

THAT YOU MAY KNOW: A STUDY OF FIRST JOHN

LESSON 1: “Assurance and the Historicity of Christ”

TEXT: 1 John 1:1–4

In 1545, the Roman Catholic Church convened the Council of Trent in response to the Protest Reformation. The original posting of Martin Luther’s ninety-five theses on the Wittenburg church door in 1517 had ignited a movement that threatened the Church and its control over the western world. Convened by Pope Paul III, the Council drew over two hundred and fifty bishops and cardinals for a series of sessions held over eight years, from 1545 to 1563.

Although the Council produced a variety of decrees and anathemas on a range of issues, its primary target was the growing Protestant movement. It *anathematized* all those who claimed that Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*, the formal principle of the Reformation), and not church tradition as well, was the ultimate authority for faith and life. It *anathematized* all those who rejected the notion that an individual’s good works played a role in justification, and *anathematized* all those who believed that faith alone (*sola fide*—the material principle of the Reformation) was the sufficient means by which God declared the sinner righteousness. Since the Church taught that salvation was dependent upon human merit and striving, and not on God’s grace alone, there could be no place for confidence in one’s eternal destiny. Consequently, the Council of Trent pronounced damnation upon anyone who claimed *assurance of salvation*: “If anyone saith, that a man, who is born again is justified, is bound of faith to believe that he is assuredly in the number of the predestinate: let him be anathema” (*Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Canon XV, “On Justification”). The Roman Catholic pope, his cardinals and bishops, and the Church’s best theologians agreed that “No one can know with a certainty of faith . . . that he has obtained the grace of God.”

The Roman Catholic Church proceeded to apply these decrees and anathemas in the years that followed, in an effort known as *the counter-Reformation*. One of the Church’s star theologians during this time was the Italian Jesuit cardinal Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621). Called the prestigious “Doctor of the Church,” Bellarmine maintained the same vehemence against the doctrine of justification by faith alone and its corresponding doctrine of the assurance of faith. Bellarmine declared unequivocally, “The principal heresy of Protestants is that saints may obtain to a certain assurance of their gracious and pardoned state before God” (*De justificatione* 3.2.3).

Nothing has changed over the last half millennium. The Roman Catholic Church—consistent with its emphasis on the necessity of good works for salvation—continues to insist that the assurance of salvation is not a gift that God gives to His children. But such a view is not limited to Roman Catholicism. Various theological camps within Protestantism today also reject the view that a believer can be certain in his salvation. To add to the confusion, easy-believism evangelicals assert the exact opposite of Roman Catholicism—that a person can be absolutely guaranteed that he is saved once-and-for-all merely by acknowledging some facts about Jesus Christ, and that to evaluate or question this assurance is tantamount to blasphemy. All of this, in addition to the doubts sowed by the enemy of men’s souls and the self-confidence cultivated by fallen human hearts, creates a quagmire of confusion regarding the issue of assurance.

Defining Assurance

To begin sorting out this confusion, we must establish a basic understanding about what assurance *is*. John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue define assurance as “**the divinely given confidence of the believer that he or she is truly saved**” (*Biblical Doctrine*, 924). Similarly, Joel Beeke describes it as “**the conviction that one belongs to Christ through faith and will enjoy everlasting salvation**” (*Knowing and Growing in Assurance of Faith*, 11). Sinclair Ferguson: “**Assurance is the conscious confidence that we are in a right relationship with God through Christ**” (“The Reformation and Assurance,” 20).

Although these definitions are simple, they nonetheless assume very profound things that must be explained accurately. The task is not easy, but thankfully, we are not without help. God has not left us without His word on the matter. He has revealed much on the topic, and it is His will that we understand these truths.

While there are numerous passages in Scripture that shed light (e.g., Romans 8), the most extended treatment is given in 1 John. Writing around the year AD 90 (several years after he had written his Gospel), the apostle John expresses his overall purpose in writing this letter unequivocally: **“These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13).**

The Context of 1 John

John wrote this letter in response to an increasingly confusing religious climate. A movement was forming at the end of the 1st cent. AD that would later come to be known as **Gnosticism**. The movement was a mixture of Greek philosophy and paganism. It promoted *dualism*—the idea that reality can be divided into two opposing categories: *the material world*, which is inherently evil because it is comprised of matter; and *the spiritual world*, which is inherently good because is not material. By John’s time, this movement had started to absorb elements of Christian belief, which in turn posed a distinct threat to the early church because it sounded somewhat *Christian*. Yet it challenged the apostolic teaching on the person of Christ, insisting that Jesus either just *appeared to be human* but was not (an idea known as *Docetism*), or that Jesus was *just a human*, born of Joseph, who became something more when the Spirit of Christ descended on Him, but returned to his exclusively human state when the Spirit left Him at His crucifixion (an idea known as *Cerinthian Gnosticism*).

As part of its dualistic worldview, this growing movement also taught that morality related to the body was unnecessary. Since the body is evil and passing away, it really didn’t matter what a person did with it. Moreover, the movement claimed it possessed special forms of knowledge (the word “Gnosticism” is based on the Greek word for “knowledge”—γνῶσις, *gnosis*) that only its leaders could freely access. All told, the movement spread confusion and uncertainty among the believers of John’s day. Undoubtedly, it led them to ask questions like, “Is the gospel of Jesus Christ true?” “How can I know that the gospel is sufficient to save me?” “Do I really have eternal life?” (see 1 John 2:18–19, 26; 4:1–3; 2 John 7–9; etc.).

In response to these and other such questions, **John wrote to defend the gospel and the Christian’s assurance in it by providing spiritual tests to define true Christianity.** In other words, the tests John provides in 1 John countered the growing confusion over the gospel caused by the false teaching of his day by providing the basis for determining fellowship among professing Christians as well as for assurance of eternal life.

Consequently, 1 John provides an excellent, infallible source from which to determine tests for true Christianity today—and that includes tests for assurance. Although our religious climate may differ, the overall emphasis of John’s letter remains timeless, authoritative, and profitable. It is as necessary and helpful as ever.

1 John 1:1–4 – “Assurance and the Historicity of Christ”

John begins where every discussion of assurance must begin—not with a focus on the *believer* and his certainty *in his belief* (the subjective element of faith) but a focus on *the One believed* and the certainty of *His existence* (the objective element of faith). In the prologue to his letter (1 John 1:1–4), John writes,

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us—what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.

We can trace John’s emphasis on the certainty of the person of Jesus Christ according to three headings:

I. The Certainty of the Incarnation (1:1)

John begins with a series of **five non-negotiable historical declarations about the person of Jesus Christ**—the very foundation where assurance must be anchored.

- 1) **“What was from the beginning”** – Although the language is similar to the beginning of John’s Gospel (John 1:1) where the emphasis is on the *pre-existence* of the Word, the emphasis here appears to be on the *incarnation* of the Word and the *constancy* of His person since His appearance as the God-man. The Gnostics taught that flesh was evil, and that Jesus only appeared to be in the flesh or that He was simply empowered by the Spirit of Christ whenever that Spirit came upon Him. In response, John emphasizes the *historicity* and *permanence* of the incarnation. That the Son of God took on human flesh is an *absolute fact*.
- 2) **“What we have heard”** – John changes to the second person plural **“we”** to highlight the personal—and plural—nature of the testimony. That God became man is evidenced by John’s own *ear-witness* testimony. Not only he, but others heard him as well. The Incarnate One is not a figment of someone’s imagination.
- 3) **“What we have seen with our eyes”** – John now increases the intensity of his certainty. Having mentioned the sense of hearing, he now moves to the sense of *seeing* (see also v. 2 and v. 3 for the same verb). People can “hear” voices, but it is another thing to “see” the ones talking to them. Moreover, this was no “seeing” in the mind’s eye. This was “seeing” with the witnesses’ *physical eyes*.
- 4) **“What we looked at”** – To emphasize that he did not see Jesus as a mere momentary vision, John adds another verb for seeing, one that emphasizes careful observation. What John saw was not an occasional apparition or phantom. Instead, men could “observe” Jesus and study Him constantly.
- 5) **“Touched with our hands”** – John culminates with a most impressive historical proof—that of *physical touch*. That He could be touched indicates most clearly that He was *in the flesh*. In fact, these last two verbs (“looked at” and “touched”) are used in another passage emphasizing the historicity of the incarnation—Luke 24:39 (“See my hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have”).

II. The Credibility of the Witnesses (1:2)

In v. 2, John reiterates the certainty of the incarnation by asserting *twice* that Jesus Christ “was manifested” and that He was “seen” by eyewitnesses. But to be certain as an eyewitness is one thing. What about those who did not have the opportunity to “hear,” “see,” or “touch”? How can they have certainty? John answers in v. 2 with two important verbs, testifying to **the certainty of the eye-witness testimony**:

- 1) **“We . . . testify”** – The verb means “to confirm or attest something on the basis of personal knowledge or belief.” It emphasizes *accurate, factual reporting* (see its use in John 19:35; 21:24). In fact, it is the Greek word from which we get the word *martyr*. Over time, the emphasis of this verb on *conviction* and *attestation to factuality* came to be used as a description for one who was willing to *die* for his belief.
- 2) **“We . . . proclaim”** – The verb means “to make something known publicly.” Used also in v. 3, the verb emphasizes *bold, public declaration*. The certainty of Christ’s historicity resulted in certain proclamation.

John assures those who have never heard Jesus with their own ears, or saw Him with their own eyes, or touched Him with their own hands, by emphasizing that the first-hand witnesses have given factual, public testimony. There was no need to doubt. The apostolic preaching about Christ is absolutely true. This is the foundation upon which the assurance of salvation must be built.

John adds an important description of what was testified to and proclaimed: **“the eternal life”** (see John 11:25; 14:6; 1 John 5:20). John describes this Life as **“with the Father”** (literally, “face-to-face with the Father”), indicating His equality with yet distinction from the Father. John also describes this Life as **“manifested to us.”**

Though very God of very God, this Life became flesh (John 1:14). He did not remain distant. He was not ashamed to be made like us and call us “brothers” (Hebrews 2:17).

III. The Consequence of the Message (1:3–4)

But the certainty of the incarnation and the credibility of its witnesses is not merely a matter of historical importance—or even merely of doctrine importance. **It has deep, personal consequences.** John expresses this in vv. 3–4 with two “so that” statements that explain the purpose of his writing:

- 1) **“So that you too may have fellowship”** — What is this **“fellowship”** (a term found also in vv. 6 and 7)? It is “life shared together.” Man was never made to be alone—and this is true not only with respect to marriage. Man was made for communion. The Gnostics had attempted to capitalize on this need by claiming that only they could provide this special, secret fellowship. But John counters and states that true *life together* can be found only in believing the apostles’ (the eyewitnesses’) message.

This fellowship is twofold. First, it is *horizontal*: **“with us.”** This fellowship is not unattainable. By receiving and believing the message that John and others communicated, there can be authentic communion with them and all others who have believed this message. Second, it is *vertical*: **“with the Father . . . with His Son Jesus Christ.”** In a real sense, the “fellowship” that John speaks of here is thus synonymous with *assurance*. By believing the apostolic message of Jesus, one can enter communion with God Himself.

- 2) **“So that our joy may be made complete”** — John is not speaking of **“joy”** here as wishful thinking or momentary gratification. Instead, **“joy”** refers to the peace, contentment, and true happiness of the soul. Here we especially see John’s *pastoral heart* (see also 3 John 4). He would find his joy not merely in his own confidence as an eyewitness of the greatest miracle ever—the incarnation of the Son of God. More than that, he would find his joy when others would come to believe in that same miracle. John’s sincere interest was the confident, assured, spiritual well-being of other Christians. It is this which sets him apart from the Roman Catholic rejection that God’s children should experience the security of their status.

For Discussion

1. Review the definitions of “the assurance of salvation” provided on page 1. How would you explain this doctrine in your own words to a new believer?
2. In light of the great divide between Roman Catholics and Protestant Reformers, why is the doctrine of assurance so closely connected with the doctrine of justification? What is the relationship?
3. Why did John write 1 John? What are some of the similarities between John’s context and our context today?
4. When discussing assurance, why is it important first of all to focus on *the One believed* rather than on *the one doing the believing*?
5. Can a person who doubts the historical accuracy and the theological truthfulness of the Bible’s witness about Jesus Christ have a claim to the assurance of salvation?

For Further Study

1. **Memorize** 1 John 5:13 and John 20:30–31.
2. **Read** through the Gospel of John (two chapters per day) before our next meeting. Begin and finish your reading each day with the prayer that the Lord would increase your certainty that everything contained in this Gospel about the life of Jesus Christ is *true*.
3. **Sing** “Come Behold the Wondrous Mystery” (#184 in *Hymns of Grace*).

Audio, video, and handouts for this session are available at www.gracechurch.org/motw.

Next meeting: September 17, 7pm – “Assurance and the Confession of Sin” (1 John 1:5–10)