

Assurance

1 John 3:19-24 WCF 18:1,2

We live in an age where everything is questioned repeatedly, perhaps that's the result of the higher education and the ongoing quest for knowledge. The more we know the more we question and that's true for matters of faith as well including the subject which chapter 18 of the Westminster Confession brings to our attention; "assurance of salvation."

Many Christians have problems with the subject of assurance and the question "am I really saved?" and related questions such as "do I really belong to God's family and do I really have eternal life?"

Well according to this passage in 1 John those who confess the true Christians faith can say 'yes' to these questions for two reasons.

1. God is greater than our hearts.

Have you ever looked back on your life as a Christians and asked how much progress have I made spiritually in the last 5 or even 10 years. Am I closer to the Lord now? Am I more like Jesus now? Or does this exercise make me think how little like the Lord I am and how much further I have to go?

As Christians, if we are honest, we often find the very thing John writes and that is that "our hearts condemn us". Like a judge in a court room, who before sentencing reads out the exact details of the accused's crimes, so our own consciences remind us of the details of our sins and accuse us. We alone know our inner motives, how often our love for the Lord or our brothers and sisters in Christ is not what it is meant to be. We know things about ourselves that others don't.

Now John isn't saying in his letter that we should deny the fact that we've sinned or shrug it off as a bit of a joke! He is saying confess it because "God is greater than our hearts and knows all things." (verse 20) And neither is John saying that God minimises our sin or turns a blind eye to sin. He knows it better than we do! He understands us more deeply than we do ourselves. God knows the very motives of our hearts. He knows our strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures. And he knows the measure of love we have.

In the earlier part of chapter 3 John wrote extensively about love and made a clear distinction between the children of God and the children of the devil. The children of the devil are like Cain who had no love for God. Genesis 4 reveals that Cains sacrifice was careless and perfunctory. Neither did Cain have any love for his brother whom he murdered.

On the other hand the love we do have for God or our brothers and sisters in Christ is evidence of the Holy Spirit's activity in our lives. It's evidence that we have been born of God or born again and that we have crossed over from life to death. This is what John wants us to know and what gives us assurance of salvation. Is there any love there at all?

Sure we are imperfect and so is our love. We wish we had a more consistent Christ-like love! However that lack and the desire for more shouldn't destroy our assurance of salvation but should confirm it because the regret at having a lack of love and the desire to do better is God's work in the believers life.

For example, some wonder and worry about the possibility that they have blasphemed the Holy Spirit; that somehow because of their perceived lack of love for God and their lack of attention to spiritual matters that it amounts to the unforgiveable sin! Well having a serious concern about that is already evidence that you are not guilty of that sin. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is attributing evil to God the way the Pharisees did when they accused Jesus of performing miracles by the power of the devil. And then its also outright rejection of the gospel and rejection of Jesus as Savior when one has at one time embraced the gospel and enjoyed the its blessings for a time. We may grieve the Holy Spirit by indifference to the word and unsanctified behaviour but that is not the same as blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.

In any case to be concerned and dissatisfied with your spiritual life is actually the product of a spiritual life and evidence of the Holy Spirit's work in your life .

Do you ever find yourself praying ""Lord help me to be a more spiritual more loving person? Lord, make me more thoroughly Christian?" I believe this kind of prayerful appeal for spiritual growth is the common experience of Christians down through the ages. In fact when you look into it you'll find that it is true that the personal reflections of outstanding Christians thinkers and writers are often quite self-deprecating. For example John Calvin's reflections of his own life just before he died are a case in point. He said to his colleagues at Geneva, "Take courage, fortify yourselves for God will make use of this church and will maintain it and he will protect it. I have had many infirmities which you have been obliged to bear with and what is more all I have done has been worth nothing. The ungodly will seize upon this word but I say it again all I have done has been worth nothing and I am a miserable creature. But I certainly can say this that I have willed what is good and my vices always displeased me and that the root of the fear of God has been in my heart. So you may say that the disposition was good and I pray that the evil be forgiven me. And if there was any good that you conform yourselves to it and make it an example." (Biography THL Parker page 183)

Now the point the apostle John wants his readers to understand is that despite any self-deprecating thoughts which we all suffer from time to time, God is greater than our hearts. That means whenever our consciences trouble us we can rest in the assurance that God knows us even better than we know ourselves. Furthermore God the Father has accepted Christ sacrifice on the cross as sufficient payment for our sins. Earlier John wrote "if we say we have no sin we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." God is greater than our hearts and his grace is greater than all our sin! That is our assurance.

In verse 21c John goes on and writes, "if our hearts do not condemn us we have confidence before God". He doesn't mean that there are some Christians who never have a condemning heart. What this means is when we deal with our accusing consciences, our lack of love and our failures by turning to God in prayer in repentance and faith, then we can be certain that God accepts us in spite of our faults because there is no condemnation in Christ. We can approach the throne of grace with confidence!

That confidence to come before God is an important part of the Christians life. Otherwise we might become tense and rigid, proud and adopt a stoical attitude about our failures; bottling it up keeping to ourselves or even simply denying them. We could become miserable and heavy hearted about our spiritual state.

But if we trust in the gracious promises of God and in the sacrifice of Christ then we can approach the throne of grace with confidence. We can have a strong assurance of salvation because God treats us as his dear children. He knows our weakness and he has compassion on us. God is greater than our hearts!

2. John encourages us to further cultivate assurance of salvation through meeting the challenge of obedience. In verse 22 John wrote “whatever we ask we receive from him because we keep his commandments and do the things that are pleasing in his sight.”

Now if receiving answers to our prayers was dependant on our obedience I doubt that we'd even dare to pray. Our obedience is always imperfect. We struggle with the remnants of sin and the old way of life in our lives. This is true for even the holiest of Christians as Romans 7 reveals. There we read about Paul's own intense struggle with sin.

As well as that, when it comes to prayer, the phrase “whatever we ask we receive from Him” does not mean that God is like an indulgent father who gives us whatever we want even if it's a frivolous luxury. Parents who do that to their children often end up with spoilt self-centred individuals who end up harming themselves more often than not. Love must often say no!

What is meant here in verse 22 where it says “whatever we ask in His name we receive because we keep His commandments” is this. As we seek to be obedient and please God then our prayers are also more and more conformed to God's will or to his commandments. So rather than pursue our own selfish desires,... as obedient children we start asking for and receiving those things which are pleasing to God.

And there are two things about this obedience which please God more than anything else. They are listed in verse 23, “that: a) we believe in the name of His son Jesus Christ and b) love one another just as he commanded us.” This is John's bottom line if I can put it that way for the Christian life of faith. In fact it is the main thrust of his letter; faith and love!

God has revealed himself ultimately through his Son. The required response is to believe. God is a God who is described as ‘love in 1 John 4:16. And the required response to this God of love is to love! Listen to what it says in 1 John 4:7. “Beloved let us love one another for love is from God and everyone who loves, is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God for God is love. And further; “this is love not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved if God so loved us we ought to love one another.”

A true Christian then, is one who believes and loves. Once again, it needs to be stressed that in this life our faith and love will always be imperfect and tainted with sin but the striving and continuing in faith and love is the all-important mark of the genuine Christian.

That's also the thrust of the last verse in this chapter. “The one who keeps God's commandments abides in him and he in him and we know that he abides in us by the Spirit which He has given us.”

The key word here is abide, or remaining in faith and love! And this is the Spirit's work in us as according to verse 24 which is further evidence of our salvation. As we abide in faith and love the Spirit assures us that we are Christians and gives us assurance of salvation.

Now lets think this through a bit further along the lines of the material in the Westminster confession of Faith. As the confession says there are those who deceive themselves with false hopes and worldly assumptions that they are in God's favour.

I think all people generally like to think that they are in God's favour. For example at a funeral I attended recently the family declined to have hymns sung, prayers said, (not even the Lord's prayer) or scripture read. And yet there was this hope expressed by the same ones who rejected the scriptures and prayers, that they thought they would see Alister on the other side or in a better place, in other words in heaven.

It's a common theme among the agnostics today and among those who say it doesn't matter what you believe so long as you believe it sincerely. What is important is tolerance they say. Christians can believe in God, but they shouldn't insist that their faith is the only way or force it on others, . Its just one option of several belief systems. If it's true for you that's fine but we all have our own beliefs. Sincerity and being nice rules OK?

Well, John calls such people antichrist's in chapter 2:22 where he wrote "who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist the one who denies the Father and the Son.

And as the confession states those who claim to be at peace who claim assurance of salvation apart from faith in Christ, "their hope will fail."

So in conclusion when it comes to the question "am I really saved?" and "do I really belong to God's family and do I really have eternal life?" We must ask ourselves do I believe in Jesus and is there love in my heart for my brothers and sisters in the Lord?

Though Calvin confessed his own struggle just before he died he nevertheless had a strong assurance. His last words to his close friend and college William Farel, quoting Philippians 1:21 was "It is enough that I live and die for Christ who is to all his followers a gain both in life and in death.

That is enough for you and me too that we live for and die in Christ.

Amen