

Pearls and Leaven

John Bolt

Précis of Herman Bavinck’s “Persevering in the Christian Life”

Introduction

The present issue of the *Bavinck Review* deals with certainty of faith and assurance of salvation. In keeping with this theme, *Pearls and Leaven* here provides advance copy of the précis prepared for chapter 10 in the forthcoming first volume of Herman Bavinck’s *Reformed Ethics*, i.e. *Reformed Ethics: Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*.¹ This précis, prepared by the editor, reveals Bavinck’s pastoral heart and his use church history to answer perennial questions.

Bavinck on “Persevering in the Christian Life”

If I believe today, can I be sure I will still believe tomorrow? Next year? On my deathbed? If I say that God preserves his elect, can I be confident that I am among the elect? On the other hand, can those who are truly converted ever fall away?

These questions have troubled Christians from the time of the apostles and received theological exposure by Augustine in his conflicts with the Pelagians. Since then, believers have struggled to

¹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics: Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, forthcoming).

find assurance of their salvation, often oscillating between being overly anxious and finding no security on the one hand, and the casual consolation of cheap grace on the other.

After Augustine, the church became Pelagian. Roman Catholic scholastic theology taught that apart from special revelation no assurance is possible. The Remonstrants and Lutherans also fail to provide full certainty. Starting with Zwingli, however, and then especially after Calvin, the Reformed tradition taught a full, confident assurance in the perseverance of the saints, one that nonetheless did not exclude all experiences of doubt and anxiety. This assurance does not derive from some private revelation beyond or outside the Word but from faith in the promises of God, from the testimony of the Holy Spirit that we are God's children, and from a serious and holy pursuit of a clear conscience and good works. Although our faith derives its stability from God's promise, it can nonetheless be strengthened by considering such "good works" as "testimonies of God dwelling in us." Any valid use of the "practical syllogism" starts with faith. But believers may not rely on good works or begin with them; this results only in uncertainty.

In the early days of the Reformation, in a time of revived, powerful faith manifested in powerful deeds, people were assured of their election; this is the assurance that the Reformed confessions refer to as "reward." Over time, however, more and more people who believed still lacked assurance and a fatal distinction was made between faith and the assurance of faith, between "refuge-taking" faith and "refuge-seeking" faith. To console anxious believers, spiritual writers tried to point out that much of what anxious people experienced within was not from themselves and was not experienced by unbelievers. In fact, their experiences of uncertainty were similar to those of all or many true children of God—namely, that faith could be very weak and still be present. Not satisfied with this, some began to seek immediate assurance, a direct illumination

from God. This was contrary to Reformed theology, which teaches that though the testimony and sealing by the Holy Spirit are supernatural, they are tethered to the Word: this testimony is in and through faith and consists of the Holy Spirit testifying with our spirit.

The question of assurance is an ancient philosophical question and includes assurance about ourselves and that which is external to us. We want to know if we can be sure of what we know. Faith is essential to all human knowing, not only the assurance of our salvation. The latter depends on and is drawn from the assurance of present grace; our election is tested by faith, not the other way around. We are assured by faith—in the promises of God, by the testimony of the Spirit. This faith is an agreement in mind and trust in the heart that God's promises are true for me; I am conscious of my own faith as a gift sealed by the Holy Spirit, also through my own works as its fruit. We can be absolutely and infallibly sure of our salvation; our past election and future glory are assurances drawn from the present experience of grace, in which we realize our adoption as God's children. The same Spirit who makes us conscious of our adoption is also the pledge and guarantee of our future glory and confirms and seals it until the final day. This sealing is objective and subjective; it is our sanctification and our awareness of our renewal as image bearers of God. Assurance of faith is a direct act of faith based on God's promises; the feeling of assurance is a reflexive act of faith that rests upon the reality of Christ in us. The Holy Spirit adopts, leads, and seals believers.

Contrary to what some pious people think, sealing and assurance are not a special, extraordinary revelation but a testimony of the Holy Spirit mediated by the Word (text), our faith, and the leading of the Spirit in doing good works. Sealing, however, is not identical with conversion, the infusion of faith, regeneration, but a moment of development (worked by the Holy Spirit) in the spiritual life distinguished from those other moments. This does not happen at

the same time in all persons; ignorance of the Word, unbelief, lack of good works may stand in the way.

When the initial joy and confidence of Reformation faith waned, people turned to self-examination using “marks” of grace. This did lead to extremes of easy and false assurance leading to indifference, on the one hand, and hyper-scrupulousness leading to anxiety and doubt, on the other. A healthy approach reminds believers not to be fooled by appearances of piety in “almost Christians” and seeks to help believers avoid becoming overwhelmed and discouraged by believing that only heroic faith can save. True faith includes trust and assurance and comes from the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit and from a serious and holy pursuit of a clear conscience and good works.