

Walking in the Light as Christians

Issues that troubled 1st century Christians at the time of John continue to trouble Christians today in the 21st century. How do I know for sure that I am a Christian? How do I know for sure that God loves me and forgives me and wants me in His family?

In his 1 Letter, John gives three powerful witnesses to answer those questions. Think of these witnesses as three concentric circles. John starts with the outer ring and works inward. But for the sake of logical progression, let us begin at the centre, which John expresses in 2:1-2: ¹ *My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin. If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.* ² *He is the propitiation for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for the sins of the whole world.*

This teaching is called *objective justification*. It is the heart and core of the gospel message, that God, of His own pure grace and mercy, sacrificed His own Son, Jesus Christ, in order to pronounce the world not guilty. It is the message that the Son willingly offered up His life as an atoning sacrifice, that is, a personal blood payment to make two estranged parties (God and the human race) “at one” again. This gift of mercy is *objective*, that is, it comes purely from the goodness of God, entirely apart from any human worth or effort. It is also *universal* - God pronounced it on the whole world: past, present, and future.

The atoning sacrifice of Christ, given “*while we were still sinners*” (Romans 5:8), is an unshakable rock of comfort, a done deal, a fact that Satan and hell cannot erase. “*God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son!*” Notice the subject of that sentence - *God!* Notice the direct object - *the world!* Our salvation occurred on God’s initiative, with the Son’s crucifixion, and was sealed and guaranteed forever with the Father’s unshakable verdict. And now, “*If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.*”

The next ring outward in the three rings of witness is the ring of *faith*. People who are ignorant of the gospel, or who have heard it but don’t believe it will not experience its blessings. John has some harsh words for the notion that all people are basically good enough for God all by themselves, needing neither repentance nor cross. He says of such ideas, ⁸ *If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us....* ¹⁰ *If we say that we have not sinned, we are making Him a liar and His Word is not in us.* John writes that we find confirmation of the gospel message through the faith changes that God works in our minds and hearts through Word and Sacrament. “*By grace you have been saved, through faith,*” Paul had written (Ephesians 2:8). This is called *subjective justification*, that is, that through our God-given faith, we receive personally what Christ bought for the world. In John’s words, “⁹ *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*” Obviously, it is not our faith in and of itself that saves us, but our faith is a living channel for the living Christ who saves us.

Christians today also derive great comfort from the ancient practice of confession and absolution. Sometimes this works best one-on-one, as a pastor or friend draws out a sinner’s confession of guilt, helps him or her lay it at the cross of Jesus, and announces God’s mercy and forgiveness. Sometimes this process also occurs in the private thoughts and prayers of a repentant Christian. And of course the confession and absolution in the Communion liturgy is a priceless way for worshippers to experience God’s forgiveness *subjectively*.

The third ring in the “levels of witness,” which John actually mentions first, is found in 1:5-7, and that is the witness of our Christian life. He says, ⁵ *This is the message that we have heard from Him and that we are telling you: that God is Light and in Him there is no darkness at all.* ⁶ *If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in darkness, we are lying and not practising the truth.* ⁷ *However, if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanses us from all sin.*

This is called *sanctification*, or the holiness and obedience that Christians demonstrate in their words and actions. Our own holiness is never complete - it is a work in progress. But it is an absolutely necessary indicator of true faith, as James so forcibly demonstrated in his epistle. John makes two equally forceful points:

- Faith without good works is no faith at all - it is dead. “*If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in darkness, we are lying and not practising the truth,*” (verse 6). “Walk in darkness” is a metaphor for living like unbelievers, unrepentantly breaking God’s commandments as a way of life.

- Every act of kindness and service and worship that Christians do gives comfort to their hearts, for these deeds show that their faith is alive, the Spirit is alive in them, and thus their forgiveness is alive and secure. *“However, if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanses us from all sin,”* (verse 7).

John’s point is not that our good deeds are the cause of our salvation. Our salvation has already been procured by the work of Christ. There is nothing for us to do! Instead, we ought to live lives, with the help of the Holy Spirit, that shows evidence of a living faith, walking in the light of Christ.