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A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_ref-rev-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ref-rev-01.php)

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# *The Holiness of God and Assurance That I Am a Christian*

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Tom Wells

**I**t is no easy matter to define the holiness of God. For anything like a complete discussion of the content of God's holiness you will want to look at the other articles in this issue of *Reformation & Revival Journal*. In this article we will narrowly confine ourselves to a single observation about God's holiness: God's holiness demands a corresponding holiness and righteousness in us. God Himself has plainly commanded: "I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy; for I am holy" (Lev. 11:44). This, of course, was spoken to His ancient people, Israel, but when we turn to the New Testament we hear it repeated to the church of Jesus Christ:

63

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, "You shall be Holy, for I am Holy" (1 Peter 1:14-16).

In other words, we are to be like God. We are to be like God in our moral character. Nor is this pious advice to be taken or left aside as the moment dictates. This is basic to the entire Christian life. If we are not holy we will never "see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). In the baldest of terms, "It is holiness or hell."

But I find all this quite intolerable. It is not that it causes me intellectual problems as though it were somehow irrational for God to call on me to be holy. The command itself makes sense, but I have a problem of another kind. I am unholy, and try as I may I cannot convince myself that I shall ever measure up to this simple standard—the holiness of God. Certainly I fall far short just now.

How then can I be a Christian? I have examined myself to see whether I am in the faith (as 1 Corinthians 13:5 exhorts me) and I find that I can give no certain answer. I have sought to

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take seriously Peter's command to make my calling and election sure (2 Peter 1:10), but doubt, based on uncertainty about the worthiness of my walk, dogs my footsteps and nudges me toward despair. I repeat, this time with still further apprehension: "How then can I be a Christian?"

In the last two paragraphs I have cast the experience of many Christians in the first person to bring it vividly before our minds. For such men and women the holiness of God that is to be reproduced in their lives stands like a roadblock on the way to a settled assurance. They can see no way around it. Perhaps you find yourself in this predicament; perhaps you have a friend afflicted in this way. Is there help? I think there is.

We must discard at once the answer of cheap grace, as in the following quotation from Heinrich Heppe: "Things are admirably arranged. God likes forgiving sins, and I like committing them." In this scenario there is no concern at all for personal holiness. No, we must seek an answer to the question of personal assurance that comes to grips with the absolute necessity of conforming to the law of God. Yet, oddly enough, unless you have robust assurance already, it is well in most cases to temporarily set to one side the demand for personal holiness. Let me show you why this is so by discussing the book that, above all others, speaks to us about the tests of Christian reality—the Epistle of First John.

First John, like all the books of the New Testament, arises out of a distinct historical situation. The writer, John, found himself faced with the apostasy of some for whom he once had entertained great hope. But these "brethren" proved false. They forsook John, Christ's special messenger, and in that way they forsook Christ Himself. As John wrote: "He who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (4:6). John could speak in this authoritative way, not because he was proud, but because he had been specially sent by

Christ Himself to give the church inspired revelation.

But when these men forsook John they did not give up the claim to being Christians. As John writes his letter he speaks to others who apparently were remaining true to the Lord Jesus. Here, then, is the salient point: John constantly has the other men in his mind, the unfaithful men who yet claimed to know Jesus Christ. Much of what we read in his epistle is shaped by this fact. And this is especially the case when John sets down the thing that characterizes the letter as a whole: the tests that determine the truth or falsity of a man's profession of faith.

How does this affect what John writes? This means that generally speaking John's tests are for those who profess robust faith in Jesus Christ. Since I think this point has often been overlooked, it bears repeating. John is setting forth tests of Christianity *primarily* for men or women who are *confident that they belong to Christ*. If we miss this presupposition on John's part I believe that we will also miss much of the point of what he has written. He is not thinking, in the first instance, of a poor trembling soul seeking to know whether or not he is saved. Rather he has in his mind's eye the man or woman who says, "I know Christ, and nothing you can say will make me doubt it." His tests may be useful to others as we will yet see, but they were originally set forth to examine the claims of those who did not doubt that they were true Christians. That does not mean that John was still assessing the state of those who had forsaken him and his Lord. He had already taken their measure. No, he was writing for the church of his day and for us, but he was doing it from the standpoint of one who saw the necessity for testing even the most confident faith. In this way two things could be accomplished. Some would be confirmed in their assurance that they belonged to Christ; others could begin to call their own confidence into question, either to have it confirmed later or to see themselves exposed as false disciples.

John tests the Christian faith of his readers in three main ways:

1) He shows them that they must hold orthodox views of Christ if they are to consider themselves Christians. For example, there was a doctrine in the air in those days that separated the human Jesus from the divine Christ. To this John responded, "Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ?" (2:22). To be a liar in John's view excluded one from being a Christian.

2) He makes plain that those who live ungodly lives cannot be Christians. "Little children," he writes, "let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the Devil" (3:7-8).

3) He lays down love of the brethren as an acid test of Christian faith. "We know we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death" (3:14). This is, of course, not a mere profession of love that we must have. It is the self-sacrificial spirit found in our Lord Jesus. "We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?" (3:16-17). Clearly the man whose "love" is not evident in readiness for sacrificial giving deceives himself about being a Christian.

We may summarize these three tests as the tests of (1) orthodoxy, (2) godliness, and (3) love.

For the purposes of this article we will be concerned primarily with the second and third tests, godliness and love. In these two tests we confront the holiness of God where it impinges on our own thoughts, words and deeds. In my experience, those who struggle to know whether or not they are genuine believers do not often feel threatened by the first test in the way they feel menaced by the following two. The

question, "Am I a godly person?" is a daunting question to answer if we are truly honest with ourselves. "Am I a loving person?" is also intimidating when I consider that the standard of love is the willing death of my Savior. These two tests, flowing as they do out of the holy character of God, have often risen up to mock the profession of the man or woman who asks them.

How then should those who are struggling to know whether they are saved apply these tests to themselves? The answer is: in general, they should not apply them at all! (I will treat an exception to this general rule later.) The tests, speaking generally, are for those who are confident that they belong to Christ. They are for men and women who say that they have fellowship with Christ (1:6) and who affirm "I have come to know Him" (2:4) and who claim to abide in Him (2:6). They are for those who profess to walk in the light (2:9) and who may think of themselves as far enough along to teach others (4:1-3). These people, the ones with robust faith, are the ones to apply these tests to themselves.

Is there no help, then, for those with doubts and fears about their own salvation? Yes, much! Their help is found in taking their eyes off of themselves and directing them to Jesus Christ. In answer to the question, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved" (Acts 16:31). He said this because he knew this truth: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

The problem of assurance is the problem of salvation. It is the agonizing question, "Do I belong to Christ or not?" The answer is the same in both cases: confident faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. The tests are for those who say, "I am a Christian!" Those who had departed from John (and from Christ) were loud in their professions of faith. "Very well then," John said, "let's see. Let's test their faith. Let's test the

faith of all of us who are sure that we belong to Christ. Here are the tests." And he followed with the tests of orthodoxy, godliness and love.

But poor trembling sinners need to turn their eyes solely to Jesus. The Puritan Thomas Willcox put it this way: If you have looked at words, duties and qualifications more than at the merits of Christ, it will cost you dearly. No wonder you go about complaining. Graces may be evidences; the merits of Christ alone (without the evidences) must be the foundation of your hope to stand on. Christ only can be the hope of glory (Col. 1:27).

When we come to God, we must bring nothing but Christ with us. Any ingredients, or any previous qualifications of our own, will poison and corrupt faith. He who builds upon duties, graces, etc., knows not the merits of Christ. Despairing sinner! Look at Christ now; look to Him and be saved, all the ends of the earth (Isa. 45:22). There is none else. He is the Savior, and there is no other besides Him (v. 21). Look anywhere else and you are undone. God will look at nothing but Christ and you must look at nothing else. This is the way to clear the fog of doubt and come into the sunshine of God's peace. In this way the holiness of God is not a threat to the soul.

What then of John's tests? Have they no use? Of course they have! For when the sinner or doubting saint has rested his or her case fully upon Christ, then comes the time to apply these tests. As a psychological state, or what I would call a state of mind, assurance, whether it comes from ourselves, or from God, or from Satan, is alike. John's tests come in precisely here; they are tests of our assurance. When the sinner no longer doubts about his interest in Christ, then is the time to test his assurance to see if it is soundly based.

We may put this in form of a chart with two columns and title it *The Question of Assurance*.

**The Question of Assurance**

**Column One**

I Have Robust Assurance That I Belong to Jesus Christ.

**Expected Action**

You Must Test the Reality of Your Faith by the Following Texts:  
 1 John 2:4-6 [the test of godliness].  
 1 John 2:9-11 [the test of love for Christian brothers].

**Column Two**

I Have Doubts Concerning Whether I Belong to Jesus Christ.

**Expected Action**

You Must Act upon the Following Texts:  
 Acts 16:31  
 John 3:16  
 Romans 4: 5.

Everything, as you can see, depends on which column describes your situation. Are you without assurance? Column two applies to you. Do you have robust faith? Column one is where you must go.

"But," someone objects, "I can imagine myself bouncing back and forth between these two columns, first resting on Christ, and then having my faith dislodged repeatedly. What should I do?"

That case, of course, is easy to imagine, but is it likely to happen? I think not. Several things make it unlikely. To begin with, experience suggests that those who lack assurance and are serious about finding it in their godliness and love have not often drawn back and started over, as it were, by simply looking to Christ. If we are convinced that John's tests are the place to find our assurance we are likely to apply ourselves more persistently to their use as assurance fails. This is a losing strategy, increasing our discomfort. At this point we must return to first things. Faith in Christ is where healing lies.

Beyond that, an increase in concentration upon Christ is

the best preparation, both for the production of godliness and its discovery in the life. Paul assures the Ephesians that the knowledge of the love of Christ is the grand basis of sanctification. He prays that they will learn the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ "that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:19). God is filled with the most wonderful qualities. Some of them, those called communicable attributes by theologians, He gives in measure to His people. How will we be filled with these? Paul's answer is clear: we will receive them by concentrating on the love of Christ. And the more of these things that actually exist in us, the more easy they will be to discover.

Here are some other questions that may arise:

First, how soon should one move from column two to column one? This is not a matter of time; it might be five minutes, it might be never. You must not take up the texts under column one until you can say that you have firm faith that you belong to Jesus Christ.

Second, suppose you have robust faith in Christ, but the texts under column one make you "uneasy." What should you do? The answer depends on what you mean by "uneasy." If you mean that you see shortcomings that you need to work on, go ahead and work on them. A Christian should be constantly striving against sin and self-satisfaction. But if by "uneasy" you mean that you have begun to doubt whether you are a Christian, you must forget the tests and take up the texts in column two.

Finally, are there any exceptions to the advice in this article to keep clear of the texts in column one unless you already have confident faith? There is one exception. Some people with little or no assurance are helped toward assurance by the tests in column one. If you are one of those people, by all means use them. But if that is not your case, you will only injure yourself by using column one. First, you must have firm faith in Christ.

Let me make one closing point. It is this: no amount of conformity to the will of God can ever bring you up to the full measure of God's holiness in this life. The Bible makes this very clear and, unfortunately, our daily experience confirms it. That raises a question: If I must always fall short of the standard set forth in the "tests," of what use are they after all?

The answer to that question seems clear. The "tests" enable a man or woman to see the *fact* of God's working in his or her life, not the *extent* of God's work. All Christians are called "saints" in the New Testament. That means two things: First, it means they have been separated from the mass of mankind to belong to God. Second, it means that God, in that act of separation, has begun to make them like Christ in godliness and love. The important phrase in that last sentence is "has begun." No Christian has arrived at perfection. No two Christians are exactly the same distance along the road to pure holiness. The "tests" do not enable us to measure our progress with precision. But our assurance is not to rest on our superiority, real or imagined, over fellow believers. It is enough for us if we can see God at work. We need no more than that.

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