

So How Do I Really Know I'm a Christian?



A few weeks ago I wrote a short piece entitled [How Do I Know I'm a Christian?](#) The post flowed from a semester of preaching through 1 John. Like John Stott (and others), I see 1 John as a letter about assurance, a brief book in which the Apostle John outlines (over and over) three signs that confirm what John already knows: namely, that the recipients of his epistles are beloved children of God.

- The first sign is theological. You should have confidence if you believe in Jesus Christ the Son of God (5:11-13).
- The second sign is moral. You should have confidence if you live a righteous life (3:6-9).
- The third sign is social. You should have confidence if you love other Christians (3:14).

There is nothing original about these points. Stott calls the three signs “belief” or “the doctrinal test,” “obedience” or “the moral test,” and “love” or “the social test.” As far as I can tell from the commentaries I consulted, my understanding of 1 John is thoroughly mainstream. I made clear that “These are not three things we do to earn salvation, but three indicators that God has indeed saved us.” I also explained that looking for these signs was not an invitation to look for perfection. “Lest this standard make you despair,” I said at one point, “keep in mind that part of living a righteous life is refusing to claim that you live without sin and coming to Christ for cleansing when you do sin (1:9-10).” In other words, the righteous life is a repentant life.

Surprisingly, the post elicited a strong response, much of it critical. As these things go on the web, some of the critiques were petty and personal. But others raised genuine concerns worth engaging. Because they raised questions people in my own congregation might have, I took time in [my sermon on May 17](#) to explore several of these concerns and respond to them from 1 John. I hope to have [a transcript of the sermon](#) available soon.

In the meantime, I thought it would be helpful to engage more substantively with one particular response. After my initial article, a number of people on twitter directed folks to [this post](#) by Chad Bird as a much better answer to the question “How do I know I'm a Christian?” I don't know Chad except that he is a [contributor](#) at Christ Hold Fast, a former Lutheran pastor and professor, and an occasional [blogger at Liberate](#). I want to interact with his post not because it is so bad, but because it is, in so many ways, terrifically good. It is heartfelt, well-written, and points people to Christ. At the same time, by my reckoning the post evidences a number of theological and exegetical missteps (or at least, half-truths). My overarching concern is that when talking about the need for personal holiness we need to find categories besides “sinless perfection” and “filthy rags.” I hope that in taking the time to respond to this brother's article I'm not stirring up more heat, but producing more light on these thorny and perennial issues of sanctification,

good works, and assurance. I've reprinted Bird's article below in ***bold italics***, with my commentary in regular print.

There are questions about ourselves that are easily answered, and there are other questions that present more of a challenge.

If someone asks me, "Are you a husband?" I can show them my ring, present my wedding certificate, point to the woman standing next to me who shares my life and my last name. Yes, I am 100% sure that I'm married.

If someone asks me, "Are you an employee?" I can show them where I work, present my pay stubs, point to the truck with which I make deliveries. Yes, I am 100% sure that I'm an employee.

Other questions are not so easily answered. If I'm asked, "Are you a good husband?" what immediately comes to mind are the times I've failed my wife, acted selfishly, and been anything but a good husband. I have no real external, tangible, objective way to answer that question. I must rely on feelings and speculations. Similarly, if someone asks, "What kind of employee are you?" my mind goes to the labor I've put in, but also to the times I've slacked off yet expected a full paycheck for a half-hearted performance. What if I think I'm doing an okay job but my boss thinks different and fires me?

There are questions about ourselves that are easily answered, and there are other questions about ourselves where we have to explore our hearts to test their sincerity, take account of the good and bad things we've done, focus inwardly to find the answer.

What about the question, "Are you a Christian?" Does this one belong to that second category, where we must explore our hearts, test our actions, focus inside ourselves to get to the right answer?

That's certainly what some people think. So they urge folks to ask themselves if they really believe, if they really love their neighbor, if they really live a moral life. But no matter how well intentioned such an urging might be, rather than helping, it is pouring the poison of doubt into the souls of those for whom Christ died.

Here Bird makes a direct reference to my blog post mentioning the three signs I argue are put forth for our assurance in 1 John. In these opening paragraphs we get a sense of Bird's overarching concern: when it comes to answering the question "Are you a Christian?" we should not look at ourselves or in ourselves. We will never find confidence by looking at ourselves, only misplaced doubt. To be sure, this is a real problem for many Christians, which is why pastoral care and one-another counseling must take into account all of Scripture and all of the life for person we are trying to help. But is it right to present these three signs (theological, social, moral) as only leading to poisonous doubt? Three quick thoughts.

1. There are people externally connected to God's covenant community who ought to doubt whether they truly belong to Christ. Isn't this the point (at least one of the points) when [1 Corinthians 6:9](#) announces "that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God," or when [Galatians 5:21](#) warns "that those who do such things [works of the flesh] will not inherit the kingdom of God," or when [Galatians 6:8](#) reminds us that "the one who sows to the his own flesh" will not reap "eternal life" but "will from the flesh reap corruption"? Weren't many of Jesus' statements meant to disturb the comfortably religious? It is possible to say "Lord, Lord" and not actually know the Lord and enter the kingdom of heaven ([Matt. 7:21-23](#)). Some people honor God with their lips, but have a heart that is far from Christ ([Matt. 15:8](#)). To be sure, the purpose of 1 John is to provide comfort for believers ([1 John 5:13](#)) not pour out the poison of doubt, but doubting our salvation is not a bad things if we are not saved.

2. The call to examine oneself does not have to lead to crippling doubt and self-loathing. When Paul enjoined believers in [2 Corinthians 13:5](#) to examine themselves to whether they were in the faith, he fully expected them to pass the test ("Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!").

3. While it is never a good idea to "focus inside ourselves," it is impossible to make sense of 1 John if looking for

moral, social, and theological evidence is entirely inappropriate. For example, [1 John 2:5-6](#) says “By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.” Likewise, [1 John 3:10](#) says, “By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.” We see similar “by this we know” language in [1 John 2:3](#); [3:14](#), [19](#), [24](#); [4:2-3](#); [4:13](#); [5:2](#). Clearly, we are meant to know something about the person by looking at what he believes, how he lives, and how he loves. One doesn’t have to be in favor of morbid introspection to understand that 1 John urges Christians to look for evidences of grace in themselves and in those who might be seeking to lead them astray.

Look inside yourself to answer, “Are you a Christian?” and you will find a heart that is deceitful above all things ([Jer 17:9](#)); a heart from which flow evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander ([Matt 15:19](#)); a conscience that testifies that nothing good dwells in you, that the evil you do not want to do, you nevertheless keep right on doing ([Rom 7:18-19](#)).

Look at your deeds to answer, “Are you a Christian?” and you will find that all your righteousness is as filthy rags ([Isa 64:6](#)); and if such be your righteousness, how dirty and defiled must be your unrighteousness. Look at your deeds and you will find that even when you have the desire to do what is right, you don’t have the ability to carry it out ([Rom 7:18](#)). Even if you did all that you were commanded, you must still say, “I am an unworthy servant; I have only done what was my duty,” (cf. [Luke 17:10](#)). If such be the response of a person whose has kept all God’s commands, then we who have broken those commands are worthy of nothing but punishment, now and forever.

Thus, to answer, “Are you are Christian?” by looking inside ourselves, or by looking to our deeds or love of the neighbor, is to drink the poison of doubt. In fact, the more Christians look at themselves to see whether they are Christians, the more they will become convinced that they are not Christians.

Let’s deal with Scripture first. Except for the reference to Romans 7, I don’t think any of these passages make the point Bird wants them to make. [Jeremiah 17:9](#) is true for the unredeemed, but is “deceitful above all things” an accurate description of the hearts of those who have been born again? What about the promise of the law of God written on our hearts in [Jeremiah 31](#)? Or the promise of a heart of flesh in [Ezekiel 36](#)? Isn’t the Christian being renewed into the image of Christ ([Col. 3:15](#)) and created in Christ Jesus for good works ([Eph. 2:10](#))?

Likewise, Jesus’ words in [Matthew 15:19](#) are not describing the regular life of a born again disciple. If they were, how could we make sense of the instructions in the Sermon on the Mount, let alone the description of those outside of the New Jerusalem in [Revelation 21:8](#)?

I’ve [written before](#) that “filthy rags” in [Isaiah 64:6](#) refers to perfunctory ritual obedience. The fact that [Isaiah 64:5](#) speaks of the Lord smiling upon “him who joyfully works righteousness” proves that God does not turn his nose up at everything we ever do in his sight. Your heavenly Father is [not impossible to please](#).

I don’t see the relevance of [Luke 17:10](#). The discussion is not whether our obedience makes us worthy of anything, but whether obedience is a helpful (and even necessary) sign of our belonging to Christ. We are talking about the fruit of our justification, not the root.

Romans 7 is notoriously difficult to interpret, but assuming the passage is speaking about the converted Paul (which is what I think), these self-recriminating verses do not mean it is wrong to look for the sort of signs 1 John outlines. Elsewhere, Paul seems quite satisfied in his conscience that he has been walking in faith (and presumably in repentance) with the Lord ([1 Cor. 4:3-4](#); [2 Cor. 1:12](#)). Romans 7 expresses the very real sense of conviction and inner turmoil we can experience as Christians, which is why I would never say Christians should only look to their own lives for assurance. It is the testimony of most great saints that the closer they got to God, the more of their sin they began to see. Assurance is not a task for the navel-gazer, but a community project that relies (among other things) on evidence and on the spiritual sense of our brothers and sisters.

The answer is found not within us but within Christ. Our assurance is in his objective, external work of salvation on our behalf. Not in our hearts but in the heart and life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we receive assurance that we are the children of God.

This is the crux of the matter. Is the Christian's assurance based on the objective, external work of salvation won by Christ on our behalf? Yes, yes, a thousand times yes! Are there other grounds of assurance? Also yes. The Reformed confessions ([Dort](#) and [Westminster](#)) mention three grounds of assurance: "the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces. . . [and] the testimony of the Spirit of adoption." On the second point regarding inward evidences of grace, Westminster lists four prooftexts:

- [2 Peter 1:4-11](#) which urges us to make our calling and election sure by the diligent effort to grow in godliness and bear spiritual fruit.
- [1 John 2:3](#) which testifies that we know we belong to God if we keep his commandments.
- [1 John 3:14](#) which assures us that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers.
- [2 Cor. 1:12](#) which speaks of rejoicing in the testimony of a good conscience.

Clearly, the Confession teaches that a transformed life is one sign (though not the only sign, and certainly not the the cause) of our right standing with God. Whether Lutheran Orthodoxy agrees with Reformed Orthodoxy on this point I cannot say, but the Defense of the Augsburg Confession does state: "It is, therefore, manifest that we require good works" (III.19).

In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself ([2 Cor 5:19](#))—the world of which you are a part. In Christ you are reconciled to God, at peace with the Lord, adopted as a child of the heavenly Father. God loved the world in this way: by sending his only begotten Son to die as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And if the world's sin is taken away, then your sins are taken away. God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us in order that in him we might become the righteousness of God ([2 Cor 5:21](#)). His worthiness covers our unworthiness.

Your name is written in the wounds of Jesus. He has dipped his pen in the crimson ink of his veins and written your name, indelibly, in the Lamb's Book of Life. He has engraved your name on the palms of his hands. He has tattooed his name onto your soul and heart and mind and body—you are completely and everlastingly his and his alone. In baptism you did not commit yourself to Christ; he committed himself to you. More than that, in those waters he crucified you with himself, laid your body with his in the tomb, and he carried you forth into the light of life again. He who believes and is baptized shall be saved. That believing, that faith, is not a conviction you created but a gift you received. By the Holy Spirit you confess, "Jesus is Lord."

Beautiful stuff. I think I detect a universal atonement in the first paragraph and a little Lutheran sacramental theology in the second paragraph, but outside of this these are wonderful gospel truths that I hope every Christian would warmly embrace.

Do we still struggle to believe? Of course we do, for we are far from perfect in this life. As a father once prayed to Jesus, so we also pray, "Lord, I believe; help Thou my unbelief," ([Mark 9:24](#)). And he does. He enlivens and strengthens our faith by continuing to forgive us, to love us, to heal us, to give us himself. It is not our faithfulness that saves us, but the faithfulness of Jesus. For even if we are faithless he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself ([2 Tim 2:13](#)).

Setting aside the question of how to interpret [2 Timothy 2:13](#) (which some take to be God's faithfulness to save us and others interpret as God's faithfulness to judge those who deny him), Bird is being both biblically true and pastorally wise to remind us that "we are far from perfect in this life." No one is without sin, and if we claim to be without sin we call God a liar ([1 John 1:8, 10](#)). The problem is that whenever mention is made of obeying God or pleasing God

(manifestly biblical categories), some Christians—whether because they have an axe to grind or (more likely) because they have a tender conscience—hear in that language: flawless, spotless, meritorious obedience. As I said earlier, when explaining the need for personal holiness in the life of the Christian, we need categories besides “sinless perfection” and “filthy rags.” Employing this category is one of the strengths of 1 John and is necessary if we are to make sense of [Hebrews 12:14](#), the Sermon on the Mount, qualifications for elders and deacons, the fruit of the Spirit, or almost anything in the New Testament.

We are capable of doing what is good—not perfectly, not without blemish and weakness, but truly, sincerely, and in a way that is pleasing to God. According to the Westminster Confession of Faith, our sins are not only forgiven in Christ, our works are also accepted in Christ, such that God, “looking upon them in his Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections” (WCF16.6). It is equally a denial of Scripture and of the grace of God to say that the Christian cannot do good as it is to say that the Christian never does what is bad ([1 John 1:8, 10; 2:1, 3, 12-14, 15-17; 3:2-3, 4-10; 5:1-5; 18-20](#)).

How do you know you're a Christian? Not because your heart is good and pure but because the heart of Christ pulses with a love for you that will never end. Not because your deeds are righteous but because he has been righteous on your behalf and clothes you with that righteousness. Not because you have lived for him but because he has lived and died and risen again for you. Not because you asked him to be your Savior but because while you were yet a sinner, Christ died for you, chose you, called you, and washed you clean in his own divine blood.

If someone asks you, “How do you know you're a Christian?” the answer is as simple as it is beautiful: you know you're a Christian because Christ has made you his own because Christ will hold you fast because nothing can separate you from the love of God because Christ knows you, forgives you, washes you, and will never let you go.

That's how you know you're a Christian.

I love a lot about these concluding paragraphs. I love the emphasis on the work of Christ on the cross. I love the focus on Christ's never-failing love. I love the reminder that we do not hold on to Christ, but he holds on to us. I love what Bird affirms in this closing section. My concern is in what he denies. I find this to be a recurring problem in recent sanctification debates. It's not the affirmations of grace that trouble me, but what so often shows up as the antithesis to grace. If the question was “How do I become a Christian?” then the “nots” would be well placed. But the question is how do I *know* I'm a Christian? In which case what we believe, what we do, and what our hearts feel is not irrelevant. What should we make of someone whose heart is bad and impure, someone whose deeds are unrighteous, someone who does not live for Christ, someone who has not asked Christ to be his Savior? I suppose in one sense—and this is likely what Bird means—we could still conclude that this person was a Christian, *if* we mean someone whose heart still struggles with sin, someone whose deeds are not always righteous, someone who does not live for Christ as well as he would like, someone whose confidence is not in faith itself but in the object of his faith. I assume that's what Bird means, but by themselves these statements say too much. They claim that looking at the heart, looking at our deeds, looking at a life of discipleship, looking at a basic faith commitment has no bearing on whether you know you're a Christian. Even if these were absent there would be no grounds for questioning your position in Christ. Is this good biblical counsel and pastoral care? Is there anything a professing Christian can say or do or fail to manifest that would suggest a profession is false?

If you can hang with me a few more paragraphs, read through this tedious but important section from (Lutheran) Defense of the Augsburg Confession:

We, therefore, profess that it is necessary that the Law be begun in us, and that it be observed

continually more and more. And at the same time we comprehend both spiritual movements and external good works [the good heart within and works without]. Therefore the adversaries falsely charge against us that our theologians do not teach good works while they not only require these, but also show how they can be done [that the heart must enter into these works, lest they be mere, lifeless, cold works of hypocrites].

The result convicts hypocrites, who by their own powers endeavor to fulfill the Law, that they cannot accomplish what they attempt. [For are they free from hatred, envy, strife, anger, wrath, avarice, adultery, etc.? Why, these vices were nowhere greater than in the cloisters and sacred institutes.] For human nature is far too weak to be able by its own powers to resist the devil, who holds as captives all who have not been freed through faith. There is need of the power of Christ against the devil, namely, that, inasmuch as we know that for Christ's sake we are heard, and have the promise, we may pray for the governance and defense of the Holy Ghost, that we may neither be deceived and err, nor be impelled to undertake anything contrary to God's will. [Otherwise we should, every hour, fall into error and abominable vices.] Just as [Ps. 68:18](#) teaches: Thou hast led captivity captive; Thou hast received gifts for man. For Christ has overcome the devil, and has given to us the promise and the Holy Ghost, in order that, by divine aid, we ourselves also may overcome. And [1 John 3:8](#): For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil.

Again, we teach not only how the Law can be observed, but also how God is pleased if anything be done, namely, not because we render satisfaction to the Law, but because we are in Christ, as we shall say after a little. It is, therefore, manifest that we require good works. Yea, we add also this, that it is impossible for love to God, even though it be small, to be sundered from faith, because through Christ we come to the Father, and the remission of sins having been received, we now are truly certain that we have a God, i.e., that God cares for us; we call upon Him, we give Him thanks, we fear Him, we love Him as [1 John 4:19](#) teaches: We love Him, because He first loved us, namely, because He gave His Son for us, and forgave us our sins. Thus he indicates that faith precedes and love follows.

Likewise the faith of which we speak exists in repentance, i.e., it is conceived in the terrors of conscience, which feels the wrath of God against our sins, and seeks the remission of sins, and to be freed from sin. And in such terrors and other afflictions this faith ought to grow and be strengthened. Wherefore it cannot exist in those who live according to the flesh who are delighted by their own lusts and obey them. Accordingly, Paul says, [Rom. 8:1](#): There is, therefore, now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. So, too, [Rom. 8:12-13](#): We are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die; but if ye, through the Spirit, do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. Wherefore, the faith which receives remission of sins in a heart terrified and fleeing from sin does not remain in those who obey their desires, neither does it coexist with mortal sin. (Ill. 15-23, emphasis and paragraph breaks mine)

I find in this section so much of what is often denied by those on the “stop looking at yourself” side of the sanctification discussion.

- We can grow as Christians (the Law being observed in us more and more).
- As the fruit of our justification, good works are necessary for the Christian.
- By the conquering power of Christ, good work are possible for the Christian.
- Genuine faith is inconsistent with living according to the flesh.

As I read the books and blogs and tweets of my brothers and sisters on the other side of these debates I often find myself saying, “Yes, I love that too! But saying yes to that doesn’t entail saying no to this.” We have to deal with people in the full range of their problems, fears, hurts, and idols. We have to sing all four parts of the score and from more

than our favorite oratorio. We have to be more careful with what we affirm *and* what we deny. And above all, we must be relentlessly biblical. If someone's sermon or book or article makes you feel condemned or feel uneasy or feel out of sorts with God that is not inconsequential, but neither is it by itself conclusive. Maybe the message was off. Maybe the messenger was clumsy. Or maybe the fault lies with the one receiving the message. If we want to be good Reformed Christians or good Lutheran Christians (or any other kind of good Christians) we must keep going back to the Bible. We have to think carefully and speak carefully. This is an important conversation with lots of theological, personal, and pastoral ramifications. If we deal with slogans and caricatures, all will be in vain. If we talk calmly and dig deeply, much can be gained.

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