

“How to Know I am a Christian”

1 John 5:13 and selected texts

Dr. Jerry Nelson

Most of us who are Christians struggle with doubts – times in our lives when we wonder if we are truly Christians.

Maybe for you it was when you were in a time of crisis:

- When you or a loved one were seriously ill,
- When you were so out of work and money that you were very afraid for your future,
- When your marriage seemed it was falling apart.

Sometimes in crisis, when our prayers seem unheard, we wonder if God is even there and if we belong to him.

For others of us doubts arise when we become so conscious of our sin: our repeated disobedience, our failure to make progress in some area of our lives, that we wonder if there is any true spiritual life in us at all or if we are simply fooling ourselves.

Maybe for some, their belief seems little more than a struggle with unbelief.

They are more conscious of doubt and sin in their lives than they are of growth and victory.

Maybe they wonder how anyone could be a Christian who doubts as much as they do.

I dare say almost every Christian has struggled with doubt about his or her relationship with God.

Even people who have been Christians many years will often experience doubt.

That is certainly my own experience.

I have wondered many times and even recently whether I am truly a Christian.

Such doubts can persist and they are painful.

Those doubts seem to come out of nowhere, but as we will see they can be accounted for and they can be countered.

What are we do make of these doubts?

If we become Christians by faith, but instead we doubt, does that mean we are not Christians?

Two weeks ago I showed you many verses in the Bible that should have made you examine yourself carefully and ask yourself, “Am I a true Christian?”

The Apostle John stated it so pointedly when he wrote in 1 John 2:4-6, 3:14 “The man who says, “I know him (Jesus), but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we **know** we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.” “We **know** that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death.”

What Christian, when reading such words, doesn't feel at least somewhat challenged?

When John describes true Christianity so vividly doesn't it make some Christians wonder if they are truly Christians?

But that is precisely the opposite of John's intention.

In 1 John 3:19 John writes, “This then is **how we know that we belong to the truth (that we are Christians)**, and how we set our hearts at rest in his (God's) presence.”

To be sure, John has every intention of causing the nominal Christian – the person who is Christian in name only – to doubt the reality of his relationship to God.

And John certainly had in mind that true Christians ought to understand the high calling of **being** a Christian.

But it was not his intention to make true Christians doubt their salvation because that would be an outright contradiction of why he said he wrote the letter of 1 John.

1 John 5:13 “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God **so that you may know that you have eternal life.**”

The past two Sundays my greatest desire was that those who are **not** truly Christians would realize that
 and would turn from their sins to believing Jesus
 so that they would be saved from the power and consequences
 of their sin
 and have an eternal relationship with God.

Today my greatest desire is that those who **are** truly Christians would have assurance of their relationship with God
 that would liberate them from doubt,
 free them to experience the joy of their relationship with God
 and energize them for a life of Spirit-led works and witness.

How can I know with assurance that I am a Christian?

Remember there is a difference between assurance and the sense or feeling of assurance.

Many things are assuredly true even if we aren't certain of them.

Remember, the earth was round even before Columbus was sure of it.

So there is the objective reality of a thing and there is also the subjective sense of it.

Our salvation is not based on our subjective "feeling" saved; it is based on Christ's objective person and work.

My sister tells me, quite erroneously I'm sure, that I used to tell her she wasn't actually related to the family but someone left her on the doorstep and my parents feeling sorry for her, took her in.

A little girl might work herself into quite a state of insecurity even though she was in fact a true child of her parents.

Doubting, or not feeling saved, doesn't change fact.

If you believe Jesus, God guarantees your salvation, even if you don't feel saved some times.

But with that I get ahead of myself a little.

Today I want to give you the three biblical means of assurance.

These are the three ways by which the Bible says you can know you **are** a Christian.

I'm going to reduce it to three words for memory's sake but reductionism has deficiencies so we will explain carefully.

The three words are **Word, Works and Witness.**

A little better would be to say, "God's Word, "God's work in us," and "God's witness to us."

Still another way of saying it is God's promise, sanctification, and the witness of the Spirit.

The first of these, "Word," is often referred to as the primary means of assurance.

The other two, "Works," and "Witness" are sometimes referred to as secondary.

They are called secondary not because they are unnecessary but because they are **based** on the primary means – the "Word."

So what is that first and primary means of assurance?

It is the Word – God's promise.

To combat doubts and grow in our sense of assurance, the Christian does not look first to him or herself or anything they have produced but instead they look at God's promises and God's faithfulness.

As I said earlier, the certainty of our salvation does not rest in our feelings of assurance.

The certainty rests in the promises and trustworthiness of Jesus.

We don't qualify ourselves for the gift of life, we don't make ourselves worthy – it is all of God.

Even when we view faith as the condition necessary to receive the promise, faith doesn't bear any of the weight but instead faith looks to God alone as the source of the faith and the faithfulness to keep his promises.

Is Jesus trustworthy?

Does he fulfill his promises?

Has he promised you that if you believe you will be saved?

Do you trust **HIM**?

The Bible says **believe** in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

It says as many as **receive** Jesus, to them God gives the right to become his children.

It says **repent**, turn from sin to Jesus.

Too many, instead of focusing on the Savior, focus on themselves and their response.

And many, when doubting their Christianity, think back to when they became a Christian and wonder if they “did it right.”

When I was a young boy I was accidentally pushed into the deep end of the swimming pool and I began to drown.

When I came to the surface, I screamed for help.

When I came to the surface the second time, my brother had his hand out to me.

Believe me I didn't stop and consider whether I had asked for help correctly or just how I should take hold of his hand.

I yelled and I grabbed!

And he saved me.

Why then is it that some of us treat our coming to faith so differently. We think back and we say:

- “Maybe I wasn't sorry enough for my sins.
- “Maybe I didn't pray the right prayer.
- “Maybe I didn't really understand.
- “Maybe I didn't mean it sufficiently.
- “Maybe my faith wasn't strong enough.

Do you see how all of those concerns focus on what I did or did not do?

That is placing faith in the quality of my faith instead of placing faith in Jesus.

Listen to this conversation:

“Do you believe Jesus will do what he says he will do?”

“Yes.

Is he trustworthy?”

“Yes.

“Do you believe Jesus forgives our sins (past, present and future) based solely on his grace when we believe him?”

“Yes.

“Do you believe him?”

“I think I do. I’m just not certain that my faith is sufficient or strong enough.

When you answer the last question that way you reveal that you still have your eyes focused on what you do instead of on Jesus and what he did.

Think of it this way. When you say, “I believe Jesus,” don’t emphasize the words “I believe,” which stresses the strength or quality of your faith, instead emphasize the word “Jesus,” – “I believe **Jesus**.”

Don’t ask if your faith is strong enough to save you, ask if Jesus is strong enough to do so.

Let me ask you again:

“Do you believe Jesus will do what he says he will do?”

“Yes.

“Is he trustworthy?”

“Yes.

“Do you believe Jesus forgives our sins (past, present and future) based solely on his grace when we believe him?”

“Yes.

“Do you believe him?”

“Yes!

Do you see what has changed?

Your focus moved from you and from you getting it right, to focusing on Jesus and him getting it right.

Theologian B.B. Warfield, a professor at Princeton Seminary at the turn of the last century, wrote, “It is not faith that saves, but faith in Jesus Christ...It is not, strictly speaking, even faith in Christ that

saves, but Christ that saves through faith. The saving power resides exclusively, not in the act of faith or the attitude of faith or the nature of faith, but in the object of faith; and in this the whole biblical representation centers, so that we could not more radically misconceive (the Bible) than by transferring to faith even the smallest fraction of that saving energy which is attributed in the Scriptures solely to Christ Himself.” (B.B Warfield, Biblical and Theological Studies, 425)

My own testimony is illustrative of this idea:

From early childhood I was taught that Jesus died for our sins and that if we believe him we would not perish but have eternal life.

Two or three times between ages 4 and 14, because of a growing understanding of sin, I attempted to become a Christian.

I say, “attempted” because, within me, the emphasis was always on what I did in response to my new awareness of sin.

I would pray a prayer or I would go forward at an invitation following a sermon and **I would try to make certain that I was doing it right** – that I really meant it, that I was sufficiently sorry for my sins, and that I prayed the right words.

But at each new stage of maturity, I would wonder if in my previous immaturity I had done it right and so I felt the need to “do it” again.

Finally at age 17, after years of doing and then doubting, I wanted desperately to be done doubting,

It is painful to believe in God but not be certain of where you stand with him.

Unfairly I assumed my own pastor would too easily dismiss my questions, and so I went to a pastor who didn’t know me well.

Though I knew the facts of the gospel, he told me again the basic good news – that Jesus died for my sins and that as many as receive him to them he gives the right to become the children of God.

He asked me, “Jerry, do you believe Jesus?”

That night my focus changed, the object of my faith was no longer my faith – no longer, getting it right – but the object of my faith was now Jesus.

He had already gotten it “right” and I believed him.

How do I know I am a Christian?

Because GOD says I am and he cannot lie.

What has God promised?

(STAND)

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

John 5:24 “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.

John 10:27-29 “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.

John 6:37-40 “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. ⁴⁰ For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.”

Ephesians 1:13-14 “And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession

Isaiah 43:1-3 "But now, this is what the LORD says-- he who created you..., he who formed you: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; **you are mine**. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned...; For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;

God longs for us to know with assurance that we are his.

Christianity is about a relationship with God.

How sad for us and for our God, if we doubt his love.

He wants us to be assured of his love.

Hosea 11:8-9 "How can I give you up?

How can I hand you over?

...My heart is changed within me;
all my compassion is aroused.

I will not carry out my fierce anger,
nor will I turn and devastate (my people).

For **I am God, and not man**--
the Holy One among you.

Does your faith waver? Do you sometimes doubt?

Then go to God's Word, and when you go to the Word and read God's promises, don't meditate on yourself, meditate on him.

When I say, "don't meditate on yourself" I mean don't think of your faith, think of God's promise and his faithfulness.

William Spurstowe one of the authors of the Westminster Confession of Faith wrote, nearly 400 years ago, that meditating on God's promises is the surest way to gain the sense of assurance.

It is like first looking at the sky at night only to see one or two stars but the longer we gaze into the sky the more stars we see until we see that in fact the whole sky is filled with them.

Likewise when we first turn our attention to the promises of God, they may appear weak and they do nothing to dispel our doubts.

But as we meditate on his promises, they come into sharper focus and our hearts are filled with confidence. (In Beeke, Assurance of Faith, 155)

The Word is the primary means of assurance. - God's sure promises and his faithfulness.

But I said at the beginning that there are two other means of assurance – “Works” and “Witness.”

These are called “secondary,” not because they are insignificant but because they are based on the “primary” means – the Word.

They are also called “subjective” because they are something we subjectively experience.

The first of those is “Works.”

By this, I mean God's work in us.

The Bible teaches that everything Christ did for us has its counterpart in us.

- He who died to save us, will save us.
- He who purchased a heavenly kingdom for us, will fit us for it.
- He who offers us his holiness, will conform us to his holy image.

True conversion will result in a changing life – one that is increasingly conformed to the character and conduct of Jesus.

1 John 3:1-3 “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him **purifies himself**, just as he is pure.

Do you want a greater **sense** of assurance that you belong to God?

Listen to the Apostle John:

1 John 2:3-6 “We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, “I know him,” but does not do

what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.”

1 John 4:7-8, 12 “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love... If we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

Jesus said it this way, Matthew 7:18-20 “A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, **by their fruit you will recognize them.**

Our sense of assurance grows as we see evidences of the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives, as we are changing.

- Do you care about your relationship with God?
- Are you sensitive to sin in your life and desire to overcome it?
- Do you obey God’s word and desire to do so more and more?
- Do you reject the false hopes and ways of the world?
- Do you look forward to seeing Jesus?
- Do you see any changes in your life?
- Do you love other Christians? (See Chapter 5 Saved Without a Doubt by John MacArthur)
- Do you desire to be more like Jesus?

If any of that is true, and increasingly true, then you have reason to be assured that you belong to God.

Now remember these actions and attitudes don’t make you a Christian but they do give evidence that you are.

Our temptation is to look at how far short we fall and then doubt our salvation.

God’s perspective is to look at how far we have come and to see the future.

Philippians 1:6 “...He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

Someone might respond, “Well I see **some** evidence of a changing attitude and lifestyle but how do I know that guarantees I am a Christian?”

It doesn’t.

The only guarantee that you are a Christian is that God has saved you by grace – that is the “primary” means of assurance that we discussed first and longest – God’s “Word”, his promise!

This secondary and subjective means of assurance (“Works”) is only evidence that increases your sense of assurance.

For centuries theologians have called this a practical syllogism.

A syllogism is a conclusion drawn from a major and a minor premise.

Here’s **the major premise:**

According to the Scripture, only those who are truly saved see the Holy Spirit’s work in them resulting in fruits of sanctification and good works.

Minor premise:

I cannot deny that by the grace of God I have experienced the Holy Spirit’s work in me resulting in fruits of sanctification and good works.

Conclusion:

Consequently, I may be assured that I am truly a Christian.

It is not that the believer sees all the fruit of the Spirit manifested in his/her life,

or that what fruit is manifested is manifested perfectly,
but they do see that their faith is resulting in a changing life.

The means of assurance are: Word, Work and Witness.

God’s “Word” establishes it,

God’s “work” in our lives gives evidence of it,

and now lastly, God’s Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

Romans 8:14-16 "Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."

Jesus said, John 3:8 "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

You can't see the Holy Spirit of God but you can tell where he's been. You can't see the Holy Spirit do his work but you can tell when he's done it.

- Why do you care about being a Christian and your neighbor doesn't?
Because of the Holy Spirit.
- Why do you desire to follow Jesus and be more like him?
Because of the Holy Spirit.
- Why are you sensitive to sin and grieve that you have hurt Jesus when you sin?
Because of the Holy Spirit.
- Why do you care about loving others?
Because of the Holy Spirit.

And it is the Holy Spirit who takes that evidence and confirms to your mind that you belong to God.

And it is the Holy Spirit who takes the promises of God and confirms to your mind that God is faithful.

And some also suggest that the Holy Spirit directly, in a mystical way, confirms that you belong to God.

Mystical or not, remember that any trust in Jesus, weak as it may be, and any outward evidence of true conversion resulting in a changing life is the work of the Holy Spirit and only further confirms that you have been "savingly" converted – that you are a Christian.

Assurance is not perfect in this life but is subject to doubt and trial.

But it should nonetheless be sought after through the means of grace.

2 Peter 1:10 “Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure.

Assurance comes through “Word,” “Works,” and “Witness.”

Meditate on God’s promises of eternal life by grace through faith.
Ignorance or forgetting God’s promises are major causes of doubt.

Follow the Lord Jesus, obeying him.

Disobedience and fruitlessness will exacerbate the doubt and rightfully so.

Invite the Spirit of God to bear witness with your conscience that you are his.

1 John 5:13 “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may **know** that you have eternal life.”

Prayer

Resources:

The “Westminster Confession of Faith” Chapter XVIII (Concise – might wish to see G.I. Williamson’s notes in The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes 1964 Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing)

Assurance of Faith Calvin and English Puritanism by Joel R. Beeke BT 785 B44 1991 (Scholarly work and thorough. See especially chapters 6 & 10)

Saved Without A Doubt by John MacArthur 1992 (Popular work. See especially chapters 2, 3 & 6)

The ABCs of Assurance by John Gerstner 1991 (Popular work laid out in short 2 to 4 page articles)

Heaven on Earth A Treatise on Christian Assurance by Thomas Brooks 1654 (Tough reading but thorough)

The Basics of Saving Faith:

“How to Become a Christian” Nov 21, 2004 sermon by Jerry Nelson

“The Invincible Gospel & The Modern Evangelical Lie” by Richard M. Bennett in Pastor Nelson’s files
 See also: “Close only counts in Horseshoes and Hand Grenades” (A true Christian is a Christ-follower) November 14, 2004, sermon by Jerry Nelson

Hymn

From depths of woe I raise to thee
 The voice of lamentation;
 Lord, turn a gracious ear to me
 And hear my supplication
 If thou iniquities dost mark,
 Our secret sins and misdeeds dark,
 O who shall stand before thee?

To wash away the crimson stain,
 Grace, grace alone availeth;
 Our works, alas! are all in vain;
 In much the best life faileth:
 No man can glory in thy sight,
 All must alike confess thy might,
 And live alone by mercy.

Therefore my trust is in the Lord,
 And not in mine own merit;
 On him my soul shall rest, his Word
 Upholds my fainting spirit:
 His promised mercy is my fort;
 My comfort and my sweet support;
 I wait for it with patience.

What though I wait the live-long night,
 And till the dawn appeareth,
 My heart still trusteth in his might;
 It doubteth not nor feareth:
 Do thus, O ye of Isreal’s seed,
 Ye of the Spirit born indeed;
 And wait till God appeareth.

Though great our sins and sore our woes

His grace much more aboundeth;
His helping love no limit knows,
Our utmost need it soundeth.
Our shepherd good and true is he,
Who will at last his Israel free
From all their sin and sorrow.

(Sinclair Ferguson is professor of systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary. Based on Martin Luther's rendering of Psalm 130 in Boice and Sasse [Here we Stand](#) , 153,4)