousness is gone. But as long as I look at Christ, there is an undisturbed consciousness of justification, and therefore of peace.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Herman Hoeksema, *Righteous by Faith Alone: A Devotional Commentary on Romans*, ed. David J. Engelsma (Grandville, MI, Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2002), 184

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 184

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 182

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 186–187

If I am ever in doubt of my salvation for whatever reason, be it my sin or the vicissitudes of life, and you are in a position to counsel me, feel free, if you feel so compelled, to point out the good works that you see in me as evidence of my faith. That may be a good start. But don't stay there too long. Point my attention away from me and on to something else. As Calvin wrote, we must fix our solid foundation on something else, or put differently, on someone else. And that someone else is Jesus Christ. There, and only there, will I find assurance of my salvation.

You need not fear that any ancient landmarks were removed, neither do you need to doubt the Catechism. That was another beautiful aspect of Synod 2018. The decision taken at that assembly was faithful to our fathers and our "ancient landmarks." In fact, our leaders took us back over 500 years to the most ancient of landmarks—the Solas of the Reformation: salvation is by faith alone, in Christ alone, by grace alone. If proof is going to be demanded of someone, it must be demanded of those who wish to alter the landmarks, not of those who faithfully defended them.

Sincerely, your brother in Christ,

Dewey Engelsma