# Introduction

The nineteenth-century church historian William Cunningham once wrote an illuminating chapter on the doctrine of assurance in the teaching of the Reformers. Using the work of Sir William Hamilton as a foil, Cunningham made several basic points about the Reformation teaching. But it is the conclusion to his chapter that is of particular interest. Cunningham ends with a note about the controversies that have particularly surrounded the study of assurance:

> It is not easy to keep the exact high road of truth; and men, filled with some one important idea or object, are very apt to run into exaggerations or extremes. Upon no subject has this been more conspicuously the case than on that of assurance; partly, perhaps, because of the influence of Luther, Calvin, and their associates. It has happened repeatedly in the history of the church, that pious and zealous men, impressed with the importance of getting a larger share of attention to the subject of assurance, have been led into the adoption of untenable and erroneous positions concerning it.[1]

This may be an exaggeration, but if so, it is only a slight one. And it is not so surprising when we stop to consider the reasons. After all, the doctrine of assurance, which is the teaching about "the conviction

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1. William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1989), 148.

or persuasion that one has been saved by the grace of God and is a Christian believer,"[2] cuts straight to the heart of the concerns of the Protestant Reformation, as well as those of everyday Christians.

In addition, a cursory look at the history of the Reformed churches in Scotland, which is not directly the focus of this book, would show that the controversy over assurance casts its shadow over much of the nineteenth century; indeed, it could be said that the Marrow Controversy was essentially a controversy about the necessity of assurance and the implications of it.[3] And certainly, the trial within the Church of Scotland of John McLeod Campbell revolved around the doctrine of assurance, even though the proximate cause of his deposition was his teaching on universal atonement.

In regards to the post-Reformation development in the area of assurance, Joel Beeke, author of several influential volumes on the post-Reformation doctrine of assurance, writes:

> Theologians and pastors of post-Reformation churches struggled for theological precision in defining the relationship between personal assurance and saving faith. Their labors produced a rich technical vocabulary that distinguished between assurance of faith and assurance of sense; direct (*actus directus*) and reflexive (*actus reflectus*) acts of faith; assurance of the uprightness of faith and of adoption; practical (*syllogismus practicus*) and mystical (*syllogismus mysticus*) syllogisms; the principle (*habitus*) and act (*actus*) of faith; objective and subjective assurance assurance of faith, understanding, and hope; discursive and intuitive assurance; immediate and mediate witness in assurance; and the being and well-being of faith. They used these terms within the context of related issues, such as possibilities, kinds, degrees, foundations, experiences, means, times, obstacles, qualifications, and fruits of assurance.[4]

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2. A. T. B. McGowan, "Assurance," in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, ed. David F. Wright, David C. Lachman, and Donald E. Meek (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993).

3. Ibid.

4. Joel Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 1.

Beeke is certainly right about the precision with which many post-Reformation theologians wrote and spoke; clarity on the matter of assurance was a pressing pastoral concern and a key feature of a distinctively *Protestant* theology. Because of its distinctiveness, and because of the sometimes fine distinctions that characterized its expression, it should come as no surprise that, as Cunningham observed, "pious and zealous men, impressed with the importance of getting a larger share of attention to the subject of assurance, have been led into the adoption of untenable and erroneous positions concerning it."[5]

And yet, it is hard not to register some surprise at the state of affairs Cunningham observes. After all, the Westminster Confession of Faith, so central to the Reformed Protestant churches in the English-speaking world, speaks with remarkable clarity on the subject of assurance. It devotes an entire chapter to the subject. It devotes more than twice as many words to the topic of assurance as to the topic of saving faith (426 to 188). Even the nature of God and God's triune essence receives a mere 315 words. Now, to be sure, the number of words alone cannot give a measure of the topic's importance, but it can show that the topic was no mere afterthought. And indeed, while there was nearly complete consensus among those who held to the Westminster Confession on the nature of God and the Trinity, there has been wide diversity on the subject of assurance.

Some trace this diversity to the fact that Westminster got it wrong. The argument is that the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) went far beyond the Reformers themselves. We must give some attention to this proposal. But even if this were so (and, as we will see, it is not quite so simple), it still does not explain the wide diversity *after* Westminster *among those who agreed* with the WCF.

5. Cunningham, *Reformers*, 148.

In other words, regardless of the diversity of opinions leading up to the formulation of the WCF, and regardless of whether the WCF got the Reformers right, the fact remains that a great many people agreed with the WCF's relatively detailed statement on assurance yet disagree sharply with one another on the matter. How is this to be explained?

It is my contention that the diversity of opinion on the question of assurance can be seen almost immediately after the WCF was formulated. In looking primarily at three figures, each of whom agreed with the Westminster formulation in its entirety, and each of whom also shared to a great extent a common intellectual heritage and set of associations, we can see the beginnings of three distinct approaches to the question—three streams flowing directly from the headwaters of the Westminster Confession. Each stream has a way of answering the two main questions at issue in the debate: How can an individual receive assurance, and how can true assurance be distinguished from false? Each stream would grow and develop, leading to greater and greater divisions and innovations. The specific winding path of each stream is beyond the scope of this study; rather, what will concern us is the emergence of the streams.

The three figures I have chosen for this study are Anthony Burgess, Thomas Goodwin, and John Owen. Of the three, I spend the most time on Burgess, since he writes more extensively on the topic of assurance than the other two. I use Burgess in this study both to set the contextual categories with which we must be familiar (Puritanism, pastoral ministry, scholastic training) and to introduce the terms and categories of the debate. But in the end, all three are essential to our portrait, because, in looking at these three, we will see our three distinct streams emerge.

But to identify these streams, we must first understand the streams that led into the Westminster Confession of Faith. That means we

must look at Calvin and Beza. In addition, we will have to try to understand the kind of document the WCF was and is—an effort that involves familiarizing ourselves with the process that led to its writing. Finally, we will need a thorough understanding of each of our major figures, including their backgrounds and associations, leading us to an understanding of what they said about the distinctive and debated topic of assurance.

This is a thorny topic, to be sure. But exposing the various ways in which the Westminster consensus was agreed with and then expanded upon should bring us somewhat closer to an understanding of the precise terms of which Beeke speaks, and the erroneous and untenable positions of which Cunningham warns. First, we must begin before Westminster.