

SBJT: What does the Gospel of John tell us about the doctrine of assurance?

D. A. Carson: At one level, the Gospel of John does not address the question of Christian assurance with anything like the immediacy displayed by 1 John. In the latter, John explicitly tells us that he has written “these things” to believers so that they may *know* that they have eternal life (1 Jn 5:13). Repeatedly we come across some such formula as “This is how we know we are in him” (1 Jn 2:5) or the like. By contrast, the Gospel of John makes no such statements. Whatever it contributes to the doctrine of assurance is more indirect.

Yet what it contributes is not for that reason insubstantial. *First*, John’s Gospel says a great deal about what might generically be called “salvation”—what it is, how it is provided, who has it, what it looks like. Inasmuch as Christian assurance is Christian assurance of *salvation* (as opposed, say, to the kind of “assurance” that is merely self-confidence, or overconfidence, or a reasonably mature “persona”), John’s Gospel contributes a fair bit indirectly. *Second*, this Gospel also explores something of the nature of spurious belief and false discipleship. It assumes no “easy believism”—and that in turn raises some questions in principle about anyone’s claims to have assurance if they are demonstrably falsified by a continuously perverse life. Although not cast in the language of assurance, such themes certainly prepare the way for the more explicit treatment found in the Epistles of John.

These twin themes are very strong. Here I can do no more than survey a few examples.

John’s Gospel aims so to bear witness

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that readers will believe “that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God,” and that by believing they might “have life in his name” (20:31). In one way or another, the entire book is devoted to this purpose. Sometimes the evangelist pursues this purpose in the context of intricate discourse or discussion. For instance, John 5:16-30 expounds the nature of Jesus’ sonship to the Father. The reason, of course, is that if John is going to talk about the importance of belief for securing eternal life (20:31), he must also talk about the object of that belief, Jesus Christ himself. That is why so much of the Fourth Gospel treats Christology. But as John unpacks Jesus’ sonship (a critical element in that Christology), the object of faith becomes clearer, and that in turn returns to the evangelist to his over-arching goal—bringing his readers to genuine salvation. So John reports Jesus’ words in the midst of this discourse on sonship: “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” (5:24).

Other important elements are obviously surfacing here, e.g. the inaugurated eschatology for which John’s Gospel is famous. The believer in this verse *already enjoys* eternal life, eternal life that will be consummated at the resurrection on the last day (5:25). But clearly, if one *already has* eternal life, and knows it, then one properly enjoys Christian assurance. Many, many passages in John’s Gospel function this way.

Some passages contribute to the same end through signs or highly symbol-laden exposition. In John 6, Jesus declares himself to be the bread of God. The “bread of life discourse,” as it is called, simultaneously links Jesus’ claim to be the bread

of life with his own miracle of the feeding of the five thousand the previous day, and with the theme of “manna.” Jesus argues that he is the ultimate “manna” of God: the Old Testament manna, however wonderful a provision, points the way to the ultimate “manna,” the ultimate “bread from God.” As the Old Testament manna sustained the life of the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings, Jesus as the manna from God provides the sustenance for eternal life.

Indeed, the point is all the clearer when one recalls the first-century agrarian setting of this discourse. In our industrialized world, for most of us food is something that comes to us in cellophane or cardboard. We are not intuitively aware that almost everything we eat is something organic that has died. A hamburger is dead cow, dead barley, dead lettuce, dead tomatoes, and so on. The only ingredients of the hamburgers that have not died are the minerals—salt, for instance, and usually too much of it. Strictly speaking, then, all the organic ingredients that died gave their life that we might live. Either the cow and the lettuce die, or I do. My physical life can be sustained only if a great number of living organisms die. People living in an agrarian culture know these things intuitively.

Jesus says, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world” (6:51). He then tells his hearers that they must “eat” his flesh and “drink” his blood. The explanation lies neither in cannibalism nor, at least directly, in the Lord’s table. Jesus himself has already shown that he understands his self-references as the bread of life to be metaphorical: what it *means* to feed on him is to come

to him and believe in him, thereby securing eternal life (6:35). But the metaphor is powerful in the first-century agrarian culture: either Jesus dies, or we do. If we are to have eternal life, the “bread” that sustains us must give up his life.

By these and scores of other themes and passages, then, John’s Gospel directs us to Jesus, and assures us that eternal life is ours because it has been secured by him in his death. We appropriate it by faith. There is no other way to return to God himself than by him who is the way, the truth, and the life (14:6). Implicitly, then, this Gospel provides excellent assurance of faith, precisely by making the object of faith so clear, and the means of salvation, faith itself, transparent.

But on the other hand, John is not naive. He does not think that every profession of faith is genuine. He carefully reports that at an early Passover in Jesus’ ministry, even when “many people” saw what he was doing “and believed in his name,” Jesus was not taken in: he “would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man’s testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man” (2:23-25). Clearly, not all professions of believing, even believing in Jesus’ name, are genuine.

Again, after the “hard teaching” of John 6, “many” of Jesus’ *disciples* are offended. They resort to grumbling, and finally turn away from him: “Many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him” (6:66). These disciples, clearly, were among those who *had* been “following” him—that is what a disciple is. But although they were “disciples” in the sense that they had been following Jesus, they were clearly not disciples in the sense that they were prepared to follow him and his teachings regardless of what he said. Unlike the Twelve (6:67),

they were unprepared to conclude, “Lord, to whom [else] shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God” (6:68-69). In John 8:31-32, Jesus tells some of those who “put their faith in him” words that help distinguish genuine faith from spurious: “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.”

In these passages John is certainly not encouraging an unhealthy introspection. He does not want people to ask themselves, “Am I a good enough disciple to conclude that my faith in Jesus is genuine?” Too much of that sort of reasoning, and sooner or later a person’s real assurance (or lack of it!) is tied to their own performance—and that is never a helpful ground of Christian assurance. The ultimate *ground* of assurance is never more than Jesus himself, Jesus and his death and resurrection on our behalf. *The ground of Christian assurance is the object of Christian faith.* Nevertheless, because eternal life, regeneration, genuine conversion, *inevitably* transform life, an utter lack of transformation rightly calls in question the genuineness of one’s profession of faith. That is a constant and driving New Testament theme, and it is treated at length by John in his first letter.

There are many rich and subtle elements in the doctrine of assurance that have not received so much as a mention here. For instance, the role of the Holy Spirit in our assurance is worthy of careful study and reflection, and John certainly contributes to that theme. But his driving emphases are clear enough, and prepare us for his more focused treatment in 1 John.