

ENCOURAGED BY THE EVIDENCE:
PREACHING THE GOSPEL MOTIVATION STRATEGY FOUND IN FIRST JOHN

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Abstract

What motivates believers? The gospel, of course—the good news about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. But when preachers use the same stock gospel phrases week after week in the sanctification-focused segments of their sermons, they do a disservice to God’s people and God’s Word. There is great variety in the way Scripture provides gospel motivation; variety that preachers ought to strive to reflect. One example of an alternative gospel motivation strategy is found in John’s first epistle. This thesis explores the way John motivates believers by identifying the evidences of their faith.

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Introduction

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” The Savior’s familiar words in John’s Gospel (chapter 15) are a reminder to every Christian that life in Jesus is an inevitably fruitful life. Believers in Jesus are like branches on a healthy tree, producing fruit without being taught or told. A believer’s fruits are thoughts, words and actions aligned with God’s will—works that are rightly called good. Jesus’ metaphor emphasizes that he is the source and strength for these works, and that apart from him they are impossible.

Jesus says all who do these works accomplish two things. First, they glorify the Father. Believers’ words and actions show the world how wonderful their God is. Second, by their words and actions, Christians show themselves to be Jesus’ true disciples. Faith in Jesus cannot be seen, but good works—the fruits of faith—can be seen. Unfortunately, however, the Christian life is complicated. Believers, even while producing fruits of faith, still struggle against their inborn nature and sin daily. This familiar, daily struggle often becomes profoundly painful and discouraging. Christians know what their Savior has said about bearing fruit, but his words do not always seem to match what they see happening in their own lives. One pastor describes this frustration: “nevertheless, we are saddened that we are not yet as pious as we wish to be. Paradoxically, growth in faith and maturity gives us keener insight into our failings and so

compounds our problem.”¹ Because of their sinful nature, Christians repeatedly need motivation, reassurance, and guidance.

The proclamation of God’s Word in the pastor’s sermon is one place where believers expect to find the help they need in their struggle against sin. Lutheran preaching rightly emphasizes that the two primary kinds of teaching in the Bible, law and gospel, work together to provide Christians with reassurance, motivation, and guidance in their daily living. Each teaching has its own work to do. The gospel forgives and motivates; the law curbs, exposes, and guides. Scripture provides this motivation, reassurance, and guidance in a variety of ways. Lutherans rightly stress that believers are properly motivated only by the gospel—the good news about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection for a world of sinners. This message is objective; it is true entirely apart from and outside of the believer’s life. The objectivity of this good news provides lasting reassurance for believers in the face of their own sins and shortcomings.

Neophyte preachers are therefore encouraged to include specific, objective, gospel statements about Jesus’ saving work in every sermon they write. However, some preachers unintentionally abuse this principle and fall into a certain trap, which Professor David Schmitt calls “gospel obsession.”² This occurs whenever the gospel becomes stale for the congregation because the preacher presents the gospel in a predictable, formulaic way week after week. He recycles the same phrase about Jesus’ perfect life and innocent death that he uses every Sunday, and as a result he misses or ignores the unique law and gospel dynamic in his text. If the preacher makes the gospel sound stale to his hearers, they can miss out on the reassurance and motivation

1. Koester, Robert. *Gospel Motivation: More Than “Jesus Died for My Sins.”* Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2006, 6.

2. Schmitt, David. “Law and Gospel in Sermon and Service.” In *Preaching Is Worship: The Sermon in Context*, 15-33. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2012.

God intends them to hear. This problem is avoided when the preacher strives to reflect Scripture's variety as he composes his sermons.

John's first epistle features a compelling example of gospel variety; a two-layered form of reassurance for believers. The first layer is what is typically expected of gospel motivation: a proclamation of Christ's work for sinners. But John includes a second layer of encouragement in which he acknowledges fruits (or "evidences") of faith. In doing so, he reassures his readers that they are, in fact, believers. This strategy is not unique to First John. However, it is a short epistle that presents several aspects of the evidences of faith in a succinct and striking way, so it is an excellent place for preachers to learn the strategy. This thesis intends to convince preachers to implement John's two-layer gospel reassurance strategy by identifying evidences of faith.

To accomplish this task, the thesis will proceed first by gathering insights about the evidences of faith from an overview of the line of thought in First John, considering the implications of this material, and finally by exploring and refuting various abuses that could occur from a misunderstanding or misapplication of John's strategy.

Overview of the Line of Thought in First John

Evidences of Faith in General

When John writes about the thoughts and behaviors of Christians, he speaks of them as *evidences*, not components or prerequisites, of faith. Also, John recognizes a connection between these evidences and a Christian's certainty. The following is a chapter-by-chapter overview³ of what John writes about evidences of faith and their function in the Christian life. There are two parts to this overview. The first will explore the sections where John talks about evidences of faith *per se*, without necessarily using them as reassurance. The second part will circle back to the beginning and look at the way John applies the evidences as reassurance and motivation.

Evidence in Chapter 2

The first place where John mentions the evidences of faith is in 2:3.⁴ “We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands.” John is beginning a new line of thought. He has just finished speaking about the reality of sin in a believer's life and has assured his sinful readers that they “have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One” (2:1). But how does someone know whether they are on this advocate's side? John says obedience to the advocate's commands is evidence of a relationship with him (2:3). Mere lip-service to the advocate while disobeying his word makes a person a truth-less liar (2:6). Later, John repeats this point when he says behavior in accordance with God's will is evidence that a person will

3. The translations, where provided, are the NIV11. Not every reference will be included in the body of the thesis. This overview section will frequently offer commentary on the flow of entire paragraphs at a time. Therefore, it will benefit the reader to open a Bible to First John and follow along while reading.

4. Chapter 1 does not mention the evidences of faith. However, it is still important to John's overall reassurance strategy. More on the function of chapter 1 will be said below.

live forever (2:17). This concept of obedience to God’s commands is just one of several evidences of faith to which John will refer throughout the letter.

John also mentions a second evidence of faith: love for others. “Anyone who loves their brother or sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble” (2:10). John states this truth both positively and negatively. Love for others is evidence of a life lived in light, while hatred for others is evidence of a life lived blindly in darkness (2:9-11). John makes it clear once more that lip-service, claiming to live in light, will not cut it. Loving behavior toward others demonstrates whether one lives in light or darkness.

In addition to obedience to God and love for others, a third evidence of faith John mentions in this chapter is having the right knowledge. In 2:18-23, John warns about the false teachers who were troubling his readers, whom he calls “antichrists.” John draws a bold line between true teachers and false teachers, and the determining factor is their doctrine about Jesus. John says any teacher who denies that Jesus is the Christ is a liar and an antichrist; a person with beliefs like this does not even “have the Father” (2:23). However, knowing who Jesus is—that he is the Christ, the promised Messiah—is evidence of a true faith and a right relationship with the Father.

Evidence in Chapter 3

In chapter 3, John revisits “obedience to God” and “love for others” evidences. At the transition⁵ into chapter 3, he cites right behavior as evidence that someone has been born of God. To John, this characteristic in those born of God is just as certain as God’s own righteousness. After a beautiful gospel-centered discussion about being God’s children, John continues the thought

5. This is a place where our English Bible chapter division is inadequate. A better place to put this chapter division is 2:28, because it begins with a strong break in thought “and now,” and explores a topic that continues through the first half of chapter 3. Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 164-165.

about obedience in verses 7-10. Righteousness is an evidence of faith, but the inverse is true as well. A continuous lack of righteousness shows who the children of the devil are. John warns his dear children to not be led astray by such people; their lack of love for others is evidence of whose team they are on.

John includes a few more general statements about the evidences of faith in verses 19-24, but because this section is so closely interwoven with assurance and gospel motivation, it will be covered in detail in a later section.⁶

Evidence in Chapter 4

Chapter 4 continues to revisit the evidences of faith John has already mentioned, with special emphasis on love for others. This chapter is key for understanding the big picture of John's reassurances, and it also includes several statements of classic, primary⁷ gospel motivation. John explains that love for others is one of the goals of God's love for us, and he also connects our love to God's dwelling in his believers. It is not strictly the kind of reassurance this thesis intends to explore. It does, however, hold an important place in John's line of thought; its significance will be discussed in greater detail below.⁸

Evidence in Chapter 5

The beginning verses of chapter 5 bring together everything John has said about the evidences of faith so far. Once again, right belief in Jesus as Christ is evidence that a person has been born of

6. Cf. pages 27-30. Several other important verses about the evidences of faith are not fully covered in this overview section. Their significance is saved for the final part of this thesis, where they will be used to refute possible misunderstandings and misapplications of John's strategy.

7. For the distinction between primary and secondary gospel motivation, cf. pages 12-14.

8. Cf. pages 10, 25.

God (5:1a).⁹ That Father-child relationship naturally produces evidence of its own: love for the Father, that is, obedience to his commands (5:3). John adds that it only makes sense that children who love their Father love his other children as well (5:1b). Thus far, the different kinds of evidences have been examined individually. But here, John explains that they tend to overlap and happen simultaneously; after all, love for others is also part of God's will (5:2). Verse 5 closes the section with another reference to believing rightly about Jesus. So, all three of John's typical evidence categories are present—right knowledge about Christ, obedience to God's will, and love for others.¹⁰ Yet, chapter 5 summarizes these evidences as one, interconnected collection of fruits produced by faith.

These general statements about fruits of faith (or even the truth that evidences of faith exist) are not necessarily very reassuring. On their own they are likely to function as mirror law, exposing for the Christian how inadequate his evidences are. He may think of all the times he has not loved others and consequently wonder about the state of his faith. But John does not merely talk *about* the evidences in general; he specifically connects them to his hearers. Once John identifies the connection, his readers are reassured. This second step is the key to John's strategy— it is what makes these statements decidedly *gospel* motivation. The second part of this overview observes this phenomenon. Near each general statement about evidences of faith, John encourages his readers by identifying these evidences in their lives.

9. "...John is not trying to show how a person experiences the new birth; his aim is rather to indicate the evidence which shows that a person stands in the continuing relationship of a child to God his Father: that evidence is that he holds to the truth faith about Jesus." Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 226-227.

10. For a helpful summary of how these verses weave all three together, cf. Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 225-227.

John Reassures His Readers by Identifying Their Evidences of Faith

Reassurance in Chapter 2

Verse 8 is the first time John uses this technique, and it is also one of the clearest examples. He reminds his readers that the command to obey God is nothing new. His readers have known this since the beginning; it was the message they heard all along. Yet, the command to obey is certainly not old in the sense of obsolete. John asserts both that the command remains relevant and that it was being fulfilled in new ways. As one commentator beautifully puts it,

We might almost translate: “It’s fulfillment is seen in him and in you.” The newness of the commandment lies in the fact that it is being fulfilled in a way that had not happened previously. To put it differently, the darkness of the old age, in which men did not love in this sort of way, is disappearing, and the light of the new age, in which Christian love is shown, is already shining. The picture is that of a world in the darkness of night, but the first rays of the dawning sun have already begun to shine...and it is here that the disciples are to be found, walking in the light and themselves shedding light.¹¹

John explicitly tells his readers that the evidences of faith he describes are on display in their lives. By saying, “this is true of *you*,” he shows he does not intend them to hear his descriptions of the evidences of faith as convicting, mirror law. He wants them to hear about the evidences and be reassured that they *are* Christians.

The second time John uses evidences of faith to encourage readers in this chapter is in verses 12-14. In verses 3-11, John has made it clear that right knowledge and right behavior are evidences of faith. Beginning with verse 12, John reassures his readers that they possess these evidences. Back in 1:8-9, John had stated that wherever there is confession, there is certainty about forgiveness. Here, John tells his readers the same certainty about forgiveness belongs to them. He continues by pointing out their right knowledge and behavior. These three, repetitive,

11. Marshall, I. Howard. *The Epistles of John*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1978.

song-like verses are a heavy dose of evidence-reassurance. John's repeating chorus of second-person pronouns shows he has no doubts about the evidences of his readers' faith.

After John tells his readers about their antichrist problem in verses 18-19, he draws a sharp contrast between false teachers and believers based on their knowledge of the truth about Jesus. Yet again, John does not intend his readers to wonder, "Could I be one of the antichrists he's talking about?"¹² In verses 20-21, he dismisses any doubt in their minds about whether they are believers or antichrists. "But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth." John assures them they have the right knowledge; they already know what he is speaking about. The evidence of right knowledge is on display in their lives, and they should be certain of their relationship with the Son and the Father. John reiterates this point a few verses later when he tells them he is writing to condemn the antichrists, not his beloved readers (verse 26). As far as his readers were concerned, they should be confident that God's anointing remains in them, and that they "do not need anyone to teach [them]"¹³ (verse 27). Again, he is reassuring them by affirming that there is evidence of their faith.

Reassurance in Chapter 3

The next time John points to evidences of faith to reassure his readers occurs in 3:13-14. After alluding to the account of Cain and Abel to illustrate his point about love and hatred, John makes a comforting application to his readers. Just as Cain hated and murdered his brother because of Abel's righteous actions, the world will hate and mistreat believers because of believers'

12. Marshall, *Epistles*, 156.

13. Cf. also 3:5, where John reminds them of their correct knowledge of the gospel of forgiveness.

righteous actions. Unbelievers also can see the evidences of faith, and it will sometimes lead them to persecute and harm Christians.¹⁴ So, John's readers should not be surprised. Instead, they should know that their faith, expressing itself in love for one another, gives them certainty they have passed from death to life. This sure hope of their future life helps Christians endure all kinds of suffering in this life.¹⁵

John again uses evidences to reassure his readers at the end of this chapter, in verses 22-24. As was mentioned above, this section comes at the end of one of the most significant portions of the letter, and it will be covered in its own section in detail below.¹⁶

Reassurance in Chapter 4

Chapter 4, like chapter 1, does not include the method of reassurance under discussion here. As he did in chapter 1, John primarily uses objective, salvation history gospel comfort to motivate sanctified living. Unlike chapter 1, John does make several general statements about evidences of faith; particularly the evidence of love for others. John proclaims God as the origin, the pattern, and the provider of Christian love for others. In doing so, he simultaneously parallels Jesus' fruitful vine metaphor in John 15. The combination of these concepts is effective and will be described in greater detail below.¹⁷

14. Cf. the Savior's words in Matthew 5:12. This negative side-effect of visible evidences is only half of the story, however. Peter's first epistle makes it clear that a believer's evidences of faith can also lead unbelievers to praise and thank God (1 Peter 2:12).

15. Compare 1 Peter 4:12-19.

16. Cf. pages 29-30.

17. Cf. page 25.

Reassurance in Chapter 5

Following John's definition of Christian love, he returns in chapter 5 to the reassurances that come from the evidences of faith. In verses 1-3, he wraps together all the concepts he has previously spoken about.¹⁸ Then in verses 4-5, he applies this full collection of evidences to the faith he shares with his readers. To paraphrase, John asserts, "*We* believe Jesus is the Christ. That is *our* faith. Therefore, *we* are born of God, and *we* overcome the world. Our right knowledge is evidence of the victory that is *ours*, and it shows itself in our obedience to God and our love for his other children." John is again identifying evidences of faith in his readers' lives; he wants them to be certain of the kind of faith they possess.

This becomes even clearer in verse 13, where John reiterates his purpose for writing.¹⁹ He intends readers to come away with certainty, assurance, and confidence that they possess eternal life, that God has given *them* his Son, and that God will hear them when they pray—all things which are characteristics of people whose faith expresses evidences such as right knowledge, obedience to God's will, and love for others, as he has described throughout the letter. And as if there were any doubt left to dispel, John assures them once more in verse 19 that they are children of God. Being God's children means they have right knowledge. It means they have love for one another. It means they do live in accordance with God's will. John clearly demonstrates that his intention in this epistle is reassurance, not condemnation. And, as the examples above have shown, he repeatedly provides significant portions of this reassurance by pointing to evidences of faith.

18. See above, pages 6-7, for more discussion on 5:1-3.

19. Note how this verse parallels John's purpose for writing given at the end of his Gospel (John 20:31).

The Implications of the Material in First John

The Great Need for Reassurance

John's emphasis on reassurance identifies (and meets!) a need that will always be felt by the Church. Centuries later, C. F. W. Walther observed that "the prevailing spiritual malady of our time is a lack of assurance on the part of Christians."²⁰ Chaos and confusion in the world around them, coupled with chaos and confusion in their own life and heart, lead many believers back into uncertainty and doubt. But does not the preaching of the Word, and the entire public ministry at that, exist to remove that uncertainty by continually refocusing on who God is, what he has done, and what he has promised? Walther thought so: "the aim of all true ministers has been to train their hearers so that they could declare themselves children of God and heirs of salvation."²¹ Believers will always need reassurance, and Scripture offers a variety of ways for preachers to proclaim it. May it never be that a preacher falls into the trap of gospel obsession by preaching the same reassurance with the same wording Sunday after Sunday! As a defense against that trap, this thesis argues that there are two main categories of reassurance found in Scripture, each of which is clearly represented and demonstrated in John's first epistle. Having reviewed the pertinent passages in First John, conclusions will now be drawn about those two categories.

Two Kinds of Reassurance

A Christian's primary, consistent, and objective assurance must come from the doctrine of justification—the truth that God has forgiven sinners for the sake of Christ's life, death, and

20. Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 309.

21. Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 392.

resurrection. Primary reassurances point believers to the *cause* of their salvation; a cause that is objective, unchanging, and entirely Christ-focused. They approach certainty from the angle of justification. This is the kind of reassurance that, thankfully, preachers are often already using.

But John demonstrates that reassurance does not need to stop there. Reassurance and gospel motivation are certainly never less than objective assurances based on Christ; but they can also be more than that. John shows us a *secondary* tier of reassurance, one that does not replace or supersede primary assurances but rather *supplements* them. These secondary reassurances point believers to the *effect* of their salvation—evidences of the faith that saves, fruits that spontaneously spring forth from the Christian. They are admittedly not as consistent, objective, or Christ-focused as primary assurances,²² because they approach from the angle of sanctification. Nevertheless, they are a valuable tool in a preacher’s toolbox—a tool that reflects the great variety in Scripture for providing reassurance and motivation, as John’s epistle demonstrates.

This secondary level of reassurance is not limited to First John. Many other epistles mention the assurance that comes from the evidences of faith.²³ Christ himself provides what is perhaps the clearest example of this form of reassurance in Luke 7:36-50 at the home of Simon the Pharisee. When the woman anoints Jesus feet with an expensive perfume and dries his feet with her hair, Jesus tells Simon, “Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven, because she loved much.” Jesus was certainly not advocating salvation by works; her generous gesture

22. Which is why the secondary can never replace or even overshadow the primary without risk or eventual consequences, as will be argued below.

23. Examples include 1 Thessalonians 4:1-2, 9-10; Philippians 2:12-16, et al.

for Jesus did not save her. Her “much love” was instead the evidence that her sins had been forgiven.²⁴

This is much like if someone were to say, “It rained last night, because the sidewalk is wet.” In other words, “I *know* that it rained last night, because I *see* that the sidewalk is wet.” The wet sidewalk is *evidence* of the rain, not the cause—but the evidence *assures* the speaker of what has *already happened*. This is how John reassures throughout his epistle. “You are children of God, because you love one another.” “You know that you have eternal life because you believe in the name of the Son of God.” “You love the children of God, because you carry out his commands.”

In summary, reassuring someone with primary assurances is an argument from cause to effect: “Jesus died for you; therefore, you are forgiven.” Reassuring someone with secondary assurances is an argument from effect to cause: “You love one another; therefore, you are forgiven.”

Law or Gospel?

Should these secondary assurances be classified as law or gospel? When John reassures his readers based on the evidences of faith, does it count as gospel motivation and reassurance? Or is it a subtle form of law as guide that cannot truly produce results? It was already noted above that general, disconnected statements about the evidences of faith do not seem to be very reassuring at face value. Instead, those who hear about fruits of faith may receive the message as convicting, mirror law if they sense they have not produced fruits like the kind the preacher is talking about. That is why John’s method of specifically identifying these evidences in the lives

24. N.B. that Jesus also uses primary reassurances in this account; he explicitly forgives her sin (verse 48) and says her faith in him has saved her (verse 50). Yet, Jesus also points out her great love—the evidence of her saving faith—both as a witness to those gathered at Simon’s house and undoubtedly to reassure her as well.

of his hearers is so important. When the believer knows the preacher is speaking to *her*, that he is talking about the evidences of *her* faith, *her* specific evidences—then she is reassured that she is a Christian. But if the preacher flatters the congregation for welcoming new visitors by readily including them in post-worship conversations, and she knows she has not personally spoken with any of the visitors, she may feel convicted or ashamed. She may wonder why her faith has not produced that fruit. At length, she may wonder if something about her faith is malfunctioning. Does this mean secondary evidences should be classified as law?

The answer to this question has far-reaching implications on the way preachers understand secondary assurances and the evidences of faith they point out. If they belong to the law, it would be inappropriate to use them as motivation. Only the gospel can motivate sanctified living. It would also be improper to reassure someone based on the law, which exists to accuse and condemn.²⁵

These questions are not answered simply, and they are only a sampling of the potential issues involved with secondary reassurances. Through the Spirit, John has provided in his first epistle the primer for properly understanding and applying the evidences of faith. Historically, however, Christians have not always remained true to John's pattern. As a result, horrible misunderstandings have crept in to doctrine and practice. These misunderstandings, as well as John's own ways of guarding against them, will be the focus of the following section.

25. Kolb/Wengert, FoC SD V 12, 583.

Various Abuses of the Evidences of Faith

The subjective, inconsistent, secondary nature of the reassurance that comes from evidences of faith—along with their potential to send mixed law and gospel messages—may cause a preacher to feel hesitant about speaking this way in his sermons. A preacher who feels this way has many excellent reasons for sticking to primary reassurances. In this section, various abuses of secondary reassurance will be evaluated. Solutions to these abuses from John’s epistle and related doctrinal material will be explored, with the intent that the preacher is encouraged to more readily make use of this additional homiletical tool.

Putting the Cart Before the Horse

One reason a preacher might be hesitant to speak so directly about the evidences of faith is the fear of giving the impression that these fruits play a role in accomplishing the believer’s salvation. Professor Habeck writes,

We want [our hearers] to remain firmly anchored in grace, in something outside of them. We’re afraid that if we credit them with good works, they might get the idea that these works give them a claim to favorable treatment on the part of the Lord. We know how deeply ingrained the *opinio legis* [the opinion of the law, that we can save ourselves by what we do] is in all of us.²⁶

The proper relationship between faith and works must always be maintained. Truly good and God-pleasing works flow naturally from faith and cannot happen before or apart from faith. Scripture is exhaustively clear that salvation is granted through faith, not through works. Before the works even “begin,”²⁷ Christ’s merit is credited to the believer through faith, and salvation is his. Justification and sanctification are confused whenever this order is reversed, and then works-

26. Habeck, Irwin. “Don’t Downgrade Good Works!” *Our Great Heritage III*, 116.

27. It is important for the sake of correct doctrine to distinguish carefully between justification and sanctification; however, the “progression” from one to the next is logical, not temporal. The two happen simultaneously in the Christian life.

righteous doctrines and attitudes creep into Christianity.²⁸ C.F.W. Walther refutes this sort of error in Thesis XVI²⁹ of his *Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, calling it the worst possible admixture of law and gospel.³⁰ In another place,³¹ Walther summarizes the issue excellently.

The Holy Scriptures emphatically testify that there can be no genuine faith without love, without a renewal of heart, without sanctification, without an abundance of good works. But it testifies at the same time that the renewal of heart, love, and the good works which faith produces, are not the justifying and saving element in a person's faith.³²

Faith must precede works, and works must follow faith. They are the evidence of faith, but they are not a part, a cause, a prerequisite, or a “final step” of faith.

But even when faith and works are kept in their proper order, careless speech and terminology can still create problems. Article IV of the Formula of Concord was written in response to misleading, confusing speech about good works. Phrases like “good works are a necessary part of salvation,” “it is impossible to be saved without good works,” and “no one has been saved without good works” could conceivably be properly understood after much careful explanation. The men who advocated these phrases understood that faith is the source of every good work and must always precede them. However, they also understood the truth John

28. Two noteworthy examples are Roman Catholic Semi-Pelagianism, which teaches that man's good works finish what God started in them, and 19th Century Rationalism, which taught that man becomes a new being by putting away his vices and leading a holy life (Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 299).

29. “In the twelfth place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when the preacher tries to make people believe that they are truly converted as soon as they become rid of certain vices and engage in certain works of piety and virtuous practises [sic].” (Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 299).

30. Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 299.

31. Thesis X: “In the sixth place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when the preacher describes faith in a manner as if the mere inert acceptance of truths, even while a person is living in mortal sins, renders that person righteous in the sight of God and saves him; or as if faith makes a person righteous and saves him for the reason that it produces in him love and reformation of his mode of thinking.” Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 210-236.

32. Walther, C. F. W. *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1986, 223.

describes in his first epistle—faith shows itself in a variety of ways, and a lack of these evidences can be a sign of a dying or dead faith. They wanted to express the importance of sanctification and avoid extremes like antinomianism or a dead orthodoxy. However, they failed to anticipate the misunderstandings generated by their way of speaking. The Formula refutes these misunderstandings and rebukes the teachers who carelessly used them, yet it also tries to fairly represent what these teachers meant by their choice of words.³³ After putting the best construction on the controversy, the formulators conclude: why even use the phrases in the first place, if they are so susceptible to misunderstanding?³⁴

Of course, none of this is an issue for John. As one writing under divine inspiration, his wording is exactly as precise as the Holy Spirit intended it to be. John certainly writes clearly about the inevitable evidences of faith, but he writes just as clearly that they cannot be considered a component or prerequisite of salvation. At the transition from chapter 2 to chapter 3, John speaks about being born of God, a common Scriptural metaphor for regeneration or conversion. He starts with the premise that “everyone who does what is right has been born of him” (2:29). He continues, “see what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” John states clearly that being born of God (i.e. being brought to faith) precedes doing what is right, and he assigns all credit for this new birth to God and his lavishly shown love. These simple words, coupled with everything John says about sin and forgiveness in this context (and previously in chapter 1), exclude any possibility of putting faith and works in the wrong order.

33. Kolb/Wengert, *Book of Concord*, FoC SD IV 36-38.

34. Kolb/Wengert, *Book of Concord*, FoC SD IV 39-40.

The Dark Side of Piety

Another cause for care when identifying evidences of faith in sermons is something Koester calls “the dark side of piety.” The sinful nature that still clings to believers after they are brought to faith tends to twist a Christian’s perspective on sanctification; false motives or conclusions can become attached to his good works. Koester observes that it can happen even amidst the best of intentions:

We have a sinful nature that is quite proficient at taking good pursuits in the wrong direction. A person can want to become pious so fervently, to put away a sin so much, to be so greatly concerned about doing the right thing for the Lord, that he or she begins to search for piety in an impious way.³⁵

Koester adds that these well-intentioned kinds of misunderstandings are often the most difficult to deal with. The believer is trying to do the right thing. Christians are supposed to be pious! They are amazed by the piety they see in others. They want to put away their sin. They become excited by the progress they see happening in their own sanctified living.³⁶ These are all good things, and yet “the flesh often intrudes even when the new man is doing a good work.”³⁷ It is ironic that a healthy desire for piety can easily become one of the greatest obstacles to sanctified living!³⁸

Because the sinful nature is involved, motives do not always remain so innocent. In a sense, looking to evidences of faith puts the believer in the spotlight. When this is the case, believers can slip into a theology of glory. Then, living piously has the self as its object; one’s own glory becomes the primary aim. For example, a Christian may strive after a more pious life

35. Koester, *Gospel Motivation*, page 7-8.

36. Koester, *Gospel Motivation*, page 167-168.

37. Habeck, “Don’t Downgrade Good Works,” *Our Great Heritage III*, page 114.

38. Koester, *Gospel Motivation*. 168.

because she craves attention and recognition for her performance. “My natural, sinful flesh wants to use piety to get something.”³⁹ Whether that “something” is happiness, success, God’s blessing (material or spiritual), or even greater certainty for myself, there is a problem. Yes, even certainty! This entire thesis has argued that evidences can be a powerful gospel motivation, but as soon as personal piety becomes a carrot for anything (especially certainty, when used as a replacement for primary assurances centered on Christ), then secondary assurances are being abused.⁴⁰

Christians ought never strive after piety with the expectation of receiving something; by definition, they live piously because their faith cannot help bearing fruit. If there is ever a goal in mind, it should be God’s glory, not the self. That attitude itself is an evidence of faith, as Walther notes: “It is one of the fruits of faith that...it gives all honor to God alone.”⁴¹ It is as the servants in Jesus’ parable once said, “We have only done our duty” (Luke 17:10).

Alternatively, the dark side of piety may lead the Christian to look at the evidences of his faith and draw several false conclusions. Perhaps he decides he is not such a bad person after all. Or he may compare himself to unbelievers and “thank God he is not like other men.”⁴² Or he will look to other believers and decide he is a “more advanced” Christian who deserves more of God’s love and blessing than his peers.⁴³ Another false conclusion could be a false sense of

39. Koester, *Gospel Motivation*, 168.

40. In other words, the intent of this thesis is not that believers run out and strive to live more piously to make themselves more certain. Instead, the intent is that preachers begin intentionally identifying evidences of faith to reassure, affirm, and motivate others in a secondary, supplementary way.

41. Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 212.

42. Compare the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). The tendency to think and act in this manner is lurking in every Christian’s sinful nature.

43. Consider the occasion when pride led John himself, with his brother James, to approach Jesus and ask for a prominent place in the kingdom (Mark 10:35-45). Or Peter’s question, “what then will there be for us?” (and notice that Jesus, before rebuking him, identifies and affirms the disciples’ fruit of faith--following him!)

security—a kind of “dead orthodoxy”—in which a believer thinks they have accomplished enough and no longer need to strive for improvement in their sanctified living. Habeck reminds that “the *opinio legis*...is always trying to strike a good bargain and get by just as cheaply as possible.”⁴⁴ In all these cases, Christians who are drawing such conclusions need to hear again the sobering reminders of the law. In fact, according to the Formula of Concord, this “dark side” of piety is one of the greatest reasons why Christians—because of their struggle against a sinful nature—still need to hear the law in all its uses.⁴⁵

For this reason, too, believers require the teaching of the law: so that they do not fall back on their own holiness and piety and under the appearance of God’s Spirit establish their own service to God on the basis of their own choice...[they] also require the teaching of the law regarding their good works, for otherwise people can easily imagine that their works and life are completely pure and perfect.⁴⁶

A believer’s sinful nature can lead them to hear about the evidences of faith and draw impurely motivated, overly-idealistic conclusions about their sanctified living.

John may speak in glowing, soaring terms about his readers’ sanctification, but he is no idealist. His continued admonitions about sin are loaded with sobering realism. John places his clearest example of this near the beginning of his epistle. “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1:8). He reminds his readers of this truth before he begins any discussion of the evidences of faith. Another example occurs in 3:2-3: “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.” Although Christians have been reborn, they

44. Habeck, “Good Works,” *Our Great Heritage III*, page 116.

45. For two excellent resources that explore the dynamic of the law’s three uses and the gospel on Christian living, see Pieper, “The Law is Not Made for a Righteous Man,” *The Wauwatosa Theology II*, 73-100, and Schuetze, “A Christian and the Law,” *Our Great Heritage III*, 121-147.

46. Kolb/Wengert, FoC SD VI 20-21, page 590.

are not perfect yet. In fact, they eagerly await Christ's appearing, when they will finally be as Christ is. In the meantime, all who have this hope in Christ "purify themselves, just as he is pure." John will not allow his readers to come away from his epistle with a twisted sense of piety!

Failure to Communicate

The next danger preachers need to be aware of when they identify the evidences of faith is the possibility of communicating "mirror law" instead of the intended reassurance and motivation. This can happen when the preacher gives a description of a Christian that does not fit all believers at all times,⁴⁷ or it can happen when a preacher speaks generally about evidences without identifying specifics from his hearer's lives, or if he gets so caught up talking about evidences (secondary assurance) that he forgets to preach Christ (primary assurance).

This miscommunication is possible because law and gospel are determined not only by their content, but also by the effect they have upon the listener.⁴⁸ This phenomenon is not limited to preaching; it can even occur even when reading Scripture. John's descriptions of evidences of faith—even when they are intended as reassurances—insofar as they expose sin and lead to a knowledge of it, are law statements.⁴⁹ How can a preacher prevent this from happening? At some level, there is little he can do. The Spirit ultimately produces the results he intends for that hearer whenever his Word is preached, whether to cut or to heal. However, whenever there is a possibility of being misunderstood, a preacher can include primary reassurance statements in the

47. Walther, *Law and Gospel*, Thesis XVII, pages 308-318.

48. Kolb/Wengert, FoC SD V 12, 583.

49. Kolb/Wengert, FoC Ep V 10, 501.

context of what he says about evidences. This way, even those who were convicted by evidence statements are later built up by specific, objective gospel.

This safeguard matches John’s approach. Beautiful, Christ-centered gospel statements can be found in the near context of each statement about evidences of faith. His secondary reassurances are consistently anchored in primary reassurances. The clearest example occurs right in the center of 3:7-10. While John discusses the evidence of obedience in contrast to sin, he writes: “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” (verse 8b). Any reader who, after reading John’s words, feels that their sinful actions places them more in the “devil camp” than the “reborn of God camp” is quickly reminded that Jesus’ mission was destroying sin by suffering its consequences and forgiving it. John’s primary gospel overrides the possible mirror law miscommunication. Preachers can confidently imitate the way John reassures believers by identifying evidences of faith; and whenever they do, they will also strive to imitate John by including gospel reassurance that cannot be misunderstood—statements about the forgiveness won by Jesus Christ.

An Overly Horizontal Approach

The last two dangers that could result from thoughtlessly preaching the evidences of faith are related. The first is something one author refers to as overextending into “horizontal preaching.”⁵⁰ He divides preaching into two dimensions: vertical and horizontal. The vertical dimension is the relationship between the hearers and God; it involves concepts like sin and grace, atonement, justification, and God’s transcendence. Vertical preaching “is unabashedly

50. Peter, David. “Balanced Preaching: Maintaining a Theological Center of Gravity.” In *Preaching is Worship: The Sermon in Context*. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2011. 35-60.

theological, theocentric, Christocentric, and doctrinal.”⁵¹ Horizontal preaching covers the relationships among believers and involves concepts like sanctification and present-day applications. It focuses on the hearers’ identity and behavior toward each other; it is often man-centered and practical.⁵² Every sermon should include elements of both, but in balance. Preaching that is too vertical, for example, comes across as aloof, impractical, impersonal, and disconnected from the hearers’ daily experience. However, preaching that is overly horizontal runs the risk of becoming preaching that is God-less (because it is all about people), idolatrous (because it elevates the self beyond God), law-oriented, and ultimately hopeless.⁵³

Horizontal preaching can also become baseless flattery, especially when identifying evidences of faith. The preacher needs to evaluate his hearer’s evidences honestly instead of “gushing” or “buttering them up” just to make them feel good. According to Habeck, the dangers of this empty flattery include crediting a person with more than they have actually done, inflating hearers’ egos, or giving the impression that the preacher seeks a favor in return.⁵⁴ When the preacher “gushes” flattery without also preaching the law, he also runs the risk of appealing to the “dark side of piety” discussed above. If he includes law preaching but still overtly flatters them, he may give the impression that their fruits of faith make up for their sins. “Yes, you have done some terrible things. But look! You cooked that meal for the family that just lost their mother. See, you have been born of God; you are forgiven!” Not only is the sermon reduced to a

51. Peter, “Balanced Preaching,” 36.

52. Peter, “Balanced Preaching,” 37.

53. These categories are treated in detail by Peter, “Balanced Preaching,” pages 48-50.

54. Habeck, “Good Works,” *Our Great Heritage III*, 114-115.

summary of believer's activity—whether failures or triumphs—instead of God's activity, but the proper relationship between forgiveness and good works is obscured.⁵⁵

First John chapter 4 anticipates this problem. After offering some bold-sounding claims about sanctification and reassurance at the end of chapter 3, John takes a chapter off from assuring his readers based on evidence. He goes out of his way to remind them where their love comes from—God's love for them, given in Christ:

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

The above quotation (4:9-11) is much more familiar to Lutheran preachers—John motivates and encourages by using primary motivation followed by third use law. Because John does not neglect primary reassurances, his secondary assurances can be understood correctly and received effectively. When pointing to the evidences of faith, the pastor needs to share John's intention: providing reassurance that is secondary and supplementary to other, primary assurances. When he does, the pastor maintains balance between vertical and horizontal preaching.

A Shaky Hope

This final point is closely related to the above concern about an overly-horizontal emphasis. There it was mentioned that such preaching ultimately becomes hopeless. That is the focus of this section. Indeed, when a believer is pointed repeatedly and exclusively to his evidences of faith, he is robbed of his certainty instead of reassured in it. This happens because in this life his sanctification will always be accompanied by great weakness.⁵⁶ The sinful nature repeatedly

55. Cf. the "Cart Before the Horse" discussion above, pages 16-18.

56. Kolb/Wengert, FoC Ep VI 13-14, 499.

hinders his progress, as even the great Apostle Paul laments in Romans 7. The Formula of Concord confesses this frustration:

Since, however, believers in this life are not perfectly, wholly, *completive vel consummative* [completely or entirely] renewed—even though their sin is completely covered by the perfect obedience of Christ so that this sin is not reckoned to them as damning, and even though the killing of the old creature and the renewal of their minds in the Spirit has begun—nonetheless, the old creature still continues to hang on in their nature and all of its inward and outward powers.⁵⁷

Believers' sins are forgiven because of Christ. Believers produce God-pleasing fruits of faith.

But believers also sin daily, and this can be a source of frustration for them. Even the believers' good works are often tainted by sin, as was noted above. Looking inwards at these tainted works as one's primary source of certainty is seeking a shaky hope. In times of especially severe struggling, Professor Armin Schuetze recommends that "[a believer] needs in daily contrition and repentance to cast himself completely upon the mercy and grace of his God in Christ Jesus."⁵⁸

It is often the case that Christians are entirely aware of their own weaknesses, and regularly bothered by them. Bringing the full fury of law preaching down on Christians who are already frustrated by their sinful weakness is a gross confusion of law and gospel. They already know that they know better. On the other hand, pointing them exclusively to the evidences of their faith when they are frustrated by their weakness is providing them with a shaky hope. This is especially true when their consciences are burdened by sin. The firm, objective hope of forgiveness in Christ is the kind of reassurance these believers need. Burdened consciences need to see Jesus, not the self! Once the primary, Christ-centered reassurance has been given to a struggling believer, the preacher can refer to the evidences once again. They can remind their

57. Kolb/Wengert, FoC SD VI 7, 588.

58. Schuetze, "Christians and the Law," *Our Great Heritage III*, 147.

hearers that “what is imperfect according to the law becomes holy and acceptable to God through the gospel, through faith in Christ.”⁵⁹ Through Christ, even weakened sanctification is God-pleasing! Therefore, pastors who strive to address, curb, comfort and encourage their hearers struggling in weakness will seek to follow John’s example in carefully weaving primary and secondary reassurances together.

At the center of John’s epistle, he treats the issue of the shaky hope that can come from self-evaluation in a beautiful paragraph that weaves together law and gospel, primary and secondary assurance, and evidences of faith. After John rhetorically asks his readers how God’s love could possibly reside in someone who has no pity on his needy brothers and sisters, he urges them to love one another not only in speech but “with actions and in truth” (3:17-18). John’s next words can be difficult to interpret; a close examination reveals a gospel-powered statement that may be one of the most comforting truths in all of Scripture. He continues,

“¹⁹ This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: ²⁰ If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹ Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God ²² and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. ²³ And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. ²⁴ The one who keeps God’s commands lives in him, and he in them.”

Does “this” in verse 19 refer forward or backward? The Greek word τούτῳ can point in either direction. Is John saying believers know they belong to the truth and put their hearts to rest when they know God is greater than our hearts (i.e. “this” is pointing forward, as the colon in NIV11 suggests), or when they “love [not] with words or speech but with actions and in truth” (i.e. “this” is pointing backward to verse 18)?⁶⁰

59. Schuetze, “Christians and the Law,” *Our Great Heritage III*, 145.

60. Some who understand it this way include Marshall, *Epistles*, 197; Koester, *Gospel Motivation*, 77; Wendland, “The Rhetoric of Reassurance”; NIV84; NKJV.

Many commentators and translations prefer “this” to point forward,⁶¹ and with good reason. They are uncomfortable with the thought that believers could find assurance by evaluating their own lives. For support, they point out how τούτῳ most commonly points forward in Greek usage, especially in First John.⁶² In a sermon on this text, Professor Siegbert Becker proclaims, “We make a great mistake when we look for certainty of salvation in our own heart in any way.”⁶³ Considering the list of potential abuses discussed above, one can hardly blame Becker for his cautionary tone.

However, considering the way John uses evidences of faith as reassurance in this letter, could there be a way to properly understand here a τούτῳ that points backward? There are examples of this phenomenon in John’s writings, too.⁶⁴ Could John be encouraging believers to evaluate their own fruits of faith and be reassured? If so, what would John’s line of thought be in these verses? Perhaps it goes something like this:⁶⁵

There are evidences of faith, and believers ought to examine their own fruits and determine whether they love others in word only or with actions and in truth. But because sanctification is a process carried out in great weakness, a believer may upon this self-examination be appalled by what he finds. He may realize how often his love for others is petty and empty. When this is the case, his heart condemns him. The sinful nature renders the “fruit

61. Including Becker, *The Word Goes On*, 131; Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 363; NIV11.

62. Marshall, *Epistles*, 197, fn 1.

63. Becker, Siegbert. *The Word Goes On*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992, 131.

64. One clear example is John 16:30: “Now we can see that you know all things and that you do not even need to have anyone ask you questions. This makes us believe that you came from God.” Marshall, *Epistles*, 197, fn 1.

65. This summary is loosely adapted from Marshall, *Epistles*, 196-198. However, it departs significantly from Marshall’s own conclusions in that he claims the assurance which comes from self-evaluation is based on an inner, seemingly immediate working of the Holy Spirit.

test” inconclusive, inconsistent, and misleading. When the secondary reassurance provided by faith-evidence falls short and fails him, whenever his conscience condemns him, “God is greater than [his] heart, and he knows everything.” The believer has “no business listening to this heart of [his]”⁶⁶ in cases like this. Whenever he looks at his evidences and condemns himself in despair, there is comfort knowing his judgment does not matter. God’s judgment matters; and he declares sinners not guilty for Christ’s sake!

This last point is admittedly implied. Yet, it is supported by chapter one. Being in a state of self-condemnation leads a believer to confess his sins, especially since he knows God is greater than his heart and knows all things. Yet, God *is* greater than his heart—he is faithful and just and will forgive sins and purify from all unrighteousness.⁶⁷ In other words, John insists that primary reassurance remains primary. Assurance *can* come from evidences of faith; but the presence of the sinful nature means these secondary assurances can only ever be secondary. So, John again weaves in primary reassurance: the kind that is objective and determined by God. Burdened consciences need to see Jesus, not self—they can never be freed from guilt by secondary assurances.

Even still, the fact that primary assurances override the secondary ones does not deter John from using both kinds and encouraging his readers to seek both kinds. In fact, before he reaches the end of this paragraph he has already circled back to the evidences of faith (verses 22-24) and their role in a believer’s confidence in approaching God. Our hearts cannot condemn us (verse 21a), because God’s not-guilty verdict in Christ is greater than any human self-evaluation. His forgiving decree produces faith, which produces fruit, including confident prayers (verse

66. Becker, *The Word Goes On*, 131.

67. Paraphrasing 1 John 1:7b.

21b) and obedience to his commands (3:22-23). John weaves the kinds of reassurance together so intimately in these verses that they cannot easily (nor in a way that is fair to the text) be separated.

Relying exclusively on the secondary assurances that come from the evidences of faith will eventually rob a believer's certainty instead of reinforcing it. Preaching that only identifies the Christians' good works without identifying their Savior quickly becomes truly hopeless preaching. But John demonstrates how—when each is used correctly in tandem with the other—preachers can affirm their hearers, encourage them, and keep their ultimate focus on (and hope in) Christ.

Summary

While preaching the reassurance that is connected to the evidences of faith could result in certain abuses, a careful reading of John's own usage of the strategy refutes each of them. John does reassure and motivate his readers by pointing them to the evidences of their faith, but always in a secondary and supplementary way. He consistently anchors these secondary reassurances in primary reassurance. He maintains a realistic view of sin in a Christian's life. He guards them against both the ditches of taking an unhealthy, twisted view of piety (pride) and feeling condemned, inferior, and disingenuous (despair). Preachers will do well to follow John's example in making careful, intentional use of this secondary form of reassurance.

Conclusion: The Strategy in Action

Perhaps the reader will benefit from seeing John's reassurance strategy applied to a sermon. The new lectionary planned for the upcoming replacement for *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* provides several excellent opportunities for evidence reassurance. In Year C, the readings in the Easter season draw heavily from 1 John. The Gospel for Easter 5 is the opening verses of John 15, where Jesus speaks about bearing fruit in connection to him. The Second Reading for that day is 1 John 3:18-24. What follows is a short application paragraph from a sermon on that reading which demonstrates the identification of evidences of faith in the hearers' lives.

“In the five short months I've been here, I've seen it clearly. I've seen you love not only in words or speech, but in action and in truth. You've noticed the needs of people around you, and you haven't withheld compassion from them. I've watched you cook meals for each other during difficult times. I've heard the words of encouragement and support you speak to each other, and to me. I've stood among you as you welcomed members of the community—often total strangers—and repeatedly fed them physical and spiritual meals. I've been humbled by your patience and by the kindness of every last one of you. As John said, this is how I know you belong to the truth. This is how I know God's love resides in you. Keep doing what you're doing!”

A secondary-assurance filled paragraph like this would certainly be surrounded by other paragraphs of law, gospel, and primary motivations focused on Christ. But it is certainly just as worthwhile to spend some time speaking directly to the New Man, affirming his progress, and celebrating the marvelous effect God's forgiveness in Christ is having on him. Christians need motivation and reassurance; what a wonderful way to give it to them!

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