It is often the case in the history of Christian doctrines that what at one time is clearly understood and well defined becomes through the course of time, changing situations, and new personalities, obscured or distorted. This can occur imperceptibly and unintentionally and it can happen even though the identity of the succeeding generations may to a large extent rise and fall on the degree of their faithfulness to the original teacher and his/her teaching.

This process of doctrinal transmutation may go on for some time until someone comes along and attempts to rediscover the original truth, possibly couched in different terms but nevertheless having the same meaning. Such a rediscovery can result in a painful identity crisis for those who were supposed to be the guarantors of this original truth. Often the rediscovery is met with denial or even hostility.

A strong case can be made that this was exactly what happened during the period of Christian history from John Calvin to John Wesley concerning the doctrine of assurance. I intend to argue that case by drawing support for the following points: (1) Calvin refused to bind his doctrine of assurance to good works by making them the primary evidence of one's election. By doing this, he sought to safeguard the proper relation between the doctrines of salvation by grace alone and assurance of salvation. (2) That Calvin's theological descendants obscured this relation between assurance and sola gratia by claiming that assurance is proved or verified by good works or by a good conscience.¹ (3) That Wesley's understanding of the witness of the Spirit was intended to effect a return to the primacy of sola gratia. It is my thesis that although there are significant differences between Calvin and Wesley on the doctrine of assurance, they are one in their desire to define assurance in such a way that the classic reformation doctrine of salvation by grace alone is not undermined.

John Calvin (1509–1564)

John Calvin, like the other great reformers, insisted that justification was by faith in God; it was a work of God rather than a human

¹In his seminal study, Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1985), M. Charles Bell argues essentially the same point though obviously in much greater detail.
achievement. Calvin was part of a generation which had tasted the fruit of the Roman system of merits, indulgences, satisfactions, and penance and found it bitter. Despite their differences, foremost among the goals of most of these reformers was the re-establishment of the Christian doctrine of salvation by grace alone.

Calvin's own position on the means of attaining salvation is unequivocal. One can seek justification either by keeping the law or by faith. But because of our sinfulness, we can never adequately keep the law so as to be justified by it. Thus, our justification can only come by a free act of a gracious God, irrespective of our merit.²

According to Calvin, we are elected to receive this justification and the faith necessary for it by an eternal decree of God. One's eternal destiny is in the hands of God rather than man.³ Once again, this serves the purpose of insuring that good works have nothing to do with the procuring of salvation.

That Calvin will tolerate nothing which even hints of works righteousness is verified in his understanding of assurance. Calvin asserts that there is a right and a wrong way to attain certainty of election. The right way is to find that assurance in Christ alone. There is no other basis for our election and, thus, for our assurance of it.

But if we have been chosen in him, we shall not find assurance of our election in ourselves; and not even in God the Father, if we conceive him as severed from his Son. Christ, then, is the mirror wherein we must, and without self-deception may, contemplate our own election.⁴

The wrong way, then, is, to question our election and to seek ways to shore up our assurance of salvation outside of faith in the benevolent attitude of God toward us as demonstrated in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

Calvin admonishes his readers not to seek assurance of salvation beyond faith in Christ because our election and predestination are ultimately hidden in the inscrutable will of God.

I call it "seeking outside the way" when mere man attempts to break into the inner recesses of divine wisdom, and tries to penetrate even to highest eternity, in order to find out what decision has been made concerning himself at God's judgment seat.⁵

Calvin even refuses to allow assurance to be directly tied to the sacraments not only because he feared that a superstitious understanding

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³*Institutes*, III.22.1-3 and 24.1-3.

⁴*Institutes*, III.24.5.

⁵*Institutes*, III.24.4.
of the sacraments would give rise to a false security but also because he saw that they were something which could be construed as a human act deserving merit.  

Calvin is convinced that a right contemplation of election should have a quieting effect, rather than a disturbing one. It is one of the main purposes of election to provide the believer with assurance. This, in turn, relieves our conscience of any potentially debilitating guilt and instills within us the confidence and energy needed to live aggressive and increasingly victorious Christian lives.

To summarize this part of our study, assurance for Calvin arises out of our election in Christ. We seek assurance of salvation in the wrong way when we seek it in ourselves. It is true that Calvin was rigorous in his application of the law. But in no way did he allow the fulfillment of the law to become a basis for determining whether one was among the elect and, hence, the basis for one's assurance of salvation. When we do this we not only fail rightly to understand the nature of our election and assurance, according to Calvin, but we also run the risk of presuming upon God.

**Calvin's Theological Progeny**

Calvin's understanding of assurance, however, was not to satisfy his theological successors. They saw Calvin's warning not to question the hidden will of God concerning one's election as an inadequate response to a legitimate and practical question. James McEwen provides us with a poignant description as to how the problem of assurance became a problem for the Calvinists.

The first generation of Reformers... had few doubts on this score [about their election]. They had been led out of the "errors of Romanism" into the gracious light of the evangelical truth. They had known, in their own hearts, the reality of God's forgiving love. How could they doubt, in face of these facts, that they were elect to salvation?

It was only after the fire of this new experience was spent that gloomy doubts began to rise in some Calvinist circles. How could a man be sure that he was one of the elect? So long as a man could point to the fact that he had been led out of the "synagogue of Satan" [the Roman Catholic Church], and had braved persecution for the true faith, he could be persuaded that he was elect to salvation. But when Protestantism was

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7 *Institutes*, III.24.4.
10 *Calvin and Scottish Theology*, 28–9, 32.
established, and Tom, Dick and Harry were all Protestants, the question arose how Tom, Dick and Harry could all be sure that they were elect?  

The following are brief examples of how some of his theological descendants in the next two centuries responded to this dilemma.  

Theodore Beza (1519–1605)  

Theodore Beza, Calvin's hand-picked successor, apparently began the departure from Calvin. He desired to clarify Calvin's system of theology by treating the doctrine of predestination in relation to divine providence rather than after justification by faith as Calvin had done. This had the effect of making the doctrine of election somewhat independent of Christology. What is crucial here is that the question of assurance of salvation was torn loose from its soteriological moorings in the work of Christ and in the justification of the believer and instead had to find some other place to drop anchor. In response to the question of where one should go to seek assurance in light of the decree of particular election, Beza responds,

To the effects whereby the spiritual life is rightly discerned, and likewise our election, just as the life of the body is perceived from its feeling and moving... Therefore, that I am elect, is first perceived from sanctification begun in me, that is, by my hating of sin and my loving of righteousness.

Ian Breward writes that Beza,

suggested that assurance was gained by proceeding from our experience to God's grace, regarding good works as certain signs of faith... Such discussions brought questions of predestination into the forefront of pastoral care, in the manner Calvin had carefully avoided.

John Knox (1505–1572)  

John Knox came face to face with the problem of assurance in the person of his mother-in-law, Mrs. Bowes. Knox insisted that election is

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12 It is beyond the scope of this essay to give a detailed comprehensive description of the developments in the doctrine of assurance in the theological tradition which traces its roots directly back to John Calvin. What I will attempt to do is to demonstrate that a continuous strain of teaching concerning assurance exists within Reformed theology in the period between Calvin and Wesley which significantly differed from that of Calvin himself.


the sole ground of our assurance of salvation and that it is not a human work. But Mrs. Bowes' chronic doubting of her election led Knox to attempt to find a way to provide assurance of election.

Mrs. Bowes apparently felt that her life was simply too corrupt to be acceptable to God and that her constant struggle to live above sin was evidence of her condemnation. Knox argued exactly the opposite: her struggle to live the Christian life, no matter how often she failed, was evidence that she was, indeed, elected to salvation.

According to Knox, then, as long as one is honestly trying to live righteously and does not obstinately continue in his/her sins, there is no reason to doubt his/her election. It is the intent to be holy rather than the actuality of one's holiness, itself, which is a reliable token of one's election before God.

Lest we get the impression that Knox was morally lax, Knox, in his defense of the doctrine of predestination against those who claimed that it promoted immoral behavior among Christians, responds that

Knox goes on to point out that even though the elect may fail miserably and the reprobate may for a time live exemplary lives, they can still perceive their respective election and reprobation by certain signs and tokens which he concludes are their good and bad works respectively.

In both of these contexts, his correspondence with Mrs. Bowes and his treatise on predestination, there is a point of agreement, and that is that although assurance of salvation is based on election (a divine act), assurance of election is based on our efforts (human acts), no matter how successful they may be, to live our lives in a manner appropriate to our election.

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17Knox, 3:363–4.


19Knox, 3:385.


William Perkins (1558–1602)

William Perkins’ concern over the doctrine of assurance is evidenced in the titles of some of his works, *A Treatise Tending unto a Declaration Whether a Man Be in the Estate of Grace or in the Estate of Damnation* and *A Case of Conscience, The Greatest That Ever Was: How a Man May Know Whether He Be the Child of God, or No*. These works and others seem to have arisen out of a desire to provide a theological foundation for pastoral counselling the dominant issue of which was assurance.  

The main premise behind his understanding of assurance is that an examination of one’s conscience would provide telling information as to one’s spiritual status. That this falls within the Calvinist (as differentiated from Calvin, himself) tradition of assurance by good works is evident by the fact that the disposition of one’s conscience, whether accusing or excusing, is determined by one’s behavior. If I have a wounded conscience which accuses me, it is most likely because I have acted wrongly.

Perkins does argue for an assurance based on faith, distinguishable, though not separable, from the assurance based on good works and that a corrupt conscience can only be reformed by an act of divine grace.  

This militates against any form of works righteousness arising directly out of his theology.

However, as soon as he moves from discussing the *reformation* of the conscience to the *preservation* of the conscience his focus shifts from divine activity to human activity. The very fact that Perkins’ principal tool of analysis is the conscience indicates that his primary concern is with that which affects the conscience most directly, human thoughts and actions.  

It is good works to which our conscience testifies on our behalf. It is sins which offend our conscience and cause it to accuse us. It is only through obedience to the will of God by doing good and avoiding evil that we can preserve a good conscience. It is only through the testimony of our conscience that we can be certain of our salvation.

Jeremy Taylor (1613–1667)

Jeremy Taylor, the seventeenth century Puritan whose influence on the theological development of John Wesley is well documented, also stands in the tradition of Calvinism as distinguished from Calvin, himself.

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23Perkins, 49-54, 73. See also 112-3.

24Keddie, 243, contends that this is not a departure from Calvin’s *sola fide* principle but I do not see how it cannot be just that.

25Perkins, 49, 63-78.
Some persons are heartily persuaded of their being reconciled; and there is no sign to distinguish them, but by that which is the thing signified: a holy life, according to the strict rules of Christian discipline, tells what persons are confident, and who are presumptuous.  

And even more to the point is the following statement:

And it is observable, that all the confidences which the Spirit of God hath created in the elect, are built upon duty, and stand or fall, according to the strength or weakness of such supporters. "We know we are translated from death to life, by our love unto the brethren:" meaning that the performance of our duty is the best consignation to eternity, and the only testimony God gives us of our election. And, therefore, we are to make our judgments accordingly.

Once again, we find the observable work of the Spirit in the believer, that is, his/her sanctification, is what gives rise to his/her assurance of justification. Theoretically, justification was to precede and provide the impetus for sanctification. But since the experience of justification could be imperceptible (a claim increasingly held, by those for whom a visible conversion would be too embarrassing), the emphasis was laid upon the visible effects of conversion (which could be rather easily counterfeited).

Richard Baxter (1615–1691)

Mention must be made of Richard Baxter, another seventeenth-century Puritan divine, who, likewise, continued in the tradition of the Calvinists. Baxter is well known for his book, *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*, much of which is concerned with the question of assurance. (In fact, an entire part is given to the issue of self-examination.) However, he takes up the problem of assurance in other places as well, most lengthily in a work entitled, *The Right Method for a Settled Peace of Conscience and Spiritual Comfort.* In this latter work, like all of his predecessors and contemporaries mentioned above, Baxter asserts that good works are in no way to be considered conditions for our justification, meritorious, or able to make satisfaction for our sins. But immediately on the heels of this confession he adds that "we may and must raise our assurance and comforts from our own graces and duties." Baxter argues that since we will be judged by God according to our works, we must judge ourselves

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27 Taylor, 177.
29 Baxter, 57.
30 This seems to be contradicted by other passages, e.g., 9:152.
31 Baxter, 57.
(and others) on that basis, just as a tree is judged according to its fruits. 32
Even more poignant are the following passages.

All these arguments prove, that we may take up our comfort from our own gracious qualifications and actions (not in opposition to Christ, but in subordination to him), and most of them prove that we may fetch our assurance of salvation from them, as undoubted evidences thereof. 33

That our comfort, yea, and assurance, hath a great dependance on our actual obedience: yea, so great, that the least obedient sort of sincere Christians cannot by ordinary means have any assurance: and the most obedient (if other necessaries concur) will have the most assurance: and for the middle sort, their assurance will rise or fall, ordinarily with their obedience . . . . 34

Thus, for Baxter, the degree of one's assurance is directly proportional to the degree of one's obedience.

Baxter also helps set the stage for Wesley's teaching on assurance by discussing the role of the witness of the Spirit in providing assurance for the believer. However, as we shall see, Baxter argues quite the opposite of Wesley. He contends that since "the Spirit is not discerned by us in its essence," it is only through its visible work in our lives, that is through the fruits of the Spirit, that we can be assured of our adoption. 35 And then he adds the following warning almost as if he were prophetically anticipating Wesley's teaching on the witness of the Spirit.

Take heed therefore of expecting any such inward witness of the Spirit, as some expect, viz. a discovery of your adoption directly, without first discovering the signs of it within you; as if by an inward voice he should say to you, "Thou art a child of God and thy sins are pardoned." 36

With this as part of the theological background, it is little wonder that Wesley's teaching met with such hostility.

The limits of time and space do not permit a discussion of Francis Turretin, the Westminster Confession, John Owen, John Goodwin, John Bunyan, Jonathan Edwards and a host of other Reformed and Puritan divines and confessions of faith, all of whom/which contributed to the transmutation of Calvin's doctrine of assurance.

Let me summarize this section by highlighting some of the differences between Calvin's understanding of assurance and that of his theological offspring. Calvin insisted that assurance of salvation was of the essence of faith which was itself a gift of God. Assurance and faith were both part of the same gracious experience. The Calvinists, seeing that in practice many people, in fact, did not receive assurance when they received saving

32 Baxter, 60.
33 Baxter, 61.
34 Baxter, 151.
35 Baxter, 53.
36 Baxter, 53.
faith and later even doubted their election, claimed that assurance must be sought in the sphere of human behavior. Thus, while Calvin’s conception of assurance was Christologically oriented, the Calvinists’ was anthropologically oriented. While Calvin taught that we should look to Christ for assurance, the Calvinists taught that we should look to ourselves. While Calvin held that election was the foundation of assurance, the Calvinists held that assurance was needed to confirm one’s election. While Calvin contended that assurance should give rise to aggressive obedience and victorious Christian living, the Calvinists held exactly the inverse, that these were what gave rise to assurance. The Calvinists asserted that assurance could be gained through self-examination of one’s life and good works. Calvin, too, spoke of self-examination but for a different purpose, “... lest the confidence of the flesh creep in and replace assurance of faith.”

In this way the Calvinists stood Calvin on his head. Alasdair Heron writes about this transmutation of Calvin’s thought by his successors,

> It would be hard to imagine a more drastic inversion of the teaching of Luther or Calvin; for while they did indeed give a place to self-examination, they insisted that For assurance of salvation we must look only to Christ.  

No one claimed that one was justified by works. That was still a matter of grace. But it is all too easy to see how works righteousness could find a way in through a backdoor, at the next point in the Calvinist’s ordo salutis, the point of one’s assurance of election.

**John Wesley (1703–1791)**

At the outset of this section it behooves us to set forth briefly the clear differences between the Reformed conception of assurance (including both Calvin and the Calvinists) and Wesley’s conception of it. First, following in the Arminian tradition, Wesley rejected the Reformed understanding of predestination and election. This immediately freed Wesley from the nagging problem of anxiety over election and enabled him to return the discussion of assurance to the context of justification by faith. Second, and related to the first, is that Wesley defended only a present assurance of a present salvation. This is based on Wesley’s rejection of the Reformed doctrines of irresistible grace and the perseverance of the saints. Wesley felt that an assurance of eternal security was not only contrary to scripture but destructive of the moral life of the Christian.

Despite these sharp differences, the problem of assurance of salvation remained essentially the same. Christians wanted to know how they could know that they were, in fact, Christians.

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37 *Institutes*, III.2.11.
Wesley's Experience Of Assurance

It would not be entirely inaccurate to describe Wesley's life prior to his famous Aldersgate experience as the quest for assurance of salvation. A detailed description of how Wesley sought to find assurance of salvation in this period of his life is beyond the scope of this study. Let it suffice to say that prior to Aldersgate, Wesley sought to find assurance of salvation in a typically Calvinistic mode: through self-examination, a holy life, and serious attention to good works. Wesley's own words confirm this view, "Neither had I the witness of the Spirit with my spirit, and indeed could not; for I 'sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law.' "39

It is no coincidence that this was the period of time in which Wesley was reading the works of men such as Jeremy Taylor and William Law (1686-1761).40 It is clear that the influence of these men on Wesley was a double-edged sword. What he learned from them in one sense, he had to unlearn in another. They showed him the importance of striving after holiness with all one's heart (a typically Calvinistic notion of sanctification), but what they did not teach him was that all the striving in the world, all the good works of a life-time, could not produce assurance of salvation. This was perilously close to placing sanctification before justification, a distorted *ordo salutis* with which Wesley became all too familiar.

Wesley's own account of his Aldersgate experience is worth quoting at this point.

About a quarter before nine, while he [Luther] was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death. 41

Note the Christological basis of this experience of assurance. It was Christ to whom Wesley looked for assurance rather than to himself. The givenness of this assurance is evidence that he believed it was a work of divine grace rather than human introspection. The point is that Wesley only found assurance when he abandoned what had become the typically Calvinistic way of searching for it, through reference to good works. The

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40 It is important to note that William Law was not a Calvinist per se, though there may have been some Calvinistic tendencies in his thought as there was in Wesley's own thought. This is evidenced in Law's book, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, ed. Paul G. Stanwood and introduction by Austin Warren and Paul G. Stanwood (New York: Paulist Press, 1978). Although I can find no evidence that Law was particularly concerned about the problem of assurance, it is clear from Wesley's correspondence with him that Wesley believed that if he lived out Law's program of spiritual formation he would find the assurance he so desperately desired. For this correspondence see *Works*, 12:51-3.
41 *Works*, 1:103.
similarities between Wesley and Calvin on these points are striking. Indeed, Wesley's own experience of assurance could have come straight from the pages of Calvin's *Institutes*.\textsuperscript{42}

**Wesley's Teaching On Assurance**

But what of Wesley's more formal (though not systematic) teaching on assurance? The locus of Wesley's teaching on the doctrine of assurance is found in his three sermons, "The Witness of the Spirit, I," "The Witness of the Spirit, II," and "The Witness of our own Spirit."\textsuperscript{43} These sermons, as well as his other tracts and letters, were the source of much conflict between Wesley and some of his contemporaries.

Based on Romans 8:15-16, Wesley taught that when we are justified, or adopted as children of God, it is the privilege of every believer to receive attestation of this by the witness of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{44} This witness of the Spirit is two-fold: direct and indirect. The direct witness Wesley admits is difficult to express in words. His most definitive articulation of it is,

> an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God directly witnesses to my spirit, that I am a child of God; that Jesus Christ hath loved me, and given himself for me; and that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God.\textsuperscript{45}

The indirect witness is the Spirit's witness through and to our spirit. Here, Wesley is referring to the fruits of the Spirit in our lives, the testimony of our conscience, and the results of self-examination.\textsuperscript{46}

Wesley argues that the direct witness of the Spirit is antecedent to, and provides the foundation for, the witness of our spirit. This is so because our ability to love God and others (which is the common denominator of all the fruits of the Spirit) is predicated upon God's having first loved us, but we can only become aware of this love for us by the direct testimony of it to our hearts.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{42} Cf., *Institutes*, III.24.5.

\textsuperscript{43} One might question the obvious fact that Wesley's teaching on assurance is more pneumatologically oriented, while Calvin's is more Christologically oriented. However, so far as I am able to discern, this does not lessen the validity of my overall thesis. In fact, it supports it, for despite the difference, both formulations highlight the fact that our assurance is to be found in an act of God (regardless of which person of the Trinity), and not an act of ourselves.

\textsuperscript{44} In his more mature statements, Wesley acknowledges that although the gift of assurance is the privilege of every believer, it may not be experienced at the moment of justification and may be experienced in degrees. For a fuller description of the developmental aspect of this doctrine in Wesley's thought see Daniel Joseph Luby, *John Wesley's Doctrine of Assurance* (M.A. Thesis, The Braniff Graduate School of the University of Dallas, 1977), 94-6, and Arthur S. Yates, *The Doctrine of Assurance, with Special Reference to John Wesley* (London: Epworth Press, 1952).


\textsuperscript{46} *Works*, 5:125 ("Witness of the Spirit, II", par II.6).

\textsuperscript{47} *Works*, 5:115 ("Witness of the Spirit, I", par. I.8).
Wesley is adamant about maintaining the distinction between the witness of God's Spirit (the direct witness of the Spirit) and the witness of our spirit (the indirect witness of the Spirit). He refuses to collapse the two into one, as his contemporaries did. Yet, the two cannot exist apart from each other. The two witnesses are distinct but not independent.

What is crucial to note is that Wesley received no argument about his description of the indirect witness of the Spirit, that is, the witness of our own spirit. There wasn't even any controversy over the reality of the witness of the Spirit. The point at issue was "whether there be any direct testimony of the Spirit at all; whether there be any other testimony of the Spirit, than that which arises from a consciousness of the fruit." That there was no witness of the Spirit distinguishable from the witness of our spirit was exactly what Baxter and others taught. For defending such a direct witness of the Spirit, Wesley was charged with enthusiasm and inventing new doctrine. Wesley, however, contends that this is simply a recovery of a "great evangelical truth . . . which had been for many years well nigh lost and forgotten."48

Why was this so threatening to Wesley's "Calvinized" contemporaries? The answer lies in the fact that it struck at the root of what had become in reality a supplementary means of obtaining righteousness through human endeavor. Wesley is intuitively correct when he writes, "I cannot but fear that a supposition of our being justified by works is at the root of all these objections [against the direct and perceptible witness of the Spirit . . . ]"50 Indeed, Wesley goes on to assert that "everyone, therefore, who denies the existence of such a [direct] testimony, does in effect deny justification by faith."51

To identify the witness of the Spirit with the witness of our spirit is to say that the witness of the Spirit is a "feeling" or a "consciousness" of our right-standing before God. But for Wesley, there must be something which causes the feeling or consciousness and this something must lie outside ourselves and be antecedent to the feeling or consciousness. It must be objectively real even if it cannot be empirically described. Even though Wesley could not adequately delineate what the direct witness of the Spirit was, it is clear that he did not want it to mean anything that could be the result of merely human activity, mental or physical.

This witness is not the work of justification, itself, though it may accompany it, and it is not the fruit of justification in our lives. It is that which assures us that we are justified, that our sins are forgiven, and that which gives us the boldness to live holy lives.

48 Works, 5:126 ("Witness of the Spirit, II", par. II.8).
To summarize this section, we may affirm that Wesley knew from personal experience that he could not gauge his spiritual vitality by considering only his good works, as impressive as they may have been. To do so would effectively undermine the divine work of justification by faith. Consequently, based on scripture and confirmed by experience, Wesley sought to reformulate a doctrine of assurance which would affirm the value of good works and conscience, yet always subordinate them to the divine attestation of our justification.

Conclusion

It has become evident from the evidence presented that, at this crucial juncture, Wesley was more like Calvin than Calvin's own theological offspring. Both Calvin and Wesley, despite their differences and in their own ways, insisted that assurance be defined in such a way as to maintain the primacy of divine operation vis-a-vis human operation in the *ordo salutis*. This is not to say that Wesley was a Calvinist, but rather that he was simply a *true Protestant*, that is, one who protests against any doctrine or practice which would enable humanity to be its own savior. At this point, Calvin and Wesley were united in their insistence on the priority of grace in the effecting and the maintenance of one's salvation.