

1 John Commentary - Introduction

PREVIOUS

1 John 1:1
Commentary

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO FIRST JOHN

First John is a book About Life: A life of assurance, a life of confidence

- About Light: light in the midst of darkness...
- About Truth: Truth in the midst of error...
- About Love: Love in the midst of a loveless society.

FIRST... A SUGGESTION... AN ENCOURAGEMENT

Let me encourage you to print out a copy of John's epistle in a literal version (NAS, ESV, KJV, not NLT or other paraphrased versions - Click the following link for a copy of [First John double spaced, wide margins in NAS - goto page 23](#)) and take a month to read through it once each day. With a printed copy you can feel the freedom to record your observations on the text (you may want to leave yourself wide margins on both sides -- if you read and study this letter for a month, you will need room to record your observations!).

As you read First John be alert for the apostle's frequent use of contrasts - light vs. darkness, truth vs. falsehood, love vs. hatred, love of the world vs. love of the Father, Christ vs. antichrists, children of God vs. children of the devil, righteousness vs. sin, the Spirit of God vs. the spirit of the Antichrist, and life vs. death.

You might also consider keeping a personal notebook as you study First John, recording your observations on the striking contrasts, the repeated key words (remembering to interrogate each occurrence of a contrast or a key word with the 5W/H'S), etc. The more time you spend observing this "simple" epistle, the more profound your insights will become. And even more important, the greater the sanctifying effect the Word of Truth will have on your daily walk in Christ (cp John 17:17) as the Spirit transforms you from glory to glory (2Cor 3:18-note). I can assure you that in both time (this present life in Christ) and eternity (our future life with Christ), the month you commit to spend in communion and fellowship with John vis a vis (French literally means "face-to-face" with) his first epistle, will yield incalculable benefits and surpassing, complete joy (cp 1Jn 1:4)!

Sidlow Baxter writes that First John "is a wonderful epistle. The words are very simple, but the thoughts are rich and deep. The style is direct and plain, yet there is a subtle, mystic depth in the way that truths are stated and in the way they are developed from one sentence to another... the tone of the epistle is *paternal* both in the fatherly affection and in the fatherly authority which characterize it." (Explore the Book. Zondervan. 1960)

The apostle John probably wrote this letter sometime around AD90 (although one cannot be dogmatic) and probably wrote from Ephesus (but again one cannot be dogmatic). **Baxter** comments...

There seems to be no good reason why we should reject the common tradition that all the apostles were martyred except the Apostle John. God had special purposes in preserving John alive upon the earth. One of these purposes finds its expression in the apocalyptic visions which were given to him on the lonely isle of Patmos, and which have been transmitted to us by pen in the last book of the Bible. But another purpose we may well suppose was that John should live long enough to see not only the Satanic inoculation of Christian doctrine with the virus of "antichrist" heresy but its process and principal characteristics, so that he might write this First Epistle of John for the future guidance of the Lord's people. Let us be deeply grateful for this epistle of the seven contrasts. May we learn it thoroughly and heed it constantly! (Explore the Book, Zondervan)

Assuming John is near the end of his life (and the only surviving apostle), his words in this epistle remind me of Paul's words in his last communication to Timothy. Both wanted to make sure that the reader understood that the "main things are the plain things" and so without the customary epistolary greeting, John begins his letter affirming that...

JESUS CHRIST IS... FULLY MAN

FULLY GOD

Oh, gift of gifts! oh, grace of grace!
That God should condescend
To make my heart His dwelling-place,
And be my closest Friend!
-J Sidlow Baxter

John's letter may be simple Greek and may not be as "hard to understand" as Paul's letters (2Pe 3:16-note), but oh how deep the current of this letter flows! Virtually every Greek word he uses is of vital importance, especially in these opening passages! The more I read and study it, the less I feel that I truly understand John's "simple" prose! For that reason, we want to make sure that we do not miss John's main point -- we as modern day followers (disciples) of Jesus Christ can trust the historical fact that Jesus was (is) fully Man and fully God. And so without delay (or formal introduction), John "eagerly" presents the evidence to support that truth.

What are the 5 facts he states about Jesus in 1John 1:1?

- (1) Jesus Christ (His Name is first mentioned in 1Jn 1:3) was from the beginning
- (2) We have heard Him speak
- (3) We have seen Him - we are "eye witnesses"
- (4) We have looked at Him closely and contemplated Him
- (5) We have touched Him-He was not a ghost, phantom or apparition, but a flesh and blood man.

Frankly if John had said nothing else, these facts would have been enough upon which we could stake our present life and our eternal destiny! Dear reader, do you believe John's introductory affirmation? (Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary says an "affirmation" is "*A solemn declaration made under the penalties of perjury, by persons who conscientiously decline taking an oath; which affirmation is in law equivalent to testimony given under oath.*")

As **John Piper** phrases it...

The spring from which the river of this text (1Jn 1:1-4) flows is Christ who never had a beginning but has existed eternally with the Father. And the ocean to which the river of this text flows is the joy of our fellowship with each other and with the Father and the Son (1Jn 1:3-4)... My goal (in his sermon) would be that God will use the water of his Word to refresh your confidence in Christ and intensify your desire for the joy of his fellowship. (See [Eternal Life Has Appeared in Christ](#))

John wrote 5 books of the Bible: His Gospel, I, II, III John, and Revelation

- Book of John—"Believe!"
- Epistles—"Be Sure!"
- Revelation—"Be Ready!"

- Book of John--salvation
- Epistles--sanctification
- Revelation—sovereignty

- Book of John—portrays Jesus as the prophet.
- Epistles--priest
- Revelation--king

Brian Bill ([Walk the Talk](#)) has a simple but accurate summary of John's profound prologue 1Jn 1:1-4...

- · Christianity is fact, not fiction. (1Jn 1:1)
- · Christianity is proclaimed, not private. (1Jn 1:2)
- · Christianity is shared, not selfish. (1Jn 1:3)
- · Christianity is rejoicing, not repressive. (1Jn 1:4)

David Legge has another summary...

- · Jesus must be encountered
- · Jesus must be experienced
- · Jesus must be expressed

Christ, Community and Communion

Now let's digress for a moment. Whenever you read the Bible, always remember **to read with a purpose**. You are not in a race to see how quickly you can complete your daily reading. You are instead invited to a relationship with the Creator of the Universe Who seeks to actively communicate with you through His "love letter", His letter of redemptive love. Remember that we only get to know someone by spending time with them. So take time to know your Father in heaven. As the psalmist says...

Cease striving and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth.
Psalm 46:10+

The Hebrew word for "cease" conveys the idea of sink down, let go, wait. It means to take your hands off and relax! It's so easy for us to get impatient with the LORD and start meddling in matters that we ought to leave alone. He is God, and His hands can accomplish the impossible. Our hands may get in the way and make matters worse. As Spurgeon said "Sit down and wait in patience, believers!" The practical implications are manifold - for one thing your life is only as big as your faith, and your faith is only as big as your God. If you spend all your time looking at yourself, you will get discouraged, but if you look to God by faith, you will be encouraged. So pull up a chair and sit awhile - in fact you might cease reading these notes and read prayerfully through First John asking the Spirit to work in your heart so that the "eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe." (Eph 1:18, 19a+).

Katharina von Schlegel, the author of the hymn "[Be Still, My Soul \(sung by Selah\)](#)", drew her inspiration for the beautiful hymn Be Still My Soul from Psalm 46:10+...

Be still, my soul; thy God doth undertake
To guide the future as He has the past.
Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake;
All now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul: the winds and waves still know
His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below.

Always make an effort to look for "key words", which will aid you in discerning the author's major subjects and themes. Key words are often detected by repetition (for more discussion see **key words**). Sometimes key words are placed throughout the book, but other times they are "key" in a single chapter. For example, in First John chapter 1 we find **koinonia** (fellowship) 3 times (and no other uses in the book) - 1 John 1:3, 1 John 1:6, 1 John 1:7. Without being too simplistic, from this observation, what does John seek to emphasize at the beginning of his epistle?

KEY WORDS FIRST JOHN BY CHAPTER				
1 John 1	1 John 2	1 John 3	1 John 4	1 John 5
Fellowship Seen "If... " Sin	Write Know Abide Commandment	Love Know Abide	Love Know Abide	Know Life

Key words 1 John

Key Words -- See importance of [key words](#) - learn how to [mark key words](#) and the associated discipline of how to [interrogate them](#)

with 5W/H questions. Practice "interrogating" key words as well as [term of conclusion](#) (therefore), [term of explanation](#) (for), [terms of purpose or result](#) (so that, in order that, that, as a result), [terms of contrast](#) (but, yet), [expressions of time](#) (including [then](#); [until](#), after) and [terms of comparison](#) (like, as). You will be amazed at how your Teacher, the Holy Spirit, will illuminate your understanding, a spiritual blessing that will grow the more you practice! Be diligent! Consider the "5P's" - Pause to Ponder the Passage then Practice it in the Power of the Spirit. See also [inductive Bible study](#) - [observation](#) ([Observe With a Purpose](#)), [Interpretation](#) ([Keep Context King](#), [Read Literally](#), [Compare Scripture with Scripture](#), [Consult Conservative Commentaries](#)), and then be a doer of the Word with [Application](#). Do not overlook "doing the word" for if you do, you are deluding yourself, and are just a "smarter sinner," but not more like the Savior! As Jesus said "blessed are those who hear the word of God, and observe it." (Lk 11:28+, cf James 1:22+),

- **Truth** ([aletheia](#)) or **True** ([alethinós](#))
 ([aletheia](#)) (9X/8V) 1 Jn. 1:6; 1 Jn. 1:8; 1 Jn. 2:4; 1 Jn. 2:21; 1 Jn. 3:18; 1 Jn. 3:19; 1 Jn. 4:6; 1 Jn. 5:6
 ([alethinós](#)) (4X/2V) 1 Jn. 2:8; 1 Jn. 5:20
- **Write/written/writing** (13X/10V) ([grapho](#))
 1 Jn. 1:4; 1 Jn. 2:1; 1 Jn. 2:7; 1 Jn. 2:8; 1 Jn. 2:12; 1 Jn. 2:13; 1 Jn. 2:14; 1 Jn. 2:21; 1 Jn. 2:26; 1 Jn. 5:13
- **Darkness** - (7X/5V) ([skotia](#) and [skotos](#) once in 1Jn 1:6)
 1 Jn 1:5 1 Jn 1:6 1 Jn 2:8 1 Jn 2:9 1 Jn 2:11
- **Light** - (6X/5V) ([phos](#))
 1 Jn 1:5 1 Jn 1:7 1 Jn 2:8 1 Jn 2:9 1 Jn 2:10
- **Born** - (9X/6V) ([gennao](#) - all metaphorical ~ "born again" of Jn 3:3+)
 1 Jn 2:29, 3:9 (2x), 1Jn 4:7, 1Jn 5:1 (2x), 1Jn 5:4, 1Jn 5:18
- **Life** - (15X/12V) Two different Greek words for "Life"
 ([zoe](#)) 1 Jn. 1:1; 1 Jn. 1:2; 1 Jn. 2:25; 1 Jn. 3:14; 1 Jn. 3:15; 1 Jn. 5:11; 1 Jn. 5:12; 1 Jn. 5:13; 1 Jn. 5:16; 1 Jn. 5:20
 ([bios](#)) 1 Jn 2:16, 1Jn 3:17
- **FOR COMPARISON - Zoe** also key word in **Gospel of John** - 36X/32V (135X in NT)
 Jn 1:4; 3:15, 16, 36; 4:14, 36; 5:24, 26, 29, 39, 40; 6:27, 33, 35, 40, 47, 48, 51, 53, 54, 63, 68; 8:12; 10:10, 28; 11:25; 12:25, 50; 14:6; 17:2, 3; 20:31
- **Love** - (46X/31V) Noun and verb
 (agape)(18X/14V) 1 Jn. 2:5; 1 Jn. 2:15; 1 Jn. 3:1; 1 Jn. 3:16; 1 Jn. 3:17; 1 Jn. 4:7; 1 Jn. 4:8; 1 Jn. 4:9; 1 Jn. 4:10; 1 Jn. 4:12; 1 Jn. 4:16; 1 Jn. 4:17; 1 Jn. 4:18; 1 Jn. 5:3
 (agapao) (28X/17V) 1 Jn. 2:10; 1 Jn. 2:15; 1 Jn. 3:10; 1 Jn. 3:11; 1 Jn. 3:14; 1 Jn. 3:18; 1 Jn. 3:23; 1 Jn. 4:7; 1 Jn. 4:8; 1 Jn. 4:10; 1 Jn. 4:11; 1 Jn. 4:12; 1 Jn. 4:19; 1 Jn. 4:20; 1 Jn. 4:21; 1 Jn. 5:1; 1 Jn. 5:2
- **Abide** (24X/18V) ([meno](#))
 1 Jn. 2:6; 1 Jn. 2:10; 1 Jn. 2:14; 1 Jn. 2:17; 1 Jn. 2:19; 1 Jn. 2:24; 1 Jn. 2:27; 1 Jn. 2:28; 1 Jn. 3:6; 1 Jn. 3:9; 1 Jn. 3:14; 1 Jn. 3:15; 1 Jn. 3:17; 1 Jn. 3:24; 1 Jn. 4:12; 1 Jn. 4:13; 1 Jn. 4:15; 1 Jn. 4:16
- **Word** (6X/6V)(logos)
 1 Jn. 1:1; 1 Jn. 1:10; 1 Jn. 2:5; 1 Jn. 2:7; 1 Jn. 2:14; 1 Jn. 3:18
- **Fellowship** (4x in 3v) ([koinonia](#))
 1 John 1:3; 1 John 1:6; 1 John 1:7
- **Children** (14x in 13v) ([teknion](#) = little children, [teknon](#) = little children, [teknon](#) = children, [paidion](#) = 1Jn 2:13, 18)
 1 John 2:1; 1 John 2:12; 1 John 2:13; 1 John 2:18; 1 John 2:28; 1 John 3:1; 1 John 3:2; 1 John 3:7; 1 John 3:10; 1 John 3:18; 1 John 4:4; 1 John 5:2; 1 John 5:21
- **Commandment** (14x in 10v) ([entole](#))
 1 John 2:3; 1 John 2:4; 1 John 2:7; 1 John 2:8; 1 John 3:22; 1 John 3:23; 1 John 3:24; 1 John 4:21; 1 John 5:2; 1 John 5:3
- **Believe** (9x in 7v) ([pisteuo](#))
 1 John 3:23; 1 John 4:1; 1 John 4:16; 1 John 5:1; 1 John 5:5; 1 John 5:10; 1 John 5:13 (Plus "faith" - [pistis](#) in 1 John 5:4)
- **World** (22x in 16v) ([kosmos](#))
 1 John 2:2; 1 John 2:15; 1 John 2:16; 1 John 2:17; 1 John 3:1; 1 John 3:13; 1 John 4:1; 1 John 4:3; 1 John 4:4; 1 John 4:5; 1 John 4:9; 1 John 4:14; 1 John 4:17; 1 John 5:4; 1 John 5:5; 1 John 5:19
- **Know** - (40X/33V)
 Ginosko (25X/21V) 1 Jn. 2:3; 1 Jn. 2:4; 1 Jn. 2:5; 1 Jn. 2:13; 1 Jn. 2:14; 1 Jn. 2:18; 1 Jn. 2:29; 1 Jn. 3:1; 1 Jn. 3:6; 1 Jn. 3:16; 1 Jn. 3:19; 1 Jn. 3:20; 1 Jn. 3:24; 1 Jn. 4:2; 1 Jn. 4:6; 1 Jn. 4:7; 1 Jn. 4:8; 1 Jn. 4:13; 1 Jn. 4:16; 1 Jn. 5:2; 1 Jn. 5:20
 Eido (15X/13V) 1 Jn. 2:11; 1 Jn. 2:20; 1 Jn. 2:21; 1 Jn. 2:29; 1 Jn. 3:2; 1 Jn. 3:5; 1 Jn. 3:14; 1 Jn. 3:15; 1 Jn. 5:13; 1 Jn. 5:15; 1 Jn. 5:18; 1 Jn. 5:19; 1 Jn. 5:20

Note: Both verbs for **know** appear together in the following verses - 1Jn 2:29, 1Jn 5:20. In addition the word **know**

occurs more in the Gospel of John than in any of the other gospels, and occurs in 1 John more than in any other epistle, another piece of indirect evidence in support of John as the author of this epistle. Exactly the same phenomenon is noted for many other vocabulary words. These include such words as; love, light, truth, fellowship, commandment, abide, witness, eternal, manifest, keep, overcome, beginning, father and son.

AUTHOR

1 John

Although the **author** never states his name, all conservative scholars agree that it was written by the apostle John. Comparison of the thought and style of parallel passages in the Gospel of John (whose authorship is well established) and First John make it clear that the same person wrote both works. As Robert Law quipped, “*On internal grounds, it would appear much more feasible to assign any two of Shakespeare’s plays to different authors, than the Gospel and the First Epistle of ‘St. John.’*” Study the following parallel passages...

COMPARISON OF THOUGHT AND STYLE IN JOHN’S GOSPEL AND FIRST EPISTLE		
First Epistle of John		Gospel of John
1 John 1:1	The beginning	John 1:1, 2
1 John 1:1	The Word	John 1:1, 1:4, 1:14
1 John 1:2	Christ Manifested	John 1:14
1 John 1:1,2	Life	John 1:4
1 John 1:4	Complete Joy	John 15:11
1 John 1:5	Light in God Light in Jesus	John 1:4
1 John 2:5	Obeying the Word	John 14:23
1 John 2:6, 28	Abiding in Jesus	John 15:4, 7
1 John 2:8; 1 John 3:11	New Commandment	John 13:34
1 John 2:8, 2:10	Light in Darkness	John 1:5, 1:9; 11:10
1 John 2:13-14	Knowing God	John 17:3
1 John 3:1	Children of God	John 1:12
1 John 3:2	Seeing God	John 17:24
1 John 3:8	Satan's Deeds	John 8:44
1 John 3:13	Hated by the World	John 15:19, 17:14
1 John 4:9	God sent His only begotten Son	John 3:16
1 John 4:12	No One Has Seen God	John 1:18
1 John 5:1	Born of God	John 1:13

1 John 5:13	These things Have been written	John 20:31
1 John 5:14	Ask Anything	John 14:14
1 John 5:20	The True God Eternal Life	John 17:2,3

Below is a table comparing the general ideas or themes in John's three major writings (these are generalizations for there is significant overlap between the points in each column)...

GENERAL SUBJECTS OR THEMES OF JOHN'S THREE MAJOR NT WRITINGS		
The Gospel of John	The Epistles of John	The Revelation of John
Salvation	Sanctification	Glorification
Past History	Present Experience	Future Hope
Christ Died for us	Christ Lives in us	Christ Comes for us
The Word made Flesh	The Word made real for us	The Word conquering
Evangelistic	Pragmatic	Prophetic

John was an eyewitness of Jesus' life - he heard, saw, touched the Word! Some have suggested that John may have been portraying himself as a "father figure" to the readers because of his frequent use of terms like **children** (1 John 2:13, 2:18, 3:1, 3:2, 3:10, 5:1, 5:2) or **little children** (1 John 2:1, 2:12, 2:28, 3:7, 3:18, 4:4, 5:21).

Whenever you read a letter, try to discern the author's **purpose** for writing, which is sometimes clearly stated as in John 20:31.

What is John's purpose according to the following verse?

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that [hina](#) = introduces a purpose statement) you may know that you have eternal life. (1Jn 5:13)

Comment: To whom is John writing? Believers. Compare the "identity" of those addressed in 1Jn 2:1, 2:12, 13, 14

First John is a gateway to the New Testament, presenting the deepest truths in the simplest terms. (Complete Biblical Library Commentary).

D Edmond Hiebert introduces his exposition on First John writing that "This weighty and challenging opening paragraph plunges into the heart of the Christian message, proclaiming that eternal life has been manifested in the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ. This paragraph is unusually involved and intense, unlike John's normal style. "It gives the impression that the author was so 'full of his subject,' so overwhelmed by the truth he sought to express, that his thoughts became crowded and his expression complicated." ([An Exposition of 1 John 1:1-4](#) - 13 pages)

*I have never read a book written in simpler words than this one,
and yet the words are inexpressible.*

-- Martin Luther

Henrietta Mears offers this simple outline of First John...

- Right Behavior (1 John 1:1-3:24)
- Right Belief (1 John 4:1-5:11)
- Rich Rewards (1 John 5:12-21)

Smalley summarizes the purpose of First John - **The purpose of 1 John** may therefore be summarized as primarily an appeal to the faithful: to strengthen the faith and resolve of true believers in the Johannine community by encouraging them to maintain the apostolic gospel. To this end the writer appeals to his readers to adopt a proper estimate of the person of Jesus, and to act with

Christian morality. As believers, that is to say, John exhorts his readers to live in the light as children of God (the paramount and complementary themes in the two main divisions of 1 John, 1:5–2:29 and 3:1–5:13). Belief and behavior, Christology and ethics, are together a consistent concern of the writer; and his insistence on the practice of Christian love and unity, as derived from the love of God (e.g. 1:3; 4:19), flows directly from the evident stresses and divisions within the Johannine circle...**A secondary intention** behind the composition of 1 John may be regarded as a refutation and correction of the inadequate views (both Christological and ethical) which were being espoused by other, heretically disposed members in the Johannine community, of a Jewish or non-Jewish background. For such adherents, John's balanced teaching about Christian belief and behavior was entirely appropriate, and provided its own appeal. (See [1, 2, and 3 John, Volume 51: Revised - Page xxv](#))

W E Vine - One of the special objects for which this epistle was written was to counteract the errors of the Gnostics. There were three sects whose heretical teachings began to influence the churches in the latter part of the first century: The Ebionites, followers of Ebion, who denied the deity of Christ, teaching that He had not come in flesh; and the Cerinthians, followers of Cerinthus, who denied the union of the two natures in Christ, i.e., the human and the divine, prior to His baptism. The apostle therefore sets forth the truth relating to both the essential deity of Christ, and to His true humanity. The second great object of the epistle was to make clear to the readers the distinguishing features which characterize those who are born of God in contrast to those which mark the children of the evil one. These characteristics center round three great truths concerning God:

1. God is Light (1Jn 1:1-3),
2. God is Love (1Jn 1:3-5:5)
3. God is Life (1Jn 5:6 to end)

The children of God have fellowship with Him in respect of each of these, in contrast to those who are not born of God.

1. Light symbolically stands for righteousness. Those who have fellowship with God do righteousness "as He is righteous." Sin is spiritual darkness, and is utterly incompatible with fellowship with God.
2. Fellowship with God, in regard to His nature as love, produces love one toward another, in contrast to the spirit which was manifest in Cain and continues in the world.
3. The "life" which God imparts is in His Son. Associated with this is the witness which each believer has in himself—idolatry is incompatible with it.

A WORD OF CAUTION A "BEREAN MINDSET" REQUIRED

Acts 17:11+ Now these (BEREANS) were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.

James Rosscup writes on **Zane Hodges'** commentary on First John in the highly respected commentary Bible Knowledge Commentary that "Passages given Hodges' turns will **surprise and dismay** {bolding mine} many from an exegetical standpoint... He opposes the view that First John aims to lead readers to see how to be assured of salvation, as some say in 1Jn 5:13... (Hodges believes) The person who "*abides in death*" (1Jn 3:14) is saved (!!!), not having fellowship with God, but will be safe forever, though missing out in terms of special reward. (See Rosscup's excellent work [Commentaries for Biblical Expositors](#) or [hard copy](#))

Related Resources:

- See Sam Storms' Discussion of Hodges' Interpretation of Fellowship
- [Paul Apple's Introduction to his commentary and Discussion of Zane Hodges](#)
- [Review of Zane Hodges' book The Gospel Under Siege](#)

Here is a letter written by **Dr John Piper** in 1986 entitled "[Who Am I Talking About?](#)"

I have referred several times to a contemporary movement of evangelicalism that offers assurance of salvation to professing Christians who go on living in sin. Who am I talking about? Here is an example.

Zane Hodges, who teaches at Dallas Seminary, has written a book entitled *The Gospel Under Siege* (Redencion Viva, 1981).

His position is the very opposite of mine:

“An insistence on the necessity or inevitability of works fundamentally undermines assurance” (p.13). That is, “if good works are really . . . an essential fruit of salvation,” we cannot be sure of our eternal salvation (p. 9). Therefore, “works have nothing to do with determining a Christian’s basic relationship to God.” “There is not even a single place in the Pauline letters where he expresses doubt that his audience is composed of true Christians.” (p. 95).

Apart from the fact that 2 Corinthians 13:5+ contradicts his last statement, 1 John remains an insuperable obstacle. His interpretation will not stand. Consider for yourselves what he says concerning 1 John 3:14+ (“We know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brothers.”). Here assurance of passing out of death into life is the product of loving our fellow Christians. **How will he escape it?**

He tries to escape it by saying that the verse has “no reference to conversion as such.” He says that there is a sphere of light and a sphere of darkness within the Christian life. “If anyone does not love his brother he is out of touch with God. He is not living as a true disciple of his Master” (p. 63). But he is still a child of God because eternal security has nothing to do with whether you are a loving person or not.

This will not stand scrutiny. The one other place where John uses the same Greek phrase (“We have passed from death to life”) is John 5:24, where he says, “Truly, truly I say to you that the one who hears my word and believes the one who sent me has eternal life and does not come into judgment but has passed from death into life.” Therefore it is **grasping at a straw** to say that “passing from death to life” in 1 John 3:14 refers to two states within Christian life. It plainly means: passing from lostness to eternal life.

I appeal to you, judge for yourselves, does John’s assurance in 1 John 3:14 come from loving the brothers or not?

Bowing before the Word with you,

Pastor John

While I agree that John does not specifically delineate a list of “test questions” to assess the authenticity of one’s faith, there is no question that the apostle deals forthrightly (“head-on”) with the subject of “professors” versus “possessors” of genuine life in Christ, a serious subject which has eternal consequences! To read First John with a mindset that this epistle has “*no relevance to authenticity of one’s salvation*” is to **pervert the message of the beloved apostle** and even worse misses the greatly needed application to the modern church where as one pastor has quipped “*many have joined the church, but have missed Jesus by a mile*”

Tom Wells (a pastor and respected Christian author) from his article **Some Pitfalls in Understanding First John** amplifies this warning to all evangelicals who would seek to accurately interpret and apply the important Epistle of First John...

The first letter of John has often been used to create a contrast between **two kinds of Christians**. The contrast is put in the following ways: 1. Those who walk in the light, and those who do not. 2. Those who confess their sins, and those who do not. 3. Those who are worldly, and those who are not. 4. Those who abide in Christ, and those who do not. 5. Those who are overcomers, and those who are not. The point of this article is to show that John is not thinking of different categories of Christians when he uses those divisions. **It is very important to recognize this because the sustained contrast between Christians and non-Christians is the main theme of the letter.** If we misapply it, we effectively pervert the teaching of the letter as a whole. Yet this has been done times without number...

... the distinction between the believer and the non-believer is the major distinction in John’s eyes.

Twentieth- century evangelicalism, on the other hand, has often used this book to distinguish between two categories of Christians. In my judgment this reflects one of our present-day misunderstandings of Scripture. It seems to me that Scripture is more concerned about whether we are genuinely Christians than it is about what kind of Christians we are. Modern evangelicalism has reversed this. **I think that the reason is this: we have made becoming a Christian so easy that there is really no need to ask whether we are really Christians or not.** This is sometimes referred to as **easy-believism**, and it appears to me to be rampant. But you need not accept my analysis of modern evangelicalism to see where the emphasis lies in 1 John. John would heartily join in Paul’s admonition: “**Examine** yourselves, whether you are in the faith!” (2 Cor 13:5-note) (Excerpt from “Some Pitfalls in Understanding First John” - I can no longer find the original article online or even for purchase. If you have access to the full article please send me an email. Thank you. The original article was published in Banner of Truth magazine - see [page 65 of the Banner of Truth Magazine Index](#) and you will see Wells’ article was in Issue 234, March, 1983, pages 9-11)

In view of the finding that up to 75% of Americans identify themselves as Christians, it is imperative that those who call themselves by this name understand how the Bible defines a "**Christian**" and so another Resource you might consider one of the following resources:

- Mike McKinley - [Am I Really a Christian?](#)
- J D Greear - [Stop Asking Jesus Into Your Heart](#)
- David Platt - [Why Accepting Jesus in Your heart is Superstitious & Non-Biblical](#) (I think this short video is Biblical. This does not mean that I approve of everything that David Platt has said on other subjects. On the subject of "Asking Jesus into your heart" I think he is accurate - in my opinion).
- Thomas Kidd - ["Ask Jesus into Your Heart": A History of the Sinner's Prayer](#)

To further substantiate the importance of rightly dividing First John's message it is notable that many highly respected pastors and commentators also interpret the message of First John as **definitely related to the authenticity of one's salvation** - John Piper, John MacArthur, Steven Cole, J C Ryle, Henry Morris, Charles Ryrie, and the list goes on and on and includes men from the modern era as well as past eras. The "school" that interprets First John as **not relating to the authenticity of one's faith** is distinctly in the minority!

QUESTION - [Is it biblical to ask Jesus into your heart?](#) - [WATCH VIDEO](#)

ANSWER - "Do you want to be saved? Then just ask Jesus to come into your heart." While this statement is not anti-biblical, neither is it expressly biblical. The wording generates a mental image that can easily lead to wrong impressions, especially among children, who tend to take things literally. Plus, the exhortation to "ask Jesus into your heart"—if that's the whole message—leaves out some important things such as repentance and faith.

The Bible does mention the fact that, in some sense, Jesus resides in our hearts: Paul prayed "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith" (Ephesians 3:17). But Paul is writing to believers who had already received Christ. The parallel prayer in verse 16 is that God "may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being." There is no evangelistic appeal in the context of Ephesians 3. Paul is not telling the Ephesians to "ask Jesus into their hearts"; he is simply elevating their awareness that Jesus is present within them through the Holy Spirit.

The verse from which the "ask Jesus into your heart" concept is usually taken is Revelation 3:20, "Here I am! [I stand at the door and knock](#). If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me." Notice, however, that the verse does not mention the heart at all. Neither does the individual ask Jesus to do anything; rather, Jesus asks us to do something. In context, Jesus is speaking to the [church of Laodicea](#), who was in desperate need of repentance (verse 19). The Laodiceans had effectively excluded Jesus from their fellowship, and the Lord was seeking to restore that fellowship. The passage does not deal with a person calling on the Lord for salvation.

The idea of Jesus "coming into your heart" is nowhere used in any preaching in the Bible. The [gospel](#) is the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection for the forgiveness of our sin (1 Corinthians 15:3–4). Gospel presentations in the Bible exhort a proper response to that message: believe (John 3:16; Acts 16:31), receive (John 1:12), and repent (Acts 3:19). We are to change our minds about our sin and about who Christ is, believe Jesus died and rose again, and receive the gift of eternal life by faith. None of the apostles ever told someone to "ask Jesus into your heart."

Often, the exhortation to "ask Jesus to come into your heart" is used as a simple way to say, "Ask Jesus to enter your life" or "Allow the Lord to take control." If this is done in the context of presenting the whole gospel, then there's no harm done. But before a person is invited to "ask Jesus into your heart," he or she should understand sin and its penalty, the payment Christ made on the cross, and the reality of Christ's resurrection. In fact, referring to salvation as Jesus' "coming into your heart" might even help a person understand that the Spirit of Christ comes to indwell the soul (see John 14:17). Still, it is always best to use the terminology the Bible uses. "Ask Jesus into your heart" does not fully communicate what is actually occurring at salvation.

Salvation is not about believing a list of facts. Salvation is not about asking Jesus to come into your heart.

When sharing the gospel, we should be careful what we say and how we say it. Even the word **believe** can be misleading if it is presented as mere **intellectual assent** (agreeing that certain facts are true) instead of as **trust** (relying on those true facts). Judas

Iscariot **believed** certain facts about Jesus, but he never **trusted** Jesus for salvation. Salvation is not about believing a list of facts. Salvation is not about asking Jesus to come into your heart. Salvation is about trusting in Jesus as your Savior, receiving the forgiveness He offers by [grace](#) through [faith](#). Salvation is about being made new through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5).

QUESTION - [What is easy believism?](#)

ANSWER - *Easy believism* is a somewhat derogatory term used against the idea that salvation is by faith alone to the extent that those who trust in Christ are under no obligation to live transformed lives. Easy believism is not just holding to [sola fide](#) ("faith alone"). Rather, easy believism is a rejection of any degree of repentance or change as a necessary aspect of saving faith.

The Bible is clear that salvation is by [grace](#) alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. The essence of this doctrine is found in Ephesians 2:8–9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (ESV). Faith, given as a gift by God, is what saves us. Ephesians 2:10, then, in contradistinction to easy believism, tells of the results of that salvation: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (ESV). Rather than being saved by some act of our own wills, we are saved by the hand of God Almighty, by His will and for His purposes. We are His servants, and from the moment of salvation, we embark on a journey of pre-ordained good works that are the evidence of, and result of, that salvation. If there is never any evidence of growth and good works, there is good reason to doubt that salvation ever took place.

The problem with easy believism is that, in its desire to defend salvation by faith alone (a vitally needed effort), it severs the biblical ties between faith and repentance and between faith and the results of salvation.

[Repentance](#) is a change of mind from an embrace of sin and a rejection of Christ to a rejection of sin and an embrace of Christ ([Mark 1:15](#); [Acts 2:38](#); [3:18](#)). Repentance is not a work that earns salvation. Repentance, just like faith, is something that God grants to those He has drawn to salvation ([Acts 11:18](#)). Repentance and belief/trust are the two ingredients of biblical saving faith.

Faith in Christ, according to the Bible, has an impact on the lives of those who believe. [2 Corinthians 5:17](#) declares, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." The idea that the new creation could permanently look exactly like the old creation is foreign to the Bible. How could the creation be new if it is the same as the old? How could the old have passed away if it is still entirely in control? How could the new have come if there is absolutely no evidence of it? When people come to faith in Christ, they progressively go from producing the acts of the flesh (Galatians 5:19–21) to the Holy Spirit producing in them His fruit (Galatians 5:22–23).

The teaching of God's Word, discipleship by another believer, regular Christian fellowship, and many other factors have a tremendous impact on how much fruit a believer produces. To say that salvation results in change is not to say that the change always happens automatically or easily or quickly. No, of course, discipleship plays a huge role in spiritual growth and maturity. At the same time, a new creation necessitates change. It is impossible for the life of a believer to continually resemble the life of an unbeliever.

Again, the goal of many of those accused of teaching easy believism is a good one. Salvation by faith alone, through grace alone, in Christ alone must be defended. As with many doctrines of the Christian faith, though, biblical truths can be overemphasized to unbiblical extremes. The idea that God instills a desire to turn from sin and follow Christ in those He is drawing to salvation does not contradict salvation by faith alone. The idea that salvation results in a transformed life that will produce fruit does not contradict salvation by faith alone.

Salvation is "easy" in the sense that God does all the work and simply calls on us to receive the salvation He has provided (John 1:12; 3:16; Acts 16:31). Believing unto salvation is "easy" in that there is not a long or complicated series of actions to perform before salvation will be granted. Believing is not easy in that it is not possible unless God does a work in our hearts (John 6:44). Salvation is not easy in the sense that it has a powerful and progressive impact, utterly transforming the lives of those who receive it.

Related Resources:

- [What does it mean to receive Jesus Christ?](#)
- [What is free grace? What is Free Grace Theology?](#)
- [What is the relationship of faith, works, and security in salvation?](#)
- [Why is faith without works dead?](#)
- [Does the Book of 1 John Present Tests of Fellowship or Signs of Life?](#)

- 1 John 3:10 [Children of God and Children of the Devil](#)
- [Loving the Brethren - Teachings of Zane Hodges](#)
- [The Unusual Teachings of Zane Hodges](#).
- Multipart discussion of [the unusual teachings of Zane Hodges, et al click Index](#)
- [What is lordship salvation?](#)

See an [Excellent summary chart from ESV Study Bible](#), entitled "Theological Themes of 1 John"

Below is the last entry in the ESV chart (bolding and underlining are mine for emphasis)

"Because they have been born again, have received the Spirit, abide in God as God abides in them, and know and love God, **Christians bear observable fruit**. They:

- practice truth/righteousness (1 John 1:6; 2:29; 3:7, 10)
- walk in the light/as he walked (1 John 1:7; 2:6)
- confess sins and have forgiveness (1 John 1:9; 2:12)
- keep/obey his commandments/Word (1 John 2:3, 5; 3:22, 24; 5:2, 3)
- love one another/the brothers (1 John 2:10; 3:10, 11, 14, 16, 18, 23; 4:7, 11, 21)
- overcome the evil one/the world (1 John 2:13, 14; 4:4; 5:4)
- do the will of God/cannot keep on sinning (1 John 2:17; 3:9, 22)
- confess the Son/believe in Jesus (1 John 2:23; 3:23; 4:2, 15; 5:1, 4, 13)

MARKS OF A GENUINE BELIEVER

Jim Bomkamp lists the following indicators or marks of a genuine believer as recorded by John in this important letter...

1. Walks in the light - 1 John 1:6
2. Has fellowship with other Christians who walk in the light - 1 John 1:7
3. Believes he has a sin nature - 1 John 1:8
4. Occasionally sins - 1 John 1:10
5. Continually keeps His commandments - 1 John 2:3, 3:24
6. Continually keeps His word - 1 John 2:5
7. Walks in the same way Jesus walked - 1 John 2:6
8. Does not hate his brother - 1 John 2:9
9. Loves his brother - 1 John 2:10, 3:10
10. Does not love the world (cosmos - the world in rebellion against God) - 1 John 2:15
11. Does not love the things in the world - 1 John 2:15
12. Does the will of God - 1 John 2:17
13. Stays in the Body of Christ - 1 John 2:19
14. Has an anointing and as a result understands the truth of the gospel - 1 John 2:20-21
15. Believes that Jesus is the Christ (Jewish Messiah of Scripture) - 1 John 2:22, 5:1
16. Abides in Christ (as a branch in the vine - John 15:5) - 1 John 2:27-28
17. Continually practices righteousness - 1 John 2:29, 3:10
18. Purifies himself just as He is pure - 1 John 3:3
19. Does not continually practice sin - 1 John 3:6, 5:18
20. Practices righteousness and is righteous, just as He is righteous - 1 John 3:7

21. His seed abides in him and he cannot sin because he is born of God - 1 John 3:9
22. Loves the brethren - 1 John 3:14
23. Loves not only with word and tongue, but in deed and in truth - 1 John 3:18-19
24. The abiding presence of the Holy Spirit gives assurance of salvation - 1 John 3:24, 4:13
25. Confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (the eternal Son of God/Messiah) - 1 John 4:2
26. Has overcome the false prophets and teachers (and the spirit that animates them) - 1 John 4:4
27. Listens to, receives, and believes in the sound teaching from the apostles (the Bible) - 1 John 4:6
28. Loves (with agape love) - 1 John 4:7,8
29. Confesses that Jesus is the Son of God - 1 John 4:15
30. Abides in (agape) love - 1 John 4:16
31. Loves (agape) because He first loved him - 1 John 4:19
32. Loves the child born of the Father (either Jesus, other Christians, or all men) - 1 John 5:1
33. Overcomes the world - 1 John 5:4
34. Believes that Jesus is the Son of God - 1 John 5:5

INTRODUCTION TO 1 JOHN
DEVOTIONAL COMMENTARY
PAUL APPLE

ASSURANCE OF ETERNAL LIFE MATURES AS WE PASS THREE PRACTICAL TESTS OF:

1. FELLOWSHIP = WALKING IN THE LIGHT
2. SONSHIP = PRACTICING RIGHTEOUSNESS
3. ABIDING = FAITH AND LOVE BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS EPISTLE - TWO TRACKS OF ASSURANCE OF SALVATION ([TRACK 1 - SUBJECTIVE](#), [TRACK 2 - OBJECTIVE](#))

Before beginning the detailed study of this epistle, I would like to offer a critique of the opposing evangelical view to show the significance of the issues involved -- how they touch on issues such as Lordship Salvation, the nature of the gospel message, the nature of true repentance and saving faith, the approach to eternal security, the perseverance of the saints, assurance of salvation ... the list goes on and on. The Book of 1 John makes very significant contributions to this discussion and will be interpreted quite differently ... depending on one's systematic theology.

To illustrate the opposing view I am going to quote extensively from **The Gospel Under Siege** by Zane Hodges (published by Redencion Viva in Dallas, TX, 1981). He is a respected servant of the Lord with excellent ministry and academic credentials. This critique is not meant as a personal criticism of him at all. I just think it serves to highlight some of the differences in perspective that genuine believers have as they approach some of these difficult issues where the Bible presents a certain degree of tension that often makes us uncomfortable ... to the extent where we seek out some more simplistic formulistic solution.

I need to quote his illustrative material in the **Prologue to The Gospel Under Siege** to set the stage:

Last night Jimmy accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Savior. This morning he is bubbling with a joy he has never experienced before.

On his way to work he meets his friend Bill. Bill has always claimed to be a Christian. He also reads a lot of books on theology. But Jimmy has never been too interested in theology up until now.

"Say, Bill," Jimmy begins, "guess what! I got saved last night. I trusted Christ as my Savior. Now I know I am going to heaven!"

"Hmmm," Bill replies, "maybe you shouldn't quite say it that way. After all, you don't really know that you are going to heaven."

"What do you mean?" Jimmy enquires. "The Bible says, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved,' and that's what I did."

Bill give Jimmy a wise and knowing look. It is the kind of look all perceptive theologians know how to give the ignorant and the unlearned.

"But did you really believe? Maybe you just believed psychologically." "What do you mean?" Jimmy is feeling a little depressed now.

"I mean," Bill continues sagely, "you can't know yet whether you have real saving faith."

"How can I know that?"

"By your works. You'll have to wait and see if you live a real Christian life." Jimmy is dejected. "You mean that if I sin, I'm not a Christian after all?"

"No, I don't mean that," Bill assures him. "All Christians fail once in a while."

"But how much do they fail? I mean, how bad does it have to get before I find out I'm not saved?"

"Well, it can't get too bad for too long."

"But how bad? For how long?" Jimmy feels desperate.

"I can't tell you exactly. But a true Christian doesn't practice sin. If you find that you are practicing sin, that will show that you didn't have real saving faith to begin with."

"What if I do pretty good for several years and then things start going bad?" "In that case, maybe you weren't saved to start with."

"Maybe? What do you mean by that?"

"I mean," Bill's tone is solemn, "you'll probably have to wait until the end of your life before you can be sure you are a true Christian. You have to persevere in good works, or your faith wasn't real."

"Do you think I can be sure before I die?"

"Maybe, Listen, Jim, I've got to rush to work. We'll talk about this some other time. Okay?"

"Yeah, okay. See you, Bill."

Bill rushes off. Jimmy is devastated. All the joy he had experienced since last night has suddenly evaporated. He is now filled with questions and doubts. Jimmy has become a casualty in the siege of the Gospel!

Talk about a **"straw man"** approach! (**ED**: Straw man = an intentionally misrepresented proposition that is set up because it is easier to defeat than an opponent's real argument.) What believer wouldn't be repulsed by the approach taken by Bill in responding to the joy of Jim's testimony of conversion? But this type of emotional rhetoric glosses over the depth of the real underlying issues and fails to do justice to the view of salvation that says **"Where there ends up being no fruit it is because there never was any true root"**

My understanding of the Biblical perspective on **Assurance of Salvation** is that there are two different tracks which are designed to complement one another. These two tracks are not mutually exclusive but are designed to exist together and even grow as one matures in the faith.

1) **TRACK #1** - Subjective Faith and confirmation by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

This track is immediately operative upon conversion so that Jimmy is totally correct in giving testimony immediately as to his confidence of being in the family of God and being certain of his final destiny in heaven. One's faith should continue to grow even though at times there may be periods of severe doubt .. so that even this track does not remain at some static level.

2) **TRACK #2** - Objective confirmation by the demonstration of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in one's changed life.

God has been extremely gracious to provide this other barometer of our spiritual standing. For there are times when our heart will condemn us and call into question the validity of our relationship with God. But "God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. (1 Jn 3:20)" At times like these when the introspective believer is wrestling with some specific area of trial, he can look to the types of general tests of life presented in 1 John and have his confidence renewed on Track #2 that he truly is a child of God.

With that introduction, let's go on to examine some of the arguments raised by Zane Hodges in Chapter 5 of his book -- **"1 John: Tests of Life?"**

A major stream in the commentary tradition on 1 John holds that the epistle ought to be viewed as offering "tests of life." That is, John confronts his readership with questions about the quality of their Christian experience from which they may draw the conclusion that they either are, or are not, true believers. Should they fail to measure up, they have no reason to think that they possess eternal life.

It would be hard to devise an approach to John's first epistle more hopelessly misguided or more completely self-defeating. If the premise on which this approach is based were true, it would be quite impossible for either the original audience of 1 John or any of its subsequent readers to possess the assurance of salvation. Since the writer repeatedly enjoins the "abiding" life marked by obedience to Christ's commands, one cannot really be certain until the end of his earthly experience whether he has abided or persevered in the requisite

obedience. Meanwhile, one must entertain the possibility that he is a spurious Christian!

As noted above, the concept of dual tracks of assurance completely deflates this type of [straw man](#) approach. In addition, the Biblical concept of **abiding** needs to be investigated more thoroughly. Is John talking about remaining vitally connected to the life of Christ as a branch remains on the vine (as opposed to being cut off and dying so that the contrast is between believers and non-believers) or is he talking about some type of subjective quality of closeness to God that all believers will exhibit in varying degrees (so that the contrast is between good believers and carnal believers)? See the Appendix for a fuller treatment of this concept of abiding.

The concept of "**fellowship**" is another key word in the epistle. Hodges agrees that part of the overt purpose of 1 John is found in its prologue "and there the purpose is defined clearly as 'fellowship' with God." But he goes on to interpret this word in its common [colloquial](#) Christian usage today rather than in its historical context:

"It almost goes without saying that 'fellowship' is not to be defined as a virtual synonym for being a Christian. King David was surely a regenerate man when he committed adultery and murder, but he could not be said to have been in God's fellowship at the time! Even on a human plane, a son or daughter may lose fellowship with a parent even though they do not thereby lose the family relationship. The equation of 'fellowship' with 'being a Christian' (or something similar) is extremely far-fetched. Fellowship, like abiding, is a fully conditional relationship and this fact is sufficiently demonstrated by the statements found in 1:5-10. Fellowship, of course was precisely what was threatened by the advent of the antichrists. Since the readers had a divine promise about eternal life, nothing these false prophets could do or say could destroy the readers' fundamental relationship to God. But should the readership begin to listen to the doctrines of these men, their experience of fellowship with the Father and the Son would be in jeopardy. Up to now, the readers had apparently resisted the false teaching successfully (4:4). The Apostle wishes this resistance to continue (2:24-27)."

We Christians today talk about falling into and out of **fellowship** with our Heavenly Father with unconfessed sin being the main determining factor. But what we are really addressing is the enjoyment of that fellowship relationship. When you look at fellowship as the sharing of the eternal life provided by God (see Prologue to Epistle) it is evident that genuine believers have an eternal unchanging relationship of fellowship to both God the Father and other members of the family of God that is not affected by our experiential walk.

Hodges goes on to write:

"The principal source of confusion in much contemporary study of 1 John is to be found in the failure to recognize the real danger against which the writer is warning. The eternal salvation of the readership is not imperilled. It is not even in doubt as far as the author is concerned. But seduction by the world and its antichristian representatives is a genuine threat which must be faced."

Actually the very real danger of [apostasy](#) (a departure from the truth on the part of those who had been professing the truth and outwardly in fellowship with the community of believers although never genuinely saved) in terms of caving in to these anti-Christian representatives is **exactly what John is addressing**. But those in Hodges' camp never seem to admit to the possibility of apostasy because of their "[Easy Believism](#)" approach to salvation.

They rightly want to maintain that the gospel message is one of by grace through faith alone without any works involved as a condition for salvation. That is where the title comes from: The Gospel Under Siege -- making the combatative charge that those who come from a more Calvinistic persuasion (where the perseverance of the saints is part of one's systematic theology and the possibility of apostasy as defined above exists) have committed the heinous error of perverting the gospel. **The distinction they fail to grasp is that the emphasis on a changed life as confirmation of genuine conversion** (on the second track of two complementary tracks) is not at all synonymous with making good works a prerequisite for entrance into salvation. What type of conversion or salvation is it where no fruit actually results?

Hodges' conclusion appropriately serves to reinforce what he has already stated ... once again revealing that he has completely overlooked the possibility of this "Two Track" approach to assurance:

"The assurance of the believer rests squarely on the direct promises in which this offer is made, and on nothing else. [i.e. [Track #1](#)] It follows from this that the assertion that a believer must find his assurance in his works, is a grave and fundamental theological error. It is an error that goes right to the heart of the nature of the Gospel proclamation. It seriously distorts that proclamation and creates in its place a new kind of message that would have been unrecognizable to the New Testament writers...Preachers and theologians cannot have it both ways. Either a man can be perfectly sure that he is born again and going to heaven at the moment he trusts Christ, or he cannot. If works must verify a man's faith, then he cannot."

The bottom line is that from an interpretation standpoint, **1 John truly is about "tests of life" with the emphasis on this [second track of assurance](#)**. From an application standpoint many of the pastoral concerns of Hodges (and others) are certainly helpful in terms of motivating believers to live in closer fellowship with the Father, abiding in a deeper sense, etc. Certainly we all benefit from applying to our lives those challenges that call us to love our brother, to separate from worldliness, to embrace the truth, to recognize error, to continue to confess our sin on an ongoing basis, etc. We can all improve in terms of drawing closer to God. But that is by way of application -- not interpretation. When you look at the contrasts presented in the epistle (between light and darkness, between life and death, between truth and error ... read through the book on your own and make a list of these contrasts ...) it is evident that these are black and white distinctions between believers and non-believers. John is presenting pass / fail tests that are designed to increase our level of assurance as believers. ([1 John - Tests of Eternal Life - A Devotional Commentary](#))

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.
- Fanny J. Crosby

Related Resources:

- [Does the Book of 1 John Present Tests of Fellowship or Signs of Life?](#)
- 1 John 3:10 [Children of God and Children of the Devil](#)
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- [The Unusual Teachings of Zane Hodges](#)
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- [Why is faith without works dead?](#)
- [What is lordship salvation?](#)

BOOK REVIEW OF "The Gospel Under Siege" by Zane Hodges

Book Review of The Gospel Under Siege by Johnny V. Miller, with the assistance of William Larkin and Paul D. Wright from Columbia Bible College and Graduate School of Bible and Missions, Columbia, SC that was published in Trinity Journal, Spring 1983, Volume 4 NS, NO. 1.

If eternal life is not the product of faith plus good works, then the only alternative is that it comes from a faith which does not produce good works. This is apparently the only alternative that Zane Hodges presents in *The Gospel Under Siege*.

Hodges, the chairman of the New Testament department at Dallas Theological Seminary, makes an important statement on the relationship of saving faith and works. His contention is clear: there is no necessary relationship at all between faith and works, either before or after salvation. If one believes that good works are the necessary outgrowth of salvation, then he also believes that one receives eternal life on the basis of good works, claims Hodges.

This contention stems from Hodges's desire to clarify the basis for assurance of salvation. As he sees it, if works are the necessary result of salvation, then one cannot be sure he is saved until he is producing good works. And if one must persevere in good works to know he is saved, then he can never know for sure in this life whether he is saved. So, if anyone is ever to have assurance in this life that he is truly a child of God, he must base it on the nature of the Gospel offer, uncoupled from any necessary Gospel effects. Or to put it another way, salvation does not necessarily produce any degree of sanctification.

Hodges is not arguing for a life of lawlessness on the part of Christians; neither his own life nor his teaching would countenance ungodly living. Instead he is seeking to combat an extreme position on assurance—"You'll probably have to wait until the end of your life before you can be sure if you are a true Christian." He wants to

show that assurance is possible the moment one believes. But he goes to another extreme and tries to prove much more than is necessary to win his case. And in our opinion he misstates the position of those who are not of the Reformed extreme he caricaturizes in his prologue, and yet who still see a necessary cause-effect relationship between salvation and sanctification taught in Scripture.

Hodges equates three positions on the relation of faith and works which are to him equally erroneous:

1. "Unless you are baptized according to Biblical custom, you cannot be saved."
2. "Unless you persevere in good works, you cannot be saved."
3. "Unless you yield your life to the Lordship of Christ, you cannot be saved."

Now either Hodges is deliberately using the word cannot with different connotations in these three statements, or else he does not understand the different content in the three views. The first statement may in fact represent a position which adds a work to faith as a condition of salvation. But the second statement represents a subjective evaluation by someone from the Reformed position who reflects upon the fruitless life of a professing Christian—the same as saying you have not been saved. And the third statement reflects on the very content of the Gospel itself—what is necessary to believe in order to be saved?

But when Hodges gives his own statement of the Gospel, it is very vague, almost without content. He appeals to Rev 22:17 ("And whoever desires, let him take of the water of life freely") and John 5:24 ("Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life"). He treats John 5:24 virtually as if it were all that Jesus had to say on the subject of soteriology, and does not attempt to identify what "word" the hearers were to respond to, or what the content of their belief was to be. And he treats the Lord's visit with the woman at the well as the sole paradigm of all Gospel encounters, but does not deal at all with the apostle Paul's post-calvary preaching of the atonement and his demand that all men everywhere should repent.

A further problem in the way Hodges deals with the Gospel is that he considers salvation only from man's side. He never attempts to distinguish professions of faith from true saving faith; in fact, one gets the impression that he sees no distinction. And he never considers the work of the Holy Spirit in calling men to salvation, in convicting them of their sinfulness and need of a Savior, or of making a man a new creation upon regeneration. Those who see a necessary connection between saving faith and good works appeal to the divine elements which are part of the salvation process as the source of the subsequent fruits of salvation.

The real heart of Hodges's work is his exegetical attempt to show that certain key passages which are normally interpreted to prove a necessary relationship between faith and works do not, in fact, show that at all. He masterfully exegetes many of the problem passages that seem to make salvation itself depend upon conditions other than true faith, and for that the book is to be commended. But it seems that the author's argument that there is never any necessary relationship between faith and works snags at three major points: (1) James 2:18–19, (2) 1 John 3:6, 9 and (3) Matt 7:15–23.

Hodges builds his exegesis of James 2:18–19 (ED: SEE ON SITE COMMENTARY ON THESE VERSES) on a highly dubious variant reading of James 2:18 which has by (κ) in place of without (χωρίς). Hodges claims that the former is the majority reading, and that both verses are the words of the objector. By taking verse 19 out of the mouth of James and putting it into the mouth of the objector, Hodges hopes to support his contention that the kind of faith referred to in this passage has nothing to do with getting to heaven, but relates only to living a productive spiritual life here below. It is the objector who brings up the issue of profession without reality, not James. This interpretation completely reverses the normal understanding of the passage. However, it is highly questionable whether κ is in fact the majority reading (see the 26th ed. of Nestle-Aland Greek text; Hodges' article in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Oct. 1963, p. 347). **No translation adopts it—not even the New King James, which is based on the Textus Receptus.** But even if it were the majority reading, that would not prove it were the better reading. And the traditional interpretation of these two verses is not so easy to dislodge; **a faith which produces no works is not different from the kind of "faith" which demons have.**

Nor does Hodges prove his point very well from 1 John. One common view of this epistle is that the apostle John is writing certain tests to show whether an individual has exercised saving faith. The writer of the epistle suggests that there were some men who had companied with the believers and professed to be believers who have now been unmasked as unbelievers (1 John 2:19). Hodges does not understand 1 John that way. He says that John is merely giving **tests of fellowship, not of real spiritual life.** Incredibly, Hodges even says that John "does not suggest that any of his readers are not Christians" (p. 54), although he is willing to

acknowledge that “no doubt the antichrists were unsaved.” Yet he does not see that as a necessary conclusion.

So he approaches 1 John 3:6 (ED: [SEE ON SITE COMMENTARY](#)) and 1 John 3:9 (ED: [SEE ON SITE COMMENTARY](#)) with the goal of showing that they have nothing to do with eternal life, but only with a life of intimacy with God after salvation. Usually the present tense *μαρτάνει* (“Whoever abides in him does not sin”) in 3:6 is interpreted iteratively that is, the abiding person does not repeatedly or habitually sin. This is in contrast to the aorist *μάρτ* in 1 Jn 2:1, a concession that any Christian is going to commit individual acts of sin. Hodges claims that such an interpretation of 1 Jn 3:6 is an illegitimate use of the present tense: “No other text can be cited where the Greek present tense, unaided by qualifying words, can carry this significance”(p. 59). Instead, he says, the terms “to see him” and “to know him” in verse 6 refer not to being saved, but to being in intimate fellowship with Christ. The person in fellowship with God does not sin.

The claims of 3:6 and 9 pertain to the believer when he is viewed only as “abiding” or as one who is “born of God.” That is, sin is never the product of our abiding experience. It is never the act of the regenerate self per se. On the contrary, sin is the product of ignorance and blindness toward God ... When a believer sins, he is acting out of darkness, not out of knowledge. He is acting as a man of flesh, not as a regenerate person. (p. 60) (ED NOTE - THIS IS FROM ZANE HODGES' BOOK)

This treatment of the text leaves much doubt. In the first place, John uses *μαρτάνει* in the iterative sense in 1 John 3:8 to describe the habitually sinful condition of the devil, so it would be natural to see John contrasting the devil and the believer by using the same tense. Further, A. T. Robertson cites *ποδεκατ* in Luke 18:12 as an interactive present, a verb with no qualifying words. Secondly, the verbs *has seen* (*ώρακεν*) and *has known* (*γινωκεν*) in 3:6 are in the perfect tense, so **John is saying that the person who sins has never seen or has never known him.** If these verses refer to a life of fellowship, not to initial conversion, then John is saying that once a believer has entered into fellowship he will never sin again. And if the regenerate nature (3:9) cannot sin anyway, as Hodges says, is it the unregenerate nature which is supposed to enter into fellowship so that it does not sin? **The view does not make sense.** The options seem to be that either the Christian sins because he has never entered into fellowship with God, or else the unregenerate nature is supposed to enter into fellowship so it does not sin.

Nor does Hodges make more sense when he says that the use of the word “brother” (1 Jn 3:10, 15) proves John is speaking of Christians alone in this passage: “An unsaved man cannot hate his Christian brother since a true Christian is not really his brother” (p. 62). Therefore, concludes Hodges, the man who is hating must be a Christian. But in the context, the example is used of Cain slaying his brother Abel, and John says Cain was from the evil one (1 Jn 3:12), so he and Abel were related as *humans* but not *spiritually*. In fact, it is love of the brothers which John says is a touchstone of one’s having “passed from death to life,” a phrase which the Lord Jesus used to mean “genuinely converted” in John 5:24, but which Hodges inconsistently would apply simply to experience here in 1 John, “and not with reference to conversion as such” (p. 63).

One additional piece of **curious interpretation** which shows the author’s **strained attempts to divorce salvation and works is his treatment of Acts 2:38.** His purpose is commendably to divorce baptism and regeneration. But to do so, he proposes that the listeners to Peter’s Pentecostal sermon were born-again by the time they asked, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37, p. 101). So Peter’s response was meant to tell them how to get forgiveness and enter into fellowship with God, but not how to be justified. Hodges says that the Acts 2 situation is exceptional: “It is probably related to the special guilt of those who had been implicated in the crucifixion” (p. 102). But if this is wherein its specialness lies, one wonders how Peter could continue with the claim that “the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off.” Paul is given as another example of one who was regenerated at one point, on the road to Damascus, and forgiven three days later when he was baptized (p. 103). Hodges asserts that Paul gave evidence of salvation en route to Damascus because he called Jesus Lord (Acts 22:10), but he fails to point out that when Paul had called him Lord in Acts 22:8, he did not even know to whom he was speaking.

In place of the “old” view that genuine salvation produces fruit in a person’s life, Hodges enunciates a new principle: “Morality is not the grounds for assurance, but the fruit of it” (emphasis his, p. 49). Good works in a Christian’s life are the product of a subjective phenomenon—assurance—not the necessary result of spiritual transformation. It would be well to repeat that the author of the Gospel Under Siege is not arguing for a lawless life. He instead wants to clarify the Gospel, and divorce it from works. But is that a necessary divorce? We believe not; in fact, just the opposite is true—it is a necessary wedding. For one thing, Jesus Himself taught that there is **profession of life** without **possession of life**—the crucial distinction is obedience

to the Father's will (Matt. 7:21). In that same context the Lord said a good tree cannot produce bad fruit (Matt. 7:18), and that consistently bad fruit evidences a false prophet. If there is no good fruit, Jesus seems to be saying, then an individual is a false prophet.

Further, a change of life was seen as a necessary evidence of salvation throughout the New Testament. John the Baptist refused to baptize the Pharisees because their lives did not evidence repentance (Matt 3:8). The Lord Jesus preached repentance, (Matt 3:17) which the Jews most certainly understood in their spiritual tradition as a turning from sin to God (Hebrew - shub). The apostle Paul preached repentance, a repentance that resulted in changed lives and appropriate deeds (Acts 26:20). And the apostles saw that this repentance which produced changed lives was not a work of the flesh, but was itself a gift of God, the evidence of God's grace in the lives of the redeemed (Acts 11:18).

The Bible does not present the repentance that leads to changed lives as a work of man, but a work of God. Therefore it is not necessary to categorize the good works which result from salvation as the work of men; they also are the work of God, although obviously not done apart from the redeemed man. Hodges has presented only two options: Either faith without any works saves, or else it is faith plus works which saves. These options are neither logically nor biblically contradictory. In fact, it is the classical presentation of a straw-man which collapses at a sneeze. To say that saving faith is a faith which produces evidence is not saying that the evidence saves. If someone gave this writer \$1,000,000, there'd be evidence somewhere—my bank account, my giving, my lifestyle—but the evidence could not be said to be prerequisite to the gift.

On what grounds should a person be given assurance of his salvation? On the basis of genuine saving faith, of course, the kind of saving faith that results in new life. And if a person makes a profession of faith and never shows any evidence of spiritual life thereafter, does one continue to assure him that on the basis of a hasty prayer, or a contentless profession, or an emotional walk down an aisle, that he has indeed passed from death to life? Does one ignore the remorseless acts of immorality, the practical blasphemies, the godless existence? The question at issue is not faith plus works, but rather what kind of "faith" is it that one is proclaiming that does not (or may not) work at all. (ED: THE SAD IRONY IS THAT YES, THE GOSPEL IS "UNDER SIEGE" BUT BY WHOM?!)