

Appendix 3

1 John

Many think that John, in his first letter, is giving believers a series of tests by which they can examine themselves, and so come to assurance. Indeed, some go so far as to think John is actually insisting on such tests for assurance. Listen to Robert A. Morey:

John constantly challenges our assurance by saying: ‘Hereby we know him if...’. He *demands* that we ‘prove’ or ‘test’ our assurance of salvation. This proof is obtained by self-examination. John *calls upon us* to examine our lives to see if God has truly given us a new heart.¹

This is a serious misreading of the apostle.

John had several purposes in writing his letter. First, like other New Testament writers, he was tackling false teachers; in his case, the Gnostics. Linked with his first aim, he was confronting mere professors, telling them in no uncertain terms that a true conversion reveals itself in observable change, in a Christ-like life. And, thirdly, he wanted to comfort and reassure doubting believers, believers who had lost their assurance and subsequent joy. It is John’s third purpose which concerns us here.

John was writing to doubting believers. That much is clear. But why were they doubting? Throughout the New Testament, we see how false teachers (Judaisers, Gnostics, whatever) and their teaching brought the early believers into bondage and sadness – not least in taking them to the law, with the consequent loss of their assurance. John wrote his letter to help believers regain their sense of assurance after they had lost it through being brought into bondage through the Gnostics. And he did it by taking them back to where they had left the road.

He was doing something similar to Paul, writing to the Galatians: ‘What has happened to all your joy?’ he asked them (Gal. 4:15). In their case, they had lost it through listening to the Judaisers, the law teachers. And the apostle set about restoring their

¹ Morey, emphasis mine.

1 John

joy and sense of liberty by instructing the Galatians, challenging them, and taking them back to the beginning, to where they had left the track (Gal. 2:16 – 3:5). Had they not been justified in Christ? Had they not received the gift of the Spirit? Of course they had! But how had they been justified and received the Spirit? By the law? They had not! Very well then. As they had begun, so they should continue. Assurance, adoption, sanctification, liberty, glory... all of it comes through Christ and not by the law.²

The principle is plain: if believers try to find assurance by their sanctification under the law, they will come into bondage and sadness through their inevitable failure to reach the standard. And the remedy is always the same: they must go back to the root of their joy in salvation; namely, Christ.

All this applies to John's letter. False teaching brings believers into doubt. As John's closing remarks make clear:

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him... The one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him. We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true – even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Dear children, keep yourselves from idols (1 John 5:13-15,18-21).

Here we have both the cure for doubt, and its preventative: 'Dear children, keep yourselves from idols'. Keep to Christ!

And do not miss John's confidence: 'We know'! No lack of assurance on John's part here! 'We know also...'. No lack of assurance on John's part here! 'We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him...'. No lack of assurance on John's part here!

Nor here:

² For the full argument, see my *Christ, Galatians*.

But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth... We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is... You know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins... We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers... We know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us... Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: we know it by the Spirit he gave us... We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit... We know and rely on the love God has for us... This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands... (1 John 2:20-21; 3:2,5,14,16,24; 4:13,16; 5:2).

Yes, I realise that one or two of these statements are generally taken to be tests, tests which believers should apply to themselves to give them assurance. While there is an element of truth in this, it must be carefully nuanced. To make sanctification the way of assurance is to misread the apostle, with serious consequences.

John, we must not forget, has his own idiosyncratic way of writing; he puts things ‘back to front!’³ Every writer has his own peculiar way of expressing things, of course. As a man can be recognised by his handwriting, so he can by the way he strings his words together: every writer has his own voice.⁴ 1 John 5:1 is typical of the striking way the apostle likes to put things: ‘Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God’. John was not saying that regeneration follows faith; rather, faith is the evidence of prior regeneration. But, as I say, the apostle likes putting things back to front.

Take, for instance: ‘You know that everyone who does what is right has been born of [God]’ (1 John 2:29). This does not mean that the practice of righteousness leads to, produces regeneration;

³ Compare ‘the man said’ with ‘said the man’.

⁴ Paul had. John had. I have. I have been told that people can hear me speaking as they read my books. Quite! See Stanley Baldwin’s letter to Winston Churchill on reading the latter’s first volume on the life of Marlborough (Gilbert pp80,104). See Lloyd-Jones: *Gospel* pp13-14. ‘[Thomas] Carlyle... contrived to get the sound of his own spoken voice into his writings’ (Abrams p948).

1 John

rather, the practice of righteousness is the proof, the evidence, the demonstration, of the fact that a sinner has been regenerated.

‘He who does what is right is righteous’ (1 John 3:7); that is, sanctification is a sure sign of justification, not the cause of it.

‘This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother’ (1 John 3:10). John is not saying that sanctification produces justification. He is not saying that by his godliness a man becomes a child of God. No! But because a man is a child of God, he will live a godly life. It is just the apostle’s own way of expressing himself.

‘Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God’ (1 John 4:2); that is, spiritual, believing, confession of the incarnation of Christ is evidence – not the cause – of regeneration, the evidence of a man being ‘of God’.

‘Everyone who loves is born of God’ (1 John 4:7, NKJV); spiritual love is an evidence of regeneration – not that regeneration is produced by it: ‘Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God’ (1 John 4:7, NIV).

Yet in all these passages, at first glance John seems to be saying the opposite. It’s simply the striking way he puts things; regeneration comes first!

Take another of John’s statements – this time where he expresses himself the ‘right way round’:

No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God... Everyone born of God overcomes the world... We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin (1 John 3:9; 5:4,18).

What I am saying is this: we can read John’s words as tests by which we have to probe ourselves to gain assurance. The right way to read him, however, is to realise he was giving *encouragements* to his readers who had lost their assurance, writing in order to reassure them. John was sure about his readers; he wants them to be sure! Applying it to ourselves: John’s ‘tests’, far from being hoops through which believers have to jump in order to be assured, *are encouragements to reassure believers who have lost their joy*. Stibbs and Packer, having pointed out that the early believers

1 John

generally did not lack assurance, and, therefore, the New Testament never discusses it, then went on to say:

The nearest thing to such a discussion is the first letter of John, which was written partly to *reassure* Christians whose prior assurance had been shaken by false teachers telling them that they were really still in darkness; but this is a different issue from that of leading into assurance Christians who have never had it.⁵

We must take a firm grip on this: John is *not* giving a series of tests by which believers can and should test themselves to come to assurance.

That being said, John's assurances, of course, are only assurances to those who are living in the way he delineates. In other words, although I do not think John's words should be used to harrow believers – rather, they should be used as reassurances for true believers – they are to be so used only by those who are demonstrating the marks of sanctification he sets out. John was not encouraging so-called 'carnal Christians' to live as they want. Not at all! But he was reassuring true believers who were living for Christ (or, at the very least, were honestly seeking to glorify Christ by obeying his commands), and so he must be read. But whatever we take from John, it is quite wrong to think that he was telling the saints that their sanctification was the source of their assurance.

Not at all! John was clear on the witness of the Spirit as the primary source of assurance: 'anointing' seems to be his favourite word to describe it. Indeed, no New Testament writer is clearer and stronger and more emphatic (repeatedly so) upon the Spirit's anointing, the gift of the Spirit, the witness of the Spirit for every believer:

You have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth... As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit – just as it has taught you, remain in him (1 John 2:20-27).

⁵ Stibbs and Packer p87, emphasis theirs.

1 John

This is how we know that he lives in us: we know it by the Spirit he gave us (1 John 3:24).

We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit (1 John 4:13).

It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth... We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son (1 John 5:6,9-11).

It is this that puts John's 'tests' in their proper light:

We know that we have come to know [Christ] if we obey his commands. The man who says: 'I know him', but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did... Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him... Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world... Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us (1 John 2:3-6,9-11,15-19).

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure. Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. No one who lives in him keeps on

1 John

sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him. Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother (1 John 3:1-10).

This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another... We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God, and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: we know it by the Spirit he gave us (1 John 3:11-24).

John was saying all this to believers, believers who, of course, had been assured by the witness (anointing) of the Spirit, but believers, who, sadly, had lost their assurance as a result of false teaching. The false teachers had taken the believers' eyes off Christ, and that had led them into all sorts of difficulty (and, I am sure, sadness for John). As he made clear right from the start: 'We write this to make our [or your] joy complete' (1 John 1:4). And, coming to the end of his letter, he could say: 'I write these things 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). 'Dear children, keep yourselves from idols' (1 John 5:21). Keep hold of Christ!

1 John

Nor must we forget what he had already said:

This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything (1 John 3:19-20).

John's use of 'to know', *ginōskō* and *eidō (oida)*, merits careful and detailed study. The words are richly nuanced.⁶ Lloyd-Jones got it wrong when he claimed that John was speaking about 'what we deduce about ourselves when we apply to our lives, and to our experiences, the various tests which are given us in the Scriptures... 1 John 3:14'.⁷ The idea of 'deduce' is quite wrong here. The thrust of 'know' is 'experience, know directly' or 'know by reflection and meditation' – not 'discover by deduction'. Eaton:

The 'tests of conversion' approach to 1 John is refuted entirely by these verses [1 John 2:12-14]. John is far from wanting his 'little children' to look to their personal character or their estimate of their spiritual strength in order to discover whether they are converted. Any sensitive soul who truly tries this will end up in endless introspection. It is only the Pharisee who can examine himself and then say with assurance: 'I thank you I am not as other men', and come away with assurance.⁸

John assures his readers: 'Your sins are forgiven', and forgiven for Christ's sake, his 'name' (his person and work). They have 'known' God, he tells them, they have 'overcome the evil one', they 'are strong', and God's word 'lives' in them (1 John 2:12-14). He has no doubt about it. And he wants them to feel it, to enjoy it, to delight in it, for themselves. He writes to reassure them, to show them that the false teaching they have imbibed is bankrupt, and so nerve them to resist the Gnostics. There's not the slightest suggestion that he wants to make his readers introspective. He doesn't doubt the reality of their conversion: to make them doubt it is the last thing in his mind! Rather, he wants to put backbone and joy into them by reassuring them. The heretics and their false teaching had unsettled his readers, had robbed them of their

⁶ See Thayer.

⁷ Lloyd-Jones *Sons* p303; see Eaton *1,2,3 John* pp20-25.

⁸ Eaton: *1,2,3 John* pp62-63.

1 John

assurance and happiness. John wants to bring the believers back to the basics so that they might recover their assurance – and in this way stand up to the heretics, and get rid of them and their false teaching with its inevitable misery and bondage. He not only points the believers to the evidence of their godliness to assure them, but he calls for their continuance in the faith in order to assure other believers that they are truly converted (1 John 1:6; 2:4-6; 4:20). As he asserts, true believers have the Spirit (1 John 4:13), and it shows (1 John 3:24; 4:12):

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: we know it by the Spirit he gave us (1 John 3:14-24).

As a result, John's 'tests' need careful handling. Just as with medicine for the body, so with medicine for the soul. A physician prescribes medicine A for condition X, and medicine B for condition Y. If I have condition X, and I take medicine B, it will do me no good; it might make the disease worse and do me serious harm; it might even prove fatal. So with medicine for the soul. If you are a Gnostic in any shape or form, reader, pay serious attention to John's words. You are in error; give up your error and come to Christ as he is revealed in the New Testament. If you are one of those so-called 'carnal Christians', read John's warnings, and take them home to yourself: be converted! If you are a doubting believer, doubting because you have listened to legal

1 John

preachers, Gnostics or whatever, then take a good dose of John's comforting cordial. Retrace your steps to where you left the road, get your mind and heart fixed on Christ, listen to the witness of the Spirit, and be reassured by the evidences of godliness in your life.

Alas, doubting believers can get John's teaching wrong, even turning it upside down, and so make their condition far worse. Although John's tests can be read as though he wanted believers to get anxious about themselves, and probe themselves as to the reality of their conversion, that is to *misread* him! The apostle's actual purpose, I say again, was very different. He was doing all he could to encourage and reassure such believers, and so bring them into liberty! He was doing all he could to restore them to where they were when they came into the faith.

In other words, while John's 'tests' certainly ought to strike fear into the false professor and the so-called 'carnal Christian', they ought to be a means of succour and encouragement to the sincere and true believer.

Let me put it another way. We should not view John's tests as a stiff barrier for the doubting believer to climb over, but rather as an open-armed welcome of assurance and comfort.

If I may illustrate. When hill-walking, I have from time to time missed my path and come up against a stone wall topped by barbed wire. Yet, if I had taken the right path, I would have met another wall straddled by a ladder stile. John did not write his book to confront his readers with a stone wall topped by barbed wire! He wrote to enable his readers to get over their fears: 'I write these things 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 same may be said about his remarks as he drew near the close of his Gospel, when John explained why he had written that volume: 'That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name' (John 20:31). Remember that in both works he was writing to believers. He wanted unbelievers to hear the truth, believe and be converted, yes, but he also wanted (perhaps, primarily he wanted) believers to read and go on believing – being confirmed in their faith.

If I may be permitted a further illustration. The bread knife! An excellent tool, one well designed for the job – cutting bread. It has a

comfortable handle and a sharp blade. Catch hold of the knife by the handle, and it can be used to slice crusty bread with ease. Catch hold of it by the blade, however, and while the handle will make little impression on the bread, the blade will make a nasty impression on the palm of your hand.

I am reminded of the way hyper-Calvinists read the invitations of the gospel. Take Matthew 11:28, for instance: ‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest’. So said Christ. Now, how should we take hold of this invitation? Should we pore over our hearts to see if we are weary, if we are weary enough, before we feel that we are invited to come to Christ? Or should we take the invitation – as Jesus clearly intended we should – and treat his words as the warmest, widest and freest of invitations? Surely, Jesus was not making sinners think about themselves, but encouraging them to think of him, and, above all urging them to come to himself for salvation and rest!

Thus it is with John’s tests. While they *can* be misread as introspective hindrances to the doubting soul, they are clearly meant as the warmest of encouragements, designed by the apostle to put doubting souls at rest.

I go further. There is no man alive – John, himself, certainly was no exception – there is no man alive who can honestly say he fulfils any of these tests as well as he should. Not one! But John was not demanding perfection! If perfection is required before we can be assured, then there’s not a true believer on the face of the globe! Having said that, yet again I have to sound the note on the other string: not demanding perfection is not the same as *laissez-faire*. The truth is, the question is: Do I have a desire to meet John’s tests? Do I, for example, desire to love and obey Christ? Do I want to love my brothers? Do I have any measure of love towards Christ? Can I detect any mark of obedience to Christ? Do I want to obey Christ?

As William Cowper has it:

*Lord, it is my chief complaint
That my love is weak and faint;
Yet I love thee, and adore:
O for grace to love thee more!*

1 John

In other words, we must not raise the barrier so high that nobody can get over. Rather, we must follow the apostle, and bring it as low as John himself did, in order that all believers might receive all the assurance he desired for them. As Calvin commented on 1 John 2:3: ‘We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands’:

We are not hence to conclude that faith recumbs [leans, rests, reposes] on works: for though every one receives a testimony to his faith from his works, yet it does not follow that it is founded on them, since they are added as an evidence... The certainty of faith depends on the grace of Christ alone, but piety and holiness of life distinguish true faith from the knowledge of God which is fictitious and dead (Col. 3:9).

Again, Calvin on 1 John 3:14: ‘We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers’:

Were it said that love makes us more certain of life, then confidence as to salvation would recumb [lean, rest, repose] on works. But the answer to this is obvious: for though faith is confirmed by all the graces of God as aids, yet it ceases not to have its foundation in the mercy of God only.

Again, Calvin on 1 John 3:18-20: ‘Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us’:

If we, in truth, love our neighbours, we have an evidence that we are born of God, who is truth, or that the truth of God dwells in us. But we must ever remember that we have not from love the knowledge which the apostle mentions, as though we were to seek from it the certainty of salvation. And doubtless we know not otherwise that we are the children of God, than as he seals his free adoption on our hearts by his own Spirit, and as we receive by faith the sure pledge of it offered in Christ. Then love is accessory or an inferior aid, a prop to our faith, not a foundation on which it rests. Why then does the apostle say: ‘We shall assure our hearts before God’? He reminds us by these words that faith does not exist without a good conscience; not that assurance arises from it or depends on it, but that then only we are really and not falsely assured of our union with God, when by the efficacy of his Holy Spirit he manifests himself in our love. For it is ever meet and proper to consider what the apostle handles. For as he condemns feigned and false profession of faith, he says that a genuine assurance

1 John

before God we cannot have, except his Spirit produces in us the fruit of love. Nevertheless, though a good conscience cannot be separated from faith, yet no one should hence conclude that we must look to our works in order that our assurance may be certain.

Finally, Calvin on 1 John 5:13-14: 'I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us':

As there ought to be a daily progress in faith, so [John] says that he wrote to those who had already believed, so that they might believe more firmly and with greater certainty, and thus enjoy a fuller confidence as to eternal life. Then the use of doctrine is not only to initiate the ignorant in the knowledge of Christ, but also to confirm those more and more who have been already taught. It therefore becomes us assiduously to attend to the duty of learning, that our faith may increase through the whole course of our life. For there are still in us many remnants of unbelief, and so weak is our faith that what we believe is not yet really believed except there be a fuller confirmation.

And now a most important statement:

But we ought to observe the way in which faith is confirmed, even by having the office and power of Christ explained to us. For the apostle says that he wrote these things, that is, that eternal life is to be sought nowhere else but in Christ, in order that they who were believers already might believe, that is, make progress in believing. It is therefore the duty of a godly teacher, in order to confirm disciples in the faith, to extol as much as possible the grace of Christ, so that being satisfied with that, we may seek nothing else.

Those words must sink in! Calvin went on:

The apostle teaches further still... that Christ is the peculiar object of faith, and that to the faith which we have in his name is annexed the hope of salvation. For in this case the end of believing is that we become the children and the heirs of God.

As for : 'And this is the confidence', Calvin declared:

[John] commends the faith which he mentioned by its fruit, or he shows that in which our confidence especially is, that is, that the godly dare confidently to call on God; as also Paul speaks in Ephesians 3:12, that we have by faith access to God with confidence; and also in

1 John

Romans 8:15, that the Spirit gives us a mouth to cry: ‘Abba, Father’. And doubtless, were we driven away from an access to God, nothing could make us more miserable; but, on the other hand, provided this asylum [refuge] be opened to us, we should be happy even in extreme evils; indeed, this one thing renders our troubles blessed, because we surely know that God will be our deliverer, and relying on his paternal love towards us, we flee to him. Let us, then, bear in mind this declaration of the apostle, that calling on God is the chief trial of our faith, and that God is not rightly nor in faith called upon except we be fully persuaded that our prayers will not be in vain. For the apostle denies that those who, being doubtful, hesitate, are endued with faith.⁹

And now Spurgeon – on 1 John 5:13:

John then proceeds to mention three witnesses. Now, dear hearers, do you know anything about these three witnesses?... Do you know ‘the Spirit’? Has the Spirit of God quickened you, changed you, illuminated you, sanctified you? Does the Spirit of God dwell in you? Do you feel his sacred impulses? Is he the essence of the new life within you? Do you know him as clothing you with his light and power? If so, you are alive unto God... One thing more I would notice. Read the ninth verse: the apostle puts our faith and assurance on the ground that we receive ‘the witness of God’. If I believe that I am saved because of this, that, and the other, I may be mistaken: the only sure ground is ‘the witness of God’. The inmost heart of Christian faith is that we take God at his word; and we must accept that word, not because of the probabilities of its statements, nor because of the confirmatory evidence of science and philosophy, but simply and alone because the Lord has spoken it. Many professing Christians fall sadly short of this point. They dare to judge the word instead of bowing before it. They do not sit at the Master’s feet, but become doctors themselves. I thank God that I believe everything that God has spoken, whether I am able to see its reason or not. To me the fact that the mouth of God hath spoken it stands in the place of all argument, either for or against. If Jehovah says so, so it is. Do you accept the witness of God? If not, you have made him a liar, and the truth is not in you; but if you have received ‘the witness of God’, then this is his witness, that ‘he has given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son’. I say again, if your faith stands in the wisdom of men, and is based upon the cleverness of a preacher, it will fail you; but if it stands on the sure word of the Lord it will stand for ever, and this may be to you a special token that you have eternal life. I have said enough upon this subject; oh that God may bless it to

⁹ Here, once again, is Calvin’s view that assurance is the essence of faith.

you! May we be enabled, from what John has written, to gather beyond doubt that we have the life of God within our souls... John desired the increase and confirmation of their faith. He says: 'That you might believe on the name of the Son of God'. John wrote to those who believed, that they might believe in a more emphatic sense. As our Saviour has come not only that we may have life, but that we may have it more abundantly, so does John write, that having faith we may have more of it. Come, beloved, listen for a moment to this! You have the milk of faith, but God wills that you should have this cream of assurance! He would increase your faith...

Will you live in perpetual questioning and doubt?... The Bible is sent that you may have full assurance of your possession of eternal life; do not, therefore, dream that it will be presumptuous on your part to aspire to it. Our conscience tells us that we ought to seek full assurance of salvation. It cannot be right for us to be children of God, and not to know our own Father. How can we kneel down and say: 'Our Father which art in heaven', when we do not know whether he is our Father or not? Will not a life of doubt tend to be a life of falsehood? May we not be using language which is not true to our consciousness? Can you sing joyful hymns which you fear are not true to you? Will you join in worship when your heart does not know that God is your God? Until the spirit of adoption enables you to cry, 'Abba, Father', where is your love to God? Can you rest? Dare you rest, while it is a question whether you are saved or not? Can you go home to your dinner today and enjoy your meal, while there is a question about your soul's eternal life? Oh, be not so foolhardy as to run risks on that matter! I pray you, make sure work for eternity. If you leave anything in uncertainty, let it concern your body or your estate, but not your soul. Conscience bids you seek to know that you have eternal life, for without this knowledge many duties will be impossible of performance. Many scriptures which I cannot quote this morning stir you up to this duty. Are you not bidden to make your calling and election sure? Are you not a thousand times over exhorted to rejoice in the Lord, and to give thanks continually? But how can you rejoice, if the dark suspicion haunts you, that perhaps, after all, you have not the life of God? You must get this question settled, or you cannot rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for him. Come, brothers and sisters, I beseech you, as you would follow Scripture, and obey the Lord's precepts, get the assurance without which you cannot obey them.

Listen, as I close, to this mass of reasons why each believer should seek to know that he has eternal life. Here they are. Assurance of your salvation will bring you 'the peace of God, which passes all understanding'... Assurance is a mountain of spices, a land that flows with milk and honey. To be the assured possessor of eternal life is to

1 John

find a paradise beneath the stars, where the mountains and the hills break forth before you into singing.

Full assurance will sometimes overflow in cataracts of delight. Peace flows like a river, and here and there it leaps in cascades of ecstatic joy. There are seasons when the plant of peace is in flower, and then it sheds a perfume as of myrrh and cassia. Oh, the blessedness of the man who knows that he has eternal life! Sometimes in our room alone, when we have been enjoying this assurance, we have laughed outright, for we could not help it. If anybody had wondered why a man was laughing by himself alone, we could have explained that it was nothing ridiculous which had touched us, but our mouth was filled with laughter because the Lord had done great things for us, whereof we were glad. That religion which sets no sweetmeats on the table is a niggardly housekeeper. I do not wonder that some people give up their starveling religion: it is hardly worth the keeping. The child of God who knows that he has eternal life goes to school, but he has many a holiday; and he anticipates that day of home-going when he shall see the face of his beloved for ever.

Brethren, full assurance will give us the full result of the gospel. The gospel ought to make us holy; and so it will when we are in full possession of it. The gospel ought to make us separate from the world, the gospel ought to make us lead a heavenly life here below; and so it will if we drink deep draughts of it; but if we take only a sip of it now and again, we give it no chance of working out its design in us. Do not paddle about the margin of the water of life, but first wade in up to your knees, and then hasten to plunge into the waters to swim in. Beware of contentment with shallow grace. Prove what the grace of God can do for you by giving yourself up to its power.

Full assurance gives a man a grateful zeal for the God he loves.¹⁰ These are the people that will go to the Congo for Jesus, for they know they are his. These are the people that will lay down their all for Christ, for Christ is theirs. These are the people that will bear scorn and shame and misrepresentation for the truth's sake, for they know that they have eternal life. These are they that will keep on preaching and teaching, spending and working, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, and they know it. Men will do little for what they doubt, and much for what they believe. If you have lost your title deeds, and you do not know whether your house is your own or not, you are not going to spend much in repairs and enlargements. When you know that heaven is yours, you

¹⁰ 'Assurance of salvation is one of the greatest motivators in the New Testament' (Eaton: *1,2,3 John* p63).

1 John

are anxious to get ready for it. Full assurance finds fuel for zeal to feed upon.

This also creates and sustains patience. When we know that we have eternal life, we do not fret about the trials of this passing life... Assurance makes us strong to suffer.

This, dear friends, will give you constant firmness in your confession of divine truth. You who do not know whether you are saved or not, I hope the Lord will keep you from denying the faith; but those who have a firm grip of it, these are the men who will never forsake it... When you know that your Lord is able to keep that which you have committed to him until that day, then you are firm as a rock. God make you so.

Dear brethren, this is the kind of thing that will enable you to bear a telling testimony for your Lord. It is of no use to stand up and preach things that may or may not be true. I am charged with being a dreadful dogmatist, and I am not anxious to excuse myself. When a man is not quite sure of a thing, he grows very liberal [unstable, undogmatic, erratic, wavering]...

God grant that you may have this assurance, all of you! May sinners begin to believe in Jesus, and saints believe more firmly, for Christ's sake! Amen.¹¹

Out of the wealth of gems in the above, because it captures precisely what John's first letter is about, I select this: 'John desired the increase and confirmation of their faith'. He was not setting out a series of hurdles over which his readers had to jump in order to get assurance.

Let me apply this to those of us who preach in a stated way. If ever there was a time when we need to openly and clearly distinguish in our ministry between the unbeliever and the believer, this is it. Indeed, on this issue we need to distinguish between the unbeliever, 'the carnal Christian' (so-called), the false professor, the doubting believer, and the assured believer. What we must not do is grab a text and go at it like a bull in the proverbial china shop! If we do, we risk making true believers wrongly unhappy – that is, quench the smoking flax. Of course, if we at the same time alarm the careless and sanctify the carnal, that may be considered a price worth paying. I don't! There's no need of it! With due care, it is

¹¹ Sermon number 2023. See also sermon number 1791.

1 John

surely possible to meet all those proper ends, and yet *not* break any bruised reeds on the way.

In the body of the book, I quoted John MacArthur. I do so again as a warning to us all. MacArthur was not sufficiently nuanced here, and I can only guess as to the hurt his words may have caused:

I think it's fair to say the pulpit is *rightly* the creator of anxious hearts. That's part of the duty of the preacher – to make the heart anxious... The pulpit is to be a purveyor of a message that creates anxious hearts... Where there is that strong preaching, there will be a battle with assurance. And I'll tell you something, it's not bad to have that; it's good because how else are we drawn to the important issue of self-examination?¹²

I am sure that the words of John – John, the apostle – properly interpreted, will reassure the doubting believer, while at the same time they rightly disabuse the unbeliever.

¹² 'Why Christians Lack Assurance', emphasis mine.