

JOHANNINE PERSPECTIVES ON THE DOCTRINE OF ASSURANCE

D. A. Carson

Synopsis

The Johannine corpus makes a significant contribution to the Christian doctrine of assurance, and much of this distinctive 'flavour' is provided by 1 John. Calvin's so-called 'three-legged stool' of assurance reminds us that Christians steeped in the Bible have long grappled with the issues raised by the epistle. A survey of John's development of Christology, the cross, the work of the Holy Spirit, regeneration, perseverance and apostasy indicates that the 'three tests' – confession that Jesus is Christ, principled obedience to his commands and love for the brothers – are intended to contribute to the Christian's assurance of salvation. Two extremes ought to be resisted. The Bible will not allow us to construct a 'one-legged stool' that excludes good works and the witness of the Spirit from assurance. However, these should be regarded as 'accessory and inferior' aids to the objective ground of assurance – the finished cross-work of Christ. Soundings in the other Johannine material, Paul's epistles and Matthew's gospel reinforce the perspective offered by 1 John. Since Christian assurance is first of all an existential matter, pastors are involved in diagnosis and should be grateful that the biblical evidence comes to us in 'occasional' and 'existential' contexts.

Compared with the way the doctrine of assurance has at times in the past occupied an important place in Christian preaching and counsel, and even served as a kind of test of theological systems, the widespread neglect of the subject is frankly astonishing.

One must ask why this state of affairs has arisen. It is bound up with the definition. By 'Christian assurance' I refer to a believer's confidence that he or she is already in a right

standing with God, and that this will issue in ultimate salvation. Christians with assurance believe their sins are forgiven, that they are accepted by God, and that they are bound for the ultimate bliss of the unshielded presence of the glory of God in the new heaven and the new earth. So why isn't this of focal interest?

The reasons are many, and vary from place to place around the world. For some people, there has been a loss of focus about what the Bible centrally deals with. The Bible has become a handbook for political movements, for race relations, for egalitarian justice, for personal fulfilment. Not for a moment would I suggest that the Bible does not speak to such issues. But the Bible is centrally concerned with the reconciliation of God's rebellious image-bearers to himself. If that vision is lost, there is little point spending much time on the doctrine of assurance. In many evangelical circles, there is so much focus on what Christian faith means to us now that there is little emphasis on being ready to meet God at the end. 'Abundant life' now has become more interesting than consummated eternal life then. In this outlook, Christian 'assurance' has to do more with present psychological confidence rather than a calm assurance that I am right with God and will be in the end. Other evangelicals have been 'burned' by the unreflective formulaic 'assurance' meted out in some circles, and retreated to relative silence.

Underlying all of these tendencies is a changing view of God. When people believed that God was just and holy, that his wrath was personal and implacable, and found it a little more difficult to believe in his love, then Christian confidence that this holy God can and does accept sinners was an important issue bound up with the gospel itself. When people believe that God is so loving that he could not possibly bring himself to be angry for very long, then why worry much about assurance? It will all sort out in the end. Add to this the unsettling postmodern certainty that there are no certainties, and notions of Christian assurance may sound vaguely *passé*.

Our silence in these areas cannot last. In North America, a small but vociferous group that has constituted itself as the Grace Evangelical Society has brought assurance onto centre

stage, albeit (in my view) in a somewhat distorted way. More importantly, the massive shifts that have taken place in academic circles on law and gospel, the nature of justification, what it means to be in the covenant, and the like, are now permeating broader pastoral circles. Still more importantly, pastors who deal with real people in the real world—people getting converted, people on their death beds, believers who struggle with sin—know that it is important to think clearly and biblically on this issue.

So I am grateful for the invitation to be a part of this volume. I had better warn you right away of two limitations I am adopting. First, there is too little space to engage, except peripherally, with some of the theological movements that are swirling around our heads. Secondly, many of the more technical judgments, and a much fuller discussion of assurance in the Johannine epistles, I have treated in my forthcoming commentary (NIGTC). So detailed defence of many points—eg that the secessionists whom John opposes in his first epistle have adopted some form of docetic Christology—will have to await that publication.

Historical Perspective

Before plunging into my four principal headings (of quite uneven length), a little historical perspective may be helpful. It is well known that Luther tied assurance and saving faith tightly together. If a person really trusted Christ—ie had as the object of his or her faith Christ and his perfect sacrifice on the cross—then assurance was nothing more than that confidence in Christ. Insofar as you trust Christ, you have confidence in him, and are blessed with assurance. If you lack assurance, you need a clearer vision of Christ and renewed faith in him.

So far as the magisterial reformation is concerned, the dispute comes over Calvin's position. Assurance in Calvin has often been likened to a three-legged stool. There are three grounds. The most important one is the objective ground, ie the finished cross-work of Christ. This is apprehended by faith. Assurance on this ground is indistinguishable from

Luther's position. The second is subjective (or sometimes called 'internal'), ie the change in behaviour that marks you out as a Christian. The third is the witness of the Spirit, enjoyed by all believers.

As Reformation theology moved to England, mediated by such transitional figures as William Perkins, these three legs, or grounds, became more prominent in pastoral and theological discussion. But the experts disagree as to whether or not there was an essential change from Calvin to the later Calvinists. Some, such as Kendall, Clifford, and Lane, argue for the affirmative;¹ others, such as Beeke and Dever, admit that there is a slight change in emphasis, but deny there is a fundamental shift in the underlying theological structure.² Whether the change was in emphasis or in fundamental structure of thought, there is little doubt as to what brought it about. On the one hand, there was some pastoral concern over the number of spurious conversions in which people were nevertheless claiming assurance of faith; on the other, there was additional reflection on certain themes and passages in Scripture, not least 1 John.

Because it has a bearing on my discussion of 1 John, it is worth reflecting a little on what Calvin actually says. Calvin's fundamental emphasis is that it is the gospel, the grace and mercy of God, the promise of justification in Christ, that grounds our assurance.³ The ground of assurance should

not be distinguished from the ground of faith, ie from Christ and the promises of God.⁴ As Lane rightly puts it, for Calvin

assurance is not a second stage subsequent to faith but is simply faith itself writ large. Since saving faith is not simply faith in the promises of God in general but faith that they apply to me, faith in itself includes assurance.⁵

This does not mean that faith is the ground of our assurance, as if faith came first and assurance were built upon it. Rather, assurance, like faith itself and inseparably from it, turns away from human pretensions and looks to Christ alone.

The centrality of this theme is also seen in Calvin's reflections on the connections between predestination and assurance. The wrong approach is to ask if you are among the elect. The person who tries to find answers in such matters

plunges headlong into an immense abyss, involves himself in numberless inextricable snares, and buries himself in the thickest darkness ... A fatal abyss engulfs those who, to be assured of their election, pry into the eternal counsel of God without the word.⁶

Assurance must be based not on what God has chosen to conceal, but on what God has chosen to reveal, viz Christ and the gospel.⁷ God 'would have us to rest satisfied with his promises, and not to inquire elsewhere whether or not he is disposed to hear us'.⁸ Or again,

If we are elected in [Christ], we cannot find the certainty of our election in ourselves; and not even in God the Father, if we look at him apart from the Son. Christ, then, is the mirror in which we ought, and in which, without deception, we may contemplate our election.⁹

¹ R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); Alan C. Clifford, *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology 1640-1790 - An Evaluation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); A. N. L. Lane, 'Calvin's Doctrine of Assurance,' *Vox Evangelica* 11 (1979) 32-54.

² Joel R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation*, American University Studies. (Series VII Theology and Religion, 89; New York: Peter Lang, 1991); Mark E. Dever, 'Richard Sibbes and the "Truly Evangelical Church of England": A Study in Reformed Divinity and Early Stuart Conformity,' Ph.D. dissertation, Cambridge University, 1992).

³ Eg *Inst.* 3.14.18-19; 3.20.10; *Comm.* Isa 33:2; *Comm.* John 3:16,36; *Comm.* 1 Cor 10:12; *Comm.* Heb 11:6; *Comm.* 1 John 2:3; 3:14.

⁴ Since for Calvin the promises of God are not only found in God's word but are visibly presented to us in the sacraments, he holds that sacraments may strengthen our assurance insofar as they confirm God's promises to us (*Inst.* 3.14.3; 4.15.1-3,14; 4.17.1ff.). But that is not something I shall pursue here.

⁵ Lane, 36.

⁶ *Inst.* 3.24.4.

⁷ *Inst.* 3.24.4-5.

⁸ *Inst.* 3.24.5.

⁹ *Inst.* 3.24.5.

On the other hand, predestination, Calvin insists, is the best confirmation of our faith, from which we reap comforting rewards, for election is bound up with the truth that salvation is all of grace, depending not on our merit but on God's grace.¹⁰ Because salvation is finally and totally the work of God, believers draw assurance from the truth that God will complete what he has begun.¹¹

What, then, of the 'subjective' grounds, ie of the changes that take place in our lives in consequence of becoming Christians? Is there a place for them in the grounding of Christian assurance? On the one hand, Calvin can say, 'Conscience derives from [works] more fear and alarm than security'.¹² This owes not a little to the fact that believers are always aware that whatever virtue or integrity they possess 'is mingled with many remains of the flesh'.¹³ But on the other hand, Calvin insists that the NT teaches that holiness is in fact a test of the genuineness of our faith—a conclusion he reaches not least by appealing to 1 John.¹⁴ Hence he writes:

One argument whereby we may prove that we are truly elected by God and not called in vain is that our profession of faith should find its response in a good conscience and an upright life.¹⁵

But the entire thrust of this passage from Calvin is that, even so, believers may use this argument only 'in such a way that they place their sure foundations elsewhere'.¹⁶ On 1 John 2:3 ('We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands') Calvin writes:

For we cannot know him as Lord and Father, as he shews himself, without being dutiful children and obedient servants ... But we are not hence to conclude that faith recumbs on works; for though every one receives a testimony to his faith from his works, yet it does not follow that it is founded on them, since they are added as

¹⁰ *Inst.* 3.21.1; 3.24.2,4,9.

¹¹ *Inst.* 3.21.1.

¹² *Inst.* 3.14.20.

¹³ *Inst.* 3.14.19.

¹⁴ *Eg Inst.* 3.14.18-19; 3.20.10; *Comm.* Ps 106:12; *Comm.* Rom 8:9; *Comm.* 1 John 2:3; 3:7,24.

¹⁵ *Comm.* 2 Pet1:10, 11.

¹⁶ *Comm.* 2 Pet1:10, 11.

an evidence. Then the certainty of faith depends on the grace of Christ alone; but piety and holiness of life distinguish true faith from that knowledge of God which is fictitious and dead.¹⁷

Elsewhere on love as a test (1 John 3:19), he writes:

We only know that we are God's children by His sealing, His free adoption on our hearts by His Spirit and by our receiving by faith the sure pledge of it offered in Christ. Therefore, love is an accessory or inferior aid, a prop to our faith, not the foundation on which it rests.¹⁸

These passages are typical. The primary ground, the ultimate ground, is Christ, the cross, gospel promises, God's covenantal faithfulness—in short, the proper object of Christian faith. But because 'the knowledge of God is efficacious', therefore 'they by no means know God who keep not his precepts or commandments'.¹⁹ Thus the argument from works can never be the ultimate or primary grounds of our confidence, but works may serve as 'an accessory or inferior aid' to assure us that our faith is not fictitious.

Calvin's treatment of the Spirit's connection with assurance is similarly nuanced. On the one hand, one can find strong statements. Without the Holy Spirit as a witness in our hearts, we should not assume that we are Christians.²⁰ As the 'earnest' of eternal life, the Spirit assures us of our election;²¹ as the seal of our adoption, the Spirit assures us that we are the children of God.²² But Calvin persistently shies away from any suggestion that this assuring work of the Spirit is a function of private, special revelation to the effect that we are God's children. The Spirit seals our adoption, confirming the promises of the Word to us.²³ It is not as if the Bible or the gospel makes general promises, and then the Holy Spirit by an act of private revelation assures us that they

¹⁷ *Comm.* 1 John 2:3.

¹⁸ *Comm.* 1 John 3:19. Cf. *Inst.* 3.2.38.

¹⁹ *Comm.* 1 John 2:3.

²⁰ *Inst.* 3.2.39; *Comm.* 2 Cor 1:21, 22.

²¹ *Inst.* 3.2.41; 3.24.1-2.

²² *Inst.* 3.2.8,11-12; 3.24.1; *Comm.* 1 John 2:19; 3:19.

²³ *Inst.* 3.1.4; 3.2.36.

relate to us, for that would be to divide the Spirit from the Word, from which notion Calvin adamantly distances himself.²⁴ The witness of the Spirit must not be separated from the witness of the Word. Thus the Spirit assures us of the reliability of God's promises, of the truth of the gospel.²⁵

Thus the three-legged stool model does not do justice to the nuances in Calvin's thought, for it conjures up an image of three 'grounds' of equivalent value in Christian assurance. On the other hand, though consequent good works and the witness of the Spirit may alike be 'accessories or inferior aids,' Calvin insists that without the witness of the Spirit and without the good works that (for instance) John specifies, the faith is fictitious.

This historical background, we shall soon discover, though it must not control our reading of 1 John, attests that Christians steeped in Scripture have thought through these issues long before we came on the scene, and introduce categories and care into the discussion that we cannot summarily dismiss.

Assurance in 1 John

No book of the NT makes more frequent explicit references to assurance. One form or another of the 'this is how we know' formula recurs constantly (eg 1 John 2:3-6; 3:10,19,24; 4:13; 5:2,13). To these must be added the exclusionary clauses that specify who is not a Christian (eg 2:4,9; 3:6,9,15; 4:3,8,20). Then there is the clear statement that some people had been accepted as Christians before they seceded, but their secession proves that they were never truly part 'of us' (2:19). That raises the question about who is and who is not a true Christian, since clearly these people had been accepted as true brothers and sisters in Christ before they left. Thus there are exhortations to persevere (eg 2:24,28).

²⁴ *Inst.* 1.9.

²⁵ *Inst.* 1.7.

These sorts of passages, in the flow of the argument, led Robert Law to specify that there are three 'tests of life':²⁶ the truth test, ie the confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (2:22, 23; 4:2, 3; 5:5), the moral test, ie principled obedience to his commands (2:3-6; 3:4-10), and the social test, ie love for the brothers (2:9-11; 3:10-20; 4:7ff). With these data in mind, we may now offer the following reflections on the theme of assurance in 1 John.

John's opponents

Though the matter is disputed, I have argued elsewhere at some length that the opponents were probably gnostics (or 'proto-gnostics' or 'gnosticising') and docetic. In other words, they were influenced by the early stages of that great, amorphous theological hotchpotch that later historians refer to as gnosticism. Because the movement was so diverse, some historians have preferred to attach the 'gnostic' label only to second- and third-century phenomena; I doubt that this is helpful. Moreover, despite the brilliance of her work, Peatremont's effort to see gnosticism as a Christian heresy,²⁷ or Pearson's thesis that gnosticism is a Jewish heresy,²⁸ or Schenke's attempt to define gnosticism in terms of Sethian documents,²⁹ or Magne's efforts at straight-line development from Christianity to gnosis and back again,³⁰ and all similar limitations, are achieved by definitions that disallow too much of the evidence, or by quite uncertain ordering or elevation of the materials. It is like asking for a precise delineation of the heritage and all the branches of New Age

²⁶ R. Law, *The Tests of Life: A Study of the First Epistle of St. John*, (3rd ed; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 [1914]).

²⁷ Simone Peatremont, *A Separate God: The Christian Origins of Gnosticism* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1991).

²⁸ Birger A. Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

²⁹ Hans-Martin Schenke, 'The Phenomenon and Significance of Gnostic Sethianism,' in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism II*, ed. B. Layton (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), 588-616.

³⁰ Jean Magne, *From Christianity to Gnosticism and from Gnosticism to Christianity*, (Brown Judaic Studies, 286; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993).

thought; it simply cannot be done, because so much of it arose very quickly, symbiotically and syncretistically. Doubtless both Judaism and Christianity developed tracks that gave the hotchpotch of gnosticism a push, but no straight-line trajectory can be traced.

Gnosticism claimed a more profound grasp of reality than could be obtained by ordinary means, a knowledge grounded in speculative knowledge of God or the gods. God or the gods are characterised by ineffability, otherness, incorporeality. Gnosticism seeks to relate this God or gods, directly or indirectly, to the rest of reality. Gnosticism can be monistic, pantheistic, or dualistic; the last of these is by far the most common worldview, especially in later gnosticism. Hope lies in acquiring 'knowledge' of these ultimate realities, which means, of course, that the dominant problem is ignorance, not sin.

Since most gnosticism adopted cosmological dualism, matter was in those circles viewed with considerable suspicion. Inevitably this affected, in 'Christian' forms of gnosticism, one's Christology: gnostic Christology is invariably docetic.³¹ In other words, Christ or the Son of God (or the 'Demiurge') may appear as a human being, but does not become one. Varied models were advanced to explain what happened: eg perhaps the Christ came on the man Jesus (procreated by ordinary means) at his baptism and left him just before the cross (so Cerinthus); perhaps he swapped bodies with Simon of Cyrene and stood by laughing as the wrong person went to the cross (in the famous version of Basilides and a few others). In any case, the effect was to deny not only the incarnation but also the relevance of the cross as the foundational solution to human plight and need. There is good evidence that many gnostics thought of themselves as being on the cutting edge of thought: they ran 'ahead'—so far ahead, John complains, that they leave the truth behind (2 John 9). But this attitude doubtless bred condescension towards those with whom they disagreed, and generated

³¹ It is a more disputed matter whether docetic Christology in the first two centuries is invariably gnostic. Once again, complex questions of definition are at stake.

feelings of inferiority and threat among those left behind—scarcely a demonstration of brotherly love. Although some later strands of gnosticism developed ascetic tracks, there is ample evidence that, precisely because the material element is of secondary importance and may (in a thoroughly dualistic world) be tied to evil, what one does in the material world becomes of little significance. At some point, then, it becomes possible to claim that one lives above sin (because one has knowledge of the ultimate realities), while (from a Christian perspective) deeply embroiled in it.

It is within some such framework that John elevates his 'three tests'. The truth test addresses the question of the incarnation and its entailments (including Christ's atoning death); the moral test addresses indifference to the ethical and behavioural matters that characterised some gnostics; the social test addresses their profound sense of superiority. It is important to see that these tests relate to real people with real points of divergence from the apostolic gospel. If the point of Christological contention had lain somewhere else, then perhaps the critical Christological confession would not be that 'Jesus is the Christ' but that 'Jesus is Lord' (eg 1 Cor 12:3).

The nature of the three tests

Nevertheless, the three tests are neither arbitrary nor isolated. They are not arbitrary, in that they have not been called forth out of thin air in order to confute some nasty people John does not like. Far from it; they are grounded in the apostolic deposit. The truth test may be shaped to confute docetic gnosticism, but the reality to which it points is the incarnation (John 1:14; 1 John 1:1-3);³² the social test may condemn the heartless superiority of the secessionists, but it is grounded in the new commandment taught by Jesus on the

³² I am of course aware that predominant exegesis during the last couple of decades denies that 1 John 1:1-3 has to do with eyewitnesses truly hearing and seeing and touching 'that which was from the [absolute] beginning' and that appeared in real history. I have dealt with such matters in some detail in the commentary, and beg leave to avoid them here.

night he was betrayed (John 13:34, 35); the moral test may challenge the indifferentism of some early Christian gnostics, but it is bound up with Jesus' insistence that those who are really his disciples (as opposed to spurious believers, John 2:23-25) hold to his teaching (John 8:31). So the three tests are not arbitrary. But neither are they isolated. By the end of his first epistle (esp. chaps 4 and 5), John shows how they are tied together. The incarnation and consequent death of the Son is the ultimate demonstration of the love of God, and that love calls us to love (4:7, 11); thus the truth test and the social test are joined. But loving one another is nothing but a response to the new commandment, and thus is a matter of obedience (4:21); thus the social test and the moral test are joined. The reason why the Son appeared was to take away our sins, so that a life characterised by ἀνομία controverts his mission (3:4, 5); thus the truth test and the moral test are joined. In Johannine thought, the divine begetting is bound up with the Son's death (John 3:1-21), and the new life thus begun inevitably produces observable fruit (John 3:8; 1 John 3:9); once again, the truth test and the moral test are linked. Other links are drawn, but all are subsumed under the truth that God is light and in him is no darkness at all (1:5); we cannot compartmentalise knowing and living, believing and acting. It becomes urgent not only to know the truth but to do it.

In short, the three 'tests of life' turn out to be not three independent 'tests', such that it might be possible to pass two out of three, but constitute a whole package, one unit. And over them all, in ways we are still exploring, John dares to write, 'And this is how we know that we know ...'

Other suggested tests

Some have proposed that three other tests are found in 1 John: (1) faith in the death or the blood of Jesus as the only ground for dealing with sin (1:7; 2:2; 4:10); (2) the 'anointing' or the Holy Spirit as an internal, intuitively recognised witness, independent of particular manifestations such as credal confession or principled obedience brought about by the power of the Spirit (2:20,27; 3:24; 4:13; 5:6-8); (3) what

Bruce calls 'continuance', ie perseverance in the faith (2:19,28).³³

Each of these proposals invites a slightly different response, and in articulating that response several elements in what John says about assurance are clarified.³⁴

(1) The death of Jesus is not attached to a 'this is how you know that you know him' utterance. But it is attached in various ways to Law's three 'tests'. I have hinted at this point already; now I must make it clear. In a book that keeps insisting that the Christ is Jesus (2:22; 5:1), John tells us that it is Jesus Christ who is the *ἰλασμός* for our sins (2:2), and that Jesus Christ laid down his life for us (3:16); in a book that keeps insisting that the Son of God is Jesus (2:23; 5:5), John tells us us that God loved us and sent his Son to be the *ἰλασμός* for our sins (4:10), and that the blood of Jesus his Son purifies us from all sin (1:7). The reason Christ 'appeared' was to take away our sins (3:5). In other words, the presupposition of the atonement is the incarnation; the purpose of the incarnation is the atonement.

More importantly, the opening polemic, which sets the stage for the rest of the book, insists that believers do not deal with their sins by denying them, but by confessing them to the God who forgives them because he is covenantally faithful and just, who purifies them by the blood of Jesus, who speaks to the Father in our defence (1:6-2:2). In other words, no less than in, say, Paul or Hebrews, John in his first epistle insists that the objective ground for anyone's approach to God is the cross-work of Christ.

The great message that John has heard and declares is that 'God is light' (1:5), and this message controls the line of his thought right through the atonement section into the insistence that those who know God obey his commands and love the brothers (ie as far as 2:11; for the continuance of the light metaphor, see 1:6,7; 2:8,9,10,11). There is no darkness at all in God (1:5), so experience of forgiveness and purification

³³ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1970), 69.

³⁴ Some of the following is lightly adapted from my NIGTC commentary.

on the ground of Christ's death must be accompanied by a life of obedience and love. Thus the ground of purification is bound up with Jesus' death, but the evidence that the purification has taken place has its role to play precisely because God is so consistently 'light' that he does not brook a double standard—one for the private or religious or faith sphere and another for the public arena of personal conduct. The latter, then, may be the arena of certain 'tests' (though that can be a misleading word, as we shall see), and passing the tests brings its own measure of assurance; but the ultimate ground for our fellowship with the Father and his Son is the death of the Son.

(2) The Holy Spirit is tied to two 'we know' formulas (3:24; 4:13). The question, however, is whether or not these or any of the other 'anointing' and 'Spirit' passages in 1 John refer to the Spirit's interior personal witness divorced from external attestation, with the result that the Spirit becomes an additional, distinguishable factor in establishing the Christian's assurance. In other words, in the theology of 1 John, does the believer's experience of the Spirit constitute an independent support for Christian confidence, or is the Spirit's work bound up with particular manifestations which, because they are observable and in the public arena, serve in fact as the real, material tests for the Spirit's presence?

The question is not an easy one to answer, and is bound up with exegetical decisions regarding how far particular statements about the Spirit or about anointing are tied to surrounding verses.³⁵ For example, the last part of 1 John 3:24, taken by itself, very much sounds as if the Spirit's role is independent of external evidence: 'And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us'. But if this is linked with the opening verses of the next chapter (4:1-6), then the way one recognises the presence of the Spirit of

³⁵ Thus the exegesis of E. Malatesta, *Interiority and Covenant*, (Analecta Biblica 69; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), who repeatedly finds the Spirit's witness in 1 John to be an independent confirmation, tends to be characterised by the close reading of verses apart from the flow of the context: see, for example, his treatment of 5:10 (313).

God is by a critical Christological confession. Again, 'We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit' (4:13): by itself, this could be taken to refer to some independent witness of the Spirit. Or in the context is this a claim that God's life in us, mediated by the Spirit, is demonstrated in love (4:12) and in certain perspectives on Jesus Christ (4:14, 15), as John brings together the 'tests'? Similar questions arise in every single one of the anointing and Spirit passages.

I would argue that in every instance the most likely reading—that is, the one that makes best sense of the flow of the text (as opposed to finding piecemeal aphorisms)—ties the Spirit to some sort of manifestation in the public arena. Not for a moment does this make the Spirit's role unimportant; it simply means that in this epistle, at least, the Spirit's work does not offer independent assurance to the believer, but is presented as that which ensures specific and certain public results. The work of the Spirit, the anointing, and the begetting from God are tied together (the first and the last explicitly in the fourth gospel, John 3:5); they are features of new covenant experience. Certainly some gnostics claimed endowment by the Spirit or special begetting. What distinguishes what John is talking about from what they are talking about? In each case—ie whether talking about Spirit, begetting, or anointing—the argument moves towards an external criterion. For example, with respect to begetting, we are told that he who does what is righteous, he who loves, and he who believes certain Christological truth, is begotten of God (1 John 2:29; 4:7; 5:1); equivalently, we are told that the one who is begotten of God does not sin (3:9; 5:18), or that which is begotten of God conquers the world (5:4).³⁶

Thus although he is careful not to define Christianity in purely functional terms (for after all it is the Spirit who is at work within us), nevertheless John insists that claims for an internal work must be tested in the public arena, or there is no way to unmask false claims. It appears, then, that the

³⁶ Cf M. Vellanickal, *The Divine Sonship of Christians in the Johannine Writings*, (Analecta Biblica 72; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1977), 229-231.

Spirit's work is jealously defended as an important component in the believer's new covenant heritage (just as Christ's cross-work is so defended), but John insists that the reality of the Spirit's work inevitably manifests itself in observable conduct and public confession of Christological truth. This is especially important in a world where many are claiming special spiritual insight but are neither conforming to the central confessional heritage of the church nor displaying transformation of life. I am not persuaded there is any emphasis in 1 John on some further, independent confirmation provided by the Spirit. In this framework the work of the Spirit is vital, but not an additional 'test'. This does not necessarily mean that there is no 'third ground' for assurance established elsewhere. For example, many cite Romans 8:16. It does mean that the only sense in which the Spirit is a 'ground' of assurance in 1 John is that the Spirit is the one by whom right confession and right conduct are effected, the one without whom they are not effected. In other words, Christian assurance is properly 'grounded' in the work of the Spirit, without which it cannot be properly 'grounded'. But that is not the same thing as saying that in 1 John an internal witness of the Spirit constitutes a 'test' independent of the other tests.³⁷

(3) The theme of perseverance (eg 2:19,28; 2 John 9) is not tied to any explicit 'we know' formula, but in certain respects it is an additional test. The assumption of 2:19 is that the departure of the secessionists proves they never were 'of us'; those who are left behind are exhorted to remain in God or in Christ (2:28). Real believers persevere; this is saying a little more than Law's three 'tests'. Moreover, this emphasis, too, has roots going back to the fourth gospel (eg John 8:31). For the moment it is enough to observe that although perseverance can be seen as an additional test, in one respect it is not; it is in 1 John merely the continuance of the other

³⁷ I should add that the work of the Spirit in the 'three witnesses' passage (5:6-8) is slightly different from what I have just described; but I have dealt with that subject elsewhere: 'The Three Witnesses and the Eschatology of 1 John,' in *To Tell the Mystery*, Festschrift for Robert H. Gundry, ed. Thomas E. Schmidt and Moiseas Silva, JSNTSS 100 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 216-232.

tests. What continuing in Christ means, in the context of this book, is continuing to confess certain Christological truths, continuing to love the brothers, continuing to obey the commands—all predicated on the finality of the incarnation and cross-work of Jesus Christ, to whom we continually return to confess our sins and receive purification. There is no encouragement whatsoever to the notion that one cannot enjoy any assurance until one has passed the perseverance 'test', for that would mean that there could be no assurance until the consummation. The basis of Christian assurance is Christ and his cross-work; perseverance is not in any sense the basis of Christian assurance.

The purpose of the tests

Should the themes of 1 John be thought of as assurance or reassurance (a difference in emphasis rather than substance)? Do the 'tests of life' serve to exclude the heretics or to strengthen the orthodox (a difference in primary focus rather than potential)?

Two things must be said.

(1) The antitheses are unhelpful. At one level, of course, because 1 John is addressed to the believers, it is written to strengthen them, not to exclude those who have already seceded. Moreover, passages such as 1 John 2:12-14, in which John insists that his readers have conquered and do have knowledge of the one from the beginning and that their sins are forgiven, sound as if the readers need reassurance. Their recent history has not contributed to a triumphalistic heritage (unlike, say, that behind 2 Cor 10-13). When John insists that all of them know the truth (2:20), one suspects that the teachings and departure of the secessionists have prompted some who were left behind to question their own status. He is encouraging them, reassuring them.

But in the nature of the case, the very tests that encourage the faithful are designed to rule the heretics out of court. That there is a danger of further inroads is suggested not only by the fierceness of the denunciations, but by the burden of 2 John. John is not only reassuring the faithful, he is warning

them against further defections and establishing criteria for exclusion. One can no more choose between the strengthening of the orthodox and the exclusion of the heretics than between the left wing of an airplane and the right.

(2) It is quite wrong to argue, as some do, that in 1 John the author is not interested in fostering endurance and perseverance. What, then, would we make of the exhortation to remain in God or in Christ (2:27, 28), or to love one another (eg 4:11), or to be careful that what they have heard from the beginning remain in them (2:24), or to exercise a healthy scepticism regarding many 'spiritual' voices that in fact lead one astray (4:1, 6)? Do not the instructions on what to do with sin (eg 1:7,9; 2:1, 2), the warnings against sin (2:16, 17), and how to handle a brother who falls into sin (5:16, 17), all point, implicitly or explicitly, to the need to persevere? Lieu, at least, is not convinced. She does not deny that these voices are present, but insists that 'theologically there is little room for all this', since absolute assurances are repeatedly given, eg 'Everyone who has been born of God does not do sin'.³⁸

But this is a false antithesis. A commonplace of NT theology, including Johannine theology, is that God's sovereign assurance does not function as a disincentive to effort, but as an incentive.³⁹ Thus while John's gospel insists

³⁸ Judith M. Lieu, *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles* (Cambridge: University Press, 1991), 58; idem, *The Second and Third Epistles of John* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1986), 190-198.

³⁹ A substantial theological judgment lies hidden behind this sentence, too complex to be probed here. Western thought has often pitted God's sovereignty over against human freedom. Human accountability depends on human freedom, which is often understood to entail absolute power to contrary, which in turn jeopardises God's sovereignty. What begins as a tension that is unresolvable because there are so many unknowns becomes an unqualified contradiction, and plays a part in the perennial move to reduce God. The current round in this respect is to advance a 'process' God. But the robust theism of Scripture does not buy into such assumptions. Human accountability is certainly grounded in human freedom, but not a freedom with absolute power to contrary. Rather, as Jonathan Edwards argues, in Scripture we are held accountable because, regardless of what sovereign 'necessity' may be operating behind the scenes, once we have weighed all the pressures upon us we do what we want to do (reflect on Acts 4:27, 28). The result is that God's election may serve as an incentive to evangelism (Acts 18:9, 10), God's minute control as an incentive to diligence (Phil

that all that the Father gives to Jesus will come to him, and that he will keep all of these since he came down from heaven to do his Father's will, and his Father's will is that he should lose none of those he has given him (John 6:37-40), John's readers can nevertheless be told that they truly are Jesus' disciples if they remain in his teaching (8:31). Or again, even with respect to outsiders, we are told that those who do not believe are those who are not among Jesus' sheep; Jesus' sheep hear his voice (John 10:26, 27). But that does not stop Jesus from berating those who do not believe (eg 10:37, 38). Again, Jesus prays for the perseverance of those the Father has given him (John 17:6-12—with the obvious exception of the one doomed to destruction), for their holiness (17:13-19), for their unity (17:20-23), and for their presence with him in glory (17:24-26). We have been so conditioned to think of this prayer as a more or less frustrated plea for the success of the ecumenical movement that we have not always grasped its thrust within the framework of Johannine theology. Either the prayer was answered—and is being answered, and will be answered—or not. But in Johannine thought, Jesus' prayers are always answered, because he always pleases the Father. The perseverance, holiness, unity, and presence in glory of the disciples are sure things, as certain as the fulfilment of Jesus' prayer. But the certainty that Jesus' prayers for the perseverance of his followers will be answered does not mitigate the urgency of the injunction to hold tenaciously to Jesus' teaching (John 8:31; cf 2 John 9).

If this is the case, then there is nothing intrinsically incompatible about a simultaneous emphasis on God's preserving role or the inevitable result of the divine begetting, and exhortations to remain, to continue, to persevere. What it does raise, however, is the nature of the falling away: what kind of explanation is provided when someone does not persevere? That brings us to the next point.

2:12, 13). God's sovereignty as an incentive to prayer (Acts 4:24-28) – and God's predestination as an incentive to perseverance (Rom 8).

Perseverance and apostasy

The passage most directly relevant, in 1 John, to the question of falling away from the faith is 1 John 2:19: the secessionists 'went out from us'—that is, they had been baptised members of the church—but they never were 'of us', ie they did not really belong to us. In other words, they must not be viewed as being true believers, or genuinely regenerate people. If they had been, they would have remained with us; their going therefore proves that they were never 'of us'. This is entirely in line with the conclusions John draws about the divine begetting: those who are born of God or begotten of God do not sin (eg 1 John 5:18).

There are three primary ways of treating this passage in connection with other things said in the epistle.

(1) Some argue that, despite what is said in 2:19, there is surely some evidence that it is possible to fall from genuine faith. In 2:24 believers are exhorted to remain in the truth; if they do, they will remain in the Son and in the Father, and ultimately receive the promised reward: eternal life (2:25). Elsewhere they are warned to be careful not to lose what they have worked for (2 John 8)—which most likely refers to eternal life⁴⁰—which therefore suggests that someone might genuinely have eternal life and then lose it.⁴¹ Thus 1 John 2:19 must somehow be relativised to accommodate these passages.

But 'to lose' something does not necessarily mean that one already has it. For example, one can 'lose' a race, which certainly does not mean one has already won it. Since in the epistles eternal life can be described as something that God has promised us (1 John 2:25), ie something that we shall receive in the future, not that we already enjoy, it is difficult not to perceive that in some passages eternal life is a goal to be pursued rather than a prize already obtained. There is no need to relativise 1 John 2:19 in this way.

⁴⁰ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 285.

⁴¹ So I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God* (London: Epworth Press, 1969), 184.

(2) Others take 2:19 at face value, but infer that this is 'not apostasy (as in Heb 6:4-6) but the revealing of their true colours'.⁴² Everything depends on the definition of 'apostasy'. From the perspective of the church(es) addressed by John and the church(es) addressed by Hebrews 6, there is no difference whatsoever: people who had formerly been baptised members of the church, believers in good standing, had abandoned that stance and gone off to some position incompatible with genuine faith. What Lieu means, I think, is that John makes it clear that the secessionists never were 'of us' (1 John 2:19), so that theologically this cannot be apostasy, even if phenomenologically it certainly was, while in Hebrews a similar defection is treated as theological apostasy. But on this latter point I am less than convinced. Certainly Hebrews is far more nuanced than 1 John about the nature of the Spirit's work: it is not cast as all or nothing, in the way that John favours. But Hebrews, no less than 1 John, makes continuance or perseverance on the part of the believer a necessary condition of genuine faith: we are God's household, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast (Heb 3:6). We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end our first confidence (Heb 3:14; cf also 6:11). In other words, in both Hebrews and 1 John, persevering to the end is treated as a mark of genuine faith. In both, some who were accepted as genuine believers leave the camp. In both, they are treated, not as temporary backsliders, but as those who have so rejected the truth of the gospel. On the one hand, they cannot be brought back to repentance, no sacrifice of sins is left for them, and their only expectation is raging fire that consumes the enemies of God (Heb 6:6; 10:26, 27); on the other, they are antichrists, false prophets, liars, and those who sin unto death (1 John 2:19; 4:1; 5:10, 16).

(3.) It is better to let 1 John 2:19 stand in its starkness, and then to perceive that conditional clauses about remaining to the end and the like (eg 1 John 2:23, 24) are simultaneously exhortations to persevere and descriptions of one of the necessary ingredients of genuine faith. If you have Christian faith that brings you into the church as a baptised

⁴² Lieu, *Second and Third*, 191.

member in good standing, but not of the sort that perseveres, preferring, instead, to move on to some new position that *de facto* disowns the faith you once espoused, then your one-time Christian faith was not ultimately genuine: you never were 'of us'. This almost definitional element in the conditional clauses about persevering to the end recurs in the NT (eg Matt 10:22; 24:13; Mark 13:13; Luke 21:19; John 8:31; 1 Cor 15:2; Col 1:23; 2:6; Heb 3:6,14; 2 Pet 1:10; 1 John 2:24; Rev 2:10). This suggests that apostasy in the NT, including 1 John, is not simply the casual walking away from the faith after a casual conversion, but the genuine tasting of something of the Spirit's transforming power, a conscious adherence to the gospel, and then a self-conscious, eyes-open rejection of the heart of that truth for something else. It is turning away from what has been a public connection; at the same time, it demonstrates that that public connection lacked the element of perseverance that all ultimately genuine conversion includes.⁴³

Recent attempts to exclude 'the tests' from assurance

In recent years a small but vociferous group of popular expositors have offered a novel reading of the assurance theme in 1 John, and something must be said about it, not only because it has captured the allegiance of a small but growing alliance of pastors, mostly in North America, but also because it does look at 1 John in a fresh way. This interpretation emerges from a group which on doctrinal grounds argues that in the NT assurance of salvation is based exclusively on Christ's finished work. There is no other ground of assurance at all. Thus assurance is part and parcel of genuine faith. To appeal to works in any way—even as evidentiary value that one's faith is genuine—is to return to assurance based on works.

In the case of 1 John, then, these authors reject the view that 1 John provides 'tests of life'. Rather, John is providing

⁴³ On some of the exegetical and theological issues surrounding this sort of formulation, see my 'Reflections on Christian Assurance,' *WTJ* 54 (1992), 1-29.

'tests of fellowship'.⁴⁴ After all, 1 John 1:3 says that the purpose of writing is that the readers may have fellowship with the apostles, indeed with the Father and with his Son. The issue is therefore not salvation, but fellowship. The critical 'this is how we know' passages are handled the same way: we know that we 'abide' in him if we conform to one or another of the 'tests'—but this must not be confused with whether or not a person has eternal life. In this light, the strong language of 3:9 presents no problem: what is at issue, finally, is fellowship with God, not whether or not a person is a Christian. You cannot go on sinning and remain in fellowship with God. This reading of 1 John necessarily affects how one takes 1 John 5:13, which clearly does specify that 'these things' are written that those who believe in the name of the Son of God may know that they have eternal life. Exponents of this position argue that 5:13 is not referring to the contents of the entire epistle, but only to the material immediately preceding it, in 5:9-12: this kind of assurance, ie assurance that we have eternal life, is based exclusively on God's testimony (5:9), which finally is what God has said about his Son. It is exclusively the objective ground that is at stake, not at all any of the subjective tests, which are finally in danger of making assurance of salvation depend far too much on works that can never be good enough.

Probably the best critique of this theological position as a whole is that of Piper,⁴⁵ whose work I need not repeat here.

⁴⁴ As far as I know, the earliest exponent of this view is Guy H. King, *The Fellowship* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1954). Others include J. W. Roberts, *The Letters of John* (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 1984); Ryrle; Zane C. Hodges '1, 2, 3 John,' in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary; New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983), 881-915; idem, *The Gospel under Siege*, 2nd ed (Dallas: Redencioan Viva, 1992); J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Joy of Fellowship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977); John G. Mitchell, *An Everlasting Love* (Portland: Multnomah, 1982). For a useful summary of the view (though the critique is thin), see Gary W. Derickson, 'What Is the Message of 1 John?' *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (1993), 89-105.

⁴⁵ John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Portland: Multnomah, 1991), 277-305. Cf also Millard Erickson, 'Lordship Theology,' *Southwest Journal of Theology* 33 (1991), 5-15. Part of the problem - certainly not all of it - is a fairly radical form of dispensational hermeneutic (by 'radical' here

When we turn to 1 John, it is fair to say, I think, that sometimes the vocabulary of different 'grounds of assurance' has distorted the exegesis somewhat. After all, different 'grounds of assurance'—shall we say three of them?—sound as if they all make the same contribution, just like the legs of a three-legged stool I mentioned at the beginning of this essay. The image is not entirely wrong if one constantly remembers that the point of it is not to say that each 'test' has exactly the same significance as the other two, but to insist that at certain levels of discussion the biblical writers will not allow us to construct a one-legged stool. But it may be misleading, if this is forgotten. In the thought of 1 John, the ultimate ground of assurance that our sins have been dealt with and that we are acceptable to the Father is the Advocate with the Father who is also the *ἰλασμός* for our sins (2:1, 2). This 'ground' serves as ground because the death of the Son is the efficient solution to the problem. The so-called 'tests of life' constitute 'grounds' for assurance, but never because they are the efficient solutions to the problem, but because they provide corroborating evidence. The evidence is corroborating because the work of Christ, worked out in the divine begetting, promises necessary change. But it is not a 'ground' of assurance in the same sense that Christ's death is.

Thus, quite apart from the slightly purple prose, it is missing the point to say,

It is pure sophistry to argue that what is meant in such theology is only that works are produced by grace and are simply its necessary results. On the contrary, if I cannot get to heaven apart from the regular performance of good works, those works become as much a condition for heaven as faith itself.⁴⁶ [emphasis his]

But here 'condition' means something quite different in the two cases, exactly analogous to the way 'ground' means something different in the two cases—and, for that matter, analogous to the distinction Calvin makes between what is

I mean that many who style themselves as dispensationalists would disavow it).

46 Zane C. Hodges, 'We Believe in: Assurance,' *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 3/2 (1990), 9.

the 'sure foundation' and what is 'an accessory or inferior aid'.

Of course, in the right pastoral circumstances the 'inferior aid' may take on special importance. For example, if someone claims assurance of knowledge of God and yet lives in a manner utterly indifferent to what this God demands, there is reason to deploy this 'inferior aid' as an exclusion principle to prick their pretensions. What is more intriguing is how John uses these 'tests' to bolster assurance in those who remain among the orthodox. Here there are four things that must be said. First, the view that the 'fellowship' with which John is concerned (1:3), and the 'remaining' to which he constantly returns, have everything to do with intimacy but not with salvation, is profoundly alien both to the theology of the epistles and to the theology of the fourth gospel. For a start, the antitheses between the 'in' group and the 'out' group are so sharp throughout 1 John that, quite apart from matters of exegetical detail, this theological construction is intrinsically unlikely. When the 'out' group are antichrists, liars, children of the devil, false prophets, and the like, there is a fundamental contrast operating that extends beyond whether or not believers are enjoying 'fellowship'.

Second, cautious mirror-reading suggests that those who remain faithful to the apostolic gospel are in this case threatened by the claims of the secessionists, not only in the doctrinal arena as shaped by the hardening 'plausibility structure' of the surrounding culture, but in the experiential arena as well. If the opponents are forging 'ahead' (2 John 9), others feel as if they are left 'behind'. To draw an imperfect analogy, it is not uncommon for pastors today to deal with Christians who feel so terribly threatened by certain enthusiastic charismatics that they doubt they know God at all.⁴⁷ However much they must be reminded that their fundamental assurance rests on Christ and his work on their behalf, and not on a particular form of experience, it is

47 The analogy is imperfect for several reasons, not least because contemporary charismatics do not normally espouse docetic Christology.

entirely appropriate to reassure them by referring to the changes of life and character that they have experienced—the more so if the particular charismatic group in question displays few of the biblically mandated *desiderata*. In other words, in an abstract system of thought it may be vital to distinguish sharply the secondary from the fundamental ‘grounds’ of assurance, but in pastoral application what is particularly stressed may be dictated in substantial part by the urgent need. Proponents of this new theology not only flatten the diversity of NT emphases, but the diversity of pastoral applications (to which I shall briefly return at the close of this paper).⁴⁸

Third, although how far back ‘these things’ in 5:13 extends is a complex question that turns in part on how one reads the structure of the epistle, nonetheless with so many ‘this is how we know’ statements and their kin scattered throughout the epistle, surely this last one (5:13) cries out to be read in line with the ones that have come before it. To read it as offering for the first time assurance in a new area is extraordinary, the more so when the next verse is linked with confidence in prayer—exactly as is done earlier in the epistle (3:21, 22).

Fourth, what initially appears as a clever way to avoid a difficult standoff between passages that seem patently perfectionist (3:6,9) and those that insist sin will continue in all believers for the duration of this age (1:6-2:2) appears on closer inspection to ignore the antithetic style of John’s address—in this respect, one must say, not unlike some of Jesus’ preaching. The most powerful points are bluntly set forth, even if this leads to formal antithesis. Scholars will not be amused: they will multiply audiences, or concoct clever interpretations. But ordinary believers at the end of the first century who are confronting gnostic secessionists who simultaneously claim to live above sin and wallow in it, all the while insisting they are on a higher or more advanced

⁴⁸ On pastoral applications, one might usefully peruse Donald S. Whitney, *How Can I Be Sure I’m a Christian?* (Colorado: NavPress, 1994).

track, will feel the power of the competing strands and be grateful.⁴⁹

Assurance in 1 John in the Context of the Johannine Corpus

In this section and the next, my purpose is not to provide even so much as a survey of how the question of Christian assurance appears in the NT books to which I make reference; limitations of time and space forbid it. My more limited aim is to show, with a few jottings, that although sometimes the categories change, the pattern of a fundamental grounding of Christian assurance in Christ and his cross-work remains intact, and, at the same time, that precisely because the gospel is understood to be efficacious, the works of a transformed life have some bearing on assurance, not infrequently in a negative way—by raising questions over the pretensions of those who claim much but perform little.

(a) It is a commonplace that John’s gospel greatly stresses active belief as the fundamental point of entry into acceptance with God. For example, on John 5:24 (‘I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life’), Barrett tellingly remarks, ‘The thought is closely akin to the Pauline doctrine of justification, according to which the believer does indeed come into judgement but leaves the court acquitted’.⁵⁰

(b) Against Forestell⁵¹ and many others, John’s gospel is full of the cross, not merely as a moment of divine disclosure, but as an atoning sacrifice. Not only is Jesus the tabernacle/temple (John 1:14; 2:19-22), he brings God near because he is the destroyed temple (2:19). As the bread of life, he dies and gives his life that others may live (John 6:51)—a

⁴⁹ By itself, of course, this does not address exactly how a passage such as 1 John 3:9 should be read. I’m afraid that, once again, matters of detailed exegesis must be deferred to the commentary.

⁵⁰ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John*, 2nd ed (London: SPCK, 1978), 261.

⁵¹ J. T. Forestell, *The Word of the Cross: Salvation as Revelation in the Fourth Gospel*, (Analecta Biblical 57; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1974).

transparent metaphor in an agrarian society, where it is understood that everything one eats to sustain life, aside from the odd mineral like salt, is something that has died. Either the lettuce and the tomato and the cow and wheat etc that go into a McDonald's hamburger dies so that I may live, or it lives and I die. As the bread of God, Jesus is not only linked to OT manna, but he is displayed as offering a substitutionary sacrifice. The same is true of the corn or wheat (12:23, 24—which is then turned to a subsidiary application). As the good shepherd, Jesus gives his life for the sheep: he dies so that they may live. The raising of Lazarus (John 11) brings Jesus back to Jerusalem and thus costs him his life, an illustration that by his death he will ultimately bring resurrection life to others. Certainly Caiaphas the high priest thinks of a substitutionary death: it is better for Jesus to die than for the nation to perish—even if he did not perceive that Jesus' substitutionary death would also be an atoning death that stretched beyond the Jewish nation to 'the scattered children of God (John 11:49-52)'.

In short, the basis of faith, and thus of assurance of faith, is tied to the cross no less forcefully, if somewhat more obliquely, in the fourth gospel than in 1 John. And the connections between who Jesus is—after all, it is the fourth gospel that sets out to prove that the Christ, the Son of God, is Jesus (20:30, 31), and insists that the Word became flesh—and what he came to perform are tied together. In neither John nor 1 John is Christological confession tied to ontology alone; the reality of the incarnation is important not only in itself, but in what the incarnated one achieves on the cross. Here is the heart of the gospel; here is the object of faith.

(c) John's gospel, no less than 1 John, insists that genuine salvation inevitably produces results. I have already alluded to John 3:8: the new birth is likened to the wind in that the origins of both may be a little hard to fathom, but in both cases you observe the results: 'So it is with everyone born of the Spirit'. Jesus' sheep hear his voice and follow him (John 10).

(d) That is why inappropriate conduct can be used to disqualify pretensions of faith (eg John 2:23-25; 6:60-71).

Thus empirical evidence may disqualify some claims. This is true despite the strongest possible language to the effect that all those given by the Father to the Son are preserved to the end (eg John 6:37-40). This is another way of saying that if some irrefragably fall away, it must be because they were not given by the Father to the Son (cf 1 John 2:19). In the fourth gospel, the elect, Jesus' sheep, those born anew, have eternal life and are preserved; thus those who do not persevere have a question placed over them.

(e) That means that believers are encouraged to persevere (eg John 8:31; cf 1 John 2:24,28).

(f) In the Apocalypse, despite profound differences of genre and emphasis, there is again a powerful dual emphasis: on the one hand, we find the exclusive sufficiency of the cross to bring about God's saving purposes, transform his people, and give them conquering faithfulness; on the other, we find numerous passages distinguishing between believers and unbelievers on the basis of their performance.

Thus, on the one hand, Christ has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father (Rev 1:5). Only the Son, symbolised as Lion and as slaughtered (yet triumphantly powerful) Lamb, can open the scroll in the right hand of the Almighty and thus bring to pass all his purposes for redemption and judgment (Rev 5). It is on the ground of the blood of the Lamb that the believers overcome the devil and his accusations (12:11). On the other hand (to take but one example), the overcomer inherits 'all this'—all the blessings of the new heaven and the new earth—while

the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars, their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulphur. (21:7,8)

The overcoming theme is critical, and its significance already established in chapters 2-3: genuine believers overcome by being willing to suffer, by remaining faithful to the gospel, and so forth.

Once again, in other words, the assumption is that, however much the cross is the foundation of all the life and

grace of Christians, the proper object of their faith and thus the ground of their assurance, there is such a connection between genuine salvation and persevering, transformed living that the absence of the latter calls in question the former.

Assurance in 1 John in the Context of Other New Testament Corpora

Here there is space for only two quick probes.

(a) Other contributors to this collection of essays are focusing on Paul, and it would be impertinent, not to say redundant, to survey the same terrain. I wish only to point out that, however much Paul directs our faith to Christ crucified, to the promises of God, and to the gospel, nevertheless Paul is very concerned when he does not perceive works as the result or fruit of this gospel. True (as many have pointed out), nowhere does Paul specifically say that works are the evidence of faith. Nevertheless, the point is frequently implicit (as Philip Kern argues in this collection). Paul knows of false professions of faith; he even knows of false apostles proclaiming another Jesus, ie people accepted as Christians or even Christian leaders by many people, yet on whom Paul is prepared to pronounce his anathema (Gal 1; 2 Cor 11). On what ground can such a distinction be made?

A text in 1 Corinthians is especially important:

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor 6:9-11)

The distinction between the two groups is not simply at the level of performance, as if Paul were saying that bad people do not enter the kingdom and good people do, for the last sentence grounds the differences between the groups in the gospel. On the other hand, the differences between the two groups is not purely at the theological level without any

distinction in performance, as if Paul were saying that those who reject the gospel are shut out from the kingdom while those who accept it get in. The bad conduct of the first group shuts them out; the second enter because of the gospel, but the retrospective way of referring to former conduct means that those who continue to perform in the old way simply do not get into the kingdom.

So when Paul addresses himself to Christians whose performance is so shaky he is not sure where they stand, he can actually tell them to examine themselves to see whether they are in the faith. They are to test themselves. He adds, 'Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?' (2 Cor 13:5). It is hard to imagine a text much closer, conceptually speaking, to 1 John 2:19 than this one. Of course, Christians must take great comfort from the fact that when God sets his love on his people, the line from foreknowledge to glorification is unbroken (Rom 8:29, 30). Nothing and no-one can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:39). But God's sovereign reliability, for Paul, then becomes an incentive to perseverance (Phil 2:12, 13). Yes, the Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are the children of God (Rom 8:16), and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ—if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory' (Rom 8:17). Are we not again reminded of the kind of definitional element in some conditional perseverance clauses?

But now [God] has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. (Col 1:22, 23)

So we return, by a slightly different route, to the same fundamental structure of thought we have already observed. The believer is encouraged to focus on Christ, and persevere, and the promises of preservation are large and generous. At the same time, spurious conversions are acknowledged, and on occasion people accepted as Christians are told to examine themselves to see if they are in the faith. When is this wise

and godly, and when does it degenerate into hopeless and destructive introspection?

(b) Though there are substantial differences in vocabulary, genre, and theological emphasis from book to book in the NT, it is striking how this balance of things recurs. In Matthew, for example, Mary's son is given the name Jesus, 'because he will save his people from their sins' (Matt 1:21). He is the one who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (20:28). The recurring passion predictions in 16:21, 17:22,23 and 20:17-19, culminate in the passion and resurrection (this is, after all, a 'gospel'), which are given meaning by the words of institution at the last supper (26:26-29). Some of the parables speak powerfully of grace (eg the workers in the vineyard, Matt 20:1-16). On the other hand, some parables speak no less powerfully of preparedness and perseverance (eg the parable of the ten virgins, 25:1-13). Only the one who stands firm to the end will be saved (24:13). Jesus insists that on the last day 'many' who have prophesied in his name and performed miracles in his name and driven out demons in his name will be excluded from the kingdom, on the ground that they did not actually do the will of his Father in heaven (Matt 7:21-23). Here, then, again, is the exclusion of some who are regarded as Christians, and whose profession of allegiance is in fact spurious.

In all of these cases, we are not far from some such word as this:

Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. (2 Pet 1:10)

Some Historical, Theological, and Pastoral Reflections

There are many passages that might be examined in detail (eg 1 John 3:9!), and many theological and pastoral issues that are implicitly raised by this review. Perhaps these final reflections will address some of them.

(a) There is ample historical evidence to demonstrate that if the pattern and flexible emphases of the NT documents

on the doctrine of assurance are not followed, personal assurance of faith and broader patterns of church life are easily skewed. Why is it in some Scottish Presbyterian congregations of, say, 200 adults, only a dozen or a score will approach the Lord's Supper, because the others do not feel they have yet gained sufficient assurance? Is it not at least partly because the 'accessory or inferior aid' that might in some cases help some to see that their lives have changed and that they are in the covenant has loomed so large that it has devoured the only fundamental grounds of our assurance, the gospel of Christ crucified? Why do many evangelicals, on the basis of a couple of proof texts, press home 'assurance' on every person who has made the merest profession of faith? Is there any evidence for this post-conversion immediacy in Acts or Paul? Is it not almost designed to give as much false assurance to spurious converts as genuine assurance to the real? Does it not unwittingly tend to foster a reductionistic form of doctrine?

It is especially important to remember such history when one finds oneself embroiled anew in doctrinal controversy. In my view, the synthesis on works and justification developing along the Sanders/Dunn/Wright axis is at certain points fatally flawed, and it has harmful effects in the area of Christian assurance. But it is far from being the only way one can mess up what the Bible says about assurance. Mere overreaction is rarely an appropriate response in questions of doctrinal complexity.

(b) Intriguingly, most of the NT passages that introduce works in such a way that they have a bearing on the doctrine of assurance do so in such a way that those works function negatively—ie the absence of works, or the performance of the wrong kinds of works, calls in question pretensions to knowledge of God. In other words, they challenge the overconfident (as in 2 Cor 13) or the disobedient (as in Matt 7). Only rarely do they function, implicitly or explicitly, in a positive way—ie the works believers perform are so different from what they used to perform that they serve as a gentle confirmation that these people are in the covenant (1 Cor 6:9-11). But in this respect 1 John is quite different: there is an emphasis on behaviour in the arena of public observation, yet

John repeatedly says that he draws attention to these things so that his readers may know that they have eternal life. Why should this be?

I shall suggest the obvious reason in the next point. Here it is important to observe that the reason cannot be tied to the personal over against the public, as if John were saying that the phenomenologically different behaviour generated by the new birth functions privately (to reassure the believer) rather than publicly (to enable others to spot who is and who is not a true believer). How can this be, when so many of John's 'tests' are cast not only so as to reassure his readers, but also to give them criteria for identifying and excluding some kinds of people (eg 4:1-6; 2 John)?

(c) Pastorally, we must recognise that the causes of doubt are many, and that God in his mercy has provided biblical revelation sufficient to address all of them. Pastors must be diagnosticians, and discern which medicine to apply.

Consider the following three cases.

The first is a pleasant, intelligent, but rather naive young woman of 17 years, reared in a godly, blue-collar home. She came to trust Christ rather early in her life. Now she is going through substantial doubt as she studies for the first year of her A-levels. Quiet probing shows that the issue is not hidden sin or complete ignorance of the truth. She is for the first time facing intellectual challenges to her inherited faith. Although her faith up to this point has been real, it has not been robust, and her parents, as godly as they are, cannot provide her with the intellectual underpinnings she needs.

The second is a young man who some weeks ago has made profession of faith at an evangelistic meeting. Now he feels more guilty than ever, and wonders if he can ever be good enough to please God. What he must see is that as one draws closer to God, it is a not-uncommon experience to become more aware of one's dirt and guilt. The only solution—at the beginning of one's Christian life, in the months and years that follow, at the end of life—is the cross of Christ. The only remedy for a guilty conscience is the forgiveness that only the God of the new covenant can provide.

The third is a Christian in middle age, a believer of almost three decades' standing. He is a church warden in his parish church. Over the years, he has taught Sunday school, reared a godly family, given sacrificially to missionary causes, led a fruitful evangelistic neighbourhood Bible study. In recent months he has drifted away. He still attends church, but there is no longer any enthusiasm. His public praying has degenerated from fervency through formalism to silence. One day he seeks his pastor's counsel in private, and confesses that he feels miserable and is not at all sure that he is a Christian. Mercifully, the pastor probes in a gentle yet firm way, asking how long it has been since he relinquished private devotions, whether he is facing particular pressures at work, and so on. It doesn't take too long before the real problem comes out: for the last year or so, this man has been carrying on a clandestine sexual affair with his secretary.

My point in these three vignettes (and it would have been very easy to multiply them)⁵² is that an entirely self-consistent but merely formulaic approach to assurance would have lacked something. In the first case, to have gone over the promises of, say, John 5:24 and the 'Romans road' would have been 'biblically faithful', but it would not have scratched where the problem itched. This young woman needed information, refutation of the arguments she was facing at school, elementary apologetics, a reading list, a discipling friend. In the second case, the young man would probably have been greatly helped by the traditional proof-texting approach, but also needed someone to come alongside and establish routines of prayer and Bible study that are genuinely gospel-centred. The man in the third case needs to be told that his want of assurance is God's megaphone challenging him in his sinful relationships, and if he persists in this rebellious, selfish, sinful behaviour, and hardens himself in it, then sooner or later someone will need to tell

⁵² In fact, thorough treatment would factor in not only the kinds of circumstances I have outlined above, but factors of personality as well. The great missionary figure Henry Martyn struggled with questions of assurance much of his life; others never struggle. If preachers are not careful, while aiming to attack one particular ill in a congregation they may unwittingly do damage to others.

him to examine himself to see whether or not he is in the faith.

Not for a moment am I suggesting that the various strands of what the Bible has to say about Christian assurance do not fit into a 'system'. Rather, I am saying that the biblical evidence, while cohering in a whole, comes to us, in the Lord's mercy, in 'occasional' and 'existential' contexts, ie not in the first instance as a systematic theology, but as material addressing concrete 'occasions'. It is not for nothing that 1 Corinthians 13:5 is found where it is, and not at the end of Romans 8—and vice-versa. One may properly surmise, then, one of the reasons why 1 John, while stressing the centrality of the cross as the only way to be reconciled to God, nevertheless stresses the importance of observable works attesting the regenerating power of God. The pastoral situation demanded it. By the absence of such works, the opponents proved themselves disqualified, outside the camp. The presence of such works served as an aid (even if an 'accessory of inferior aid!') to reassure the believers, since in this case the opponents were such triumphalists (2 John 9) that the remaining believers were feeling threatened and needed concrete evidence in the public arena to the effect that they had known God and did know God.

Clearly it would be possible to take the various strands we have uncovered and weave them into a different system—one which, I would argue, stands farther removed from the balance of Scripture. Worse, it is possible to take just one strand and construct, not a well-proportioned doctrinal mosaic, but a single, monochrome hammer. One could so stress, say, 2 Corinthians 13:5 or 2 Peter 1:10, 11, that one ends up with some Presbyterians in the Scottish Highlands; one could so stress, say, John 5:24, that one ends up with countless thousands of spurious converts who never lack assurance. If you get this doctrine wrong, you may encourage improper introspection, or foster profane impertinence, or confuse backsliding and apostasy, or backsliding and spurious conversion. Precisely when does the 'sin unto death' occur for which there should be no more prayer (1 John 5:16, 17)? But the danger of imbalance is never warrant for

reductionism. It is, rather, a call not only to biblical and doctrinal maturity, but also to pastoral sensitivity.

(d) One must constantly remind oneself that Christian assurance is first of all an existential matter. If a believer trusts Christ absolutely for his or her salvation, and finds that the gospel promises are more than abundantly adequate to administer peace with God, then he or she is enjoying Christian assurance, whether or not he or she is mature enough yet to have formed a well-considered doctrinal structure on this subject. In other words, Christian assurance is not first of all a theoretical matter but an existential matter. I say this not because there are no structural questions at stake—after all, this essay and this book give ample evidence to the contrary—but because if the issue becomes primarily theoretical in the church it is useless; worse, it is prostituted. Our assurance is not in (the doctrine of) assurance, but in Christ. If in our efforts to make assurance well grounded we insist on a theoretical, epistemologically rigorous certainty that requires nothing less than omniscience, we have returned, by another route, to the profane probing into the secret counsels of God that Calvin abominates.⁵³

We must speak of knowledge and certainty and assurance in the way that the Bible does—and that way is finally grounded in the exclusiveness and effectiveness of the gospel.

Summary

Much of the distinctive flavour of the Johannine contribution to the Christian doctrine of assurance comes from 1 John. Although 1 John strongly emphasises that sins

⁵³ Indeed, one might argue that the Council of Trent confuses the issue because it not only rejects the mainstream Reformation doctrine on this subject, but caricatures it in terms of absolute confidence (chap. 9, 'Against the Vain Confidence of Heretics,' in *Decree Concerning Justification* [1547]). Thus the anathemas are pronounced against those who assert they are justified 'without any doubt whatever', or claim a 'certainty of faith, which cannot be subject to error', or the gift of perseverance 'with an absolute and infallible certainty'. Trent is wrong on matters of substance; but Trent also misrepresents the Reformation position, at least so far as it is represented in Calvin.

are dealt with exclusively through the cross (eg 1:6 – 2:2; 4:10), nevertheless he insists that conduct in the public arena—certain confessions of truth, principled obedience, and love for the brothers—contributes to assurance. This raises fundamental questions about the nature of that contribution and its relation to faith in an unfaltering object, the gospel of Christ crucified.

This paper surveys some of the distinctive emphases in 1 John, and compares them with similar emphases in the rest of the Johannine corpus and in other NT books. It offers suggestions on the way Christian assurance properly relates to other themes—predestination, the efficacy of Christ's cross-work, the work of the Holy Spirit, regeneration and its fruits, perseverance, the nature of apostasy, spurious conversion—and offers some pastoral and historical reflections.

Exploring further

1. In the NT, how is election related to the question of personal assurance of salvation? How should one properly use election in this regard in pastoral application? What would be improper use?
2. Some take 'God's seed remains in him' (1 John 3:9) to mean 'God's nature or regenerating power remains in him [ie in the believer]', while others take it to mean 'God's seed [ie his offspring, his children] remain in him [ie in God or in the Son of God]'. In the framework of Johannine thought, which interpretation is more likely? What difference will your judgment make to the interpretation of the larger passage?
3. What distinguishes apostasy from a case in which someone has made a superficial and essentially meaningless profession of faith and then some time later wants to abandon Christ? What differences will there be in your pastoral approach? Under what conditions is it appropriate (is it ever appropriate?) not to pray for someone (cf 1 John 5:16, 17)?

4. Construct several hypothetical 'case studies' that bear on the question of assurance (perhaps not so hypothetical; they may be drawn from your pastoral experience) and think through, biblically and theologically, how to deal with them. Justify your views.
5. 'We shall not restore the importance of the question of personal assurance until we restore to public vision the character of God and the pressing urgency of being prepared to meet him on the last day.' Comment on the quotation, and discuss what bearing it may have on the priorities of your own ministry.