

SOTERIOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF GOD

PART 62

1 JOHN: RELATIONSHIP OR FELLOWSHIP?

1 John: relationship or fellowship? Many theologians use 1 John as a book to train people to “know” they are saved. But is that what 1 John is all about? If 1 John is dealing with relationship, then the subject is justification salvation, but if it is dealing with fellowship then the subject is sanctification salvation. The difference is huge and it affects how we think about salvation. If 1 John is about justification salvation, then the book is about faith plus works and it directs us into a life of introspection and subjective examinations of our walk in order to assure us of our eternal life. On the other hand, if the book is about fellowship, then it directs us to walk in the Light and when we stumble we aren't proving unbelief. Instead, when that happens, John is telling us that the Lord has made a way for us to be restored to fellowship with the Lord who died for us.

“One book in the Bible was written for the express purpose of addressing the assurance of our salvation. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the New Testament book of 1 John was included in the Scriptures with this need in mind. With apostolic authority coupled with pastoral care, John wrote this book to assist you in discerning if you are truly a Christian. By this I do not mean a Christian in name only. Anyone can take the name of Christ and identify himself outwardly with the Lord Jesus, yet inwardly not be born again, just as anyone can buy a Dallas Cowboys sweatshirt or jersey and wear it in public, yet not be on the active roster of the Dallas Cowboys. Almost anyone can have the outward association if they so desire, but relatively few know the inward reality of actually being on the Lord's team. The purpose of 1 John is to help you and me determine, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, whether or not we are genuine children of God. Am I a true believer or merely a make-believer? Am I a contender or only a pretender?” [Steven J. Lawson, *Absolutely Sure: Settle the Question of Eternal Life*, pp. 20-21].

Doesn't this sound so good? Doesn't it sound so pious and so Christian? But it isn't; it's deadly. His analogy with the Dallas Cowboys is completely misleading. What does it take to be a Dallas Cowboy football player? It takes hard work. You work your way onto the roster of a professional football team, or any football team for that matter. Belief is the operative factor that makes one a Christian; trying to work your way into Christ, defeats Christianity. Fans who wear a football jersey do not believe they are actually football players. This analogy is in direct contrast to those who believe in Christ alone and do no work whatsoever to be saved. In terms of philosophy, this man is basing his argument on logical fallacies. He is employing reasoning by analogy by

comparing two items with each other, but the items he is comparing are not comparable. His analogy is false and it has no factual basis at all. What he is actually resorting to is called manipulative propaganda. In the end, he is presenting a gospel of faith plus works.

Most of the pastors/theologians who teach the doctrine of assurance from 1 John do so in an attempt to ease the conscience of those in their flock who are struggling with their personal eternal security. But is that the end result of what they are doing? Instead of simply assuring people they have eternal life based on their faith in the person and work of Christ Jesus, they direct them to examine their life concerning personal sins and good works. The end result is people are driven into even deeper despair than at the beginning!

The foundation for this error is the failure of many pastors, teachers, and theologians to distinguish between justification salvation and sanctification salvation. "...[T]he assurance of one's salvation is an issue that individual Christians have wrestled with in virtually every generation since the inception of the church. Surely this is due to the fact that believers, who have taken the Scriptures seriously, have been confronted with passages that offer assurance of eternal life as well as those that bid them to test themselves or even warn them of the perils of falling away. After querying such texts, many ponder whether they can truly be assured that they have been born of God and whether this divine birth will result in final salvation whereby the believer will have eternal life ([1 John] 5:13)"[Christopher D. Bass, *That You May Know: Assurance of Salvation in 1 John*, p. 1]. It is true that people have struggled with the concepts of assurance and eternal security almost from the beginning of the church, but why is that? It's because early on people began demanding behavioral standards from people in order to prove their salvation was true and real. The concept of grace was almost obliterated early in church history. Because the difference between justification and sanctification was confused, people became confused when they read Scriptures that referred to sanctification as though they referred to justification. Notice this pastor wrote that people can experience the "divine birth" and yet fail to achieve what he called "final salvation." No one can fail to achieve final salvation if they have been born again. He relies on 1 John 5:13 for this statement, but what does that Scripture really say?

1 John 5:13 ¹³These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

The only test for determining the new birth is belief. "The words 'these things' refer not to the entire epistle but to vv 6-12. This near reference is consistent with John's style elsewhere in the letter....Every believer knows at the point of saving faith that he has

eternal life, because the promises he believes guarantees it. But the believer is not immune to doubts after he is saved. The antidote to such doubts is always God's promises. These promises can be referred to repeatedly as a fresh source of assurance. No book of the Bible contains more of these straight-forward guarantees than John's gospel itself. First John 5:11-12 reminds the readers of God's testimony they have already believed. Since the believers he writes to have believed *in the name of the Son of God* (whose identity is attested by 'the Spirit, the water, and the blood,' v. 8), then they should rest securely on the testimony that God has given about and through His Son. This testimony assures believers that they do *have eternal life*. All true assurance of salvation and *eternal life* must rest on the 'testimony of God,' for only that testimony has full reliability. Ironically once one's Christian experience is made the grounds for assurance, John's statement in v 13 about *knowing* becomes a complete impossibility!" [Zane C. Hodges, "1 John" in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, pp. 2:1225-1226].

Bass does acknowledge that assurance of eternal life is grounded in the person and work of Jesus Christ, but as so often happens, he then adds works to faith as proof that a person is genuinely born again. Note all the qualifying words he uses in the following quote that follows his statement that assurance is found in Christ alone. "While assurance is fundamentally grounded in the work of Christ, this letter also demonstrates that the lifestyle of the believer serves as a vital corroborating support for such assurance. This is seen in the numerous sets of criteria or 'tests' that occur throughout the letter....The Holy Spirit should produce a change of life in the new covenant believer that is observable in the public arena and therefore able to be tested and validated. John's tests were written with the primary purpose of his readers' introspection and subsequent reassurance as they came to understand that it was they who were holding to a right belief in Jesus, striving to live righteously, and loving the brethren....I will argue that those who have truly been born of God will take John's warnings and admonitions seriously and therefore persevere in holy living. Those who fail to do so demonstrate that they have never truly been born of God....One's lifestyle is 'vital' in that if a person fails to keep the commands, love the brethren, and have a right confession of Jesus, he demonstrates that he was never a child of God and should have any false assurance eradicated" [Christopher D. Bass, *That You May Know: Assurance of Salvation in 1 John*, pp. 2-4].

Both Bass and Lawson are Southern Baptist pastors. What is the primary focus of the Southern Baptist churches? It's evangelism. If these men are preaching the gospel of faith plus works their books present as the gospel, how many people are actually being saved under their preaching? Surely some are, but it won't be because they are preaching a faith alone in Christ alone gospel but instead they preach a faith plus works gospel which leaves people dead in their sin.

MacArthur understands assurance according to a biblical presentation of it but he then turns right around and destroys assurance by misinterpreting other Scriptures. He wrote this in his Seminary newsletter. "...[T]he cognitive assurance we have in the act of faith, based on the promises of Scripture, is not perfect or full. In addition to the cognitive element, there is a subjective element of assurance that comes by the witness of the Holy Spirit in us. And there's a third element: the behavioral assurance—how we live our lives. All three contribute to a full assurance. The cognitive assurance, based upon the promise of Scripture, is valid only if you have the subjective affirmation of the Spirit of God working in you, and the manifestation of the life of God in you evidenced by the way you live" [John MacArthur, Jr., *The Master's Seminary Mantle*, 10, no. 1, pp. 1, 4]. According to MacArthur Scripture is not enough for you to be assured of eternal life; you must also subjectively feel the Spirit's work and you must live a life that proves you have eternal life. He wrote a book on 1 John in order to prove this assertion. The problem is 1 John proves no such thing; MacArthur is preaching a false gospel of faith plus works.

In his book, MacArthur devotes the first chapter to proving that assurance belongs to every believer based on faith alone [John MacArthur, Jr., *Saved Without a Doubt: How to be Sure of Your Salvation*, chapter 1, "A Collective Work," pp. 17-21]. In the next chapter, he examines troubling verses and misinterprets them to justify the doctrine I just read to you.

The first Scripture he uses to deny assurance based on faith alone is Galatians 5:4 concerning falling from grace.

Galatians 5:1–5 ¹It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. ²Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. ³And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. ⁴You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. ⁵For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness.

The problem for MacArthur is that Paul is writing to believers who are returning to the Law and trying to impose the Law, specifically, in this case, circumcision, on other believers. MacArthur sees these people as false professors of faith and not as people who truly believe. This is totally a sanctification issue and it has no bearing on determining whether or not these people ever experienced justification salvation. Paul's letter says they are believers; he says "Christ set us free" and he told them to "keep standing firm." Unbelievers, no matter what they profess, are not set free and they cannot stand much less stand firm. What do unbelievers have to stand firm on?

Nothing! MacArthur assumes falling from grace means a person was never born again, but that is a false presupposition. People who revert to a Law mentality are out of fellowship with the Lord. They have not lost justification and it is not proof that they were never saved; it is strictly a sanctification salvation, fellowship issue. "Legalism poisons one's motives and hence one's works. The believer who adopts legalism has fallen from grace. His fall is from the experience (not the position) of grace" [Robert N. Wilkin, "Galatians" in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, p. 2:847].

Next he uses Hebrews 6 concerning the impossibility of renewing people again to repentance once they have fallen away.

Hebrews 6:4–6 ⁴For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.

This Scripture is a bit complicated and I'm not going to go into great detail explaining in precise detail what it means. This letter was written to believing Jews in Jerusalem who were contemplating returning to Judaism in order to escape the persecution the early Jerusalem church was experiencing from the Jews. Ultimately, the warning refers to the fact they would be placing themselves back under the curse that was to fall on the nation due to their rejection of Christ and they would therefore experience death in the 70 A.D. judgment. MacArthur's presupposition is these Jewish believers are not true believers but only profess to believe. "It is encouraging to know what God can do with a repentant heart. But it should make the hairs on your neck stand up on end knowing what He will do with unrepentant sinners. In particular, those who know the truth of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ—who perhaps have seen it change the lives of many of their friends and family members, who may even have made some profession of faith in Him—yet who turn around and walk away from full acceptance, are given the severest possible warning. Persistent rejection of Christ will result in such persons' passing the point of no return spiritually, of losing forever the opportunity for salvation. That is what always happens to the individual who is indecisive. He eventually follows his evil heart of unbelief and turns his back forever on the living God" [John MacArthur, Jr., *Saved Without a Doubt: How to be Sure of Your Salvation*, pp. 28-29]. He put a lot of his own personal viewpoint into this explanation with no exegetical warrant for so doing.

The third Scripture MacArthur uses as a troubling verse that causes people to question their salvation is John 15:6.

John 15:6 ⁶“If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned.

This is part of the Upper Room Discourse and the Lord is speaking to His disciples. This is not about unbelievers; it is about bearing fruit and the divine discipline of those who fail to bear fruit. Verse 3 makes it clear believers are the subject of the Lord's message; He said, “You are already clean...” In John 13:10, the Lord made it clear that being clean in this sense refers to justification salvation. MacArthur claims that a Christian must bear fruit or he cannot be a true Christian. “It is the essence of the Christian life to bear fruit....The fruit of salvation is good works [he cites Ephesians 2:10]...If saving faith is present, it can't help but produce fruit [he cites James 2:17 concerning dead faith]. Good works don't save a person, but they do show that his or her faith is genuine...There is no such thing as a fruitless Christian. Everyone bears some fruit. You may have to look hard to find even a small grape, but if you look close enough, you will find something...[he makes that claim based on v. 2 that says the branches are in Him (“in Me”) thus making them believers so they must produce fruit], Externally they may be attached, but no life flows through them...Some only appear to be a part of God's people....Appearance devoid of reality is grounds for being removed from God's people...Those who do not abide will be judged...Since they have no living connection to Jesus Christ, they are cast out” [John MacArthur, Jr., *Saved Without a Doubt: How to be Sure of Your Salvation*, pp. 31-33]. Ephesians 2:8-10 tell us we are saved to do good works but they do not say we are proving we are unsaved if we fail to fulfill the duty of doing good works to glorify Him. The dead faith James refers to in James 2:17 is not referring to unbelief. It is referring to a believer who is doing nothing with the salvation He has graciously been given by the Lord. His faith is worthless if it is not working to help others. It is a falsehood for these teachers to say that it is impossible for a Christian to fail to bear fruit. It happens all the time. No one is saying it is good or even that it is acceptable, but it doesn't mean a person never believed and received eternal life in the first place. Those who do not abide and are cast into the fire are believers who experience temporal discipline because they are not bearing fruit. The references is not to unbelievers.

The fourth Scripture he cites that causes people to doubt their assurance is the unpardonable sin, Matthew 12:30-32.

Matthew 12:30–32 ³⁰“He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters. ³¹“Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. ³²“Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.

MacArthur actually presents a fairly accurate, but somewhat incomplete, explanation of the unpardonable sin concerning the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish religious leaders. But then he goes ahead and assigns another application to the Scripture that simply is not there. "Is there a secondary application? Yes, that unregenerate people can be forgiven anything if they are willing to repent and come to Christ. But continual, unrepentant blasphemy against the convincing and convicting work of the Holy Spirit, defined as fully knowing the facts about Jesus but nonetheless attributing His works to the devil, cannot be forgiven" [John MacArthur, Jr., *Saved Without a Doubt: How to be Sure of Your Salvation*, p. 37]. That is not an appropriate application, secondary or otherwise, that can be derived from the national rejection of Christ as the Jewish Messiah. What he said is true to an extent because anyone can be forgiven anything by coming to faith, but it isn't based on Matthew 12:30-32. It is not true that a person of this age who attributes the Lord's work to Satan cannot repent, meaning change his mind, and be saved. Notice the contradiction within this quote. In the first sentence he says that "unregenerate people can be forgiven anything..." In the very next sentence, he contradicts that by saying that "fully knowing the facts about Jesus but nonetheless attributing His works to the devil, cannot be forgiven." Which is it? Are all personal sins committed in this age forgivable or not? Are personal sins even the issue in the first place? Isn't our sin nature the real issue? While he doesn't define it here, the other error MacArthur makes is his definition of repent that means to be sorry for one's sins and to turn from them with the understanding that they will not be committed henceforth.

MacArthur uses 1 John as a test of relationship, that is, he claims John wrote the book to present a series of "tests" in order for people to evaluate themselves to see whether or not they are true believers in Christ Jesus or merely people who claim to be Christians but who have never truly experienced the new birth. "Throughout the letter [1 John] is a series of tests to determine whether you possess eternal life. If you don't pass these tests, you'll know where you stand and what you need to do. If you do, you'll have reason to enjoy your eternal salvation with great assurance" [John MacArthur, Jr., *Saved Without a Doubt: How to be Sure of Your Salvation*, pp. 68-69]. MacArthur created eleven such tests he claims John presented in his first epistle.

1. Have you enjoyed fellowship with Christ and the Father?
2. Are you sensitive to sin?
3. Do you obey God's Word?
4. Do you reject this evil world?
5. Do you eagerly await Christ's return?
6. Do you see a decreasing pattern of sin in your life?
7. Do you love other Christians?
8. Do you experience answered prayer?
9. Do you experience the ministry of the Holy Spirit?

10. Can you discern between spiritual truth and error?
11. Have you suffered rejection because of your faith?

Before we examine MacArthur's tests of justification salvation, let's compare his list with a list developed by Steve Lawson. Notice how subjective these "tests" are. Two men trying to make the same argument from the same Scriptures can't even agree on what those Scriptures are saying. Their lists are similar but they are not the same. They are not the same because literal hermeneutics have been abandoned so they are then free to make these Scriptures say what they want them to say. We will examine MacArthur's tests and check his exegesis as we do.

1. Communion with Christ.
2. Confession of sin.
3. Commitment to God's Word.
4. Compassion for believers.
5. Change of Affection.
6. Comprehension of the truth.
7. Conformity to Christlikeness.
8. Conflict with the world.
9. Confidence in prayer.