

EDITORIAL: PAUL WASHER'S MISERABLE DOCTRINE OF ASSURANCE

Rev. Martyn McGeown

Introduction: Washer's "Shocking Youth Message"

If you have heard of Paul Washer of Heart Cry Missionary Society in Radford, Virginia, it is probably because of one sermon in particular, "Shocking Youth Message Stuns Hearers." Washer, who never intended that his sermon should go "viral" and who did not give that garish title to his sermon, preached that message in 2002 to some 5,000 young people, mostly Southern Baptists, at the "Youth Evangelism Conference" in Montgomery, Alabama.

The thrust of Washer's message, after observing the worldliness and carnality of the young people on display at the conference, even after many of them had "accepted Jesus" in the altar call that followed the previous speaker's message, was that most of the young people in his audience showed no evidence of genuine conversion. After reading his text from Matthew 7:13-27, Washer begins with the blunt statement, "Within a hundred years, a great majority of people in this building will possibly be in hell."¹ Later, he declares,

What you need to know is that salvation is by faith and faith alone in Jesus Christ. And faith alone in Jesus Christ is preceded and followed by repentance, a turning away from sin, a hatred for the things that God hates and a love for the things that God loves, a growing in holiness and desire not to be like Britney Spears, not to be like the world, and not to be like the great majority of American Christians, but to be like Jesus Christ.

At that point, the audience erupts into applause. On hearing the applause, Washer cuts them off, "I don't know why you're clapping. I'm talking about you. I didn't come here to get amens. I didn't come here to be applauded. I'm talking about you."

¹ Paul Washer, "Shocking Youth Message" (transcript) (<http://media.sermonaudio.com/mediapdf/52906154239.pdf>).

The rest of the message is an explanation of conversion and its fruits, with the warning that those who lack the fruits of conversion are not saved and must not consider themselves to be saved. Washer has in mind most of his audience, which is what makes the youth message “shocking,” for he dares to question the salvation of those who have “accepted Jesus into their hearts” or “made a decision for Jesus.”

There is much that can be commended in the message, for it rightly exposes much of the foolishness claiming to be Christianity in modern evangelical circles. Certainly, we oppose carnality, worldliness, antinomianism and “easy-believism” as much as Washer. I offer a selection of short quotations from Washer as a sample: “Conversion is not a flu shot ... The question is ... are you continuing to repent of sin? Are you continuing to believe?” “Most of our Christianity comes from songwriters and not from the Bible.” “You can profess to know Jesus, but my question for you [is] ... does Jesus know you?” Finally, he warns,

If after a few weeks, you go right back into the world, live like the world, act like the world, I want you to know something; you didn't get anything here this weekend. You got emotion; that's about it. If you really got something from the Lord ... it will last.

The sermon, however, is not expository or exegetical; therefore, there is no detailed explanation of the text of Matthew 7. Washer also espouses “radical” (not total) depravity and some form of general atonement, for he tells a group of people, many of whom, he says, will be in hell that Jesus “bore [their] sin.”

Some in the established churches, even in Reformed churches, listen to a sermon like Washer's “Shocking Youth Message” and think that their pastor's sermons are tame in comparison. It is very likely that they are—pastors do not generally shock people in their sermons, nor should we expect to be shocked. We should simply expect to be fed week by week through the faithful exposition of the Word of God.

While Washer's message might have been appropriate for that occasion, a Reformed minister will not address a Reformed young people's convention with the words, “Within a hundred years, most of you will be in hell.” In the

Editorial: Doctrine of Assurance

case of a Reformed young people's convention, he is addressing baptized, catechized, covenant young people. I have had the privilege of addressing such young people at a Reformed convention and I can say without any hesitation that they display their faith in a life adorned with good works. Certainly, it is necessary to include warnings (to the youth and to the adults alike) in Reformed sermons but the general address of the preaching in Reformed churches is, and must be, "Beloved congregation in our Lord Jesus Christ."

Washer himself, unlike some of his admirers, does not make the "Shocking Youth Message" a pattern for preaching. In an interview in 2013 with Christian blogger, Tim Challies, Washer makes reference to his most famous sermon:

It has led some young reformers to hold an unbalanced view of the kind of preaching that is needed for true revival. The message I preached was hard, very hard, but it was the exception and not the norm of my preaching. There are times when a "hard word" must be preached, even to God's people. However, the church and the individual believer do not grow by daily helpings of "hard words," but by being encouraged by the full counsel of God.²

If your minister is a faithful man who preaches the full counsel of God, do not despise the manna of the word that he brings by looking for exciting and shocking messages elsewhere. If you do not have a minister who brings the Word, do everything in your power to seek out faithful preaching in a true church for the good of your own soul, for the good of your children and for the glory of God.

Washer's "Gospel Assurance"

Washer has authored a three-volume work, *Recovering the Gospel*, published by Reformation Heritage Press, and enthusiastically endorsed by Joel Beeke, president of Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The three volumes are *The Gospel's Power and Message*, *The Gospel Call*

² Paul Washer, "Interview With Tim Challies" (www.challies.com/interviews/an-interview-with-paul-washer).

and True Conversion, and *Gospel Assurance and Warnings*.³ The third volume on assurance, hailed (on the back cover) by Beeke as “a tremendously helpful tool to seek solid assurance,” and containing, according to Beeke, “sweet help for God’s children struggling to enjoy assurance of their Father’s forgiveness and acceptance,” is the focus of this series of editorials.

I sharply disagree with Beeke—Washer’s doctrine of assurance is *not* “helpful” and it is *not* “sweet help,” but will lead the conscientious reader to languish in crippling doubt. In fact, I would argue that Washer’s teachings are pastorally disastrous. If you are struggling with assurance or if you know of someone who is struggling with assurance, do *not* place Washer’s books into their hands. Do not be fooled by the word “assurance” in the title of Washer’s book. In these editorials, I will explain why I advise the reader to avoid Washer’s sermons and writings.

While Washer does make some good statements on assurance, the general message of his book will introduce doubt, which is *not* the Reformed approach to preaching and teaching. Had Washer expanded upon points such of these, he could have written a helpful book. He could have encouraged the reader to find assurance in Christ through faith in Him. Sadly, as we shall see, that is not the approach that Washer takes. Washer writes, for example,

When doubts arise and the onslaught of the enemy is at a fever pitch, the believer does not look inward to find personal virtue or strength; rather, he rebuffs the enemy’s brutal accusations by turning his eyes from self, pointing to God in Christ, and crying out victoriously: “Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us” (Rom. 8:33-34).⁴

Some people have an equally dangerous imbalance in their theology, and they bolt the doors to heaven and shut

³ Douglas Kuiper reviewed the first volume in the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, vol. 49, no. 1 (November, 2015), pp. 146-152.

⁴ Paul Washer, *Gospel Assurance and Warnings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), p. 134.

Editorial: Doctrine of Assurance

themselves out with their severity. They have a high view of salvation and take it as a matter of utmost seriousness. They willingly submit to the biblical admonitions to examine themselves and make their calling and election sure. However, they have set a standard that is beyond the Scriptures. They believe that before they can possess even the slightest degree of assurance they must bear the marks of the most mature Christian ... They are no longer looking to Christ but have turned their eyes inward to focus on self and performance. It is a deadly focus!⁵

Washer begins with the question, “How can I know that I have been born again, that I am truly a child of God?”⁶ This is actually the wrong question, for the question of assurance goes beyond merely knowing that I am a regenerated child of God. The *Canons of Dort*, which teach a masterful doctrine of assurance, go further, for the Remonstrants (Arminians) could, and did, confess that it was possible for a Christian to know that he is born again.

What the Arminians denied was that it was possible for a Christian to know (1) that he is eternally and unconditionally elected unto salvation, and (2) that he will persevere in the true faith until the end. Even today, you will meet Arminians who claim to possess present salvation but because they believe in the falling away of true saints, they have no assurance that they will personally persevere to the end. Listen to Dort: “The elect ... *attain* the assurance of this their eternal and unchangeable election” (*Canons* I:12). “Of this preservation of the elect to salvation, and of their perseverance in the faith, true believers for themselves *may and do* obtain assurance” (*Canons* V:9). Notice that for Dort assurance is not only possible, but *actual* and *normal* for Christians.

Washer insists that, because the danger of self-deception is so great, all professing Christians must examine themselves to see if they are true believers. In fact, they must examine themselves regularly. One wonders if Washer’s children examine themselves regularly to see if there is any evidence that they are truly his (Washer’s) children. Do they anxiously examine and re-examine their

⁵ Washer, *Assurance*, p. 183.

⁶ Washer, *Assurance*, p. 3.

birth certificates? Do they live in fear that, perhaps, their birth certificates are elaborate forgeries? No healthy parent-child relationship functions that way.

Washer on Self-Examination

The text to which Washer frequently appeals is II Corinthians 13:5: “Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?” Washer offers no exegesis of the text, but concludes,

[Paul] tells them to test themselves and examine themselves *with regard to the authenticity of their profession* ... Paul [admonishes] professing Christians in Corinth to examine themselves *and look for evidences of conversion*.⁷

Washer’s understanding of II Corinthians 13:5 is seriously flawed and pastorally disastrous. Paul is not writing to “professing Christians.” He is writing to beloved saints. The apostle does not call the Corinthians to look for evidences of conversion. He calls them to examine themselves, “whether [they are] in the faith.” Those two propositions are not the same, as we shall demonstrate.

In II Corinthians 13, Paul issues a challenge to his critics who “seek a proof of Christ speaking in [him]” (v. 3). The proof that Christ has spoken through Paul is the Corinthians themselves. The fact that they believe in Jesus Christ, that they are “in the faith,” is the evidence that Paul has preached the truth to them. If they are not true believers, then Paul is not a true preacher and did not bring them the true gospel. If Paul is not a true preacher but the purveyor of a false Christ (as Paul’s enemies alleged), then they are not true believers. Therefore, the issue is not, “What proof is there that Christ has spoken through Paul?” but “What proof is there *that you Corinthians are in the faith?*”

In verse 5, Paul writes, “Examine yourselves ... prove your own selves.” Two verbs are used in the text. The first is “examine,” the Greek verb *peirazoo*, which is often rendered “tempt” or “test” in the New Testament; the second is “prove,” the Greek verb *dokimazoo*, which is rendered “prove,” “try,” “examine” or “discern.” That Paul uses both verbs here is significant because it tells us something important about the test that he expects the Corinthians to undergo.

⁷ Washer, *Assurance*, p. 16; italics mine.

Editorial: Doctrine of Assurance

The object of this examination is personal: “yourselves” or “your own selves.” Paul does not call the Corinthians to examine or prove one another, but themselves. Each person must do this privately for himself or herself. The goal of the examination is to see “whether ye be in the faith.” This does *not* mean, “Test yourselves to see if you are believers. Test yourselves to see if you truly believe.” (That is evidently what Washer understands the text to teach for he presupposes it throughout the book.) Instead, the meaning is, “Test yourselves whether you are *in* the faith, that is, whether you believe the truth of the apostolic faith (and are walking and living in the sphere of it).”

The expectation of this examination comes out in the use of the two verbs. If Paul had written only *peirazoo*, he would be expressing a negative expectation, for the general meaning of the verb is to test with some expectation of failure. When Paul uses this verb, therefore, he shows that he expects that when the Corinthians examine themselves with respect to the faith they will find something negative: they will find weaknesses in their faith and sinful patterns in their walk. From these weaknesses and sins the Corinthians must repent. Concerning these weaknesses, they must cry, “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief” (Mark 9:24).

However, by adding the verb *dokimazoo*, Paul expresses another expectation. Greek scholar, Richard Trench, explains the nuance of the Greek verb:

... there follows for the most part not merely a victorious coming out of the trial, but it is further implied that the trial was itself made in the expectation and hope that the issue would be such; at all events, with no contrary hope or expectation. The ore is not thrown into the fining pot ... except in the expectation and belief that, whatever of dross may be found mingled with it, yet it is not all dross, but that some good metal, and better now than before, will come forth from the fiery trial.⁸

In other words, Paul expects that the Corinthians, while finding weaknesses, imperfections and sins in their lives, will nevertheless confirm by means of

⁸ Richard C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, repr. 1969), p. 279.

the test, examination or “proof” that they are actually “in the faith,” holding fast to the objective truth of Jesus Christ. He does not expect them to discover that they are unbelievers, hypocrites or reprobates. The word “reprobates” in II Corinthians 13:5-7 is not a reference to eternal, unconditional reprobation. A reprobate in that sense is one eternally hated and rejected by God and ordained to everlasting destruction in the way of his sins (Rom. 9:22). While the doctrine of reprobation is clearly biblical, the word “reprobate” in Scripture simply refers to one who, having undergone a test, is not approved. Paul’s conclusion is that the Corinthians have not failed the test. They will not fail the test, for Paul has confidence that they are truly “in the faith” and that “Jesus Christ is in [them].”

John Calvin remarks on this text,

They [i.e., the papists] bid us be satisfied with a “moral conjecture,” as they call it—that is, with a mere opinion, so that our consciences remain constantly in suspense, and in a state of perplexity. But what does Paul say here? He declares, that all are *reprobates*, who doubt whether they profess Christ and are a part of His body. Let us, therefore, reckon *that* alone to be right faith, which leads us to repose in safety in the favour of God, with no wavering opinion, but with a firm and steadfast assurance.⁹

Calvin does not mean, of course, that all sincere Christians who, to one degree or another, struggle with doubts, are reprobates. Rather, he strongly expresses the view that assurance is of the essence of faith, and that doubts are abnormal, unhealthy, and to be condemned in a Christian. This is the teaching of the Reformation, which delivered the church from “the doubts of the papist” (*Canons* V:R:5).

Indeed, it is actually impossible for an *unbeliever* to examine himself whether he is in the faith. The unbeliever *knows* that he is not in the faith. His conscience accuses him that he is not in Christ. Therefore, there is nothing for him to examine. Even the hypocrite knows that he is not in the faith, although

⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. John Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, repr. 2009), 2:397; italics in the original.

he may deceive others around him. It is not the calling of the Christian to engage in the spiritually damaging activity of anxiously wondering whether he a true believer. Instead, the believer must be assured of his faith. Certainly, he ought to examine his life, not to determine if he is a believer (he must know that), but whether his life is as it ought to be. Having examined himself, he must repent of those things in his life that “failed the test.” This, of course, is especially necessary prior to partaking of the Lord’s Supper: “But let a man examine [*dokimazoo*] himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup” (I Cor. 11:28). Paul does not write, “Let a man examine himself and then, crippled with doubt, self-loathing and fear, let him stay away from the table of the Lord.” Examine yourself and then come!

Washer’s Appeal to I John

Washer does not view assurance as of the essence of faith but (ordinarily) the product of a lengthy process of struggle. This popular view of assurance, derived especially from certain Puritan writers, is not the Reformed view, that is, the view set forth in the Reformed confessions. It is also not the teaching of the Bible, for there are no examples in the Word of God of sinners coming to Jesus in faith and struggling for an extended period of time over the question whether or not they are truly children of God.

While Washer does not subscribe to the *Three Forms of Unity* (he is a “Reformed Baptist,” that is, a Baptist who adheres to the Five Points of Calvinism), Joel Beeke, who enthusiastically endorses Washer’s book, does subscribe to the Reformed confessions. I am convinced that no one can read through the *Heidelberg Catechism*, the *Belgic Confession* and the *Canons of Dordt*, and then espouse the Washer-Beeke view of assurance.

Listen, for example, to the testimony of Zacharias Ursinus, one of the authors of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, in a private letter to a doubting friend:

If you mean that we cannot say with certainty that one will be saved, you are right when speaking of others; but with regard to oneself, or one’s own conscience and convictions concerning oneself, such a conception is both shocking and blasphemous, and subverts the very foundation of faith.

British Reformed Journal

Whoever has taught you such an idea, has instructed you as would a devil, even though he came from heaven. I will say even more; if you are not certain in this world that you are an heir of eternal life, you will not be one after death. From such a fate the Lord deliver you. For faith itself is that certainty which is the beginning of eternal life, which beginning everyone must possess in this life who would have it hereafter. If you would remember the meaning of the word hope, that it is a certain expectation of eternal life, you would not write to me what causes my hair to stand on end. I would not accept a hundred thousand worlds and be so far away from my Lord as not to know certainly whether I am His or not.¹⁰

Since Washer views assurance as a quest, which for some takes months to attain, Washer proposes twelve tests, which he derives from the first epistle of the Apostle John.¹¹ By applying these tests to ourselves, says Washer, we will be able to determine whether we have really undergone conversion. Although it might not be Washer's intention (his intention is to flush out false professors and unmask hypocrites), his application of the tests will leave the conscientious reader enslaved to doubt. He will not succeed in flushing out the hypocrites. Instead, he will convince many of God's children that they are, indeed, hypocrites. This is the effect of Washer's teaching because his tests are applied too strictly.

It is not my intention to examine all twelve of these tests from I John, but to show in general how Washer unhelpfully applies them. The tests are "walking in the light" (1:5-7), "confession of, and hatred for sin" (1:8-10), "keeping God's commandments" (2:3-5), "walking as Christ walked" (2:5-6), "love of the brethren" (2:7-11), "hatred of the world" (2:15-17), "remaining in the church" (i.e., not apostatizing) (2:18-19), "confessing Christ" (2:22-24; 4:1-3,

¹⁰ Quoted in Otto Thelemann, *An Aid to the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Douma Publications, 1959), pp. 452-453.

¹¹ Washer: "Some people hear the gospel, repent, and believe, and gain an immediate assurance wrought by the Spirit of God. Others fight for days, weeks, or even months before they gain a similar assurance ... It is quite another thing to lead [someone] to the promises of salvation and tarry with him until he has truly entered through the narrow gate and God has granted him the wonderful gift of assurance" (*Assurance*, p. 188).

Editorial: Doctrine of Assurance

13-15), “purifying oneself” (3:1-3), “practising righteousness” (2:28-29; 3:4-10), “overcoming the world” (4:4-6; 5:4-5) and “believing in Jesus” (5:9-12).

A few words about I John are in order. The Apostle John writes to believers both to warn them and to encourage them. He warns them about certain false teachers (antichrists and false prophets) who have left the church (2:18-19, 22-23; 4:1-3) but the main emphasis of his epistle is on *encouragement*. He encourages those who have not left the church with the false brethren that they are God’s true children. He encourages them to continue in faith and in love. He encourages them concerning God’s promises. He encourages them concerning the forgiveness of their sins. He calls them not to examine themselves *whether* they are Christians but he encourages them that they *are* Christians. He does this with tender addresses (“[my] little children,” “brethren” and “beloved”) and by teaching them how Christians ought to—and do—live.

When John describes how Christians live, as those who walk in the light, as those who confess and hate their sins, as those who keep God’s commandments, etc., he does so not in order to make Christianity impossible, but to make it easy to distinguish between the believer and the unbeliever. In other words, John does not write, “True Christians walk in the light but you can never determine whether you actually walk in the light.” John does not write, “True Christians confess their sins, but you can never know whether your confession of and hatred for sin is sufficient evidence of true conversion.” John does not write, “True Christians keep God’s commandments but, since your obedience is always only partial, you must live in perpetual doubt whether your obedience is actual evidence of conversion or the mark of a hypocrite.” Instead, John encourages the reader this way: “You walk in the light—know and be encouraged that you do have fellowship with God.” “You confess your sins—know, be certain and be confident that God forgives your sins.” “You keep God’s commandments—know, be certain and be confident that you are in Him.” “You walk as Christ walked—rejoice in the knowledge of your certain salvation.”

At the same time, I John warns those who openly and consistently walk in darkness (i.e., unbelievers) that they are not partakers of salvation. He warns those who refuse to confess their sins (i.e., unbelievers) that they are self-deceived, that “the truth is not in [them]” (1:8) and that “his word is not

in [them]” (1:10). He warns the person who does not keep God’s commandments, that is, the one who walks impenitently in sin, that he is a “liar, and the truth is not in him” (2:4). He warns the one who hates his brother that he is “in darkness” (2:9). Washer wants to do justice to these serious warnings but in doing so he destroys the comfort of the Word of God for conscientious Christians. The faithful pastor must be very careful not to do this. Warnings always have a twofold effect—the unbelieving hypocrite will be hardened in his sin, while the believing child of God will repent.

Nevertheless, John does not ground the assurance of the Christian in these “evidences.” Assurance is not based on works; assurance is *by faith alone*. Assurance *is* faith, for assurance (or faith) is simply taking God at His Word—“whosoever believeth hath everlasting life” (John 3:16, 36; 6:40, 47).

He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son. And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life. These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; *that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God* (I John 5:10-13).

Take the Christian who believes but is unsure whether he is saved, that is, the Christian who lacks assurance. Although such people are common in churches where a certain kind of theology, such as the Washer view of assurance, is preached, they are an anomaly. A Christian without assurance cannot pray, for he cannot address God with the words, “Our Father.” A Christian without assurance does not know whether God is his Father or not. The *Heidelberg Catechism* views the address of the Lord’s Prayer, the prayer that Jesus taught *all* Christians to pray, as exciting in us “a childlike reverence for and confidence in God, which are the foundation of our prayer” (A. 120). A Christian without assurance has no confidence in God. A Christian without assurance cannot perform good works, because good works are the fruit of faith and of thankfulness—and if he cannot perform good works, he cannot find assurance in good works! While such a Christian might believe that there

Editorial: Doctrine of Assurance

is a God, that Jesus is God's Son and that salvation is found in the cross, he does not know whether Christ atoned for *his* sins or not, for he does not know whether forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness and eternal life belong *to him personally*. Therefore, he cannot be thankful. At best, he can thank God for "common" things such as food, clothing and shelter (things for which the wicked ought to, but do not, thank God), but he cannot thank God for spiritual blessings, for he has no assurance that they are his! Listen to the *Heidelberg Catechism's* definition of faith:

True faith is not only a certain knowledge, whereby I hold for truth all that God has revealed to us in His Word, but also *an assured confidence*, which the Holy Ghost works by the gospel in my heart; that *not only to others, but to me also*, remission of sin, everlasting righteousness, and salvation are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits (A. 21).

The believer *knows* that he is in Christ, that he has the forgiveness of sins, that he has salvation, everlasting righteousness and eternal life. He knows this by faith. He knows this by faith alone. Anything that militates against such assured confidence in God must be rejected.

John Calvin excoriates those teachers who promote doubt:

Lastly, there was another *most pestilential error*, which not only occupied the minds of men, but was regarded as one of the principal articles of faith, of which it was impious to doubt, viz., that *believers ought to be perpetually in suspense and uncertainty as to their interest in the divine favor*. By this suggestion of the devil, the power of faith was completely extinguished, the benefits of Christ's purchase destroyed, and the salvation of men overthrown. For, as Paul declares, *that faith only is Christian faith which inspires our hearts with confidence, and emboldens us to appear in the presence of God*, (Rom. 5:2.) On no other view could his doctrine in another passage be maintained, viz., that "we have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15.) But what is the effect of that hesitancy which our enemies

require in their disciples, save *to annihilate all confidence in the promises of God?* Paul argues, that “If they which are of the law be heirs, faith is made void, and the promise made of none effect” (Rom. 4:14.) Why so? Just because the law keeps a man in doubt, and does not permit him to entertain a sure and firm confidence. *But they, on the other hand, dream of a faith, which, excluding and repelling man from that confidence which Paul requires, throws him back upon conjecture, to be tossed like a reed shaken by the wind.*¹²

Pestilential error!

Suggestion of the devil!

Strong words from the Reformer of Geneva!

The sin of a Christian without assurance—and make no mistake, it *is* sin—is unbelief. Doubt is unbelief. It is a subtle form of unbelief, an unbelief that masquerades as humility. Nevertheless, it is proud unbelief. For if assurance is not found in faith alone, it can only be found in one other place—in the sinner’s works. And since the sinner’s works are a flimsy foundation for assurance, it is not at all surprising that the one who looks for assurance in his works is condemned to a life of fear and doubt.

However, we should note that doubt, which is unbelief and which is sin, is often found in the true believer’s heart. If lust, pride, selfishness, anger and hatred, which are sins, can be found in a believer’s heart—and none can deny that these sins are found in our hearts—certainly, the sin of doubt is found in a believer’s heart. This does not excuse sin, but it gives us reason to fight against and struggle against this sin. What we do *not* do is to excuse, to coddle or to justify doubt, anymore than we excuse, coddle or justify lust, pride, selfishness, anger and hatred.

When David doubted, he did not praise his doubt: “Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God” (Ps. 43:5).

¹² John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* (Dallas, TX: Reformation Heritage Press, 1995), pp. 27-28; italics mine.

Editorial: Doctrine of Assurance

Jesus rebuked Peter for doubt: “O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?” (Matt. 14:31).

The *Canons of Dordt* testify that the true believer struggles with doubts, but the Reformed fathers call these struggles “carnal doubts” (*Canons* V:11). Carnal doubts are the doubts *of the flesh*, that is, *sinful* doubts. If you have doubts, do not give in to them but struggle against them and do not listen to any teacher who tells you that doubts are good!

Washer’s Twelve Tests From I John

Washer’s conclusion concerning the twelve tests from I John is as follows, “If we have these qualities, and they are increasing in us, we have evidence that we have come to know God and bear the fruit of a child of God.”¹³ “We have evidence.” It is no exaggeration to summarise Washer’s assertion this way: “If you have these twelve qualities, congratulations: there is *some evidence* that you are a Christian!”

As Washer explains these twelve tests, he makes some very troubling statements, which, if taken seriously, shake the reader’s assurance at its very core. Washer begins very ominously, as he applies the first test, “walking in the light:”

If we say that we have fellowship with God and we walk in the light, then we have passed John’s first test *on the way to a full assurance of salvation*. We have laid *the first stone in a wall of hope* that will be founded on the Scriptures and impregnable to the enemy’s darts of doubt. We should be encouraged, but not presumptuous. We must continue on to John’s other tests and examine our lives in light of them.¹⁴

However, I John states, “if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin” (1:7). Washer interprets this to mean, “If you walk in the light, you are *on the way* to full assurance. You have good reason to hope, but do not be presumptuous.” I hope that the reader can spot the difference between those

¹³ Washer, *Assurance*, p. 153.

¹⁴ Washer, *Assurance*, p. 28; italics mine.

two statements. Quite frankly, if a doubting saint picks up Washer's book and gets as far as his first "test," he should throw the book away because things only get worse. Washer is not building a wall of hope; he is filling a quiver with the arrows of doubt, which the believer can then shoot at himself. He is providing ammunition for the accuser of the brethren.

At the end of the next chapter, which explains the believer's sensitivity towards, and hatred for, sin, Washer asks the reader some penetrating questions:

Are we growing in our knowledge of God's holiness and, in turn, becoming more and more sensitive to sin in our lives? Do we react to our sin with a greater sense of repugnance and disdain? Do we battle against it? Does the weight of our sin, coupled with the kindness of God, lead us to repentance and confession? If we have answered yes, *there is some evidence* that God has done a saving work in us.¹⁵

Notice Washer's devastating conclusion. Sorrow over, hatred of, flight from and battle against sin are only "some evidence." In other words, the evidence is not yet conclusive; perhaps, it is circumstantial evidence, but not enough to convince a jury and certainly not enough to convince one's own fearful, doubting heart. This means that it is possible for a hypocrite to experience such sorrow over sin but to fall short of conversion. That means that you, the reader of Washer's book, might be a hypocrite, your sorrow for sin notwithstanding. That is *not* what I John is teaching! "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1:9). John does not write, "If we confess our sins, there is *some evidence* that God has done a saving work in us, so that he *might* forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness, if our sorrow is genuine."

The Bible views sorrow over sin as proof of salvation. Of course, there is a false sorrow, for "the sorrow of the world worketh death" (II Cor. 7:10) but that is merely a form of self-pity caused by the evil consequences of sin. Jesus assures the believer who mourns over his sins and sinfulness that he *is* blessed and that he "*shall* be comforted" (Matt. 5:4).

¹⁵ Washer, *Assurance*, p. 39; italics mine.

Editorial: Doctrine of Assurance

The *Canons of Dordt* apply Jesus' words to the believer:

Moreover, to hunger and thirst after deliverance from misery and after life, and to offer unto God the sacrifice of a broken spirit, is peculiar to the regenerate and those that are called blessed (Ps. 51:10, 19; Matt. 5:6) (*Canons III/IV:R:4*).

The *Heidelberg Catechism* describes “the mortification of the old man” in these words: “It is a sincere sorrow of heart that we have provoked God by our sins, and more and more to hate and flee from them” (Q. & A. 89). The one who sorrows over sin so as to hate and flee from sin does not merely have “some evidence” but must be assured that God has “begun a good work” in him, which He shall assuredly bring to completion (Phil. 1:6).

In the chapter entitled “Rejecting the World,” Washer makes this astounding statement: “The person who has crucified the flesh, with its passions and desires, and is walking in the liberty of the Spirit *has great reason for hope* that he has become a child of God.”¹⁶ Washer’s “hope” (one of the stones in his vaunted “wall of hope”) is not biblical hope, for the hope of the Bible is a certain, future, promised good, for which the believer ardently and confidently longs. Washer’s “hope,” however, does not make the believer certain. Paul writes, “they that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts” (Gal. 5:24). Washer writes, “They who have crucified the flesh have great reason to hope.” Paul says, “They *are* Christ’s.” Washer says, “They have *great reason to hope* that they are Christ’s.” The apostle preaches assurance. Washer preaches doubt and uncertainty.

Washer continues to apply the twelve tests in such a way that none of them (and not even all of them together) give solid assurance to the reader who takes them seriously. In doing so, Washer believes that he is warning the empty professor and hypocrite, while he hopes to help the believer on his quest for assurance. Sadly, however, Washer’s teaching must lead to doubt, fear and even despair *for the believer*. This is all the more reprehensible since the great theme of John’s first epistle is the believer’s *knowledge of God*. In other words, despite the good exegesis of I John (and there *is* some, although there is also much that is questionable), the texts of the epistle are *misapplied*.

¹⁶ Washer, *Assurance*, p. 75; italics mine.

Whereas, I John was written in order “that ye may *know* that ye have eternal life” (5:13), Washer writes—whether intentionally or not, this is the effect—that *ye may doubt* whether ye have eternal life. This is easily demonstrated by reading I John, the very epistle that Washer expounds in his book. Take note of the repeated refrain of “we know:” “And hereby we do *know* that we know him, if we keep his commandments” (2:3); “hereby *know* we that we are in him” (2:5); “but we *know* that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him” (3:2); “We *know* that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren” (3:14); “And hereby we *know* that we are of the truth, and shall *assure* our hearts before him” (3:19); “And hereby we *know* that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us” (3:24); “Hereby *know* we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit” (4:13); “And we have *known* and *believed* the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him” (4:16); “By this we *know* that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments” (5:2); “And we *know* that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness” (5:19); “And we *know* that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may *know* him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life” (5:20).

Conclusion: Washer’s Confession of Doubt

The Apostle John gives assurance to his readers that they are in Christ by describing the characteristics of true believers. These characteristics are easily discernible in the life of every child of God. Washer’s “tests” have the opposite effect for, after jumping over all twelve hurdles, the reader can *still* not be sure that he or she is in Christ.

None of this merely academic for Washer—he applies it to his own life. In a sermon, Washer makes the following confession:

I have great assurance. When I study my own conversion and when I discuss it with other men, when I look over the twenty-five years of my pilgrimage with Christ, I have great assurance of having come to know him. But even now if I were to depart from the faith and walk away and keep going

Editorial: Doctrine of Assurance

in that direction into heresy and worldliness, it would be the greatest of proofs that I never knew him, that the whole thing was the work of the flesh.¹⁷

Some people might admire such a “humble confession” but you should find it truly horrifying. To echo Ursinus, such a confession should cause your hair to stand on end. Washer does not have assurance of final perseverance and Washer looks for his assurance in the same place he teaches others to look: to his life, to his experiences, to his works. How different is Washer’s confession to the one confessed by the catechumen in the Reformed churches: “I am, and for ever shall remain, a living member [of the church of Christ]” (*Heidelberg Catechism*, A. 54)!

According to Calvin, Washer’s confession of doubt is akin not to the Reformed faith but to popery! Commenting on Colossians 1:23, he writes,

Now he [i.e., Paul] paints in lively colours assurance of faith when he bids the Colossians be grounded and settled in it. For faith is not like mere opinion, which is shaken by various movements, but has a firm steadfastness, which can withstand all the machinations of hell. Hence the whole system of *Popish theology* will never afford even the slightest taste of true faith, which *holds it as a settled point, that we must always be in doubt respecting the present state of grace, as well as respecting final perseverance.*¹⁸

How grievously Washer destroys the comfort of the Word of God, both for himself and for those who take him seriously! “Neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand” (John 10:28)—*but I could walk away*. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” (Rom. 8:35)—*but I could walk away*. “Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6)—*but I could walk away*. “I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep

¹⁷ Paul Washer, “The Church Is One. False Prophets Will Pay” (www.youtube.com/watch?v=z7CGCXFp5Bs). The comments begin at 9:20 minutes.

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, trans. John Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, repr. 2009), p. 160; italics mine.

that which I have committed unto him against that day” (II Tim. 1:12)—*but I could walk away*. “Kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (I Pet. 1:5)—*but I could walk away*.

The believer *cannot* walk away for the grace of God keeps him. The believer can fall, even grievously, but our heavenly Father is faithful:

But God, who is rich in mercy, according to His unchangeable purpose of election, does not wholly withdraw the Holy Spirit from His own people, even in their melancholy falls; nor suffers them to proceed so far as to lose the grace of adoption and forfeit the state of justification, or to commit the sin unto death; nor does He permit them to be totally deserted, and to plunge themselves into everlasting destruction (*Canons V:6*).

Christian reader, you must believe that. You must believe that about yourself. Assurance is *not* the result of an arduous quest. Assurance is the activity of true faith, of ordinary faith. To believe is to be assured. To be justified by faith alone is to have “peace with God” and to “rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (Rom. 5:1-2). To be a child of God is to know that one is a child of God. Otherwise, how can the Christian pray “Our Father which art in heaven”? How can the Christian serve God with a thankful heart, if he does not know whether God loves or hates him, whether his sins are forgiven or not and whether he is headed for heaven or for hell? How can the Christian live or die happily, which the *Heidelberg Catechism* sets forth as the normal Christian experience, if he has no assurance of election, salvation and final perseverance?

You must not allow the purveyors of doubt to rob you of the precious gift of assurance: “For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance” (I Thess. 1:5).