

SOTERIOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

PART 63

1 JOHN: RELATIONSHIP OR FELLOWSHIP? PART 2

Test # 1: "Have you enjoyed fellowship with Christ and the Father?" [pp. 69-70]. He bases this on 1 John 1:2-3.

"Have you experienced the communion with God and Christ? Have you sensed Their presence? Do you have a love for them that draws you to Their presence? Have you experienced the sweet communion of prayer—the exhilarating joy of talking to the living God? Have you experienced the refreshing, almost overwhelming sense of grace that comes upon you when you discover a new truth in His Word? If you have, then you have experienced the fellowship of salvation" [p. 70]. Notice the reliance he places on experience; he used that word four times in six sentences. This sounds more like mysticism than Bible based Christianity. Are human experiences reliable? No! I suspect a lot of people who claim to believe in a god of some sort who is not the God of the Bible could and would answer these same questions in the affirmative. We've all read accounts written by Christians who are in difficult circumstances and feel abandoned by God; does that mean they are not Christians because they have not felt, experiential fellowship with God at that moment? No! Human emotional ups and downs and the varying circumstances of life that can influence how we feel about our relationship with the Lord do not determine whether or not we are true believers. MacArthur's relationship test relies solely on subjective [based on or influenced by personal feelings, tastes or opinions], introspective [the examination or observation of one's own mental and emotional processes] self-evaluations which can never be accurate because no one can truly conduct a perfectly honest, unbiased, and clearly thought out self-evaluation. By nature, people always rationalize their behavior and think of themselves more highly than they probably should so any truly accurate self-assessment of our relationship with God is generally suspect. How much fellowship does it take for us to absolutely know we have true fellowship with God and are therefore justified? Can we ever doubt it and still know we are justified? How many times can we be out of fellowship and still know we are justified?

Test # 2: "Are you sensitive to sin?" [pp. 70-72]. He bases this assertion on 1 John 1:5-6.

1 John 1:5–6 ⁵This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. ⁶If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth;

Remember, MacArthur is using this Scripture to illuminate relationship truth which this Scripture is not about. Relationship truth involves being a member of the family of God as a result of the new birth; it involves positional truth and a judicial proclamation of righteousness. The problem for his doctrine is verse 6 specifically says this is fellowship truth John is addressing. In other words, this truth is about the walk of one who has already accessed relational, positional truth by virtue of placing their faith in Christ Jesus. This is experiential sanctification truth; it is not about determining whether or not one has been born again.

He interprets 1 John 1:8-10 as truth that is relating to unbelievers but it is not; it is relating to believers.

1 John 1:8–10⁸If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.

Notice the personal pronouns John uses here. If John refers to “we” and to “us,” isn’t he including himself? If he is including himself with this larger group, then isn’t the larger group referring to believers also? Yes; John would never include himself with unbelievers concerning either the sin nature or personal sins. Neither MacArthur nor anyone subscribing to his position would ever say that the apostle John was not a believer. How then can they say that those he refers to as “we” and “us” can include unbelievers?

MacArthur’s presupposition is that John is writing about unbelievers. “Some people make some pretty amazing claims that hold no water. They claim to have fellowship with God—to be Christians (v. 6), to have no sin (v. 8), and even to have never sinned (v. 10). They think they are walking in the light when actually they are walking in darkness. It is characteristic of unbelievers to be oblivious to the sins in their lives. The individuals mentioned in verse 8 are not dealing with their sins because they think they’ve reached a state where they have no sin. But they are deceiving themselves. Those mentioned in verse 10 have never even confessed or acknowledged sin...Since unbelievers are so insensitive to the reality of their condition, human sinfulness is the right starting point in sharing the Gospel” [p. 71].

It is exegetically inexplicable that MacArthur forces verses 8 and 10 to pertain to unbelievers but he makes verse 9 pertain to believers, which it does, but so does 8 and 10. Context demands these three verses to be considered together and all three are dealing with believers. Verse 8 is referencing our sin nature, which believers still have in this dispensation, and verses 9 and 10 are dealing with believer’s personal sins.

It is a false claim to say that we have no sin (v. 8) meaning no sin nature. "The idea would be that our sin nature is completely gone. To say this is to deceive ourselves. The fact that we are not conscious of sin does mean we are without it....To have no sin [meaning a sin nature] is to have no need of a Savior, which would make the coming of Jesus unnecessary" [Radmacher, Allen, and House, *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary*, p. 1706]. John is not referring to unbelievers; he is referring to believers who say their sin nature has been eradicated. [NOTE: Many theologians believe verse 8 is also referring to personal sins so study the issue and make up your own mind.]

Verse 9 is familial, fellowship truth. "If a believer confesses [acknowledges; agrees with God about] his or her specific sins [personal sins] to God, He will cleanse all unrighteousness from that person. The believer need not agonize over sin of which he is not aware. Forgiveness and cleansing are guaranteed because God is faithful to His promises....Since John is speaking to believers, the forgiveness here is not for their initial justification-salvation. His concern is sanctification-salvation. Christ accomplished the first portion of our salvation on the Cross while on earth. The second part of our salvation is before the throne of God...We should be careful to distinguish this family forgiveness of the Father for His children from the forgiveness we received at our redemption. This passage is written to those who are already saved from eternal judgment due to their sins but now are children of God in need of forgiveness for failures in their children walk" [Radmacher, Allen, and House, *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary*, p. 1706].

Verse 10 is referring to believers who claim they do not commit personal sins. This is a serious issue in some denominations that believe people can lose their salvation. Some pastors in these churches teach that their people do not commit personal sins, but they simply make mistakes instead. That is nothing but deceptive word games. John absolutely condemns that line of thought. "We may admit to having a sin nature while still denying any personal sin and therefore any need for confession. The Greek verb translated *we have not sinned* indicates a denial in the past that continues to the present. Unlike v. 8, which speaks of the guilt of sin or a sinful nature, this verse is about the denial of any particular sins [personal sins]. To make this denial is to call God a liar because God's word emphasizes the penetrating nature of sin. Denying that sin is in us indicates that God's word is not in us. In other words, a person who denies committing sinful acts does not have the Word of God changing his or her life" [Radmacher, Allen, and House, *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary*, p. 1707].

What constitutes being sensitive to sin? How much sensitivity to sin do we have to possess in order to know we are saved? I've known new believers who have no concept of just what makes something sinful; they know they have done wrong in God's sight but they may not exactly know what defines sin. If a new believer lacks nearly perfect knowledge from the start, does that mean he is still unsaved? How long

must a person be saved before this sensitivity to sin kicks in? What happens when a new believer just can't shake a particular sin pattern in his life? Is he unsaved? What happens when a mature believer falls into some sort of sin pattern or has a personal sin that is hard to shake? Does that prove he is a false convert? What if you don't confess your personal sins? How long can you commit personal sins and how many personal sins can you commit before you prove you are really unsaved?

It is easy to see what a quagmire we fall into when we try to establish standards to identify believers apart from grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Our own personal, subjective standards, no matter who we are, are never a measure of justification—or anything else for that matter. The Bible is the standard. How can anyone have assurance by using the standards MacArthur imposes on them? There is no stability in the life of a believer resulting from the doctrine of justification salvation as presented by MacArthur. Paul warned about this in his letter to the Ephesians.

Ephesians 4:14 ¹⁴As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming;

Test # 3: Do you obey God's Word? His foundational Scripture for this test is 1 John 2:3-5.

1 John 2:3–5 ³By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. ⁴The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; ⁵but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him:

MacArthur claims that obedience to God produces assurance but that is impossible. The Bible says we can be assured of our justification salvation based only on the promises of God that "whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Believers all have a sin nature; John established that fact in 1 John 1:8. That means we cannot live a perfectly obedient life. How can a human being with an intact, operative sin nature evaluate himself in order to determine whether or not he is saved based on his own personal behavior and obedience? It's impossible. How much sin can be in one's life and still be assured of salvation? What kinds of sins prove one has never been saved? Are little sins sort of OK but big sins prohibited? How many believers perfectly obey God's Word day in and day out? Ultimately, this introspection forces people to focus on themselves and not on the Lord. MacArthur's theology is informed by Puritan dogma; he constantly quotes them and his doctrine of obedience has been shaped by their theology. The problem is the Puritans drove their people crazy with this doctrine and MacArthur knows it. They spent inordinate amounts of wasted time writing books telling people how to have assurance that they are one of the elect and thereby

justified. "...the construction of a doctrine of assurance became important within the Puritan movement because the Puritans took sin and self-examination seriously. The more people become occupied with sin and its gravity in God's sight, the more likely they are to despair over both sin and themselves. Such despair makes fertile soil for cases of conscience that revolve around assurance of election and salvation" [Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*, p. 588]. It drove the Puritans to great depths of despair when they examined their personal Christian walk because they knew they never measured up to the perfect standards their theology demands. They never knew whether or not they were saved because they were looking inward, which is subjective and introspective, rather than looking to the Scriptures which is an objective standard. The Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints always kept them wondering, and agonizing about, whether or not they were truly among the elect. MacArthur admits the standards set by the Puritans were impossible for them to live up to and he even admits their "demanding preaching led to a widespread *lack* of assurance among their flocks. Christians became obsessed with whether they were truly elect, and many lapsed into morbid introspection and utter despair. This explains why so much of the Puritan literature is written for people struggling with the question of assurance" [John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to the Apostles: The Role of Works in the Life of Faith*, p. 140]. The problem for MacArthur is that he teaches the very same thing; there may be a difference in degree but there is no difference in the details. He just doesn't lay it on quite as thick as the Puritans did.

MacArthur is not unaware of the argument that assurance is based solely on the Scriptures and on God's promises revealed therein, but he rejects the concept that Scripture alone is sufficient for assurance. "A Christian is so much more than someone who simply at one point in time believed the truth. A true believer has an ongoing love for God that holds fast even in trials. And as we've noted previously, love for God manifests itself through obedience to His Word" [p. 145]. He quoted Calvin who did base assurance on the promises of God, however, Calvin also contradicted this with his definition of the perseverance of the saints which plays right into MacArthur's theological wheelhouse. But Calvin did write, "Therefore our mind must be otherwise illumined and our heart strengthened, that the Word of God may obtain full faith among us. Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit" [John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, p. 3.7.2]. MacArthur rejects that by saying, "Some assurance belongs to the essence of faith, but believing does not necessarily bring *full* assurance. 'I do believe; help my unbelief' (Mark 9:24) is a sincere expression of every new believer's heart. Even the apostles pleaded with Jesus, 'Increase our faith!' (Luke 17:5). The later Reformed theologians, recognizing that genuine Christians often lack assurance, denied that *any* assurance is implicit in

believing....The later Reformers, battling antinomian tendencies in their movement, wanted to emphasize the importance of practical evidence in the lives of believers" [John MacArthur, , *The Gospel According to the Apostles: The Role of Works in the Life of Faith*, p. 139]. There is no such thing as full assurance as opposed to assurance that is less than full; we either have assurance or we don't have assurance. The charge of being antinomian is still the charge leveled at Free Grace believers today.

To complete the circle on Calvin's confusion concerning whether or not the Word of God is sufficient to provide assurance, after writing it was sufficient he also wrote that justification and sanctification cannot be separate elements of salvation. "But, since the question concerns only righteousness and sanctification, let us dwell upon these. Although we may distinguish them, Christ contains both of them inseparably in himself. Do you wish, then, to attain righteousness in Christ? You must first possess Christ; but you cannot possess him without being made partaker in his sanctification, because he cannot be divided into pieces [I Cor. 1:13]. Since, therefore, it is solely by expending himself that the Lord gives us these benefits to enjoy, he bestows both of them at the same time, the one never without the other. Thus it is clear how true it is that we are justified not without works yet not through works, since in our sharing in Christ, which justifies us, sanctification is just as much included as righteousness" [John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, p. 3.16.1].

This doctrine represents a tremendous amount of confusion between positional and experiential truth and between justification and sanctification.

MacArthur has definitely placed himself into the Reformed camp of theology concerning these matters. The question each one of us must answer for ourselves is, do we stand on the objective truth of Scripture alone or do we add our subjective, introspective, and even emotional thoughts, wants, and theologies into the Scriptures and hold other people to what we think rather than to only what the Bible has to say about justification?

He uses two Scriptures to try and prove that full assurance is not possible based on the Scriptures alone; only partial assurance is, according to him, possible based on the Bible by itself.

Mark 9:24 ²⁴Immediately the boy's father cried out and said, "I do believe; help my unbelief."

Luke 17:5 ⁵The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

The apostle's request in Luke is not about doubting their assurance of salvation at all. They are making a request that is a sanctification issue. The disciples ask the Lord to help them develop their faith in order to increase their ability to do His will and obey His commands. This is not remotely about the Lord's disciples having less than full assurance of saving faith. It is about their spiritual growth and empowerment.

“Appeal is often made to Mark 9:24 to support the notion that faith and doubt in the same object can coexist simultaneously....One must be careful not to oversimplify and over apply this passage. To suggest that the father's statement proves that faith and doubt in the same object can coexist is unwarranted. In the first place the faith in question is not an issue of *saving faith*. That is, the issue at hand was not eternal salvation but physical healing. Second, in saying 'I believe' the man was expressing his general faith in Jesus' claims (he was apparently a believer—a Christian); yet, in saying, 'Help my unbelief' he was expressing doubt about the specific situation at hand, namely, his son's potential for healing. This is not faith and doubt in the same object. All believers, at times, have doubts about God's provision or other specific issues in their Christian life. But it does not follow that such doubts should alert the person to the fact that he may be unsaved” [J. B. Hixson, “The Nature of Saving Faith” in *Freely By His Grace: Classical Free Grace Theology*, p. 192].

MacArthur goes on to say that pastors today fail to create doubt in the people of their flock because they do not call people to holy living. “...today assurance is rarely made an issue. Few professing Christians seem to lack assurance because evangelistic preaching is usually devoid of any call to holy living” [John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to the Apostles: The Role of Works in the Life of Faith*, p. 140]. MacArthur apparently views his role as a pastor in part to scare his people into obedient, holy living according to what he considers to be a holy, Christian life. This is an astonishing admission on his part. Where in the world does it say in the Bible that it is the pastor's job to create doubt on the part of his flock concerning their salvation? It never says that! A pastor who is doing his job assures his people of their faith based on the Scriptures. It is not his job to scare by telling them they are not saved based on their behavior. They may not be living Christian lives but that is a sanctification issue and not a justification issue. If a person articulates facts concerning their faith that call into question their understanding of justification salvation, then it is entirely appropriate to question them concerning what they do or do not believe about Christ and His work. That situation then becomes a justification issue and not a sanctification issue. If they articulate a biblical gospel based on their belief in Christ and His work, then we are dealing with a sanctification issue and our approach to dealing with their problem is different. We don't deal with justification in the same way we deal with experiential sanctification issues.

My position is solidly based on the fact that any person can objectively know, based on the truth of the Scriptures, that they are justified and eternally secure and that is all the assurance anyone needs. MacArthur rejects that doctrine and claims there must be both objective and subjective [based on or influenced by personal feelings, tastes or opinions] evidence of faith in order to be fully assured. When he combines the two, he comes up with his own personally developed guidelines for determining assurance. "The Bible suggests that a well-grounded assurance has both objective and subjective support. The objective ground is *the finished work of Christ on our behalf*, including the promises of Scripture, which have their yea and amen in Him. The subjective ground is *the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in our lives*, including His convicting and sanctifying ministries. Romans 15:4 mentions both aspects of assurance: 'Whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through *perseverance* [subjective] *and the encouragement of the Scriptures* [objective] we might have hope" [John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to the Apostles: The Role of Works in the Life of Faith*, p. 143].

Romans 15:4 ⁴For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance [ὑπομονή, patient waiting] and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

The problem for him is that he abuses this Scripture by misinterpreting it in order to justify his doctrine. The hope Paul is referring to here is not about our hope of justification salvation. The hope Paul is talking about concerns our sanctification. Hodges understands the hope to be "the certain expectation of the Second Coming of Christ and of the establishment of His kingdom" [Zane C. Hodges, *Romans: Deliverance From Wrath*, p. 426]. Even a fellow Lordship salvation advocate disagrees with MacArthur's interpretation. Thomas Schreiner writes, "The experiences of Christ, reflected in the OT, are a pattern and a model for the church. As the prototype he should be imitated....The Scriptures play a vital role in the lives of believers. Not only are they the source of 'instruction,' but also believers derive 'consolation' from them—the word ἰσχυρισμός is a genitive of source. The word 'consolation' here means that believers receive strength and comfort from the Scriptures to continue living in a way that honors God....The purpose of the Scriptures is that believers should have 'hope.'...Hope is generated through carefully reading, understanding, and obeying the OT" [Thomas R. Schreiner, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Romans*, p. 748]. I could not find any other theologian who agrees with MacArthur's interpretation of this verse.

MacArthur's point is the objective truth of the Scriptures concerning justification salvation is not enough to assure us that we have hope. Instead, we have to persevere in order to know we are saved. Our justification salvation is therefore dependent on the

holy, Christian quality of our walk. This is the same type of thinking expressed earlier by Bass when he wrote that we can undergo the divine birth and yet fail to achieve final salvation because we haven't lived the right Christian life. His definition of perseverance is the Calvinist theological definition that says a person's failure to live a holy life or the commission of egregious sins or to otherwise fall short of whatever standard a pastor like MacArthur decides is the standard by which Christians must live proves they are unsaved and therefore have no hope. That is the basis for his interpretation of Romans 15:4. Perseverance, ὑπομονή, means the act or state of patient waiting for someone or something [BDAG]. In this verse, our behavior is not the meaning of perseverance. "Patient waiting" could have been used to interpret this word. Hope, ἐλπίς, means to look forward in confident hope or expectation. It is to look forward to something with some reason for confidence respecting fulfillment. [BDAG] "In the NT these words never indicate a vague or a fearful anticipation, but always the expectation of something good" [*New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, s.v. "ἐλπίς"]. MacArthur is redefining perseverance and hope when he claims that each believer must subjectively examine their walk, identified by the word "perseverance" in this verse, in order to determine whether or not they can possess the hope of justification salvation. The words do not refer to that concept.

The Calvinistic definition of perseverance really causes problems in correctly interpreting 1 John. The doctrine called the perseverance of the saints does not allow for the fact that truly born again people can wilt under persecution and under the general pressure of a sin filled world and fall away. It does not allow for believers to fall into egregious personal sin patterns. It does not allow for anything less than life-long faithfulness. It is all about the believer proving that he is saved and that is how so many theologians interpret 1 John. But 1 John isn't about this issue at all; it's about fellowship within the family of God. "The perseverance of the saints is a major tenet [sic; this should be "tenet"] of Reformed Protestant theology. That, as I pointed out in the introduction to this book, is in contrast to the teaching that denies believers can ever be sure of their salvation in this life. The Bible teaches that the saints will never abandon their faith—that they will always persevere in believing God through every trial until they are glorified. True believers won't believe for a little while and then bail out" [p. 146]. Actually, the Bible doesn't teach this [see 1 Timothy 1:19-20 concerning Hymenaeus and Alexander]; Reformed theology teaches this and it is in error. He is right that the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is a "major" tenet of Reformed theology; the problem is it isn't a tenet of the Bible, at least the not the way they define it.

Concerning this test, is MacArthur's call to obey the Scriptures a good thing? Of course it's a good thing. But is it a test to be used by believers to prove they are truly saved? Of course it isn't. This generates the same kind of doubt that undermines assurance his first two points generated. How much obedience to God's Word is enough to prove

salvation? What about believers who don't know the Word? What about sincere believers who sit under pastors who don't teach the Word? Are they unsaved because they can't obey what they don't know? Along those same lines, how long should new believers be given in order to know the Word so they can obey the Word and thereby prove they are really saved? Who gets to decide what obedience looks like? MacArthur has written the Bible isn't sufficient to accomplish that end. Certainly the Bible sets some behavioral standards but too often we see pastors such as MacArthur evaluating other believer's lives based on their own personal standards rather than on biblical standards. If a believer never studies the Bible to learn those standards, does that prove he is unsaved?

It is difficult to understand how MacArthur can claim a high view of the Scriptures on the one hand and on the other hand dogmatically claim they are insufficient as the basis for providing assurance to the believer. Pentecost presents the proper view of the Scriptures as they are presented in 1 John concerning obedience and fellowship. "'Know him' is more than knowing we are saved, it is knowing that we are abiding in Christ. Obedience, then, determines whether we are in intimate fellowship with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Obedience is the basis of and the prerequisite to the believer's joy....And in the things of God, there can be no peace or contentment until those who are God's own are in subjection to His authority. Since we are by nature rebels, a problem arises. It is that problem of inherent disobedience that John treats in this passage....The test of fellowship with God, then, is what we do in obedience to His instructions in His Word. The believer who loves God wants to please Him and shuns displeasing Him....When we adopt the standards of the world, we will never conform to God's holy demands and joyfully obey His Word. In the midst of the world's inflexible standard is the inflexible standard of the Word of God, revealing the demands of God's absolute holiness. God fellowships with His children on the basis of His unalterable, holy character. 'Thus saith the Lord' is the basis of fellowship and the ground of the believer's joy" [J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Joy of Fellowship: A Study of First John*, pp. 37-40].