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Chapter 1
THE NATURE OF THE BELIEVER’S ASSURANCE OF SALVATION IN 1 JOHN

Introduction

It has been more than three hundred and fifty years since Thomas Brooks penned the words, “The being in a state of grace makes a man’s condition happy, safe, and sure; but the seeing, the knowing of himself to be in such a state, is that which renders his life sweet and comfortable.” Such an assertion is as true today as it was then, since the assurance of one’s salvation is an issue that individual Christians have wrestled with in virtually every generation since the inception of the church. Surely this is due to the fact that believers, who have taken the Scriptures seriously, have been confronted with passages that speak of assurance of eternal life as well as those that speak of testing oneself and of a warning. After querying such texts, many ponder whether or not they can truly be assured that they have been born of God (2:29; 3:1–2,9; 4:4,7; 5:1,4,18) and whether this divine birth will result in final salvation whereby the believer will have eternal life (5:13). In light of this, it is clear that this book grapples with a biblical theological issue that is of utmost importance for every child of God.

Thesis

No other book of the New Testament speaks of the believer’s confidence or assurance of salvation as frequently and explicitly as the first letter of John, for the predominant theme of the entire letter is Christian certainty. This is seen in the way the writer assures his readers that the cross-work of Christ is the effective solution for their sins (1:5–2:2; 4:9–10), the way he reassures them of their present status with God (2:3–6,12–14; 3:1–2; 4:4; 5:18–20), as well as his numerous

2 All Scripture references are from 1 John unless otherwise noted.
“tests of life,” given to help them “know” that they have come to know God (2:3). This letter, however, also contains warnings regarding false teaching and exhortations to persevere in love, righteousness, and the message heard from the beginning (2:15, 24, 26, 27, 28; 3:7; 4:1; 5:21). Thus, its readers are confronted with the tension between various assurances regarding their present status as children of God and passages that bid them to test themselves, exhort them to live righteously,4 and warn them of false teaching. To be sure, the very question of assurance of eternal life in 1 John centers on the relationship between such passages. Therefore, this study will seek to answer the question: What is the nature of the believer’s assurance of eternal life in the first letter of John?

I will argue that the writer of 1 John grounds his reader’s assurance of eternal life on the solid foundation of the person and work of Jesus Christ (1:1–2:2; 4:9–10; 5:18). Jesus is clearly displayed as the believer’s παράκλητος (“advocate”) with the Father (2:1) and the ἰλασμός (“propitiation”) of their sins (2:2; 4:10). Given that sin is inevitable in the life of the believer (1:7–2:2; 5:16–17), nothing other than the work of Christ can be viewed as the foundation of assurance, for it is the only effective remedy for their sins and thus the only ground for confidence of right standing with God. Moreover, it will be argued that assurance is not only grounded in the past work of Jesus on the cross but also on the promise of His ongoing work of protecting those who have been born of God (5:18).

While assurance is fundamentally grounded in the work of Christ, this letter also demonstrates that the lifestyle of the believer serves as a vital corroborating support for such assurance. This is seen in the numerous sets of criteria or “tests” that occur throughout the letter. Here I will argue that John viewed his readers as a new covenant community, expecting God’s own Spirit to dwell in them and empower them to walk in the light. The Holy Spirit should produce a change of life in the new covenant believer that is observable in the public arena and therefore able to be tested and validated. John’s tests were written with the primary purpose of his reader’s introspection and

4 Phrases such as “persevere in righteous living,” “persevere in holy living,” “heeding of biblical warnings” will be used synonymously and varied for stylistic purposes.
subsequent reassurance as they came to understand that it was they who were holding to a right belief in Jesus, striving to live righteously, and loving the brethren. Moreover, I will also argue that these tests have a retrospective aspect in that they enabled John’s readers to comprehend that those who departed from the fellowship had done so because they were never genuinely part of the community as made obvious by their fundamental failure of each of the three tests. Finally, I will argue that the tests at least implicitly have a prospective or exhortative element. In other words, even though the primary purpose of a statement like “no one born of God sins” (3:9) was to distinguish between those who were indifferent to sin and those who strive to live righteously, such a passage would nevertheless serve to motivate a child of God to continue to strive to live without sin.

This prospective element of the tests as well as John’s periodic warnings about the false teachers and exhortations to persevere (2:15a, 24, 26, 27, 28; 3:7; 4:1; 5:21) give rise to the discussion on perseverance in 1 John and its relationship to assurance. Here I will argue that those who have truly been born of God will take John’s warnings and admonitions seriously and therefore persevere in holy living. Those who fail to do so demonstrate that they have never truly been born of God (2:19). Therefore, this study will argue that John views the believer’s assurance of eternal life as compatible with his ongoing need to persevere in righteous living.\(^5\) In fact, it will be argued that these two are inextricably tied together in that the believer’s

\(^5\) I will use the terms “assurance” and “perseverance” when synthesizing John’s teachings on comfort and exhortation even though neither term is explicitly found in the letter of 1 John. The purpose for substituting these terms for the Johannine terms such as “knowing/confidence” (assurance) and “abiding/doing/keeping” (perseverance) is two-fold. First, it would be cumbersome and perhaps confusing to attempt to use such Johannine language when synthesizing his teachings, since such ideas are conveyed throughout this epistle in numerous and variegated ways. Moreover, it is believed that “assurance” is a very adequate term to describe John’s emphasis on “confidence,” “knowing one has eternal life,” “knowing one has passed from death to life,” “knowing one abides in him and he in them,” etc. It is also believed that “perseverance” is perhaps the best term to describe John’s emphasis on continually “abiding in God,” “doing righteousness,” “keeping the commandments,” “keeping oneself from idols,” etc. In addition, the themes of assurance and perseverance are also present conceptually in such things as “God being greater than the believer’s heart” (assurance) and the language of interiority and the obligations that follow (perseverance). Thus it seems appropriate to substitute the terms “assurance” and “perseverance” for the Johannine language in some of the synthesis sections for the sake of clarity.
confidence that they are children of God due to the work of Christ is a key impetus to their perseverance (3:3; 4:11) and their perseverance in righteous living actually aids in bolstering their assurance (2:3–5).

Nevertheless, while John emphasizes that his readers' perseverance in righteousness is vital, it cannot be viewed as the ground of their assurance. This is clearly found in the work of Christ. Therefore, the thesis of this study is that the letter of 1 John teaches that assurance of eternal life is fundamentally grounded in the work of Christ and supported in a vital, yet subsidiary way, by the lifestyle of the believer. One’s lifestyle is “vital” in that if a person fails to keep the commands, love the brethren, and have a right confession of Jesus, he demonstrates that he was never a child of God and should have any false assurance eradicated. It is “subsidiary” in that the letter also teaches that no one lives perfectly holy (1:6–2:2; 5:16–17), so the believer must continually look back to the work of Christ on the cross for the forgiveness and cleansing of sin.

Such a thesis lands us right in the middle of the historical debate on the nature of the believer’s assurance, where one of the central concerns from the Reformation onward has been the outworking of the biblical tension of finding one’s assurance in Christ and the relation of that assurance to persevering in godly living. Since the inception of the doctrine of assurance, this tension has been the source of much dispute over such issues as the degree to which the believer’s assurance is linked to his perseverance in godly behavior. Of course there is also the question of how much assurance a believer might have without being presumptuous. In other words, can a believer be assured of final salvation or is he only able to find assurance that he is trusting in Christ today? These and similar questions have been debated since at least the time of the Reformation and continue into the present day. Therefore, in order to properly move forward with this present examination of assurance in 1 John, it is helpful to first look back at some of the history of this debate.

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Method of Interpretation

Before proceeding to the survey of views, it is important to pause and briefly discuss the method of interpretation that will be used in this work. This book is a biblical theology of assurance in 1 John. Some will no doubt take issue with this statement, since this study interacts with works that are more dogmatic or systematic in nature (especially in the survey of views below). Moreover, the very question of assurance is one that has traditionally been addressed in systematic theology as opposed to biblical theology. Nevertheless, this book is a biblical theology of assurance in that an inductive method of interpretation is used throughout. Every attempt has been made to follow the description of biblical theology described by Carson when he says that “biblical theology focuses on the inductive study of biblical texts in their final form, seeking progression towards greater and greater faithfulness.”

I have not started with doctrinal statements on assurance and sought texts in 1 John to support them; rather, I have begun with the text of 1 John and sought to allow it to speak for itself.8

Survey of Views

With the importance that was once placed on the doctrine of assurance of salvation, one is a bit perplexed to find that there has been so little written on this issue in the discipline of biblical theology.9 To be sure, in the areas of historic and systematic theology, there have

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been numerous articles\textsuperscript{10} as well as monographs and dissertations on assurance in the theology of various noteworthy historical figures or particular periods of time.\textsuperscript{11} Nevertheless, in the field of biblical studies, this issue has not drawn the recent attention I believe it deserves.

When we turn to the specific issue of assurance in first John, the literature becomes all the more scant. To date, I am unaware of a single monograph and know of only a handful of journal articles written on this subject.\textsuperscript{12} While there is one recent dissertation,\textsuperscript{13} it is actually in the mold of the previously noted studies that focus on assurance in the theology of a historical figure and would therefore seem to fall into the category of historical rather than biblical theology. Hence, in the survey that follows, I have made every effort to focus on assurance in 1 John when possible, but the lack of materials with which to interact has caused me to venture outside of 1 John in order to summarize each of the various positions on this issue. Such venturing out of 1 John in order to summarize certain views (like medieval Roman Catholic or Arminian) is justified for at least two reasons. First, while this work is a biblical theology of assurance in 1 John, it is my hope that it will aid in furthering the broader theological discussion on assurance.\textsuperscript{14} Second, it is important to examine the main historical


\textsuperscript{13} T. F. Atchison, “Towards a Theology of Christian Assurance from 1 John with Reference to Jonathan Edwards” (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2004).

\textsuperscript{14} This is due to my conviction that all theology must begin with the detailed exegetical work of biblical theology. The best way to build a theology of assurance would be to begin with
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views of assurance, since such views have no doubt influenced the way many later interpreters have read the text of 1 John.\(^\text{15}\)

This survey will begin with four key historical trajectories of assurance of salvation that have been seen in the history of the church. These include (1) Medieval Roman Catholicism, (2) Luther and Calvin, (3) Later Calvinism: *Westminster Confession of Faith*, and (4) Arminianism. This will be followed by a brief overview of some of the current literature on 1 John where we will see that the majority of the contemporary commentators display striking similarities with one of these four historical views.\(^\text{16}\)

**Medieval Roman Catholicism**

While an argument could be made that there was a firm belief of assurance of salvation among some in the Patristic period,\(^\text{17}\) it would appear that the predominant view in the medieval period was that there could be no assurance of salvation, except perhaps by some special revelation.\(^\text{18}\) Gregory the Great (d. 604), who is considered by Philip Schaff to be the one of the best representatives of Medieval a biblical theology of each biblical book on this issue. Hence, this study is but one step in an overarching doctrine of assurance.

\(^{15}\) This insight came through a conversation with T. R. Schreiner on July 25, 2005.

\(^{16}\) For a more detailed history of research, see C. D. Bass, “The Nature of the Believer’s Assurance of Eternal Life in 1 John,” Ph.D. Diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 6–37.

\(^{17}\) See especially Yates, *The Doctrine of Assurance*, 149–56, who cites statements of assurance from such church fathers as Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Hilary, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, and Augustine. See also J. Zens, who argues that though a doctrine of assurance was “not written propositionally during the first three centuries of the Church, it was observed by the world that Christians had a certainty about God their Father and His destiny in their lives” as a result of their willingness to die the most heinous of deaths for the Christian faith (“The Doctrine of Assurance: A History and Application,” 36). Moreover, Robert Letham is probably correct in his assessment that “the emphasis in the early centuries was on the controverted areas of Christology and Trinitarianism. Questions concerning the application of redemption did not become a really major concern until the Reformation. Additionally, the lack of discussion of such matters was explained by the absence of controversy leaving no pressing need for close definitions to be made” (“The Relationship between Saving Faith and Assurance of Salvation” [Th.M. thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1976], 5–6).

\(^{18}\) R. Seeberg notes that Duns Scotus “asserted the possibility of being sure of possession of grace on the basis of works,” but this does not seem appear to be a common view during this period (*Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966], 2:202).
Catholicism,\(^{19}\) clearly denied that there could be any assurance of salvation for the believer. McGiffert, in his *History of Christian Thought*, says that Gregory believed and taught that “constant anxiety is the only safe attitude until life is over and temptation past. Assurance of salvation and the feeling of safety engendered by it are dangerous for anybody and would not be desirable even if possible.”\(^{20}\) Gregory believed that the church helped her faithful ones by mixing both hope and fear.\(^{21}\) This can be seen in his response to a woman who inquired about assurance at the imperial court to which he replied, “Thou shouldst not become easy in mind about thy sins.”\(^{22}\) This is because he believed that “assurance was the mother of all negligence.”\(^{23}\) Likewise, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) taught that actual certainty of salvation was unattainable, “since the grace of God lies beyond the sphere of human perception, and hence the possession of grace can only be inferred *conjecturaliter* from good works.”\(^{24}\) Thus, according to Aquinas, most Christians do not have personal assurance of their salvation unless by chance God reveals it to them through some special privilege.\(^{25}\)

Though the Council of Trent was not until 1547, it is worth mentioning at this point since its teachings fundamentally sum up the Medieval Catholic view of assurance. Here the writers went to great lengths to explicate that an individual could not be assured of eternal life:

No one, moreover, so long as he is in this mortal life, ought so far to presume as regards the secret mystery of divine predestination, as to determine for certain that he is assuredly in the number of the predestinate; as if it were true, that he that is justified, either can not sin any more, or, if he do sin,


\(^{22}\) Ibid.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 84.


that he ought to promise himself an assured repentance; for except by special revelation, it can not be known whom God has chosen unto himself.\textsuperscript{26}

Moreover, the later canons on justification anathematized anyone who claimed or taught that an individual could be assured of salvation.\textsuperscript{27}

\textbf{Martin Luther}

Of course this is the context into which Martin Luther was born (1483–1546) and would eventually challenge head on. In fact, it was Luther who argued that the Roman Catholic view of assurance must be eradicated, since it denied the very gospel itself. Luther’s understanding of the believer’s assurance of salvation comes directly from the pages of Scriptures, not least from 1 John. Commenting on 1 John 5:13, he says, “For contrary to the manifest understanding of all men I \textit{must believe} and \textit{be certain} that I must live forever, even though I see in the meanwhile that I am being consumed by worms. Indeed, I \textit{must believe} and \textit{be sure} that I not only shall have but do have eternal life.”\textsuperscript{28}

Luther’s linking of faith and certainty here demonstrates that he views the assurance of salvation to be of the essence of saving faith and thus the possession of every genuine believer.\textsuperscript{29}

For Luther, assurance is part and parcel of saving faith precisely because it is grounded on the promises of God, which were fulfilled in the work of Christ and not on the works of man. This is evident in his comment on 1 John 1:7 when he says:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 113–14. One such example is Canon XVI: “If any one saith, that he will for certain, of an absolute and infallible certainty, have that great gift of perseverance unto the end,—unless he has learned this by special revelation: let him be anathema.”
\textsuperscript{28} M. Luther, \textit{Lectures on the First Epistle of John}, ed. J. Pelikan, trans. W. A. Hansen in vol. 30 of \textit{Luther’s Works} (St. Louis: Concordia, 1967), 320–21 (emphasis mine). Compare his often cited comment on Ps 90:17: “He who prays for remission of sins and hears the absolution of Christ should be certain that truly, just as the Word declares, his sins are forgiven; and he should be assured that this is in no sense man’s work but God’s work. Whatever, therefore, is done in the church \textit{must rest on certainty}” (M. Luther, \textit{Selected Psalm II}, ed. J. Pelikan, trans. P. M. Bretscher in vol. 13 of \textit{Luther’s Works}, [St. Louis: Concordia, 1956], 140).
\textsuperscript{29} “Faith is a living and daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge and confidence in God’s grace makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God.” (M. Luther, \textit{Word and Sacrament}, ed. E. T. Bachmann, trans. C. M. Jacobs, vol. 35 of \textit{Luther’s Works} [St. Louis: Concordia, 1960], 370–71).
\end{quote}
But if we cling to the Word that has been made known, we have this treasure, which is the blood of Christ. If we are beset by sins, no harm is done. The blood of Christ was not shed for the devil or the angels; it was shed for sinners. Accordingly, when I feel sin, why should I despair, and why should I not believe that it has been forgiven. For the blood of Christ washes sins away. The main thing is that we cling simply to the Word. Then there is no trouble.\(^\text{30}\)

There is no trouble because Luther’s assurance is fundamentally founded upon Christ and not one’s own works.\(^\text{31}\)

It is important to note at this point that since Luther viewed faith and assurance as so closely tied together, he can at times be found implying that a lack of assurance demonstrates that one is not a believer.\(^\text{32}\) Luther, however, appears to qualify such statements by asserting that believers can have a weak faith and suffer from doubts from time to time for various reasons.\(^\text{33}\) Therefore, though assurance is of the essence of faith, it is not perfect. There are times a believer might have greater assurance and times when his assurance is weak.

So what place, if any, did Luther have for works in relation to assurance? In his comments on 1 John 2:3, he asserts that “if the true knowledge of Christ is present, it will not be without fruit or without works that are truly good.”\(^\text{34}\) Luther desires to make certain that the one who is truly a believer will have fruit/evidence of that belief in the way he lives. His comments actually resemble much of contemporary scholarship in referring to John giving tests or ways in which a believer might learn that he is genuine: “And if you do not hate your brother, you learn in this way that the kingdom of God is in you.”\(^\text{35}\)

\(^{30}\) Luther, Lectures on the First Epistle of John, 228.

\(^{31}\) See also his comments on 4:17 where he says, “Therefore if consciousness of a great sin weighs you down, comfort yourself with this blood of love. . . . No human religion can hold its own in the face of the judgment, but it is solely in the blood of Christ that we have confidence on the Day of Judgment” (Luther, Lectures on the First Epistle of John, 301–02; ibid., 236).

\(^{32}\) M. Luther, Word and Sacrament, ed. E. T. Bachmann, trans. C. M. Jacobs, vol. 35 of Luther’s Works (St. Louis: Concordia, 1960), 13: “Should you . . . not believe that your sins are truly forgiven and removed, then you are a heathen, acting toward your Lord Christ like one who is an unbeliever and not a Christian; and this is the most serious sin of all against God . . . . By such disbelief you make God a liar.”

\(^{33}\) M. Luther, Selected Psalm II, 138: “Therefore we become frightened at the slightest occasion. Furthermore, because sins and the punishment of sin are daily experiences, there are enough occasions for sorrow and for weakness of faith.”

\(^{34}\) Luther, Lectures on the First Epistle of John, 238.

\(^{35}\) Ibid (emphasis mine). See also his comment on 3:24, where he asserts that we know that God abides in us because his Spirit produces works in us: “For he who does not despise the
With Luther though, one must always remember that he goes to great lengths to hold the biblical tension between faith and works, even if he almost sounds contradictory at times. Perhaps the most indicative comment of Luther’s understanding of this tension can be found in his commentary on 1 John 3:19–20 and is worth citing at length. Beginning in 3:19, Luther says:

This is the evidence with which we assure ourselves of our calling and by which it is established that we are standing in the truth. If I am not moved by the weakness of my brother, I surely do not love him. From the fruits of love we can learn that we have love. Faith is established by its practice, its use, and its fruit. . . . The consciousness of a life well spent is the assurance that we are keeping the faith, for it is through works that we learn that our faith is true.\(^{36}\)

One is amazed, however, to find that he immediately follows this line of thinking with this comment on 3:20:

If you lack works, yet you should not lack faith. Even if persuasion is lacking, yet faith and hope are greater. For it is the sum and substance of the Gospel that you should believe and hope. Although we should consider ourselves unworthy, yet we should accept the grace that is offered and the Gospel. Even if our conscience makes us fainthearted and presents God as angry, still ‘God is greater than our heart.’ Conscience is one drop; the reconciled God is a sea of comfort. The fear of conscience, or despair, must be overcome, even though this is difficult. It is a great and exceedingly sweet promise that if our heart blames us, ‘God is greater than our heart’ and ‘knows everything.’\(^ {37}\)

It is therefore clear that Luther believes assurance to be of the essence of faith precisely because it is grounded on the work of Christ. In spite of this, he does appear to allow the believer’s perseverance in holy living to serve as a secondary support or confirmation to this assurance. For Luther, then, the promises of God as fulfilled in the work of Christ were the absolute foundation of assurance, while one’s

Word of God, to him He brings the first fruits of the Spirit, which show him how he can learn that he is in God and God is in him” (ibid., 282). Or again on 4:18, Luther says, “everyone should test his faith. If he believes in Christ, he has love” (ibid., 302).

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 279 (emphasis mine).

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 280 (emphasis mine). See also his comment on 2:29, in which Luther says, “John proceeds to exhort to works and the fruits of grace, and he does so with various proofs, in order that he may arouse us to do good, yet in such a way that we do not put our confidence in these works. It is Christ’s first aim that the tree be good, then that it bear fruit. What is the source of goodness? It does not come from the fruits; it comes from the root. It does not come from sanctification; it comes from regeneration. For he who is born of Him is righteous (v. 29)” (ibid., 264; emphasis mine).
perseverance in righteousness could provide only a supporting/confirming role.

John Calvin

It is widely recognized that Calvin, like Luther, understood assurance to be of the essence of saving faith. This can be seen throughout his many writings but perhaps most clearly in book 3, chapter 2, paragraph 7 of his *Institutes of Christian Religion*, where he sets forth his definition of saving faith: "Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a *firm and certain* knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit." This definition makes it clear that assurance is of the essence of saving faith because it is fundamentally grounded upon the unconditional promise of God as fulfilled in Christ. Precisely because one's faith is founded on the promises of God and not on

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38 For a helpful discussion on the similarities of Luther and Calvin on the assurance of Salvation, see R. C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993). Zachman's basic thesis is that "even though Calvin and Luther do have different emphases and motifs in their theology, they agree fundamentally that the foundation of the assurance of faith lies in the grace and mercy of God toward us in Jesus Christ crucified, revealed to us in the gospel. The testimony of a good conscience confirms, but does not ground, this assurance of faith by attesting that our faith in Christ is sincere and not feigned" (*The Assurance of Faith*, viii). See also W. Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (London: Banner of Truth, 1862; reprint, 1967), 111–48, esp. 119.

39 J. Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, 2 vols. ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles, Library of Christian Classics, vols. 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960). Henceforth, Calvin's *Institutes* will be cited as *Inst.* followed by book, chapter, and paragraph (i.e., *Inst*. 3.2.7.). Following Calvin's own appeal, I have interacted with Calvin's *Institutes* 1559 edition, since he states on p. 3 ("John Calvin to the Reader") that he was not satisfied with his *Institutes* until the 1559 edition. Moreover, he also notes that one should read his commentaries in light of the *Institutes*, since in his publishing of commentaries he notes that he will always "condense them, because I shall have no need to undertake long doctrinal discussions, and to digress into commonplaces. In this way the godly reader will be spared great annoyance and boredom, provided he approach Scripture armed with a knowledge of the present work [Institutes], as a necessary tool" (John Calvin to the Reader, 4–5).


41 Calvin, *Inst.*, 3.2.32.
one’s own works, it is the “sure and secure possession of those things which God has promised us.”

It is also true that Calvin believed that the doctrine of predestination was an integral part of the believer’s assurance. Contrary to later reformed theologians, he warned strongly against the idea of querying the hidden will of God, teaching that believers should instead anchor their assurance in what is revealed in Scripture. Assurance, then, is found in Christ as we see Him in the Word of God, so “predestination, rightly understood, brings no shaking of faith but rather its best confirmation.” Therefore, predestination bolsters the believer’s assurance, since it elucidates the very fact that salvation and perseverance are all of grace and not works.

Of course Calvin’s insistence on the fusion between assurance and saving faith could lead one to believe that a lack of such assurance indicates that a person might not be a believer. Like Luther, Calvin qualifies such statements throughout his Institutes and commentaries in his insistence that assurance is not perfect. While assurance is of the essence of faith, faith is never perfect, and he regularly speaks of such things as “weak faith,” “least drop of faith,” and “imperfect faith.” Such faith is nevertheless “real faith” and we are “illumined as much as need be for firm assurance when, to show forth his mercy, the light of God sheds even a little of its radiance.”

42 Ibid., 3.2.29.
43 Ibid., 3.2.41. Cp. Calvin, First Epistle of John, 204.
44 Calvin, Inst. 3.24.4: “Satan has not more grievous or dangerous temptation to dishearten believers than when he unsettles them with doubt about their election, while at the same time he arouses them with a wicked desire to seek it outside the way. I call it ‘seeking it outside the way’ when mere man attempts to break into the inner recesses of divine wisdom, and tries to penetrate even to highest eternity, in order to find out what decision has been made concerning himself at God’s judgment seat. For then he casts himself into the depths of a bottomless whirlpool to be swallowed up; then he tangles himself in innumerable and inextricable snares; then he buries himself in an abyss of sightless darkness.”
45 See Calvin, First Epistle of John, 240; idem, Inst. 3.24.4–5.
46 Calvin, Inst. 3.24.9.
47 Calvin, First Epistle of John, 203; Calvin, Inst. 3.21.1.
48 Calvin, Inst., 3.2.16. Here Calvin can be found making such bold statements as, “No man is a believer, I say, except he who, leaning upon the assurance of his salvation, confidently triumphs over the devil and death . . . . We cannot otherwise well comprehend goodness of God unless we father it from the fruit of great assurance.”
49 Ibid., 3.2.18–20.
50 Calvin, Inst. 3.2.19 (emphasis mine).
clear that such faith/assurance is something that believers can grow and progress in from weak to strong.\textsuperscript{51}

The Holy Spirit also plays an essential role in the believer’s assurance of salvation, according to Calvin.\textsuperscript{52} In fact, Letham rightly asserts that “it was Calvin more than anyone else who was responsible for the emergence of the doctrine of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit and for stressing that it was this that was the root cause of all assurance that the Christian enjoyed.”\textsuperscript{53} According to Calvin’s definition of faith cited above, the certain knowledge of God’s benevolence towards believers is not only founded upon the promise of Christ but also revealed to the minds of believers and sealed upon their hearts by the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{54} Faith, therefore, is not something initiated by man but is clearly a “work of God” and “manifestation of God’s power.”\textsuperscript{55} For Calvin, the Spirit does not work in some private mystical way apart from the Scriptures to assure the believer’s heart;\textsuperscript{56} rather, He seals the very promises found in the Scriptures upon the hearts of the believers and assures them that they are true.\textsuperscript{57} Moreover, Calvin also taught that the Spirit produces the fruit of obeying God’s commands and living righteously, by which the believer might find further confirmation that his faith is genuine.\textsuperscript{58}

Since Calvin teaches that the Holy Spirit produces the fruit of righteous living in the life of the believer, the believer should be able to look to such fruit and derive assurance. Interpreters of Calvin, how-

\textsuperscript{51} This is seen in Calvin’s comments on 1 John 5:13 when he says, “As there ought to be a daily progress of faith, so he says that he wrote to those who had already believed, so that they might believe more firmly and with greater certainty, and thus enjoy a fuller confidence as to eternal life” (emphasis mine) (Calvin, First Epistle of John, 264). See also Calvin, Inst. 3.2.19.

\textsuperscript{52} Calvin, Inst. 3.1.4.


\textsuperscript{54} Calvin, Inst., 3.2.7.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 3.2.35.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 1.9.1–3.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 1.7; 1.9; 3.14; 3.2.36.

\textsuperscript{58} This is clearly seen in Calvin’s comments on 1 John 4:12–13: “He speaks, however, first of love, when he says, that God dwells in us, if we love one another; for perfected, or really proved to be, in us is then his love; as though he had said, that God shews himself as present, when by his Spirit he forms our hearts so that they entertain brotherly love. For the same purpose he repeats what he had already said, that we know by the Spirit whom he has given us that he dwells in us; for it is a confirmation of the former sentence, because love is the effect or fruit of the Spirit” (emphasis mine) (Calvin, First Epistle of John, 243). See also Calvin, First Epistle of John, 227.
ever, must be careful on this very point, for Calvin, like Luther, is quite cautious to uphold the biblical tension between faith and works or the “basis” of assurance and its “secondary support.” Against what would later be referred to as the practical syllogism, Calvin writes, “For a conditional promise that sends us back to our own works does not promise life unless we discern its presence in ourselves. Therefore, if we would not have our faith tremble and waiver, we must buttress it with the promise of salvation, which is willingly and freely offered to us by the Lord in consideration of our misery rather than our deserts.”

On the other hand, Calvin does affirm that works are “signs of divine benevolence,” “fruits of regeneration,” “proof of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit,” and “signs of the calling,” which all serve to strengthen assurance. Even here though, he is careful not to overstate the use of righteous living in assurance. To be sure, the heeding of biblical warnings and holy living of the believer serves to bolster one’s assurance of salvation but must never be viewed as the foundation of such assurance. Calvin’s comment on 1 John 2:3 is insightful:

After having treated of the doctrine respecting the gratuitous remission of sins, he comes to the exhortations which belong to it, and which depend on it. . . . For we cannot know him as Lord and Father, as he shews himself, without being dutiful children and obedient servants. In short, the doctrine of the gospel is a lively mirror in which we contemplate the image of God, and are transformed into the same . . . But we are not hence to conclude that faith recums on works; for though every one receives a testimony to this faith from

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59 The practical syllogism of the later Reformed tradition “is a conclusion drawn from an action. The basic form of the syllogism when it pertains to salvation is as follows: Major premise: Those only who do ‘x’ are saved. Minor premise (practical): But I do ‘x’. Conclusion: Therefore I am saved” (Beeke, Assurance of Faith, 97 n. 153).

60 Calvin, Inst., 3.2.29. Moreover, commenting on one of Augustine’s statements as to why he does not put any trust in his works, Calvin writes, “He gives two reasons why he dared not vaunt his works before God: because if he has anything of good works, he sees in them nothing of his own; and secondly, because these are also overwhelmed by a multitude of sins. From this it comes about that his conscience feels more fear and consternation than assurance” (ibid., 3.14.20). This of course is due to the fact that believers are always aware that whatever good work they do is tainted with the flesh (ibid., 3.14.19).

61 Emphasis mine. In his commentary on 1 John 1:7, Calvin writes, “He now says, that the proof of our union with God is certain, if we are conformable to him; not that purity of life conciliates us to God, as the prior cause; but the Apostle means, that our union with God is made evident by the effect, that is, when his purity shines forth in us” (Calvin, First Epistle of John, 164; emphasis mine). See also ibid., 215, 217; Calvin, Inst. 3.14.18–20.
his works, yet it does not follow that it is founded on them, since they are added as an evidence.62

It is clear that for Calvin, the believer’s perseverance in righteousness serves only “to confirm confidence, as a prop, so to speak, of the second order; but in the meantime we ought to have our foundation on grace alone.”63 The foundation of assurance cannot finally be the lifestyle of the Christian, since he continually struggles with sin and is in constant need of cleansing (1 John 1:7).64 Therefore, assurance is of the essence of faith since it is fundamentally grounded on the promises of God as fulfilled in Christ, while man’s heeding of biblical warnings and perseverance in holiness serves as an important yet secondary support.

Later Calvinism: Westminster Confession of Faith

As the Reformation continued through the teachings of Calvin’s successor Theodore Beza on into England through such key figures as William Perkins, the reformed doctrine of assurance continued to experience changes.65 Following Calvin, it would appear that the secondary support of assurance, specifically sanctification, began to receive heightened emphasis. Here however, there is intense debate amongst Reformation and Puritan scholars as to the degree to which later Calvinists changed Calvin’s view of assurance. On the one hand, there are those who would argue that there is a fundamental distinc-

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62 Calvin, *First Epistle of John*, 173–75 (emphasis mine). Or again, commenting on 1 John 3:19 he says, “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 faith, not the foundation on which it rests” (ibid., 222; emphasis mine). See also ibid., 165–66, 182, 218, 222.

63 Ibid., 246 (emphasis mine).

64 Commenting on the fact that Jesus is our advocate in 1 John 2:2, he says, “By these words he confirms what we have already said, that we are very far from being perfectly righteous, nay, that we contract new guilt daily, and that yet there is a remedy for reconciling us to God, if we flee to Christ; and this is alone that which consciences can acquiesce, in which is included the righteousness of men, in which is founded the hope of salvation” (ibid., 170–71; emphasis mine). Ibid., 167.

65 For a diverse description of the evidence, see Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*; Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*; Letham, “Saving Faith and Assurance in Reformed Theology; Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology*. 
tion between Calvin and later Calvinists. On the other hand, there are those who are just as adamant that the change was “quantitative and methodological and not qualitative or substantial.” A sure conclusion seems difficult and scholars on both sides appear equally immovable in their position.

**Westminster Confession of Faith.** Whatever conclusion one may draw on this issue, it is enough for our purpose to notice that by the time the *Westminster Confession of Faith* was drawn up, changes in the Reformed doctrine of assurance have most assuredly taken place. To begin with, while Calvin and Luther argued that one’s assurance was of the essence of saving faith, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* asserts that it is something that comes later:

> This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith but that a true believer may wait long and conflict with many difficulties before he be a partaker of it: yet, being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto. And therefore it is the duty of everyone to give all diligence to make their calling and election sure.

Interestingly, one of the verses cited in support of the statement that assurance is not of the essence of faith is 1 John 5:13, since John says that he has written to those who believe but nevertheless appear to be in need of assurance.

The other clear distinction between Calvin and Westminster was Calvin’s insistence that the ground of assurance is the promises of God as fulfilled in Christ and that holy living serves as a secondary

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68 *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1646, 1990), XX, 3 (henceforth, *WCF*).

69 See chap. 6 where I interact with this idea in more detail.
support. In contrast, by the time of Westminster, there seems to be equality among three “grounds” of assurance:

This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion, grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith, founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are children of God; which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption. 70

Once again, a key section of this statement is supported with a passage from 1 John. Here 1 John 3:14 is cited in support of the statement that one of the three parts of the foundation is the “inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made.” Therefore, it appears that this confession held to a three-tiered foundation as opposed to Calvin and Luther’s single foundation with secondary supports.

**Jacobus Arminius: A Dissenting Voice**

Of course Calvin and later Calvinists were not the only voice on assurance during this time. In fact, one key voice was a student of Theodore Beza named Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609). Arminius was a contemporary of William Perkins who grew to disagree with many of the assumptions of Reformed Theology. 71 The key point of departure with which this study is interested is his view on the believer’s assurance of salvation. It is important to note, however, that Arminius was in substantial agreement with much of later Calvinism’s view of assurance. He agreed that assurance is to be found in Jesus as well as “the action of the Holy Spirit inwardly actuating the believer and by the fruits of faith, . . . and the testimony of God’s Spirit witnessing together with his conscience.” 72 Nevertheless, his point of departure on this issue was in the degree of assurance that a believer might actually have without being presumptuous. Arminius asserted that a believer

70 WCF, XX, 2.
71 For a survey of Arminius’s disputes with other reformed theologians, see C. Bangs, Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1985); Letham, “Saving Faith and Assurance in Reformed Theology,” 311–19.
could have a **present assurance** of **present salvation** but not a **present assurance** of **final salvation**.\(^3\)

Regarding assurance of present salvation, he says, “With regard to the certainty [or assurance] of salvation, my opinion is, that it is possible for him who believes in Jesus Christ to be certain and persuaded, and, if his heart condemn him not, he is now in reality assured, that he is a Son of God, and stands in the grace of Jesus Christ.”\(^4\) On the other hand, regarding present assurance of final salvation, Arminius begins by posing two questions: “Is it possible for any believer, without a special revelation, to be certain or assured that he will not decline or fall away from the faith? . . . Are those who have faith, bound to believe that they will not decline from the faith?”\(^5\) He responds negatively to both questions: “The affirmative of either of these questions was never accounted in the church of Christ as a catholic doctrine; and the denial of either of them has never been adjudged by the church universal as a heresy.”\(^6\) Hence, for Arminius, a believer could find only present assurance of present salvation but not present assurance of final salvation.

### Contemporary Views of Assurance in 1 John

Having surveyed four historical trajectories of assurance, it is now important to switch gears and briefly examine a sampling of the contemporary views of assurance that can be found in the commentaries and articles on 1 John. Every effort has been made to understand inductively the various ways in which individual scholars have interpreted John’s teaching on assurance. Moreover, I have sought to evaluate where each writer falls with reference to the four historical trajectories surveyed above. This is not to say that those shown to fit within a particular category are in complete agreement, for each certainly displays his or her own nuances. The purpose, then, is not to establish

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\(^{3}\) Bangs, *Arminius*, 347–48. It may be helpful to note at this point that John Wesley’s view of assurance appears to be virtually identical to that of Arminius on this point. The one apparent difference might be the degree to which Wesley would stress the role of the Holy Spirit in assurance (see M. A. Noll, “John Wesley and the Doctrine of Assurance,” *BibSac* [1975]: 161–77).

\(^{4}\) Arminius, *Writings of James Arminius*, 1:255 (emphasis his).

\(^{5}\) Ibid., 2:503.

\(^{6}\) Ibid.
a rigid system of classification but to demonstrate that the majority of the contemporary views of assurance in 1 John are quite similar to one of the four historical trajectories surveyed above. Therefore, following the ordering above, I will survey some of the contemporary literature under the headings (1) No Assurance of Salvation, (2) Luther and Calvin, (3) Later Calvinism, and (4) Arminianism. Moreover, I have added a fifth category to this part of the survey (“The Grace Movement”) to account for what is a rather new interpretation (historically speaking) on assurance in 1 John that has been quite influential in American Evangelicalism. Due to the aforementioned dearth of literature on the specific topic of assurance in 1 John, only a handful of the works in this survey are specific to this topic. Beyond these, I have also surveyed some of the more influential commentaries on 1 John with hopes of understanding their view of assurance in this epistle.

**No assurance of salvation.** In a book as heavy laden with statements of confidence and assurance as 1 John, it is difficult to imagine that any serious interpreter of the text would argue that John does not assure his readers of eternal life (5:13). Not surprisingly, none of the interpreters surveyed here can confidently be placed under this heading. This is because, to one degree or another, all of the commentators surveyed speak of John offering “assurance” or “reassurance” and perhaps even “tests” throughout their commentaries. However, while some of the Catholic commentators use the term “assurance,” they do not seem to be referring to assurance of salvation but are simply arguing that John is giving his readers “assurance” that they are on the right side of the dispute between he and the secessionists. D. A. Carson has perhaps best assessed the situation in his statement that the majority of the Catholic commentators on 1 John “largely bypass

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77 It is important to keep in mind that I am not attempting to understand each writer's personal view of assurance of salvation. The goal is to understand what each writer believes John to be teaching.

78 This survey is far from exhaustive, for that would take a book in itself. This study is not a historical survey of assurance in 1 John; rather, it is a biblical theology of assurance in 1 John, and thus, the purpose of this survey is simply to overview the broad spectrum of contemporary scholarship on the nature of assurance of salvation in 1 John.

The Nature of Assurance of Salvation in 1 John

the theme of assurance and see in this book a depiction of proper Christian communal life.” Nevertheless, none of the Catholic commentaries surveyed can be confidently placed under this rubric, since each are exegetical in their approach and appear to interpret such passages as 5:13 to be saying that John has written to give his readers assurance.

Luther and Calvin. Those who fall under this heading do not necessarily agree with every aspect of Luther and Calvin’s views of assurance, for even Luther and Calvin themselves display subtle nuances. Interpreters placed here are those who understand John to be teaching that assurance is fundamentally grounded on the promises of God as fulfilled in the work of Christ and only secondarily supported by the fruit of the Spirit. Moreover, each of those in this group understand John to be teaching that those who are “born of God” will persevere to the end, so assurance in 1 John is of both present and final salvation.

The clearest illustration of this view is D. A. Carson, who asserts that in 1 John, the “objective ground of assurance” is the “finished cross-work of Christ,” while the believer’s diligence in good works “should be regarded as ‘accessory and inferior’ aids” to such assurance. The letter of 1 John was written as a result of a crisis that was “precipitated by the secession of some members who have been powerfully influenced by some form of protognosticism. Their departure left behind believers who were, spiritually speaking, badly bruised. The raw triumphalism of most forms of gnosticism dented the confidence of those who refused to go along with the movement.” Therefore, John sets forth “tests” in order to reassure his readers that they have eternal life and that it is the false teachers who actually fail the tests and therefore do not have eternal life abiding in them. Moreover, John also exhorts his readers to persevere in the faith, which is in no way contradictory, since in Johannine theology, “God’s sovereign assurance does not function as a disincentive to effort, but as an incentive.” To be sure, in Johannine thought, those who fail to

82 Carson, “Reflections on Assurance,” 274.
84 Ibid., 75–76.
persevere, demonstrate that they were never genuine believers to being with (2:19). Nevertheless, this perseverance and passing of “tests” serve as a secondary support to one’s assurance that is fundamentally grounded upon the cross-work of Christ.  

While Schreiner and Caneday’s recent biblical theology of the relationship of warning passages to perseverance and assurance does not focus exclusively on 1 John, they do interact significantly with this letter. The overarching thesis of this book appears at first glance to land them closer to the view of later Calvinism, since they argue that biblical warnings are a means of salvation and then the heeding of such warnings are a means of assurance. Nevertheless, the careful reader will note that such statements are periodically qualified throughout the book, for they even assert that they are right in line with Luther and Calvin. In addition, they strive to make certain that “biblical assurance rests fundamentally on God and his promises” and even assert that we should emulate Calvin “by also preserving the balance between the foundation and confirmation of our assurance.” Moreover, while using the analogy of assurance based upon a three-legged stool, which is the terminology of later Calvinists, they are nevertheless careful to clarify that it is an insufficient analogy, because the primary leg is the promises of God.  

Commenting specifically on 1 John, Schreiner and Caneday argue that the “primary goal” of the letter is assurance and this assurance is grounded on the promises of God and work of Christ. They go on to argue that though the promises of God are the “fundamental leg” of a three legged stool, it would nevertheless be wrong for us to “conclude from this that the other legs of the stool are superfluous.” In fact, the idea that a transformed life is vital evidence of salvation is a theme that permeates the entire letter. Moreover, they rightly contend that John did not write these “tests” or warnings to further shake the
confidence of his readers but to comfort them as they came to realize their own genuineness and that it was actually the secessionists who failed to pass the tests.\textsuperscript{93} Finally, Schreiner and Caneday argue that the third leg of the stool (the witness of the Holy Spirit) is also observable in passages like 4:13, where believers are assured that we abide in Him and He in us as a result of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{94}

**Later Calvinism: Westminster Confession of Faith.** This category differs from the previous one in that there is the belief that assurance is not part and parcel of saving faith and therefore is something a believer might not attain for some time. Moreover, while Calvin and Luther argued for a foundation with secondary supports, this view puts forth a multi-tiered foundation of assurance. The contemporary scholars I have placed under this rubric do not necessarily argue that assurance is something a believer might not attain for some time. Instead, the key delineating factor for placing interpreters under this heading is their argument that assurance in 1 John is grounded on a multi-tiered foundation rather than asserting that assurance is based on the foundation of Christ with secondary supports. Like the view of Luther and Calvin, all who fall in this group argue that John teaches that a genuine believer cannot lose his salvation, so assurance is of both present and final salvation.

Colin Kruse appears to be a good example of this view. He argues that the purpose of 1 John was to “bolster the assurance of his readers by the double strategy of showing the secessionists’ claims to be false and showing his readers that they are in the truth.”\textsuperscript{95} Many of the “tests” are claims of the false teachers, which John turns on their heads. Commenting on the “test” in 2:3, Kruse says, “Ongoing assurance that we are people who know God is dependant upon ongoing obedience to his commands.”\textsuperscript{96} He gives the impression that John's grounds for assurance are equal: “The readers’ assurance is to be

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 285.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 303–04. For others who appear to fall into this overall view similar to that of Luther and Calvin, see du Toit, “The Role and Meaning of Statements of ‘Certainty’”; M. M. Thompson, 1–3 John, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992).
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 77.
grounded on God’s testimony about his Son, their own godly living, loving action and concern for fellow believers, their obedience to the love command, and the Spirit’s testimony to Christ.”

Moreover, this assurance is of both present and final salvation, as is made clear in his rejection of the idea that the sin that leads to death can be committed by one who is truly born of God. In light of this, Kruse apparently fits quite well in this category.

Arminian. Those who fall under the Arminian heading are similar to the previous view in that they assert that John teaches that assurance comes through believing in Jesus and confirming that one passes the tests laid out in this epistle. The point of departure, however, is that those in this camp argue that genuine believers can lose their salvation. Therefore, like Arminius, these interpreters argue that assurance is only present assurance of present salvation.

I. Howard Marshall asserts time and again that John’s purpose for writing this letter was to assure/reassure his readers of their salvation. The primary mode of deriving such assurance through this letter is the series of “tests” set up by John. On this point Marshall says, “John is writing the present verse with a positive purpose, to reassure his readers that their experience of God was genuine. We can know by this he says: The test is whether we keep His commandments. This test is deliberately put as a condition, since it may or may not be true of each of the readers; each one must ask himself whether he fulfills the condition.”

Hence the believer is to read the tests in 1 John and examine himself to see if he passes the test. If he does, he is able to...
walk away with assurance of his salvation. Marshall is careful, however, to make certain that he is not teaching that salvation turns on works. Commenting on 1:7 he makes it clear that believers will sin and must look to the blood of Jesus to cleanse him from his sin. Moreover, he is clear that assurance derived from obedience alone might lead one to feel that he is not abiding in God, so it is the Holy Spirit whose presence and witness brings the assurance so dearly desired. Nevertheless, Marshall gives the impression that the predominant emphasis in 1 John is assurance of salvation that comes through the heeding of John’s warnings and persevering in holy living that includes obeying the commands, loving the brethren, and having a right confession of Jesus. Moreover, Marshall holds that such assurance is only assurance of present salvation in that he asserts that John teaches that genuine believers can fall into apostasy. This is most clear in his comments on 1 John in his book Kept by the Power of God. Here he says, “According to 1 John, then, sin is a possibility among believers, even to the point of denial of Christ, and the teaching of the Epistle is not fully accounted for if sin is regarded as a possibility only among those who have never been truly converted.” It would appear then that Marshall believes that 1 John teaches that assurance of salvation comes through faith in Christ, the witness of the Holy Spirit, and the obedience that must follow to demonstrate the reality of such faith. This assurance, however, is only present assurance, because the genuine believer can in fact walk away from the faith.

As noted above, there are also some Catholic commentators who seem to fall somewhere between this category and the first one. Raymond Brown is good example of this position. Brown argues that 5:13 should be seen as the purpose statement for the entire epistle of 1 John. This epistle was written as a result of the schism that had occurred in the community and those who departed were attempting

102 Ibid., 112; cp. 118.
103 Ibid., 202–03.
104 Ibid., 152, 160–61, 249–50.
106 Ibid., 186–87. See also his comments on 184–85.
107 Brown, Epistles of John, 630–33.
to influence others to embrace their teaching and follow them. This epistle then is a polemic designed to help his readers understand that the secessionists are in the wrong and he is in the right. Commenting on the purpose statement of 5:13, Brown says that John “wishes to strengthen his readers in their Christology since only a faith that is correct Christologically gives life.”

It is somewhat puzzling to try to decipher Brown’s view of the nature of assurance in 1 John. While he uses the term “assurance” and “reassurance,” it is difficult to understand exactly what he is teaching. At times he can be seen saying that John is reassuring his readers that they know Christ, have had their sins forgiven, or even that they have eternal life. Moreover, Brown speaks of John “wanting his readers to face the parousia with confidence based upon their abiding in Christ.” Nevertheless, throughout the countless passages that most commentators want to speak of assurance of salvation, Brown tends to avoid such terminology. Instead he seems to prefer to speak of John reassuring his readers not that they have eternal life, but that they are the ones who are on the right side of the schism. This is seen most clearly on his comments on 5:13, where he says “several times previously, after he has described dualistically the situation vis-à-vis the secessionists, his pastoral sense has led him to reassure his readers that they are on the right side and hence are not the object of his polemic.” Moreover, for the majority of commentators, John offers a series of “tests” by which his readers might find comfort that they are truly believers and recognize that it is the false teachers who actually fail to pass these tests. For Brown, however, such “tests” like keeping the commandments (2:3) are not tests of whether one might

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108 Ibid., 632.
109 Ibid., 364: “In the next unit (2:12–17) the author turned his attention to the first group, the children of light who are his ‘Children,’ reassuring them that they have known Christ, have had their sins forgiven, and have conquered the Evil One.” Or again commenting on 3:20, Brown says, “In 1:8–2:2 the sinner was assured that God forgives through the atonement of Christ, and that same assurance is repeated here” (477).
110 Ibid., 633: “The readers know that they possess eternal life (5:13).”
111 Ibid., 420–21; cf. 477, 561.
112 Ibid., 371–76. Here he speaks of “reassurance against secessionist deception.”
113 Ibid., 633–34 (emphasis mine).
detect the presence of God in their lives and thus derive assurance but are the very means by which believers might have that relationship.\textsuperscript{114} Finally, Brown gives the impression that the most assurance a believer might experience is some form of assurance of present salvation but certainly not final salvation. In the context of 5:13–21, he contends that “amidst his reassurances the author mentions also a deadly sin or sin unto death (5:16).”\textsuperscript{115} Brown believes this to be the sin of the secessionists, which could be committed by one who has actually passed over from death to life. On this point he says, “When his readers came to faith and joined the Johannine Community of ‘brothers,’ they passed from death to life (1 John 3:14). By leaving the Community the secessionists have shown that they hate the ‘brothers’ and have reversed the process by passing from life to death. In this sense theirs is a sin that is unto death.”\textsuperscript{116} Hence, if one is able to “reverse the process” and “pass from life to death,” then believers can lose their salvation; thus their assurance is at best an assurance of present salvation but certainly not final salvation.\textsuperscript{117}

The Grace Movement. There is one final view that does not fit any of the historical views surveyed above. This is the view purported by a group known as the “Grace Movement.”\textsuperscript{118} While this group has clearly captured a following at the popular level, it has not enjoyed the same response among biblical scholars. Nevertheless, it is important to interact with this view, if only briefly, due to its popularity in many of our churches as well as the fact that they have introduced a rather novel view of assurance in 1 John. Here I will interact primarily with

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 278–79. This is seen in his comment on 2:3 when he says, “The author argues that one cannot know God without keeping his commandments. . . . one gains a knowledge of God through behavior, when that behavior is governed by God’s commandments. Keeping the commandments is more than an external way of verifying a claim to know God; rather it is a criterion that has an essential relationship to the claim made” (278–79; emphasis mine). Moreover, in his footnote to the last sentence of this quote this view is clarified even more when he asserts, “There is a problem with R. Law’s thesis that 1 John supplies the ‘tests’ by which one can detect the presence of divine life, as exemplified by the many ‘This is how we can be sure’ sentences. . . . for the Johannine writer what is offered is more than a test; it is a means (279; emphasis mine).

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 636.

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid (emphasis mine).

\textsuperscript{117} For others who appear to fit into the Arminian camp, see S. S. Smalley, 1, 2, 3 John, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 51 (Waco: Word Books, 1984); J. Painter, 1, 2, and 3 John, Sacra Pagina, vol. 18 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2002).

\textsuperscript{118} This group now has its own journal—Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society.
Zane Hodges, since he has been one of the more influential voices in this movement and has written extensively on 1 John.\(^{119}\)

Hodges’s overarching theology of assurance is that it is based exclusively on the promises of God and work of Christ and is therefore completely divorced from works. On this point he says, “Basically we insist that the New Testament Gospel offers the assurance of eternal life to all who believe in Christ for that life. The assurance of the believer rests squarely on the Biblical promises in which this offer is made, and on nothing else.”\(^{120}\) Assurance is therefore part and parcel of saving faith but can have no secondary support, for that would result in works righteousness or assurance based upon works.\(^{121}\)

It would appear that Hodges begins with this overarching theological construct of assurance and then imposes it on the text of 1 John by way of a very innovative reading of John’s tests. Arguing against the overwhelming majority of New Testament scholars, he asserts that John does not give “tests of life/salvation/assurance” throughout this epistle; rather, he gives his readers “tests of fellowship.”\(^{122}\) Here he contends that John must be speaking about tests of fellowship,\(^{123}\) since the purpose statement of 1 John comes in 1:3 as opposed to 5:13\(^{124}\)–5:13 is only the purpose statement for 5:9–12, while 1:3

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\(^{121}\) Ibid.


\(^{123}\) Hodges says the only “test of salvation” in the whole letter is found in 5:1 (*Epistles of John*, 144).

serves as the overarching purpose statement for the whole epistle. Therefore, the purpose of the letter is “fellowship.” Following this line of thinking, the numerous “by this we know” passages such as 2:3 were not written to strengthen the readers’ assurance of salvation but their assurance that they are currently enjoying right “fellowship” with God. Here, “having come to know God” does not speak of salvation but fellowship. Therefore, passages such as 3:9 do not present a problem, since the person walking in close fellowship with God actually does not sin. When he does sin, however, he simply demonstrates that his fellowship is momentarily broken and thus temporarily conceals the fact that he is really a believer. Therefore, John does not give a series of tests to demonstrate who was genuine and who was not; rather, he offers “tests” to help the readers understand that succumbing to the teaching of the false teachers could disrupt their fellowship with God.

Hodges wants to make it absolutely clear that this “fellowship with God” or “abiding in God” must never be misunderstood to be referring to salvation. He argues that if one were to assert that “abiding/remaining” in God or in the community was at all tied to regeneration or salvation, then one could not be certain of their salvation until death. To support this view, however, Hodges is forced to come up with some fanciful exegesis at a number of places like 2:19. Against the clear teaching of the passage, he insists that the “us” from which

125 It should be noted here that a recent dissertation by G. W. Derickson argues that virtually everyone (with the seeming exception of him and Smalley) has misunderstood the letter of 1 John and that the correct understanding is that neither 1:3 or 5:13 should be seen as the purpose statement, but both should be viewed as a purpose statement (“An Evaluation of Expository Options of 1 John” [Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1993]; idem., “What is the Message of 1 John?” BibSac 150 [1993]: 89–105).

126 This view also appears to reject completely any polemical overtones to the letter.

127 Hodges, Epistles of John, 75–77. Hodges denies that “passing from death to life” in 3:14 speaks of conversion. Commenting on this verse he avows, “But it would be a mistake to read the statement as if the apostles were sure of their eternal salvation because they loved the brethren. There is no reason why this should be true for them or any other Christian. Assurance of salvation is based on the testimony of God (see 5:9–13 and discussion there). Instead, in a perfectly normal use of the word know, John declares that he and his fellow apostles have a direct and immediate knowledge of their passage from death to life through the experience of loving their Christian brothers” (Epistles of John, 156–57).


the false teachers have departed was not the community to which John was writing but the apostles themselves. He seems confident that these false teachers “went out” from the Jerusalem church as opposed to a secession from the community to which John has written.\textsuperscript{130}

**Plan of Procedure**

It is clear then that there is much diversity in the way in which assurance of eternal life has been understood in 1 John. I will show how this letter teaches that assurance of eternal life is fundamentally grounded in the work of Christ and supported in a vital yet subsidiary way by the lifestyle of the believer.

This effort will begin in Chapter 2 where I will focus on the historical setting and purpose of 1 John. I will begin with a mirror reading of the text in order build a working hypothesis regarding the situation to which John has written. After examining the text of 1 John itself, attention will then be turned to the external evidence in order to establish whether or not any of the known false teachings (or a combination of them) that were contemporaneous with this letter might account for the problems found here. Finally, after examining each of the letter’s purpose statements, I will set forth the argument that John has written the entire letter to assure his readers that they are the ones who have eternal life and concomitantly to exhort them to continue to abide in Christ.

Chapter 3 will start at the beginning of the letter and argue that John seeks to ground his readers’ assurance in the cross-work of the Christ from the very outset (1:1–2:2). This will be followed by an examination of the other passages where Christ’s finished work on the cross is emphasized (3:5,8; 4:9–10; 5:5–7). Finally, the chapter will end with a discussion of the assurance one should have as a result of the ongoing work of Christ in His divine protection over those who have been born of God (5:18).

In Chapter 4, I will examine the idea of the new covenant in 1 John. Here I will attempt to demonstrate that John has alluded to the text of Jer 31:29–34 in his discussion of the \textit{κρίσμα} (“anointing”) that

\textsuperscript{130} Hodges, *The Epistles of John*, 108–09.
abides in his readers and teaches them all things (2:20,27). I will then lay out some of the promises of the new covenant and argue that the writer of 1 John understood these to be fulfilled in the community to whom he has written.

Chapter 5 will then focus on the writer’s emphasis on the lifestyle of the believer. Here I interact with his tests of righteousness, love, and belief, and argue that these tests serve as a vital support for the reader’s assurance of eternal life. Moreover, this chapter will include a discussion on perseverance and apostasy in 1 John and interact with how these ideas fit within a letter that was written with the primary purpose of assuring its readers.

Finally, chapter 6 will summarize and conclude the study. Here the aim is to see how the key themes discussed in chapters 2 through 5 fit together. This will be followed by an examination of some of the pastoral implications of this study and some of the ways in which pastors and lay leaders can apply such teachings to real people in real situations in life.