
Chapter 5.5

Virtue Apologetics & Assurance of Salvation

The Fruits of the Spirit, Not a "Testimony"

Overall Objective

To demonstrate that supernatural virtue is also the only sufficient proof that we are saved.

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Primary Points

- Contrary to the belief that our personal assurance of salvation rests in some subjective “testimony of the Spirit,” the Bible teaches that such assurance is based on the objective fruits of the Spirit.
- The Apostle John’s intention in 1 John is to teach new believers how to tell if they have been born again, and he repeatedly points to the evidence of love and holiness.
- The Bible emphasizes our love for other Christians more than for others.
- Nonetheless, we would contend that the clearest, most immediate proof of our spiritual regeneration is our *desires*, not our practice.
- For some, the Apostle John’s instruction on the proof of salvation too dogmatic and unqualified. However, we should be careful of watering down his statements.
- While a person living a lifestyle of sin may be a Christian, we have a biblical mandate to lovingly warn them that neither we nor they have reason to believe they are a Christian.
- Christ said that even fakes performing miracles, exorcisms, and prophesying in His name could be exposed by their lack of virtue.
- Several of the Church’s best teachers have supported the view that virtue is our personal proof that we are saved.
- A subjective foundation for our assurance is no foundation because even spirits must be tested objectively.
- An emphasis on some sort of subjective assurance of our salvation has given some an excuse to ignore a lack of objective evidence, leading to a false assurance.

A) Biblical Support for Assurance through Objective Virtue

We are arguing in this book that the ultimate proof that only authentic Christianity saves people from the punishment of God, is their supernatural virtue. How then do we know that we are saved? By the same evidence: supernatural virtue.

Contrary to some who teach that it is *gifts* of the Spirit, such as speaking in tongues, that proves our salvation, we contend that it is the *fruits* of the Spirit (cf. Gal 5:22-26; Col 3:12-15). Against the common teaching of our Roman Catholic and Lutheran brothers that our *water* baptism gives us assurance of our salvation, we would claim that it is the life transformation that comes with *spiritual* baptism (cf. Eph 1:13-14). And against John Calvin (1509–1564) who suggested some inner, subjective feeling of assurance that the Spirit communicates to our spirit, we insist that the real “testimony of the Spirit” to our salvation is the objective, observable virtue that flows out of the born again Christian’s life. ¹

A.1) The Apostle John’s Support of Objective Assurance

It is this very thing that the Apostle John is so eager to explain in his epistle. While the Apostle’s purpose for writing his Gospel was **“that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name”** (21:31), his purpose in 1 John is, **“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).

His goal in his Gospel is the salvation of unbelievers, while his goal for the epistle is assurance for believers. ² While the Apostle John claims in his Gospel that it was Christ’s physical miracles that authenticated Him as the only way of salvation (cf. John 14:6; 20:30), he claims in his epistle that it is our miraculous, objective virtue that proves we have such salvation.

For example, he writes in simple and straightforward terms:

We know that we have come to know Him 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. (1 John 2:3-6)

In other words, the certainty of our salvation rests not in feelings

or subjective revelations from the Spirit, but rather in the objective evidence of our Christ-like virtue. John Stott, in his superb commentary on 1 John, comments on this passage as follows:

The Gnostics in particular laid claim to the knowledge of God. They had been enlightened with the true *gnōsis*. John does not deny the possibility of knowing God, since both the Old Testament and the Gospel promise it (e.g. Jer. 31:34; Jn. 17:3). But he insists that no religious experience is valid if it does not have [objective] moral consequences (cf. Tit, 1:16). It is not the person who claims to be a Christian and to know God who is presumptuous, but the person whose claim is contradicted by his conduct. He is a liar (v. 4).³

The Apostle repeats this truth several times in this short letter. He writes again in chapter 2:

Anyone who claims to be in the light [correctly believing what is necessary for salvation] **but hates his brother is still in the darkness** [i.e. unsaved]. **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.** (1 John 2:9-11)

Granted that the supernatural and superior virtue of Christians proves the truth of Christ, how do we know if we possess the truth of Christ? The Apostle writes:

If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of Him. (1 John 2:29)

No one who lives in Him keeps on 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 . . .

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 3:6-10)

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. (1 John 3:14)

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. (1 John 3:18-20)

Dr. Stott comments regarding these latter verses:

It is implied that we shall be able to do this [be assured of our salvation] only if we know that we belong to the truth. It is the mind's knowledge by which the heart's doubts may be silenced. But how can we know this? What is the meaning of the *this is how* with which the verse begins? . . .

Here (as in 4:6) it seems to refer back to the preceding paragraph about love. It is 'everyone who loves' who 'has been born of God and knows God' (4:7). Love is the final objective test of our Christian profession, for true love, in the sense of self-sacrifice, is not natural to human beings in their fallen state. Its existence in anyone is evidence of new birth and of the indwelling Spirit (3:24; 4:12-13), and it shows itself 'with actions'.

'There are actual things we can point to - not things we have professed or felt or imagined or intended, but things that we have done' (Law). If we thus love 'in truth' (v. 18), we may indeed have full assurance in our hearts. 'The fruit of love is confidence' (Westcott).⁴

The Apostle John also explains why love is the ultimate proof of our standing with God:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." (1 John 4:7-8)

The kind of love that God is requiring can only come from Him, and He only gives it to those who know Him.⁵

Notice the Apostle's focus on loving Christians rather than non-Christians. He says, "**We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers**" (3:14; cf. 2:9-11; 3:12, 15-17; 4:20-21). Make no mistake, the Apostle is referring to Christian brothers, not just a stranger. This is because it is those Christians whom we live and labor with that will sin against us the most, not a stranger. Being kind to strangers is relatively easier than bearing with the weaknesses of Christians in your local church. Cults do the former, only Christians can and will do the latter. Supernatural love is really demonstrated in how we treat other Christians. Nonetheless, R. Alan Cole notes, "This is not a popular view today, for to us it smacks

of 'favoritism,' but there is no question that it is biblical." ⁶ However, Dr. MacArthur correctly points out, "How we treat each other is our greatest attraction to a world seeking love, kindness, and compassion." ⁷

Obviously, in none of these statements is the Apostle implying that a born again Christian cannot sin. First of all, he has already said that to claim sinless perfection is to be deceived (cf. 1:8, 10), and secondly, he has promised that, "**if anybody does sin, we have One Who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One**" (1 John 2:1).

Also, we would contend that the clearest, most immediate proof of our spiritual regeneration is our *desires*, not our practice. It is our *desires* to be holy that change rather powerfully and immediately when real conversion occurs, because we immediately receive "**a new heart and . . . a new spirit**" (Ezek 36:26), which is Christ's own heart and Spirit because He has come to live inside of us. However, while our *desires* change rather powerfully and immediately, it will require our whole Christian life for our consistent *practice* to catch up. God changes our desires radically and instantly at conversion, but we still need to, "**be transformed by the renewing of [the beliefs of our] mind**" (Rom 12:2) so that we more consistently practice what we desire.

Therefore, it is not our fluctuating performance which we should base our assurance of salvation on, but our ardent, abiding, enormous hatred of sin in our lives. This is precisely what is illustrated in the life of the Apostle Paul in Romans 7:14-25. His struggle with sin in him, *even after over 20 years of being an Apostle of Jesus Christ*, ⁸ was very real. ⁹ But even more real was his great hatred for that sin. He wrote:

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. . . . As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. . . . So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Rom 7:15-25)

Do you sense the passionate "**hate**" for indwelling sin in the Apostle's words? It was not the absence of sin that alone demonstrated the Apostle possessed the Holy Spirit, but his great desire to be holy. Accordingly, it is not only the victories over sin that

prove our salvation, but the very fact that we are **"waging war"** against it at all, tells us the Holy Spirit lives in us.

So much so that the Apostle recognized that, in a sense, **"it is no longer I myself who do"** the sins he hated, but the sinful habits and lies still operating in the unrenewed parts of his mind. On the contrary, he said, **"in my inner being [my real regenerated self] I delight in God's law,"** which is something the unregenerate will *never* do. And it is that very **"delight"** in obeying God, and our passionate hatred for sin, that will inevitably result in the practically holier life that the Apostle John describes so clearly.¹⁰

The Apostle John's concern, then, is not the struggle with a sin here and there that all Christians experience. Rather, he is writing of the habitual and persistent pursuit, practice, and even pleasure of sins against God and our conscience. Christians do not habitually practice sin, do not persistently pursue it, and certainly do not enjoy living in it. This is what makes us radically and miraculously different than we were before our rebirth, and from the rest of the world who are still **"all under sin"** (Rom 3:9).

One could hardly make our point better than the renowned NT scholar F. F. Bruce (1910-1990) who wrote concerning the kind of assurance of salvation taught in 1 John:

Whatever high claims may be made by one who indulges in sin, that indulgence is sufficient proof that he has no personal knowledge of Christ. . . . [T]he new birth involves a radical change in human nature; for those who have not experienced it, sin is natural, whereas for those who have experienced it, sin is unnatural—so unnatural, indeed, that its practice constitutes a powerful refutation of any claim to possess the divine life.¹¹

Some may find the Apostle John's instruction on the proof of salvation too dogmatic and unqualified. However, we should be careful of watering down his statements. Of course, theoretically, one could **"not do what He [Christ] commands,"** be one who **"hates his brother,"** and **"one who continues to sin" and still be a Christian, even though the Apostle says they would be "a liar," "still in darkness,"** and have never **"known Him"** (1 John 2:4, 9; 3:6). Perhaps a real born again Christian could live for an extended period of time in a hateful, sinful lifestyle, although we doubt it. For certain they would be miserable, and if not, then they truly would have no basis to believe they belong to Christ.

And this is the Apostle John's point. We doubt he intended to exclude all possibility that there could be someone whom God knows is a Christian, but whose life is so barren of holy, virtuous fruit at the moment, that to a discerning human it would not seem so. While as mere human beings we cannot be dogmatic about the true spiritual state of another human being, the Apostle John *was* dogmatic that if

agapē love and holiness are not characteristic of a person's life, then they are a liar to claim they are a Christian. At the very least then, we can compassionately tell a sinful and selfish professor of Christianity that while they may be a born again Christian, neither we nor they have any reason to believe they are. And this is why throughout Scripture, those who claim to know Christ are encouraged to, "**be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure**" (2 Pet 2:10; cf. Phil 2:12; Heb 3:7-19; 6:1-12; 10:26-39). Therefore, a more consistent application of *virtue apologetics* would helpfully expose more of the many merely professing Christians, perhaps relieving them of their self-deception as to their true spiritual state.

A.2) Jesus' Support of Objective Assurance

And this was not only the teaching of the Apostle John. The King had made the same claim in His Sermon on the Mount (cf. Matt 7:21-27). He described people doing all sorts of things even in His "**name**" including prophesying, exorcisms, and miracles. And yet, "**many**" of these very kind of people were unsaved "**evil doers**." It was in this context that Christ said, "**Not everyone who [merely] says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only he who does the [moral] will of My Father Who is in Heaven.**"

Christ went on to compare two kinds of people. There are those who "**hear these words of mine and put them into practice,**" and therefore, have a saving faith that will "**not fall.**" But there are those who "**hear these words of mine and do not put them into practice**" and therefore have a "faith" "**built . . . on sand**" which will, at some point, "**fall with a great crash.**" For Christ, it was obedience to His word that tested the legitimacy of a person's salvation (cf. Matt 13:18-23; John 15:1-8).

A.3) The Apostle Paul's Support of Objective Assurance

In addition, we may note here that this was precisely the Apostle Paul's point in relating the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5. In verse six he states clearly that, "**The only thing that counts [for possessing and claiming salvation] is faith expressing itself through love.**" As Dr. Stott puts it here, "the faith which saves is a faith which works, a faith which issues in love,"¹² and a love that can be objectively observed.

While throughout Galatians 5 the Apostle is certainly speaking of the internal moral battle that occurs between the "**sinful nature**" and "**the Spirit**" (Gal. 5:17) in the life of the believer, he also makes it clear in the passage that the objective "fruit" of the Spirit is the

evidence that a person is **"not under law"** (v. 18, i.e. saved) and that they **"belong to Christ Jesus"** (v. 24).

On the other hand, those who do not bear the fruit of the Spirit, but by default, exhibit the **"acts of the sinful nature"** (v. 19) prove their damned state because, as the Apostle says, **"I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God"** (v. 21).¹³ No amount of subjective, peaceful, self-affirming feelings about one's relationship and standing with God can, or should, make up for a lack of the objective moral evidence of one's life.

Accordingly, the Apostle Paul testifies in Acts, **"First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds"** (Acts 26:20). This is why he told the Romans: **"Through Him and for His name's sake, we received grace and Apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the [moral] obedience that comes from [saving] faith"** (Rom 1:5). *Saving faith* will result in obedience to God and prove our salvation.

Having Christ in us is to be saved, and the Christ in us will show Himself. Paul wrote the Corinthians: **"You show that you are a letter from Christ . . . known and read by everybody . . . written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts"** (2 Cor 3:2-3).

Like the Apostle John in his epistle, the Apostle Paul reminds us that supernatural virtue is what the confidence of our salvation is based on when he says, **"Those [deacons] who have served well gain . . . great assurance [parrēsian] in their [saving] faith in Christ Jesus"** (1 Tim 3:13).¹⁴

B) Historical Support for Assurance through Objective Virtue

While there has been considerable support for Calvin's rather mystical view of the testimony of the Spirit, we would suggest there is equal or greater historical support for the more objective view that Spirit-produced virtue is the true testimony of the Spirit to our salvation. St. Augustine (354-430) put it this way, in the context of what proves we have received the Holy Spirit:

When we laid the hand on these infants, did each one of you look to see whether they would speak with tongues, and, when he saw that they did not speak with tongues, was any of you so wrong-minded as to say, "These have not received the Holy Ghost." . . . If then the witness of the presence of the Holy

Ghost be not now given through these miracles, by what is it given, by what does one get to know that he has received the Holy Ghost? Let him question his own heart. If he love his brother, the Spirit of God dwelleth in him. ¹⁵

Elsewhere Augustine said, "Now whosoever has not charity is wicked, because this gift alone of the Holy Ghost distinguishes the children of the kingdom from the children of perdition." ¹⁶

From there, as with a lot of theology, we fast-forward to Martin Luther (1483-1546) who wrote:

Faith . . . is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God, John 1[:12-13]. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men, in heart and spirit and mind and powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit. It is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever. ¹⁷

Likewise, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) completely rejected John Calvin's idea of a mystical, subjective testimony of the Spirit to our salvation. As Dr. Bloesch relates, "For Jonathan Edwards Christian [moral] practice is the cardinal sign that we have been endowed with the Spirit," ¹⁸ in distinction from some subjective action of the Spirit. Accordingly, in the conclusion of Edwards' massive study on this very subject, *Religious Affections*, and after rejecting many other approaches to the assurance of salvation, including the subjective doctrine of a "testimony of the Spirit," he writes:

I shall consider Christian practice and holy life, as a manifestation and sign of the sincerity of a professing Christian, to the eye of his neighbors and brethren. . . . And that this is the chief sign of grace in this respect, is very evident from the word of God. [Christ taught] men's fruits must be the chief evidence of what sort they are . . . so it is the evidence that Christ has mainly directed us to give to others, whereby they may judge of us: Matt. 5:16. . . . Doubtless, when Christ gives us a rule how to make our light shine, that others may have evidence of it, his rule is the best that is to be found. . . . Thus it is plain, that Christian practice is the best sign or manifestation of the true godliness of a professing Christian, to the eye of his neighbors. . .

Christian practice is plainly spoken of in the word of God, as the main evidence of the truth of grace, not only to others, but to men's own consciences. It is not only more spoken of and

insisted on than other signs, but in many places where it is spoken of, it is represented as the chief of all evidences. . . .

Another thing which makes it evident, that holy practice is the chief of all the signs of the sincerity of professors, not only to the world, but to their own consciences, is, that this is the grand evidence which will hereafter be made use of, before the judgment seat of God; according to which his judgment will be regulated, and the state of every professor of religion unalterably determined [cf. Matt 25:31-46]. . . .

Now from all that has been said, I think it to be abundantly manifest, that Christian practice is the most proper evidence of the gracious sincerity of professors, to themselves and others; and the chief of all the marks of grace, the sign of signs, and evidence of evidences, that which seals and crowns all other signs. . . .

Another thing which makes it evident, that holy practice is the principal evidence that we ought to make use of in judging both of our own and others' sincerity [in claiming to be a Christian], is, that this evidence is above all others insisted on in Scripture. A common acquaintance with the Scripture, together with a little attention and observation, will be sufficient to show to anyone that this is ten times more insisted on as a note of true piety, throughout the Scripture, from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelations, than anything else. . . .

And for us to make that great which the Scripture makes little, and that little which the Scripture makes great, tends to give us a monstrous idea of religion; and (at least indirectly and gradually) to lead us wholly away from the right rule, and from a right opinion of ourselves, and to establish delusion and hypocrisy. . . . Christian practice is plainly spoken of in the word of God, as the main evidence of the truth of grace, not only to others, but to men's own consciences.¹⁹

Presbyterian theologian Donald Bloesch also notes that elements of Puritanism and Pietism rejected the subjective view of the Spirit's testimony to our salvation:

[O]ne of the major debates in Puritanism revolved around the assurance of salvation. Whereas the Reformers taught that faith itself brings assurance, the Puritans . . . encouraged believers to look for signs and evidences that attest the genuineness of their commitment to Christ. . . .

While orthodox Lutherans gained their security by looking back to their baptism, the Pietists underlined the need for a new experience, a new regeneration. . . . [They insisted that] our salvation is meaningless unless it produces fruits of obedience that attest whether we belong to Christ. . . . In contrast to

Lutheran orthodoxy Zinzendorf [1700–1760, a foremost leader of Pietism] held that saving faith includes the impetus to love. "Even if one believes, yet he will not be saved, if he does not love. . . . There is no saving faith which is not simultaneously love for Him who laid down His life for us." ²⁰

We think Scripture proves Zinzendorf right.

C) The Superiority of *Virtue Apologetics* for the Assurance of Our Salvation

The first problem with making some subjective action of the Spirit the bedrock assurance of our salvation is that it is just that: subjective. NT scholar Thomas Schreiner, Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, writes that this supposed action of the Spirit is:

a religious experience that is ineffable, for the witness of the Holy Spirit with the human spirit that one is a child of God is mystical in the best sense of the word. ²¹

While we have a great deal of respect for Dr. Schreiner, we must confess that calling something "mystical" is often simply an attempt to put a spiritual spin on nothing more than a feelings-oriented, and therefore, unreliable experience. As we have discussed thoroughly throughout *Knowing Our God*, we were created to trust facts, not feelings, or even spirits.

Accordingly, we read in 1 John: "**Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God**" (4:1). And how else can we test such things except by objective means, rather than subjective ones? And this is precisely what the Apostle prescribes when he writes: "**This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God**" (4:2). ²²

Secondly, an emphasis on some sort of subjective assurance of our salvation has given some an excuse to ignore a lack of objective evidence, leading to a false assurance. For example, the NT scholar Everett F. Harrison writes in the popular *Expositor's Bible Commentary*:

A comparison of [Romans 8:]15 and 16 will bring out an important truth concerning the assurance of salvation. All too often a believer may come to the point of doubting his salvation because his sanctification has proceeded so slowly and so lamely. The Spirit, however, does not base his assuring testimony on progress or the lack of it in the Christian life. ²³

Dr. Harrison and others seem to forget that it was this very lack of holiness that prompted the Apostle to exhort the Corinthians: **“Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves”** (2 Cor 13:5). And the test was not to see whether or not they *felt* like they were Christians, but whether or not they were *acting* like Christians (cf. 2 Cor 12:20-13:11). Such an approach to the work of the Spirit in assuring us of our salvation can serve to give many a false assurance.²⁴

Here we are reminded of the King’s sobering words when He said: **“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only he who does the will of My Father Who is in Heaven. ²²Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ ²³Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from Me, you evildoers!’** (Matt 7:21-23)

There is little doubt that such people could have professed to an internal, reassuring sense in their spirit that they had a personal relationship with Christ. What is also certain is that they did not possess the fruits of the Spirit in a sincere and supernatural manner. It is just this kind of horrible deception that can be encouraged by the teaching of the “testimony of the Spirit” to our salvation.

One wonders if the reason for commonly suggesting our assurance of salvation depends on something other than objective evidence, is to give a sorry excuse for the multitude of people who claim to be born-again Christians but do not live like it. It is unfortunate that such a doctrine has given such people warrant to muster up their own internal and faulty confidence and ignore the real evidence exhibited in the way they love, talk, and think. Such a position is not only unbiblical, but also not helpful for the Christian, and dangerous to the Church.

The perspective of Edwards and Augustine is so desperately needed in a world in which so many claim to be Christians, and then stain the name of Christ by being sinful. The result is that the high and holy calling of Christian means nothing because a multitude of obviously unregenerated people are claiming it and being allowed to do so. The Church is so eager to add to its numbers, make it easy to become a “Christian,” and not offend, that it is reluctant to promote supernatural virtue as the real sign of being worthy to call oneself a Christian. The result is perhaps the world likes us more, but we have abandoned the example of our Savior Who called His followers to radical virtue, cared much for spiritual maturity, and very little about numerical quantity, and reserved His strongest rebukes for those who claimed a relationship with God but did not live like it.²⁵

Accordingly, John Wesley (1703–1791) warned of such self-deceit when he wrote: “How many have mistaken the voice of their own

imagination for the witness of the Spirit of God, and then idly presumed they were the children of God while they were doing the works of the devil." ²⁶

Likewise, Wesley's contemporary during the Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards wrote:

Here it may be proper to observe, that it is exceedingly manifest from what has been said, that what many persons call the witness of the Spirit, that they are the children of God, has nothing in it spiritual and divine; and consequently that the affections built upon it are vain and delusive. That which many call the witness of the Spirit, is no other than an immediate suggestion and impression of that fact, otherwise secret, that they are converted, or made the children of God, and so that their sins are pardoned, and that God has given them a title to heaven. . . .

What has misled many in their notion of that influence of the Spirit of God we are speaking of, is the word *witness*, its being called the witness of the Spirit. Hence they have taken it, not to be any effect or work of the Spirit upon the heart, giving [objective] evidence, from whence men may argue that they are the children of God; but an inward immediate suggestion, as though God inwardly spoke to the man, and testified to him, and told him that he was his child, by a kind of a secret voice, or impression: not observing the manner in which the word witness, or testimony, is often used in the New Testament, where such terms often signify, not only a mere declaring and asserting a thing to be true, but holding forth evidence from whence a thing may be argued, and proved to be true.

Thus Heb. 2:4, God is said to "bear witness, with signs and wonders and divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost." Now these miracles, here spoken of, are called God's witness, not because they are of the nature of assertions, but evidences and proofs. . . .

Many have been the mischiefs that have arisen from that false and delusive notion of the witness of the Spirit, that it is a kind of inward voice, suggestion, or declaration from God to man, that he is beloved of him, and pardoned, elected, or the like, sometimes with, and sometimes without a text of Scripture; and many have been the false and vain (though very high) affections that have arisen from hence. And it is to be feared that multitudes of souls have been eternally undone by it. ²⁷

Those are true and sobering words that would not seem to be heeded enough by those who promote the doctrine of the "testimony of the Spirit" to the assurance of our salvation.

A third problem with such an approach to assurance is that it becomes difficult to explain why many Christians do not have it. If it is a universal work of the Spirit on behalf of Christians then why doesn't the Spirit assure all Christians of their salvation? Is it because they lose the Spirit, or it somehow stops "talking" to them? If it is suggested that sin can hinder the assurance of the Spirit, then we would suggest we are right back to the objective tests of salvation that we support. Which would seem to be exactly what William Craig, a proponent of the "testimony" to our assurance, is saying when he remarks, "Only as we walk in the fullness of the Spirit can we be guaranteed the assurance of which Paul speaks."²⁸

Finally, resting the epistemological foundation of the genuineness and exclusivity of our Christian faith on something as elusive, subjective, mystical, and private as some "testimony of the Spirit," guts the Christian faith from its most important proof for its superiority over other faiths. What would keep anyone from claiming the same "testimony," when objective virtue is deliberately excluded as a test of it, and it is defined as merely a subjective, mystical "feeling" of assurance that one is in a right relationship with God? This is yet another reason we promote *virtue apologetics* and the claim that the objective, supernatural virtue of the indwelling Spirit is the ultimate and universal proof of the exclusivity of salvation through Christ.

Pastoral Practices

- Because many in the Corinthian church were not living up to the moral standards of authentic Christianity, Paul instructed them at the end of 2 Corinthians to, "**Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you--unless, of course, you fail the test?**" (2 Cor 13:5). Paul was exhorting them to evaluate the spiritual fruit in their lives to demonstrate that Christ was indeed living in them. We would like to suggest that you do the same for a moment. Not because the authenticity of your Christianity is in question, but rather, to really experience *virtue apologetics* for yourself.

Compare yourself to who you were before the time you believe your spiritual rebirth occurred. Or consider the life of the typical unbeliever in your neighborhood, classroom, or work place. Are you more loving? Are your motives different? Do you demonstrate the fruits of the Spirit more than you did before, and more than your relatives, co-workers, and friends who do not have the Holy Spirit? We believe such an exercise will prove our point, and be a helpful reminder that you have in fact been regenerated and sealed with the Holy Spirit for eternal life.

- It is important to teach our people a biblical perspective on assurance of salvation. This was the Apostle John's purpose in 1 John and it should be one of our purposes as well. Teaching the biblical perspective of the Apostle can help those real Christians who are unnecessarily struggling with assurance, and help merely religious people in your congregation realize they do not have the Holy Spirit or the Savior. Challenging people to more honestly look at the objective fruit of the Holy Spirit in their lives will be a good thing.

Extras & Endnotes

Gauging Your Grasp

- 1) What are some references in 1 John to the fact that virtue proves our salvation?
- 2) We claim that Scripture prioritizes love among believers to demonstrate its supernatural nature. Do you agree? If this is true, why would it be?
- 3) How should we respond to someone who claims to be a Christian but is living a lifestyle of sin?
- 4) What did Christ say would expose even fakes performing miracles, exorcisms, and prophesying in His name?
- 5) What are the dangers of placing our assurance of salvation on something as subjective as an inward "testimony of the Spirit"

Recommended Reading

- For further discussion regarding John Calvin's "testimony of the Spirit" and a refutation of the Scriptures used to support it, see chapter 3.4.

Publications & Particulars

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- ¹ For further discussion regarding the “testimony of the Spirit” and our assurance of salvation see chapter 3.6.
- ² Dr. Stott remarks regarding the central subject of John’s epistles:
 The predominant theme of these letters is Christian certainty. Their characteristic verbs are *ginōskein*, 'to perceive' (twenty-five times) and *eidenai*, 'to know' (fifteen times), while a characteristic noun is *parrisia*, 'confidence of attitude' or 'boldness of speech'. The certainty of Christian people is twofold - objective (that the Christian religion is true) and subjective (that they themselves have been born of God and possess eternal life). Both are expounded by John, who takes it for granted that this double assurance is right and healthy. His teaching about these certainties, their nature and the grounds on which they are built, urgently needs to be heard and heeded today. . . . A fresh certainty about Christ and about eternal life, based upon the grounds which John gives, can still lead Christian people into that boldness of approach to God and of testimony to the world which is as sorely needed as it is sadly missing in the church today. (*Letters of John, (TNTC)* [Eerdmans, 1988], 56, 60)
- ³ Stott, *Letters*, 95.
- ⁴ Stott, *Letters*, 149.
- ⁵ For a discussion of 1 John 3:18-4:2; 4:13; and 5:6-11, which some claim would support a subjective, mystical “testimony of the Spirit” see chapter 3.4.
- ⁶ R. Alan Cole, *The Letter of Paul to the Galatians (TNTC)* (Eerdmans, 1989), 231.
- ⁷ John MacArthur, *MacArthur’s New Testament Commentary*, Electronic Edition STEP Files CD-ROM (Parsons Technology, 1997), Gal 6:10.
- ⁸ NT scholar and Pauline expert F. F. Bruce dates the Apostle’s conversion in A. D. 33 and the writing of Romans in A. D. 57. (“Paul the Apostle,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (ISBE)*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley ed., 4 vols., [Eerdmans, 1988], III:699, 709)
- ⁹ There is a great deal of debate regarding whether or not the Apostle is speaking of a regenerated believer in Romans 7:15-23. In the end, identical language in Galatians 5:16-17, which seems most clearly to refer to the internal moral struggle of believers, provides strong evidence for our position that the Apostle is speaking of the same thing in Romans. For further discussion see 7.?
- ¹⁰ Many will feel that the Apostle John’s rather dogmatic and unqualified statements must be balanced with the honest warning of the Apostle Paul:
What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each His task. ⁶ I planted the seed [the church in Corinth], Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor

he who waters is anything, but only God, Who makes things grow. ⁸ **The man who plants and the man who waters** [the local church] **have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor.** ⁹ **For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building** [a local church].

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation [planted the local church in Corinth] **as an expert builder, and someone else** [another pastor/teacher] **is building on it. But each one** [pastor/teacher] **should be careful how he builds** [the local church].

¹¹ **For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.**

¹² **If any man** [pastor/teacher] **builds** [the local church] **on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw,**

¹³ **his** [pastoral/teaching] **work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's** [pastoral/teaching] **work.** ¹⁴ **If what he has built** [specifically regarding the local church] **survives, he will receive his reward.** ¹⁵

If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames. (1 Cor 3:10-15)

First, it is important to notice that the context here specifically regards those involved in ministry, like a Paul or Apollos (vs. 5-9), and the **"work"** being evaluated is specifically their efforts to **"build"** the local church. As NT scholar Gordon Fee puts it:

This text . . . is neither a challenge to the individual believer to build his or her life well on the foundation of Christ, nor is it grist for theological debate [e.g. a proof text for purgatory]. Rather, it is one of the most significant passages in the NT that warn--and encourage--those responsible for "building" the church of Christ. In the final analysis, of course, this includes all believers, but it has particular relevance, following so closely as it does vv. 5-9, to those with teaching/leadership responsibilities. (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians (NICNT)* [Eerdmans, 1987], 145)

Likewise, Charles Hodge wrote concerning 1 Corinthians 3:15:

The apostle is here speaking of those teachers who, although they retain the fundamental doctrines of the gospel, yet combine them with error. This is plain from v. 12, "If any man shall build on this foundation." It is not enough, therefore, that a minister hold fast to fundamental truth; he must take heed what he teaches in connection with that truth. If he mingles with it the wood, hay and stubble of his own philosophy, he will find himself a loser on the day of judgment. (*Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, online at ccel.org; cf. Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament*, Electronic Edition STEP Files CD-ROM [Findex.Com, 1999]; Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [Eerdmans, 2000], 296; contra Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians* [Eerdmans, 1985], and John MacArthur. C. K. Barrett apparently has no specific opinion, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [Hendrickson, 2000])

Accordingly, we are reminded of the warning in James: **"Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that**

we who teach will be judged more strictly (James 3:1). Evidently, the King will more rigorously evaluate the work of Pastors and Teachers on that Day, specifically how Christ-centered their teaching and philosophy of ministry was.

Nonetheless, such a truth need not be seen as a correction of the biblical expectation that all born again Christians will bear significant and recognizable amounts of virtuous fruit. In other words, isn't it possible for a minister to exhibit the fruits of love and holiness in his personal life, but allow false doctrine and worldly wisdom to influence how he proceeds to teach, grow and lead the local church? We think so, and this is specifically what the Apostle Paul is speaking of.

Accordingly, NT scholar Anthony Thiselton writes:

The argument [of 1 Cor 3:5-17] flows on from what has been established in 1:18-3:4 [the dichotomy between Christ-centered wisdom and worldly wisdom]. . . . The background contrast between "two wisdoms" . . . provide two evaluative frames of reference within which assessments of ministers, the ministry, and ministerial activity appear in very different lights. (296)

Along the same lines, Dr. Fee explains:

It is unfortunately possible for people to attempt to build the church out of every imaginable human system predicated on merely worldly wisdom, be it philosophy, "pop" psychology, managerial techniques, relational "good feelings," or what have you. But at the final judgment, all such building (and perhaps countless other forms, where systems have become more important than the gospel itself) will be shown for what it is: something merely human, with no character of Christ or his gospel in it. Often, of course, the test may come this side of the final one, and in such an hour of stress that which has been built of modern forms of *sophia* [wisdom] usually comes tumbling down. (144)

Therefore, 1 Corinthians 3:5-15 is not a clear statement that we can expect genuine believers in general to live a life that bears so little fruit of the Holy Spirit living in them, that in the end, they have virtually nothing to show for it. On the contrary, the Apostle's focus here is on one particular type of Christian work, that of pastors and teachers building the local church. Even the imagery of "**escaping from the flames**" seems to refer to the metaphorical building, which is the local church, being spoken of throughout the passage, and what specifically is burning then is that work, or the building (as a noun and verb), of a local church.

¹¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Eerdmans, 1970), 90, 92.

¹² John Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Intervarsity, 1994), 134.

¹³ Unfortunately, Dr. Stott would seem to take the view that Paul's discussion only regards those Christians who are in bondage to sin and those living in liberty, and their internal struggle between the Spirit and the flesh (145-54). Accordingly, he does not even address the meaning of Paul's references to being "**under the law**" (v. 18, cf. v. 23). Dr. Cole takes the same position, suggesting that "**under the law**" does not even apply to the Mosaic law. (209) The internal moral struggle of the Christian is obviously part of Paul's thought (cf. 5:17), but the Apostle goes beyond that to claim

that those who “**are led by the Spirit . . . are not under law**” (v. 18) and that those who really live in the flesh, “**will not inherit the kingdom of God**” (v. 21). The bondage that Paul is most concerned about in this chapter and throughout the epistle is to the Mosaic law, which leaves one “**under a curse**” (3:10) and “**alienated from Christ**” (5:4). It is living in the power of the Spirit, producing His fruits, that proves we are no longer under that law and are saved.

R. N. Longenecker seems to recognize that Paul is addressing two issues in this passage when he comments:

Paul sets out his lists of vices and virtues in order to highlight his two conclusions: (1) that “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (v 24), and so cannot live in a libertine fashion; and (2) that “since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit” (v 25), thereby expressing “the fruit of the Spirit” in our lives. (*Galatians (WBC)* [Nelson, 1990], 249; cf. 246-7)

- ¹⁴ There is a great deal of debate as to what Paul meant regarding a “**great assurance [parrēsia] in their faith in Christ Jesus**” (1 Tim 3:13). While we relate it to a confidence before God, most others apply it to a boldness in speech (cf. TEV, Calvin, MacArthur). Some allow for both meanings rather simultaneously (cf. George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles (NIGTC)* [Eerdmans, 1992], 174; John Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus* [Intervarsity, 1996], 102).

NT scholar Gordon Fee relates the options and leans toward our own view when he writes:

The meaning of this last phrase [in 1 Timothy 3] is not entirely clear. The word for great assurance often conveys the sense of having boldness or openness toward others (cf. 2 Cor. 3:12; Phil. 1:20; Philem. 8; cf. also GNB). But the word can also refer to one's “confidence” before God, as in Ephesians 3:12 (cf. Heb. 10:19, 35). Hence the NIV translates **great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus**.

This is not an easy decision. On the one hand, it would add a further dimension to what it means to have good standing, namely, the confidence in speech that comes from soundness in life and work. On the other hand, it could refer to the double nature of the “reward;” namely, a good reputation with other people and confidence before God. On the whole, the latter is to be preferred, because the qualifying prepositional phrase says “in **faith**” (not in *the faith*), implying, as throughout 1 Timothy, one's own **faith in Christ**. (*1 and 2 Timothy, Titus (NIBC)* [Hendrickson, 1988], 89-90)

The primary support for interpreting Paul here as referring to a boldness in speech is that this is what *parrēsia* literally means (*pan*, all, *rhēsis*, speech: “freedom of speech”). Accordingly, this is how it is used throughout Acts (cf. noun: 2:29; 4:13, 29, 31; 28:31; verb: 9:27f.; 13:46; 14:3; 18:26; 19:8; 26:26).

However, as with any language, it was common for the literal meanings of classical Greek words to change to more popular meanings over the centuries, and these may not have much relationship to the word's original etymology. Thus, throughout the NT, *parrēsia* is used in ways that have

nothing to do with speech at all (cf. 1 John 2:28; 3:21; 4:17; 5:14; Eph 3:12; Heb 3:6; 4:16; 10:18-19, 35; Job 22:26; 27:10 in LXX).

Finally, we believe the context of Paul's statement favors our view that he is speaking of an assurance of salvation, rather than a boldness of speech. First, Paul clearly says this confidence relates to a deacon's personal "**faith in Christ**," and says nothing here about boldness of speech at all. Secondly, public speaking as in evangelism or teaching would not seem to be a primary expectation of first century deacons, but rather practical service. Finally, Paul is stating the rewards of service and assurance of salvation would certainly be more valuable than boldness of speech.

Accordingly, Albert Barnes commented:

As it is here connected with "faith" . . . it means, evidently, not so much public speaking, [but] as a manly and independent exercise of faith in Christ. The sense is, that by the faithful performance of the duties of the office of a deacon, and by the kind of experience which a man would have in that office, he would establish a character of firmness in the faith, which would show that he was a decided Christian. This passage, therefore, cannot be fairly used to prove that the deacon was "a preacher," or that he belonged to a grade of ministerial office from which he was regularly to rise to that of a presbyter. (*Barnes' Notes on the New Testament*, Electronic Edition STEP Files CD-ROM [Findex.Com, 1999], *in loc.*).

¹⁵ Augustine, *Homily on the Epistle of St. John*, 6.10; online at www.ccel.org.

¹⁶ Augustine, *The Trinity*, xv, 18; online at www.ccel.org.

¹⁷ Martin Luther, "Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, Timothy Lull ed., (Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 101.

¹⁸ Bloesch, 55.

¹⁹ Edwards, II.12.

²⁰ Bloesch, 115, 119.

²¹ Schreiner, 503.

²² For all of Dr. Bloesch's support of a mystical assurance from the Spirit, he seems to end up agreeing with us that the ultimate test must be objective. He writes:

I believe that the final authority for the Johannine writer is the paradoxical unity of Word and Spirit, since he appeals both to the witness of objective history that is mediated by church tradition and to the interior witness of the Spirit. The continuing witness and developing tradition of the apostolic church needs to be illumined by the Spirit if it is to have final or ultimate authority for faith. At the same time, John is not espousing subjectivism, for the spirits must be tested (I Jn 4:1-2). (316)

First of all, we have argued especially in chapter 3.7 that the Apostle never "appeals . . . to the interior witness of the Spirit." Secondly, it would seem even Dr. Bloesch recognizes the inadequacy of such a subjective criteria and ends up with an objective one which is the kind the Apostle prescribes in

order to test the spirits.

²³ Everett F. Harrison, "Romans," Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. CD-ROM (Zondervan, n.d.), *loc. cit.* For further discussion of the proper interpretation of Romans 8:15-16 see section ?

²⁴ For further discussion of the proper interpretation of Romans 8:15-16 see section 3.6.

²⁵ For further discussion of *saving faith* and *false faith* see chapter 6.6.

²⁶ Reference unavailable.

²⁷ Edwards, II.1.10-11.

²⁸ Craig, 31.