

Response to a Baptist Preacher Influenced by the “Free Grace” View of 1 John
Popularized by Zane Hodges

The following is a (somewhat adjusted) version of a letter I wrote to someone who had read my study ["The Just Shall Live by Faith": Faith and Salvation in All Its Aspects](#). I thought that the questions and answers were important enough to post here. The person was commenting on my statements in the following two paragraphs in the application section of the study on "The Just Shall Live by Faith" mentioned immediately above. I had written:

Furthermore, one who does not manifest the obedience of faith should neither be self-assured, nor be assured by others, that he has indeed passed from death to life. Believers have the blessed possibility and privilege of being assured of their salvation (1 John 5:13), but only those who manifest the changes evident in 1 John are truly believers. Christian personal workers should follow the pattern of Jesus Christ, who told new converts, “If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed” (John 8:30-32). Someone who has newly professed conversion should not be given assurance because he has repeated a sinner’s prayer or made an outward profession. While it is most proper to rejoice that someone has made such a decision, personal workers should explain that true conversion results in a lifestyle of obedience to Jesus Christ, and explaining what Scripture sets forth as the faithfulness that pertains to the just, they should allow the Holy Spirit to give assurance. Indeed, neither one with a merely outward profession, nor a true Christian who is backslidden and spiritually decaying, should expect to have Biblical assurance of salvation. Also, before a backslidden Christian can possess Biblical assurance, he needs to repent and have an upright heart before the Lord restored.

On the other hand, believers who do manifest the obedience of faith should not doubt their salvation. God wants His faithful people to joyfully possess an assured salvation, and a lack of assurance is a great hinderance to the further growth of Christian faith and to holy living (1 John 1:4; 2:1; 5:13c). Believer, be assured of your salvation, so that you may more deeply believe in Christ! It is not a secondary or a little thing for you to have assurance. It is the will of God. God has changed you, and His Spirit testifies inwardly to you that you are a child of God. Will you suppress and deny God’s testimony and His work in you? What sort of ingratitude and unreasonableness is this? God has specifically, and in love, “written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God” (1 John 5:13). Receive His promise—be assured of your salvation—and go on in your Christian walk from strength to strength.

The person made the comments I discuss below in my letter to ---.

Dear ----,

I thought it would be important for me to answer the questions that you asked, as they are important ones. They relate to the character of the gospel, and the NT shows us that such matters are not "agree to disagree" situations, but ones where resolution around the teaching of Scripture is to be sought for and obtained as soon as possible (Gal 2:5).

Here were your comments, which I will follow with my responses:

1.) You first commented on my statement here:

Furthermore, one who does not manifest the obedience of faith should neither be self-assured, nor be assured by others, that he has indeed passed from death to life. Believers have the blessed possibility and privilege of being assured of their salvation (1 John 5:13), but only those who manifest the changes evident in 1 John are truly believers. Christian personal workers should follow the pattern of Jesus Christ, who told new converts, "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed" (John 8:30-32). Someone who has newly professed conversion should not be given assurance because he has repeated a sinner's prayer or made an outward profession.

Concerning this, you stated, "*This takes the joy out of the gospel.*" You also commented, specifically on the sentence "Someone who has newly professed conversion should not be given assurance because he has repeated a sinner's prayer or made an outward profession," that: "*This makes it subjective. A person can attain these things and not be saved. It takes all the joy out of the gospel because you never know if someone was saved. It attacks faith.*"

1., My response:

First, the Lord Jesus is very clear that simply making an outward profession is not the same as true conversion. That is what He says in John 8:30-32, specifically speaking to new converts. This is what He teaches in the parable of the four soils; the last three would have been people who made an outward profession, but were not saved. What you appear to be arguing for is the opposite of the teaching of Matthew 7:21-23 and many other passages. If we are going to say that assurance should be given immediately to everyone simply because he makes an outward profession, we are

going to teach exactly the opposite of what the Lord Jesus and the rest of the Bible say many, many times. Furthermore, there is no passage that says that making an outward profession is the basis of assurance. As for saying that repeating the sinner's prayer is the basis of giving people assurance, since Scripture never records anywhere either Christ nor the Apostles leading anyone to repeat such a prayer after them, they certainly did not give people assurance because they prayed one. We need to take our methods of giving people assurance from the Bible alone. What the Bible teaches does not "attack faith," nor does it "tak[e] all the joy out of the gospel." If we are going to give everyone assurance because of repeating the sinner's prayer or making an outward profession, we had better first show how the many passages that say exactly the opposite really aren't teaching what they seem to be teaching.

Furthermore, when we have a Biblical methodology so that the large majority of those who make professions are baptized, added to the church, and follow the Lord, in the long term people are much more excited when someone makes a profession than if we are in a situation where the large majority of professions are false and people don't stick. "So and so professed conversion!" is much more exciting, in the long term, when the person will still be there five years later than when "so and so got saved" means, 90% of the time, that the person will never darken the door of the church building. People may say "Amen" but they don't think it's really a big deal in the long term, because they know nobody will actually be in church in all likelihood. I would suggest that equating outward professions and repetitions of the sinner's prayer with conversion is what actually takes the joy away in the long term by downgrading the powerful effects of the new birth. In my Christian life I have been both in situations where the large majority of those who are testified of as being "saved" never show up and in situations where the large majority who profess faith are actually saved and do show up, and I confess that the joy in the latter places over a testimony of conversion is much greater.

I am very excited for people to get saved. In the very paragraphs you comment on, I stated that "it is most proper to rejoice that someone has made [a salvation] decision." Now it is true that if someone says the sinner's prayer and then never comes to church or follows the Lord, I don't say Amen to that. There are no examples in the NT of people who are saved who don't get baptized and join the church (unless they, say, die first, like the thief on the cross)--it is 3000 saved, baptized, added to the church, not 3000 saved, 50 baptized, and 1 in the church. The numbers that are counted as saved in the Bible are the numbers of church members. Are we are in agreement on this?

Third, what Scripture teaches, obviously, cannot "attack faith," unless the faith is not a Biblical, true faith. Before we say that I "attack faith" by stating that an outward

profession should not be assumed to be the same as true conversion, we had better demonstrate that the Bible teaches that we are to equate the two.

What is more--while history is not our authority, and so if Scripture actually denies what I believe I proved exegetically with many lines of evidence, we should reject history for Scripture--the historical record of events like the 1st Great Awakening, at which time the American South essentially became the Baptist/Bible Belt, and countless Baptist churches were planted, was filled with people preaching boldly, pointedly, and unashamedly exactly what I said above. On the other hand, assuming that profession = possession and giving assurance to everyone who says he has sincerely made a decision, regardless of the evidence of his life, historically fills Baptist churches with unconverted people, destroys revival, and leads to theological modernism. As someone who has dedicated your life to preaching the gospel, I would highly commend to you the historic Baptist and Biblical position on assurance--which is exactly what I wrote above--and highly recommend that you believe it, love it, cleave to it, and boldly preach it everywhere. If you preach, instead, the position that we are to give assurance to everybody who says he has made a salvation decision, and that the historic Baptist view on assurance is something that "attacks faith" and takes all the "joy out of the gospel," that is certainly a radically different message. By all means preach this new message if it is what the Bible says, and reject the historic Baptist view--but you had better be able to make your case for this new doctrine, and this repudiation of the historic Baptist faith, exegetically. If that cannot be done, may I suggest that you love and boldly embrace the position of our Baptist forefathers, and the message preached in historic revivals, and reject the new view of assurance you are advocating? Only one of these two messages can be faithfulness to the truth once delivered unto the saints.

Fourth, I would like to see the passages of Scripture that say that an unsaved person can live a genuinely holy life, that "a person can attain these things [the marks in 1 John] and not be saved," as you affirm. It seems like many passages of Scripture say exactly the opposite; e. g. 1 John 3:7-15:

⁷ Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous.

⁸ He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.

⁹ Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.

¹⁰ In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother.

¹¹ For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.

¹² Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous.

¹³ Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you.

¹⁴ We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death.

¹⁵ Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him.

Scripture is actually very clear that unsaved people cannot do anything spiritually good (Romans 8:6-8) and are under the dominion of sin (Romans 6), so they cannot live genuinely holy lives. If we think unsaved people can live genuinely holy lives, or that a holy life is not one element of Biblical assurance, we are affirming exactly the opposite of what the passage above states, and we should change our view to agree with the Apostle John that the children of God are manifest and the children of the devil are manifest by doing/not doing righteousness.

2.) You also stated, on the same section above, "So if I manifest them one day and not another day then I am saved one day and not another day." Here you are confusing eternal security--which is objective, not experiential, and unchanging, with personal assurance of salvation, which is subjective, experiential, and changeable. A true believer is always just as secure as the saints in heaven already. He is secure whether or not he has assurance. A believer can lack personal assurance, but he cannot lack eternal security. That is evident even from a text like 1 John 5:13; not all believers know they have eternal life. If you believe, say, that someone who has said the sinner's prayer and then commits a murder a week for ten years should have assurance of salvation, we would need to see the passages of Scripture that teach this--but there aren't any. In fact, we are specifically told not to be deceived into thinking in such a way:

⁹ Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind,

¹⁰ Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.

¹¹ And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor 6:9-11)

If we say that fornicators, idolators, adulterers, etc. inherit the kingdom of God, we need to not be deceived, because Scripture says in many, many places that they don't. For another example:

¹⁴ Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.

¹⁵ For without are dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie. (Rev 22:14-15)

Let's be sure that our thinking on these matters comes from Scripture alone, and let's remember that the many passages like 1 Cor 6:9-11; Rev 22:14-15, etc. are just as inspired as John 3:16. The truth--which I demonstrated in my study with careful, detailed exegesis--is what I said in the paragraph right before the one your questions are on. I had said: "Can the believer's faith fail him in particular trials? Yes, certainly. Can he fall into spiritual declensions and periods in which his faith is growing weaker? Sadly, the answer is an unequivocal affirmative. However, notwithstanding all such concessions, it is nevertheless those only who are JUST who will LIVE, and will do so because they exercised saving faith, entrusting themselves to Christ as both Lord and Savior, at the moment of their justification and regeneration."

I want you to be aware of where the position that you (at least seem) to be advocating, that assurance of salvation is based simply upon professed faith and nothing else at all, so that saying a holy life is part of Biblical assurance is, in your words, to take the joy out of the gospel, comes from. It was popularized by a man named Zane Hodges, who wrote a book called *The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God's Love*, in which he tried to overturn the Christian consensus that 1 John presented persevering righteousness, belief, and love as the tests of spiritual life. Hodges was a false teacher. In addition to his new view of 1 John, he taught that a lost man does not have to be aware of, know, understand, or believe in the deity, death, and/or resurrection of Christ, but can still be born again. He held to many other wretched heresies. He was an unregenerate false teacher. His view of 1 John did not exist in print until the 1950s, at which time it was still very obscure, and only began to enter and corrupt Baptist churches very, very recently. It did not exist for the first 95% of church history. The fact that a changed life is part of assurance of salvation was universal among true (Baptist) churches, and even in the Protestant world, until a time after your parents were born. Hodges' view is not the faith "once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3) but a dangerous heresy. We need to recognize and reject it and continue to hold to the Biblical, Baptist faith of our Baptist forefathers, or, if we are going to reject the position on 1 John taught by Baptists from the 1st century until the 1970s or later--then we ought to stop calling ourselves Baptists and call ourselves something else, like "Hodgeites." If we are willing to lay down our lives for the first century Gospel,

then we need to reject Hodges' view of 1 John for the historic Baptist doctrine, the view that is perfectly obvious from a natural reading of 1 John and many other passages of Scripture when interpreted literally, grammatically, and historically. By the way, I have a very difficult time thinking that our Baptist forefathers and everyone else for 95% of church history were "attack[ing] faith" and "tak[ing] all the joy out of the gospel" by teaching what I wrote above, so that nobody could exalt faith and have joy in the gospel until Zane Hodges and a few other non-Baptists like him came along and popularized a new view of 1 John.

3.) In a later note, you wrote: "Often they doubt it the most if you make all these requirements." I would suggest that we consider that the Apostle John made the requirements, not me. All I did was study every passage in the OT and NT in the "just," "live," and "faith" word groups, classify all these passages, and draw exegetical conclusions from them. Before we say that I made up requirements that lead people to doubt their salvation, we really ought to carefully exegete passages such as the 1 John 3 text above and show that they don't really mean what they plainly say, and show that the rest of my exegesis is in error. If the Apostle John says things like "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren" (1 Jn 3:14), then we actually know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren, not come to "doubt it the most" by "mak[ing] all these requirements." Godly people actually get assurance from verses like 1 John 3:14, not come to doubt, or such verses are not the truth.

4.) You asked, "Have you ever doubted your salvation?"

Answer: I'm sure that I have, although I don't think I have for a long time. I can't remember the last time I had a problem with doubting my salvation. Books like 1 John are very comforting and assuring.

5.) You asked: "In witnessing would you take someone who had just been saved to Jn 3:36 and tell them [sic] that they [sic] have eternal life now that they [sic] have believed?"

Answer: Since Jn 3:36 is a verse about how to get eternal life, not a verse about the subjective peace and joy from assurance, it would not be the first place I would go to explain assurance. I would use Jn 3:36 to explain how to get eternal life, since that is what it is about, and I would use verses about assurance to explain assurance. I would go to the passages actually about assurance, such as 1 John. The Lord Jesus told people who had just been saved that if they had just been truly converted and had just become His followers, they would continue in His Word--something Paul also says and something found in many other passages of Scripture (Jn 8:30-32; Heb 3:14; Mt

24:13; etc.), so I would tell someone who has newly professed conversion what the Lord Jesus and the Apostles told people like that. They knew a whole lot better than I do what to tell people, and so following what they did is going to be the best thing I can do.

When I was an undergrad in college I had read a variety of stuff on soulwinning from the Sword of the Lord which left my evangelistic methodology shallow. I led lots and lots of people to repeat the sinner's prayer and then sought to give them assurance because they made a decision. None of them ever came to the church I was a member of at the time. I wish I could go back now and tell those people, almost all--I hope not all, period!--of whom I almost certainly made two-fold children of hell what Christ told people in John 8:30-32 instead of telling them what the Sword of the Lord organization told me to tell them. Unfortunately, I can't do that. However, I would encourage you not to follow my bad practice and don't waste years of your life misleading people, but instead turning many to righteousness, so that you can shine like the stars forever and ever (Dan 12), instead of giving people false assurance for a number of years, like I did. When you stand before the Lord you will be very glad if you use the passages actually about assurance to give people assurance instead of using other passages that aren't about assurance and so giving people false assurance.

6.) Two other comments you made were: "Acc. to the previous how can he be assured if it is based on a focus on himself and not on the Bible?" At the end, when I stated "Receive His promise--be assured of your salvation--and go on in your Christian walk from strength to strength," you commented: "This is contradictory to the previous [sic]. Here you are saying it is based on the promise but early [sic] you said it is based on what a person does??"

My response: First, where did I say that a person is to focus on himself and not on the Bible? If you could quote the part where I said a person is to "focus on himself and not on the Bible," I would appreciate it. I will then immediately take that sentence out. Perhaps we should carefully consider what the historic Baptist position actually advocates first, and not fall into Hodges' heresy based on a misrepresentation. Most people don't fall into Hodges' heresy through careful exegesis of Scripture, but through setting up straw men, like that the historic Baptist and orthodox Christian view of 1 John is to "focus on himself and not on the Bible," and then, based on such misrepresentations, they adopt Hodges' heresy as the (alleged) only other alternative. Let's avoid that snare.

The way Hodges would argue--which I suspect is what you are advocating--is that if a holy life, love for the brethren, etc. have anything to do with assurance, then one must be focused on himself. However, this is not the case, for the following reasons.

A.) Most importantly, Scripture never, ever presents the matter this way. Hodges has to torture the plain teaching of many passages of Scripture to come to his position--for example, in relation to the 1 John 3 text quoted above, he taught that some saved people are children of the devil. That is what one has to do to if he is going to deny the plain teaching of the passage that believers practice righteousness as a lifestyle.

B.) Secondly, the holy life of the justified is not self-produced moralism, but it is part of the purchased inheritance that they have through the cross of Christ. Regeneration--based on the cross--shatters the power of sin over the newly redeemed person. Sanctification--purchased by the cross and applied progressively by the Holy Spirit--is based on the cross. Christlikeness flows out of the cross. It is not based on self-sufficient moralism. When 1 John plainly says, over and over, that the children of God cannot practice sin because they are born of God (1 John 3:9), the Apostle is pointing to a fruit of the cross, not to self-sufficient moralism. Furthermore, honest believers see and get assurance both through the change Christ (not they themselves) has wrought in them, 1 John 3, and they also characteristically confess their sins and look to the cross for cleansing, another mark of the children of God which brings them assurance (1 John 1:9). Consider 1 John 1 in context:

1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life;

2 (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;)

3 That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.

4 And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full.

5 This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

6 If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth:

7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.

8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

In the Apostle John's day, there were proto-Gnostics who had left the fellowship of the church (1 Jn 2:19), and John is writing to assure those who did not follow the proto-Gnostics of their salvation. He reminds them of the reality of the incarnation, contra the Gnostic docetism (1:1-2). He says that they--all believers--are really the ones in fellowship with God, not the proto-Gnostics. (While there is a clear right with God/not right with God distinction in Scripture, in context 1 John 1:3 is not distinguishing some believers as in fellowship with God from believers who aren't; he is saying that all the church members/saved people he is writing to are in fellowship with God and know God because they are saved; it is like 1 Cor 1:9, where all believers are in the fellowship of His Son; or Jn 17:3, where all who have eternal life know God, a fellowship term. See the vast majority of commentaries on 1 John for more information.) John wants the church to have full joy because they are the ones who have eternal life, not the proto-Gnostics (PG's), v. 4. John's message is not new but old; God is holy, and those who are in saving fellowship with Him (all believers) walk in the light, v. 5-7, unlike the proto-Gnostics, who didn't care about holy living because they thought the body/flesh was unchangeably sinful and only the spirit was holy, and unchangeably so. All believers are in fellowship with God, unlike the PG's, and the blood of Christ continually cleanses them from sin, v. 5-7. The PG's said they had no sin, but believers characteristically confess their sins, v. 8-10, and God has forgiven and does forgive them, and progressively cleanses and purifies them from all unrighteousness through progressive sanctification, a process that will culminate in glorification. These facts assure the church that it was they, not the PG's, that are the ones with eternal life, for 1 John 1 describes them, not the PG's.

Thus, both the change believers see Christ has wrought in them (1 John 3), and the fact that they confess their sins and recognize that they have not arrived (1 John 1:8-10) point to the cross. Neither is self-dependent moralism. The contrast is not "either you believe in self-dependent moralism or you adopt the view of Zane Hodges," but the contrast is between the Biblical and historic Baptist view--which is Christ-focused and Christ-dependent--and the view of a heretic whose ideas have only very, very recently begun to infiltrate a minority of Baptist churches. Let's reject the view of Zane Hodges, let's be Christ-dependent and Christ-focused, and let's be honest with the Scripture Christ inspired and recognize that the Holy Spirit says that the new life He imparts to His people is one of the things that gives the saints assurance.

5.) I will respond to one final comment you made--I think the rest are answered above. You said: "If a person doesn't have assurance and shouldn't have it when they [sic] are in sin, that is like an earthly father saying you are not my son because you are doing such thing [sic]. Knowing one is 'accepted in the beloved' is the greatest environment for growth, Eph 1:6." Of course, I believe, and stated in my study, that having assurance is important for Christian growth. I entirely agree with you on that.

In relation to your analogy, I would point out that you didn't give any verses for your position. The verses on the believer's adoption and sonship actually show that the sons of God are like God their Father--the image of God has been and is being renewed in them again so that the dominion of sin is shattered, they are becoming holy like God their Father (Col 3:10), and will be perfectly holy like Him in glory in the future, 1 John 3:2. The passages on sonship actually associate a holy life with sonship. For example, 1 John 3:2-3--the sons of God purify themselves, even as He is pure; those who are Christ's brethren as sons of God are predestinated to be conformed to the holy image of His Son and the sons of God are led by the Spirit of God to mortify the deeds of the body, Romans 8. Scripture teaches the children of the holy heavenly Father are like their Father, and children of the devil are like their unholy father. A more Biblically accurate analogy would be the following. Let's say there were two families living next to each other. In one family the parents were both blue eyed, blond-haired, light-skinned people from Norway. In the other family the parents were both very dark skinned, black, curly-haired, brown-eyed people from Africa. If two children were playing outside of their houses, and one child had blond hair, blue eyes, and white skin, while the other had very dark skin, black hair, and brown eyes, but both children said they were the children of the Norwegian family, which one would be telling the truth?

Friend, let's recognize that the view of Zane Hodges on 1 John is false and one of the many heresies that he held. Let's hold to the view of 1 John, and the view of assurance, held by our Baptist forefathers for the first 95% of church history. Let us passionately love the truth, and because we love it, let's hate every false way, such as the Hodges view of assurance and of 1 John, and let's strive together with all our might to keep it out of every true church, for many people will be burning in hell eternally because they were given assurance by someone with Hodges view when they weren't really saved. Let's love God, love the gospel, and earnestly contend for all the faith once delivered to the saints--a faith once delivered in the first century, not by Zane Hodges in the late 20th century.

With love for Christ and for you,

Thomas Ross

[Comment on this letter, part 1](#) [part 2](#)