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A0501 – Jan. 02, 2005 – 1 John 5:13 – Assurance of Salvation

Now, in vv. 5-12 John has been telling us about the “Testimony of God” concerning His Son. In v. 5 we find that the one who believes that **Jesus is the Son of God** is a world-conqueror. When a person believes this he is believing in the one indivisible Person of Jesus Christ. You can’t separate Jesus from Christ as the Revisionists in John’s letter were doing. Jesus Christ is an indivisible Person. His messianic coming was marked by His baptism (by water) and His crucifixion (by blood). In addition to these two historic witnesses the Holy Spirit is a living witness to the indivisible Person of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, God has placed this witness in those who believe in His Son by imparting eternal life to the believer. Therefore, it follows that one who has believed in the Son of God can **know, on the basis of God’s testimony**, that he has eternal life (5:13). Verse 13 is the clear, logical conclusion of John. One can know whether or not he has eternal life on the basis of God’s testimony. If God’s testimony is greater than man’s testimony (v. 9) then we can find assurance of our salvation only by trusting God’s word. If God said it that should be the end of it.

The reason John has been writing about God’s testimony in vv. 6-12 is precisely for this reason: to assure his readers that because they believed in Christ they do possess eternal life and to encourage them to continue living by faith. That’s the clear teaching of this section of Scripture. However, verse 13 has not always been understood this way. Therefore, today we will grapple with verse 13.

Greek Text 5:13 Tauta egrapsa humin hina eidete hoti zoen ekete aionion, tois pisteuousin eis to onoma tou uiou tou theou.

Translation 5:13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.

The words **these things** have been taken as referring to many different sections of the epistle (1:1-5:12, 5:1-12; 5:6-12). A very popular view, and the way you have probably

been taught, is to see **these things** as referring back to the entire contents of the epistle. Those who hold this view imagine that this one verse gives the entire purpose of John's epistle. The reason they do this is because they are confused about what John's argument is so they resort to comparing 1 John to John's gospel to help them find the argument. When scholars do this they read the Gospel of John and fasten in on John 20:31 as the purpose of John's gospel, "...these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name." Then they say that John's 1st epistle is like John's gospel in that the purpose of John's first epistle is found at the end of 1 John in chapter 5:13. "*These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.*" So, they use this supposed correlation of John putting his purpose at the end of his letters to stake their case for John's entire purpose of 1st John. And they interpret 5:13 to mean "*I have written to you who CLAIM to BELIEVE*". Maybe you do believe maybe you don't believe but these things are written "in order that you may find out if you really believe or not." In other words the first epistle of John is full of "Tests for Salvation". That is, tests to see whether you really have eternal life? And that's what 1 John is supposedly all about. Are you really a believer? Do you really have eternal life? If you pass these tests then you are a true believer. If not your not really a believer. So, these people are saying that John's intention was to write a letter to a mixed group of believers and unbelievers so they could find out by going through these tests if they were believers or not.

I have tried to show time and again that this view of the epistle is a dreadful distortion of John's true intention. John is not writing to a mixed group of believers and unbelievers. He is writing to a group composed of believers only. There are at least six reasons for concluding this. If these six reasons are good enough then we can say with confidence that this book has nothing to do with tests of salvation. Tests of salvation might be legitimate for a group with some unbelievers in it but not for a group that John affirms are believers.

1) THE PHRASE **THESE THINGS**. The *first* evidence comes from the phrase **these things**. It is supposed by many that **these things** in 1 John 5:13 refer to the contents of the entire epistle. But, a careful concordance search shows that John uses this phrase three other times in the epistle. First, turn to 1 John 1:4. Here, **these things we write to you** refer back to vv. 1-3 and give the major purpose of the epistle which is to "Promote Fellowship by Maintaining Right Doctrine and Avoiding Sin". Second, turn to 1 John 2:1. Here, **these things I am writing to you so that you may not sin** refers back to 1:5-10. John is trying to convince his readers not to sin because sin breaks fellowship with

God and with one another. Finally, turn to 1 John 2:26. Here, **these things I have written to you concerning those who are deceiving you** refers back to 1 John 2:18-25 where he warned them about the antichrists because the antichrists carry false doctrine and false doctrine leads to sin which leads to the breaking of fellowship. So, does it make much sense to say that 1 John 5:13 is the purpose of the entire epistle? This approach just doesn't fit and it leads to a faulty view of assurance of salvation. Instead, in 1 John 5:13, the phrase **these things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God** refers back to 5:6-12, not the whole epistle. What John is doing in 1 John 5:13 is giving the basis for assurance of salvation. How do I know if I'm really a believer? By trusting God's testimony/word not by going through the tests of salvation. Trusting God's testimony is essential to avoiding sin and promoting fellowship.

2) THE PHRASE **HIS BROTHER**. The *second* evidence is John's 11 uses of the phrase **his brother** (1 Jn. 2:9, 10, 11; 3:10, 12, 15, 17; 4:20, 21; 5:16). One must first be a Christian brother before he can love or hate **his brother**.

3) THE EVIDENCE OF SPIRITUAL MATURITY. *Third*, key evidence is found in particular in 2:12-14 which presents a single group of people looked at from different perspectives of their spiritual growth (little children, children, young men, and fathers). These people are not mere Christians but have advanced through many stages of Christian growth. They are perhaps the leaders of the local church John is writing to.

4) THE PHRASE **LITTLE CHILDREN**. *Fourth*, key evidence is found in the verses that use the phrase **little children** (1 Jn. 2:1, 12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21). The title **little children** is never used by any other NT writer. The only time it occurs outside of 1 John is in John's gospel where Jesus Himself used it of the 11 apostles just after Judas left (John 13:33). It is clearly a term used solely of genuine Christians and never used of those who may or may not be Christians.

5) THE **WE, YOU, THEY** PASSAGES. *Fifth*, John is writing *against* the antichrists not *to* the antichrists (1 John 2:18-19). In several places John uses a three-fold contrast between **we** (the apostles), **you** (the readers), and **they** (the antichrists) (e.g. 1 John 2:18-20; 4:4-6). John is not writing *to* those who are unregenerate but *to* those who are regenerate and he is warning them *against* those who are unregenerate, the antichrists.

6) THE **ABIDING** TERMINOLOGY. *Sixth*, the "abiding" terminology used throughout 1 John. Six times John uses the term **abide(s)** or **abiding** in the book (1 Jn. 2:6, 10, 14, 24, 27, 28; 3:6, 9, 14, 15, 17, 24; 4:12, 13, 15f). The Greek word for **abide** is *meno* and

means “to remain or stay”. It is a term that is used strictly of believers in the Bible (cf. John 15:1-8). It is never used of unbelievers. Unbelievers cannot abide. Believers may or may not abide but the term is used strictly of believers.

These six evidences show conclusively that John did not doubt even slightly his reader’s salvation. In fact, there is no way you could even conclude that this book is a Test of Salvation unless your theology dictated ahead of time that perspective. Instead, the true purpose of John is to “Promote Fellowship by Maintaining Right Doctrine and Avoiding Sin”.

Now, as I stated in brief, if you take 1 John to be a book of Tests of Salvation then you will inevitably teach a faulty view of assurance of salvation. So, I want to take the rest of our time to look at the two basic views of assurance that are prevalent in Christianity today. We’re trying to answer the question “**How can I have assurance that I’m saved?**” and there are two basic answers to that question. *First*, I know by self-examination. This amounts to measuring my obedience or works. This answer focuses on self. It says, I’m going to look at myself and my performance and see what it looks like. If it looks good then I’ll be assured that I really am saved. *Second*, I know by God’s testimony. This answer amounts to trusting God rather than self. Instead of trusting my subjective examination I’m going to trust what God says. The first answer is popularly known under the title of Lordship Salvation and the second as Free Grace.

First, let’s look at Lordship Salvation, the first answer to the question which says I can be assured of my salvation by self-examination, measuring my obedience or works. Let’s think about this for a minute. Can I really be certain that I’m saved if I ground my assurance in my obedience or lack of obedience? The answer should be obvious...“Those who are willing to look at themselves with complete honesty will find more grounds to doubt their salvation than to be assured of it. Some even teach that this uncertainty is healthy! But this does not reckon with the fact that the apostle John expected his readers to **know that** they had **eternal life**. The irony is that once Christian experience is made the grounds for assurance, as some hold First John does, John’s statement in this verse about *knowing* becomes a complete impossibility!”¹ To be certain of salvation under this model one would have to be perfect all the time. But John said earlier in this epistle, “*If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.*” So, no one can claim to be totally without sin and as long as we have sin as a part of our experience it cannot be the ground of assurance.

Second, let's look at Free Grace, the second answer to the question. They say that the only way one can have assurance that they are saved is by trusting God's testimony. I'm going to trust what God says rather than my performance. Turn with me to **John 5:24**.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who *hears* My word, and *believes* Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.

Notice the one who hears Christ's word, and believes the Father who sent Christ, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life. There is nothing here about self-examination of one's performance. The Bible simply says that if you hear and believe then you have eternal life. If we trust God's testimony regarding this then we have assurance. If we don't trust God's testimony then assurance is impossible. "Every believer *knows* at the point of saving faith that he has eternal life because that's what the promises he believed guaranteed. Turn to **John 11:25-27**

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ She said to Him, "Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, *even* He who comes into the world."

Is there any doubt here in Martha? Does she have assurance that she has believed? That she has eternal life? Of course she does. Where does Martha ground her assurance? Does she ground her assurance in her good works, in her obedience? No, she grounds her assurance in God's testimony which says that believing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God means you have eternal life. There is no other place to ground assurance than the immutable, eternal word of God. It should be clear to all that true assurance of salvation must rest on God's testimony, because that testimony has full reliability and solidity. Those who think that a firmer ground for assurance can be found in the lives they lead are living in a world of self-deception. We can never say that we are totally without sin. Therefore, to even suggest that Christian experience can stand on an equal level with God's testimony as a ground of assurance is almost if not outright blasphemy since it puts sinful fallible human experience on the same level as the infallible testimony of God!

Now it is true that one must believe the right content in order to be saved. That's not under issue. But what is under issue in these two radically different answers to the question is "how is a person justified?" "How does a person get right with God?"

Now, we would all probably stand up and say “a man is justified by faith alone in Christ alone”. Every Protestant would agree with that statement. But what ever Protestant would not agree on is what you mean by “faith”! This is where the problems come from. Those who hold to Lordship Salvation have a different meaning of the word “faith” than those who hold to a Free Grace position.

The issue at stake is the definition of faith. John MacArthur, a major proponent of Lordship Salvation, gives us several definitions of “saving faith” in his book *The Gospel According to Jesus* which I will read to you now.ⁱⁱ

“A concept of faith that excludes obedience corrupts the message of salvation” (p. 174).ⁱⁱⁱ

“Forsaking oneself for Christ’s sake is not an optional step of discipleship subsequent to conversion: it is the *sine qua non* of saving faith” (p. 135).

“He is glad to give up all for the kingdom. That is the nature of saving faith” (p. 139).

“His demeanor was one of unconditional surrender, a complete resignation of self and absolute submission to his father. That is the essence of saving faith” (p. 153).

From this definition Lordship Salvation cannot escape the charge that it mixes saving faith with works. This results in justification by faith + works. The way Lordship Salvation hides works in the message of salvation is revealed by MacArthur on the very next page of his book. He says “Obedience is the inevitable manifestation of saving faith”. In other words, what MacArthur is saying is that if you have really exercised saving faith then that saving faith will inevitably produce obedience (works). But this is the same thing as saying that without obedience there is no justification and no heaven. Viewed from that perspective “obedience” *is a condition* of justification and for getting to heaven! By making obedience a necessary component of saving faith Lordship Salvation distorts the plan of salvation. The Lordship Salvation syllogism reduces to this:

Major Premise: We are justified by faith

Minor Premise: Faith *inevitably* produces good works

Conclusion: We can be judged according to our works

The major premise is true. The minor premise is a theological fallacy that cannot be established from the Bible. The conclusion contradicts the major premise. If we are saved by faith alone then how can we be judged on the basis of our works unless works are a

condition of justification? You should be able to see now that this is a false gospel. And according to Paul, a false gospel is really no gospel at all.

Those who view “saving faith” this way claim that when we understand “faith” rightly then we realize that obedience, forsaking all for Christ, unconditional surrender, etc... are all implicit in the term faith. In other words, they load the word “faith” with all these other components. But what do the Greek Lexicon’s say about the word “faith”? How do they describe what this word means? Search as long as you want you will never find a Greek Lexicon that adds any of the defining elements that the Lordship Salvation teachers claim are implicit in the term “faith”. Pershbacher’s Greek Lexicon says of *pistis* (4102):

Faith, belief, firm persuasion, assurance, firm conviction, ground of belief, guarantee, assurance, good faith, honesty, integrity, faithfulness, truthfulness, faith in God and Christ, the matter of Gospel faith. (Perschbacher, p. 329)

Lordship Salvation is nothing more than a popular propagation of post-Reformation Puritan theology. MacArthur and others claim that this is the gospel that everyone used to teach but Church History refutes such a claim. Has MacArthur ever read John Calvin? If he did he would find a strikingly different and a very biblical definition of faith. In Calvin’s own words:

Now, we shall have a complete definition of faith, if we say, that it is a steady and certain knowledge of the Divine benevolence towards us, which, being founded on the truth of the gratuitous promise in Christ, is both revealed to our minds, and confirmed to our hearts, by the Holy Spirit. (Calvin Institutes III.II.7)

Calvin is saying that faith is knowledge founded on truth of God’s promises. Calvin would have torn MacArthur to shreds for distorting the gospel so badly because MacArthur is not leading people to rely on Christ but on their own works. That’s no gospel at all! R. T. Kendall, perhaps the greatest living authority on John Calvin, says this regarding Calvin’s understanding of “faith”

What is absent is a...faith that must await experimental knowledge to verify its presence. Faith is “something merely passive, bringing nothing of ours to the recovering of God’s favour but receiving from Christ that which we lack.”^{iv}

In other words, Calvin makes assurance of the essence of saving faith. We don't have to wait until we have good works to verify that we really do have faith. This is because, for Calvin faith is simply receiving something. Faith is receptive, not active. Since it is not an act it cannot be classified as a work and can thus be the human requirement of each individual. He does not separate faith from assurance as Lordship Salvation teachers insist. Quoting from Kendall once more...

Calvin emphatically warns against looking to ourselves, that is, to our works or the fruit of the Spirit, for certainty of our salvation. We must turn from ourselves to rest solely on the mercy of God. The Scholastics taught that the Christian should look to works and to the virtues of righteousness as proof of salvation. However, Calvin rejects this exhortation to self-examination as a dangerous dogma, and argues that we can never rely on such a subjective basis for assurance, for our sinfulness insures that we will not find peace in this way. Forgetting the judgment of God, we may think ourselves safe when, in fact, we are not. By placing our trust in works, rather than in God's freely given grace, we detract from his salvific work in Jesus Christ. If we look to ourselves, we encounter doubt, which leads to despair, and finally our faith is battered down and blotted out. Arguing that our assurance rests in our union with Christ, Calvin stresses that contemplation of Christ brings assurance of salvation, but self-contemplation is "sure damnation." For this reason, then, our safest course is to look to Christ and distrust ourselves.^v

Martin Luther taught the same thing about "faith" that Calvin taught,

Faith holds out the hand and the sack and just lets the good be done to it. For as God is the giver who bestows such things in His love, we are the receivers who receive the gift through faith which does nothing. For it is not our doing and cannot be merited by our work. It has already been granted and given. You need only open your mouth, or rather, your heart, and keep still and let yourself be filled.^{vi}

In MacArthur's appendix he lists others who teach the same gospel as him (e.g. Guthrie, Alleine, Watson, Manton, Goodwin, Matthew Henry, Whitefield, Edwards, Boston, Gill, Spurgeon, Ryle, Warfield, Allis, Pink, Tozer, et. al). The list would lead you to believe that any other gospel was completely unheard of in Church History. But his list is nothing more than a litany of Puritan theologians who support his view. Many godly men throughout Church History who held radically different understandings of the gospel, faith, and assurance are simply ignored! R.L. Dabney, a Puritan during the 19th

century noted that later Reformers rejected the first Reformers definition of faith and assurance.

The source of this error [about faith and assurance] is no doubt that doctrine concerning faith which the first Reformers, as Luther and Calvin, were led to adopt...It is very obvious...that these views of faith and assurance...ground themselves in the faulty definitions of saving faith which we received from the first Reformers, They...defined saving faith as a belief that “Christ has saved *me*,” making the assurance of hope of its necessary essence...the later Reformers...have subjected this view to searching examination, and rejected it...^{vii}

Notice that Dabney admits that the later Reformers rejected Luther and Calvin’s teaching on faith. MacArthur is not teaching the only gospel the church has ever known.

Let it be said clearly: *lordship salvation holds a doctrine of saving faith that is in conflict with that of Luther and Calvin and, most importantly, in conflict with God’s Word.*^{viii}

It cannot be overemphasized that the Lordship Salvation gospel is a “new gospel”. A new way of salvation which does not lead to Christ but to self-examination. A “new gospel” that hides additional elements in the word “faith” and in so doing destroys “grace”. Anyone who claims that “faith” includes implicitly or inherently or inevitably any elements such as *obedience, forsaking all, submission to Christ’s Lordship, discipleship, confession of sin, sorrow, crying to Christ, et al* is a false teacher. The Greek Lexicons and the absence of these elements in salvation passages make it impossible that their doctrines of faith and assurance have any firm biblical support. What this means is that the Lordship Gospel is in reality a false gospel according to Jesus and Paul. Propagation of any other gospel than that which we received from Paul was condemned as anathema in Galatians 1.

Believers can begin to doubt their salvation. We are not immune from doubt (Luke 7:18-19). But the antidote for doubt is to go back to the promises of God! You have to go back to God’s testimony. Regardless of what your heart or someone else tells you you have to rely on God’s testimony regarding eternal life (John 3:16, 18, 36; 5:24; 6:35-40, 47; etc...). And that testimony is that if you believe that Jesus is the Son of God you have eternal life.

Back in 1 John 5:6-12 John is calling us back to the testimony of God so that they will be assured that they are saved. One commentator says,

The logic of John’s argument is evident. Since the believers he writes to have believed **in the name of the Son of God** (whose identity is attested by “the Spirit, the water, and the blood,” verse 8), then they should rest securely on the testimony that God has given *about* and *through* His **Son**. This “testimony” (found in John 5:24 and in so many other places in John’s gospel) assures the believer that he does **have eternal life**. If Jesus said so, God said so—and there the matter should rest!^{ix}

“To believe the biblical promises about eternal life is to believe that one *has* eternal life. If one does not believe that he or she *has* eternal life, one does not believe the promises, since the promises assure believers that we do.”^x

To conclude, “John addresses his audience as “believers.” Although the Revisionists are telling them that they do not have eternal life, John is reminding them that they do. It is their world-conquering faith in Jesus as the Son of God that has given them this, and God’s testimony about His Son verifies this fact beyond all controversy or contradiction.”^{xi}

ⁱ Hodges, Zane, *The Epistles of John* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 229.

ⁱⁱ By the way, the term “saving faith” is a fallacy because it tries to make a distinction between “faith” and “saving faith”. But the Bible doesn’t complicate faith like that. Either you have “faith” that Jesus is the Son of God or you don’t.

ⁱⁱⁱ Other statements by MacArthur in his book *The Gospel According to Jesus* that confuse salvation with sanctification include: “Forsaking oneself for Christ’s sake is not an optional step of discipleship subsequent to conversion: it is the *sine qua non* of saving faith” (p. 135). “He is glad to give up all for the kingdom. That is the nature of saving faith” (p. 139). “His demeanor was one of unconditional surrender, a complete resignation of self and absolute submission to his father. That is the essence of saving faith” (p. 153). “So-called ‘faith’ in God that does not produce this yearning to submit to His will is not faith at all. The state of mind that refuses obedience is pure and simple unbelief” (p. 176).

^{iv} Kendall, R.T., *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: University Press, 1979), 19

^v Hodges, Zane, *Absolutely Free!* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 215.

^{vi} Hodges, Zane, *Absolutely Free!* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 227.

^{vii} Hodges, Zane, *Absolutely Free!* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 209.

^{viii} Hodges, Zane, *Absolutely Free!* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 209.

^{ix} Hodges, Zane, *The Epistles of John* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 228.

^x Hodges, Zane, *Absolutely Free!* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 175.

^{xi} Hodges, Zane, *The Epistles of John* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 227.

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