

THE ESSENTIAL FORM AND FASHION OF THE JUSTIFYING FAITH

By Pierre Du Moulin (1568–1658)

With notes by Erik Pontoppidan, as found in his ‘The Mirror of Faith.’

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The character and essence of the justifying faith is very well described in Art XXII of the Confession of the Reformed Church of the Netherlands: *The true faith is the one that apprehends Christ with all His merits, appropriates Him as its Savior, and seeks nothing besides Him.*

But those who describe faith as *a certain assurance by which the believer firmly believes that his sins are forgiven in Christ*, have, in my opinion, failed to grasp the nature of faith and seem to have intended to describe the perfection of faith rather than its nature.

For it would be an inexact definition of a human being to put it this way: A human being is a being which has an excellent soul, a well proportioned body, great understanding, and incomparable beauty, and is also living in its palmiest days; for these attributes point to the perfection of a person, not to the kind of beings to which he belongs. A baby is a human being as well as its father, and an ugly person is a human being no less than is a beautiful person. In the same manner it is a poor description of faith to say that it is a full and firm assurance of our salvation in Christ (for each person in particular); for tho this is indeed the acme and perfection of faith, it is not the essential form of faith.

This consists of three parts, as presented in said confession of faith: 1) to apprehend the merits of Christ; 2) to appropriate Him as one’s Savior; 3) to seek no salvation besides Him. But this is found even in those who doubt and tremble; and who will deny that the father of the epileptic boy had the saving faith when he cried out and said: *I believe; help Thou mine unbelief?* Verily, it is highly indiscreet to teach children and simple folk that faith is a firm confidence and a full assurance that their sins are forgiven in Christ. This is like learning a master-trick of jumping from the lowest to the highest step of a flight of stairs. Therefore it often happens that beginners in faith soon become provoked and discouraged; and many that have made considerable progress in faith have painful pangs of conscience, supposing that there

¹ Translation amended by the digitiser. The original translation reads ‘constantly’, but seems to be a mistranslation as the original French reads *fermement*, i.e ‘firmly’ or ‘tightly’.

can be no faith without a firm assurance of salvation², while this is often most abundant in those who are least satisfied with themselves, especially since it is impossible to worry sincerely and heartily about the lack of faith without having faith; or it is impossible for a person to perceive that he has only a small portion of faith without first possessing its true essence. Far be it from us, however, to join the Papists in leading people into doubt and vacillation and depriving faith of its certainty, its firm confidence, upon which all our consolation depends; on the contrary, we exhort the believer to strive might and main to acquire the assurance and firm confidence that God is reconciled to us in Christ. We teach that a person shall not abide in a general knowledge of Christ and His benefits; for this is the unsound, worthless, and arid faith of the Papists. We teach that we must appropriate to ourselves the benefits of Christ as constantly and firmly as possible, and when we find that our trust and confidence is still weak and frail, we must persist in earnest and ceaseless prayer to God, entreating Him *to speak peace to our souls and to let His Spirit bear witness with our spirit that we are children of God* (Rom. 8:16).

This Spirit of God is *the Holy Spirit of promise and an earnest pledge of our inheritance* (Eph. 1:14). Therefore this Spirit is as infallible as God Himself; for it is God that speaks in our heart. And therefore we must shun the opinion of Bellarmine given in his Second Book, Third Chapter, where he says about justification *that the witness of the Holy Spirit brings us only a probable, a reasonable certainty*.

But in order to make further headway and define the real nature of the justifying faith within its own limits, we must carefully observe this distinction, namely, that confidence in God is of two kinds: 1) By one kind we flee to God, lean against and depend upon Him. Of this, David says: *In Thee, O Jehovah, do I take refuge* (Ps. 31:1). And Isaiah: *Let him trust in the name of Jehovah, and rely upon his God* (Is. 50:10); 2) the second kind of confidence in God is the witness of the Holy Spirit to the effect that God is reconciled to us in His Son Jesus Christ, and that eternal life belongs to us, from all of which there arises in us peace of conscience and a holy security. This confidence is a result of the one first mentioned. This order is carefully observed in the following: *These things I have written unto you, that ye may know that ye have eternal life, even unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God* (1 John 5:13). Now, then, here are two different things: 1) to believe on the Son; 2) to know that we have eternal life; and the former is certainly the cause of the latter. Here we have another passage to the same effect: *In whom we have boldness and access in confidence thru our faith in Him* (Eph. 3:12). Here we see again that our faith in

² Pontoppidan: In speaking of faith, our sainted Luther generally gives it the name of the sure, firm, and bold confidence, all of which Chemnitz shows to be the very fruit and result of faith, but by no means its nature and essence. Now, what Moulin presents here does not in any manner contradict what Luther teaches. At the time of Luther so many errors had crept into Christian life, including the Papistic doubt-faith, as tho no one could be sure of the grace of God, but must live in continual fear. Therefore it was not unfair for Luther to stress the indubitable heavenly confidence, or, as we called it above, the triumphant confidence, the highest degree of faith, which is most strongly opposed to the Papistic doubt. It should also be added that here and there the writings of Luther are so full of consolation for those who have a feeble faith as any one can wish, and they do not vary to the extent of a hair's breadth from this system of Moulin.

Christ and our boldness and access thru faith are different, as a cause and its effect.

Between these two kinds of confidence, therefore, there is the same difference as between wishing and obtaining, between seeking and finding. By the former confidence we apprehend the promises of God, by the latter God seals these in our hearts. To aid our understanding, let us call the former a *confidence of refuge*, the latter *one of feeling*. The former flees to the grace of God in Christ Jesus, and the latter feels this grace sealed in the heart; which, therefore, are two entirely different things.

In order to throw some more light on this sacred doctrine—I find that it has not yet been made so clear in our church as it ought to be—and in order to comfort timid souls, I wish to point out that the mere confidence and refuge or the emotion of the heart which in its need and distress strives to apprehend the grace of God in Christ, this is the real means of justification, the real essence of faith, and the causes for it are given below:

1) The promises are not given to the latter kind of confidence, but to the former: *And it shall be, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved* (Acts 2:21). *Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest* (Matt. 11:28). *Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out* (John 6:37). Here we see that the promises are given to him who *comes* and to him who *seeks refuge* in God thru Christ. But that assurance of salvation shall be given to none but those who come with boldness and have in themselves the witness³ of the Spirit of God that they are saved—that I find nowhere in Scripture. For all the commands and examples of holy boldness and assurance of salvation of which Scripture is full, serve to strengthen the faith and make it more perfect, and also to convince gainsayers who teach doubt and not faith. But from all this it does not follow that a person is to be justified by means of certainty of his salvation.

2) By looking closely into this matter we shall find that the promises are made not to them that find but to them that seek, as finding, to be strictly correct, is a reward of seeking. *Seek, and ye shall find* (Matt. 7:7). And it would be unreasonable to say that eternal life is to be promised only to those who have found it. He who is sure of his salvation thru the witness of the Holy Spirit has already found his salvation. And if all believers at all times found this salvation sealed in their own hearts, they would need no more promises. But in as much as our faith is weak and unequal, we still must needs seek that which we already have found.

3) And, verily, those who in justifying faith peremptorily demand a perception and

³ Pontoppidan: Here the author quite evidently refers to the manifest and distinct witness of the Holy Spirit which is described in the Second Part of this book (The Mirror of Faith), and which, as stated above, is not immediately granted to all just and believing souls. But as to the indirect witness of the Holy Spirit which we perceive as inducement to prayer, war against the flesh, and other good exercises, no one must deny that such experiences ought to be common and, outside the hour of affliction, belong to all true believers.

assurance of their salvation do not rightly understand themselves; for it is as tho they were to say: *In order to be justified before God you must feel and perceive that you are justified.* But this kind of faith contradicts pure reason; for you must be justified before God ere you can perceive your justification.⁴

4) Therefore it becomes necessary to recognize two functions in faith. One is the *direct* power by which we embrace and apprehend Christ; the other is the *reflex* power, by which we know our own condition and perceive that we are apprehended by Christ. By the former we really believe on Christ; but by the latter we ascertain that we believe, and the faith which has apprehended Christ, softly and sweetly reclines in itself. But there are many who have actually accepted Christ without distinctly perceiving that they have accepted Him; and these are nevertheless justified. For it is unquestionably true that we are justified by the *direct* power of faith and not by its *reflex* power; or, we are justified not because we perceive that we believe, but because we believe.

⁴ Pontoppidan: A host of writers insist upon a strong and firm assurance of the forgiveness of sins, tho such assurance is only a result of justification, which does not always follow immediately upon the forgiveness, and is, least of all, a preceding means of justification, which, as Moulin quite justly observes, would be unreasonable—like putting the horse before the cart, as we say. The Papists, therefore, are doing us an injustice by accusing us of an absurdity, especially Wazqvetz: By the justifying faith the sectarians understand that peculiar faith that, depending on the promises, a person believes and trusts that all his sins are forgiven thru Christ (I Secunda Disp. CCIX, Cap. I, N. 1). These words are true or false according to our interpretation. The Papist uses them only to disgrace us, saying: Just look at these absurd Lutherans! They teach that we are to obtain the forgiveness of sins by believing that the sins are already forgiven. If I ask: Where shall I begin in order to be justified and to enjoy the grace of God?—they say: Only believe it is so. Is it not an unreasonable matter? One that is not yet justified shall believe that he is in order to be justified!—But here the Papists attribute to us an opinion which we hardly ever thought of. We know that the trustful confidence works in two ways in justification. Before justification this confidence is turned to Christ (direct); after justification it points to the grace already received, and rests sweetly upon it (reflex). In this manner the saving faith has two functions in our justification. First, when the sinner repents of his sin and contemplates the evangelical promises, faith is kindled in his heart by the Holy Spirit, and He exalts the heart of the poor sinner and draws it to Christ; so that the troubled sinner, with mournful longing, apprehends the Lord Jesus with all His merits and thinks in his heart somewhat after this fashion: O Thou Lamb of God who bore the sins of the world! May Thy merits, Thy blood, Thy death be credited unto me in this anguish and distress! In Thy sacred wounds I hide myself. Between me and the judgment of God I place Thy death, Thy suffering, Thy satisfaction.—In such longing and confidence in Christ faith takes its beginning in our conversion. It is the first function of the true faith, and as soon as it takes place, justification with God in heaven also takes place, so that God proves and applies His holy Gospel to the poor sinner, declares him justified and free from condemnation for the sake of the Savior, whom he has apprehended in faith. Thereupon, after justification has taken place, faith also comes to its second function! For as the penitent sinner is now justified before God by faith, there arises in him boldness, rest, and peace in his conscience, so that he now considers himself justified, praises the grace which he has received in Christ and takes comfort therein. Justification, therefore, does not mean that I should immediately say to a person who is repenting of his sins: Believe that your sins are forgiven in Christ! No, that his sins are forgiven, a person believes after his justification. But to a sinner who only now repents of his sin I say: Behold the Lord Jesus Christ, He has paid for you; if you ask for His grace, appeal to Him, apprehend Him and carry Him before the judgment of God, then God will justify you. In this manner the poor sinner must apprehend the Lord Jesus and appropriate His holy merits, and then he will be justified. Thereupon, when he is justified, he may in the name of God believe that he has received grace in Christ.

5) Therefore we must carefully note what this is: *to believe unto salvation; it is nothing but coming to God thru Christ*, about which Jesus Himself says: *I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall not hunger, and he that believeth on me shall never thirst* (John 6:35). In these words it is obvious that belief and coming mean one and the same thing, and everlasting life is promised to all those that take refuge in Christ. Similarly: *Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out* (John 6:37). *Come unto me all ye that labor*, etc. (Matt. 11:28).

6) Since difficult words must be explained by means of easy ones, and not easy words by difficult ones, it is reasonable and fair to explain believing by coming, and not coming by believing.

7) Experience teaches us that many come to Christ and earnestly embrace Him without being able to perceive any consolation in their soul for many years. But that they have actually accepted Christ in earnest is obvious from the fact that they can endure all the terrors of conscience and all attacks of melancholia; they do not desist from what they have once apprehended, but constantly struggle against their spiritual afflictions, saying with the prophet Isaiah: *I will wait for Jehovah, that hideth His face from the house of Jacob, and I will look for Him* (Is. 8:17). There is no doubt but that such persons are justified, tho they do not find it in themselves; for this passage is firmer than heaven and earth: *It shall be, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved* (Acts 2:21).⁵

8) I further say that the power of faith works most vigorously where this reflex power, the sweet peace of conscience, is not experienced. It is not worthy of wonderment that we depend upon the goodness of God at a time *when the Lord says to our soul: I am thy salvation* (Ps. 35:3). But it is worthy of praise and wonderment that we cling to God when He hides His face from us. This is what Job did when *God hid His face from him and held him for His enemy* (Job 13:24). *When he might have taken his flesh between his teeth, and put his life in his hand* (Job 13:14) (according to some commentators he must have bitten his own flesh on account of excruciating pain, his life being on the point of passing out of his hand like a bird) he still cleaved unto God with the little remnant of life that was left in him, and believed in spite of what he perceived and felt, saying: *Behold, He will slay me; I have no hope: Nevertheless I will maintain my ways before Him*.

9) And since *faith is assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen* (Heb. 11:1), it cannot be denied that we have faith when we apprehend the grace of God in Christ even tho we neither see nor feel it. But those who by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit have attained to a faith which is full of light and consolation, do not only walk in faith, but to a certain extent even by sight.

⁵ Pontoppidan: This passage, which is exceedingly rich in consolation, must not be taken as a hypocritical cry, Lord! Lord! but must be understood as an earnest longing and cry of a penitent soul—this passage, I wish to say, the Holy Spirit seems to be determined to drive home with unusual force, giving it in three different places (Joel 2: 32; Acts 2:21; Rom. 10:13).

According to the reasons mentioned above, I therefore hold that the essential form of faith, also called the aspect of the justifying faith, consists in our coming to God thru the merits of Jesus Christ, and not in each individual person's assurance of his own salvation. For altho these two things are connected with each other, so that our coming to God thru Christ cannot be perfect until it has caused in us a firm assurance of our salvation, we are not justified by means of this assurance of our salvation but by means of our coming to Christ; for the real cause of our being justified is that we seek our salvation in Christ and depend exclusively upon Him, which can be done with fear and trembling, without any certainty as to the outcome, as a malefactor surrenders himself completely to the mercy of the king, tho in terrible fear of losing his life.

I must not deny that doubt is surely a great weakness in faith. But there are two kinds of doubt: one (which it would be more proper to call anxiety) is the believer's doubt about his salvation; but in spite of this he cleaves unto God, and he has no hesitation as to whether he is to depend upon God or not. We have an example of this kind in the disciples who, when the storm terrified them, cried to Jesus, who was sleeping in the ship: *Save, Lord, we perish!* The other kind of doubt is that the heart hesitates, not knowing whether it is to take refuge in God or not. The doubt of King Jehoram was of this second kind: *Behold, this evil is of Jehovah; why should I wait for Jehovah any longer?* (2 Kings 6:33). This disease is mortal, and very few recover from it after they have advanced so far as to think evil of God, to nurse a sort of grudge against Him. But the kind of doubt first mentioned can easily co-exist with the justifying faith, as may be seen from the above reference to the apostles, whom Jesus rebuked on account of their little faith, tho they were saved by their faith.

Such doubt is truly something to be ashamed of, and yet it is a certain sign of a justifying faith, in the same manner as weakness is a sign of life in a person. Whoever has such worry and doubt about his salvation, also has godliness in himself, tho he misuses it to some extent and turns it into terror. But be this as it may, this godliness is a work of faith. I therefore find that it is a dangerous teaching to claim that the justifying attribute and nature of faith is to be sure of one's salvation. Thereby many have fallen into deep despair, and a theologian holding this opinion will find it impossible to satisfy and strengthen a trembling conscience without upsetting his own theory; for he must finally come to the admission that faith has vicissitudes of its own, that man is not saved by any certainty of the goal of his faith, but that it is God who is merciful to us for Christ's sake. Furthermore, as long as conscience flees to this firm support it is without danger; and the trembling faith, tho sick, being unable to rejoice in its God, is still living, for it leans up against God.

The origin of this error is due to a misunderstanding of the following words by James: *Let him ask in faith, nothing doubting: for he that doubteth is like the surge of the sea driven by the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord* (James 1:6, 7). From this passage the wrong conclusion is drawn

that whoever labors under doubt and fear can expect no justification. In the first place it might be said that in this passage the apostle speaks of those who ask for wisdom but not salvation; but no matter what the apostle means by wisdom, the following verse removes the whole difficulty: *A double-minded man* (properly: a man having a double heart), *unstable in all his ways*. Here it is made known that the apostle speaks of a man who does not honestly cling to Christ, but divides his heart between the false and the true religion, hesitating as to whether he is to depend on God or not. But the believer having a weak faith does not deserve this bad name: he should not be called a man having two hearts as long as he trusts in God thru Christ with an upright heart and does not seek salvation in any one else, even if he trembles in his confidence and has not attained to the right degree of full certainty.

I also wish to add that there are other and equally clear and unmistakable testimonies of the justifying faith, besides the assurance of this salvation, and they are all the gifts of sanctification which spring from faith as their source; *for faith works thru love* (Gal. 5:6). And wherever you find Christian gentleness, unvarnished godliness, an ardent love, a sincere zeal for the glory of God, you may boldly say of such a person as James says of Abraham: *Thou seest that faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect*. For whatever is good in us is a work of faith. Furthermore, in order that no one shall accuse me of defending all doubt, I want to add that the firm confidence is not only the perfection of justification, but even its very nature itself. But since faith has a double aim and purpose, namely, Christ and the benefits of Christ, the firm confidence is not equally necessary in both. The first aim of faith is Christ, the second is salvation. The first and essential aim of hope concerns things to come (Rom. 8:25). But faith aims at the present. The love of God in Christ⁶ is the aim and goal of faith; for the believer *shall have* salvation yonder, but Christ he *possesses* even at the present time.

Therefore it is absolutely necessary unto justification that we apprehend the first aim of faith in great confidence and hold it fast unswervingly, and this is a firm trust: that we depend on Christ, the true aim, and remain firm with a sort of holy stubbornness, even if we have some fear and doubt with regard to the other things that we have in view. But whoever does not apprehend the first and most important aim of faith with a firm conscience *is double-minded* and is in such a condition that he cannot be justified, and *he should not dare to expect anything from the Lord* until he has done these two things: First, and above everything else, he must believe and hold as an unquestionable truth *that there is salvation in Jesus Christ and in none other; and that there is no other name under heaven, that is given among men, wherein we must be saved* (Acts 4:12). Next he must trust in and depend upon Christ with his whole heart and surrender himself completely to Christ. If this confidence is

⁶ Translation amended by the digitiser. The original translation reads 'love of Christ in God', but seems to be a mistranslation since the original French reads *L'amour de Dieu en J. Christ*.

not firm, faith has not attained to its justifying quality,⁷ and even if such a person may be justified before God, his justification is not yet sealed for him in his heart, and he cannot be assured *before feeling in faith the two conditions mentioned above, namely a certain persuasion*⁸ that there is no other name under heaven but that of Jesus wherein we must be saved, and a complete trust⁹ in Him. As to the second aim of faith: salvation, it must be embraced with a firm confidence; but if this confidence should not happen to be so very firm and sure, it does not follow that there is no justifying faith present, provided conscience with a firm trust apprehends the first aim, which is Christ. For a person's justification is brought about by confidence and trust in Christ; this trust in Christ will finally—sooner or later—bring assurance of salvation, and this will never fail. *For justified by faith, we have peace with God thru our Lord Jesus Christ.*

May God give us grace *to hold fast the beginning of our confidence firm unto the end* (Heb. 3:14); *looking unto the author and perfecter of our faith, Jesus* (Heb. 12:2); *being confident that He who began the good work in you will perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ.* To Him, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be glory and praise for ever. Amen.

⁷ Pontoppidan: When we compare this with what the author has stated above with regard to the right ground of faith, there seems to be some contradiction, unless we assume that by the “justifying quality” of faith he has not understood justification itself, but the exalted perception and assurance thereof. The latter is no doubt aimed at by the words of Richard Baxter: It is asked whether there is a justification of which the sinner is assured by a declaration made by the Judge in his conscience? Answer: Those who are justified will sooner or later become conscious of their justification by the light, or at least rays, from the face of God, but in most persons this consciousness is dim and vague.—If this “justifying quality” of faith is taken to mean this assurance of justification, which the above seems to indicate, the author's inconsistency is only apparent.

Digitiser: I believe Pontoppidan has misunderstood Moulin here. There is no contradiction in Moulin saying ‘faith has not attained to its justifying quality’. He has been speaking of a man with a double heart, hesitating as to whether he is to depend on Christ or not. Unless this man trust in Christ with his whole (i.e undivided) heart his faith has most certainly not attained to its justifying quality, for he is yet still seeking salvation apart from Christ. He must look to Christ alone.

⁸ Translation amended by the digitiser. The original translation read “and he cannot be assured that there is no other name under heaven but that of Jesus wherein we must be saved, and next a complete trust in Him.” But when compared to the French it was clear some phrases had been passed over, which I have inserted in Italics. “**& il n'en peut-être assuré devant que sentir en foi les deux conditions susdites, à savoir une certaine persuasion** qu'il n'y a point d'autre nom sous le ciel que Jesus-Christ par lequel il nous faille être sauvez, & une entière confiance en lui.”

⁹ or ‘confidence.’