

Initial Assurance or Reassurance? (1 John 5:13)

Question: *If assurance is of the essence of saving faith, why does 1 John 5:13 imply that these believers might never have known that they had everlasting life?*

Answer: Does the text really imply this? What we know is that John desired that they possess absolute certainty of their everlasting life. Does he suggest that they *never* possessed certainty? Or have they *lost* (or might *soon lose*) their certitude?

The Readers

Important clues about the readership of 1 John often escape us. Rather than addressing believers within one congregation, it lacks the personal greetings of John's other epistles. Thus, it may well address *leaders* of several churches under John's care (perhaps the seven churches of Asia). Zane Hodges argues:

... First John might have actually been intended for the leaders of the various churches to which it went. There are indeed indications within the epistle (2:12-14; 2:20; see Commentary)¹ that the readership is regarded as spiritually mature ["you are strong, God's word abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one"]. In that case, the First Epistle was intended *to fortify the leaders* who would bear the major burden of resisting the false teachers.²

A leader lacking absolute assurance would be weak and overcome by the evil one, lacking the abiding Word of God (contrary to 1 John 2:14). Identifying readers is crucial for the following analysis.

The Context

Why did John address these leaders? He did not write *correctively* (as if they *already* lacked assurance).³ 1 John 2:24-26 explains that he wrote *preventatively* to counteract deceptive teachers:

Therefore let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is the promise that Himself He promised us—eternal life.

These things I wrote to you concerning those who [seek to]⁴ deceive you [and your congregations].⁵

Evidently, the deceivers denied Jesus Christ's promise of everlasting life, because the conclusion of John's response to them (2:18-25) emphasizes: "And this is the promise that He Himself promised us—everlasting life." Deceivers rejected Christ's promise; the addressees were to continue proclaiming that promise of everlasting life.

The Readers Were Already Believers

The false teachers denied that Jesus is the Christ (1 John 2:22). By contrast, John calls his readers *believers*, i.e., ones who believe His promise of everlasting life (1 John 5:13). In that light, 1 John 5:13 offers *reassurance*, not initial assurance.

The context of 1 John 5 further strengthens the case. In 1 John 5:13 the *these things* refer back to 5:6-12. In the closing section (5:10-12), John returns to the issue of believing God's testimony or disbelieving it:

He who believes in the Son of God has the *testimony* in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has disbelieved the *testimony* that God *has testified* about His Son. And this is the *testimony*: that *God has given us everlasting life, and this life is in His Son*. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

These things I wrote to *you who believe in the name of the Son of God*, so that you may [continue]⁶ knowing that you have everlasting life, and so that you may [continue] believing in the name of the Son of God [emphasis mine].

God's *testimony* is that *God has given us everlasting life, and this life is in His Son*. John calls these leaders *believers*, i.e., they believe the testimony about everlasting life. The inescapable conclusion is that what John's readers already believe is that Jesus Christ, God's Son, has guaranteed them everlasting life.

So then, why does John urge leaders who presently believe Jesus' promise of everlasting life to continue knowing that they have life? If they were to lose their assurance, their resultant teaching would undermine the certainty of their congregations. 1 John 2:26 tells leaders that he wrote 2:18-25 preventatively to counteract the false teachers that sought to deceive them. In turn, these leaders would need to minister to their assemblies both correctively and preventatively. That is, some congregants may have had their confidence undermined, while others were in danger of losing it. The promise of everlasting life is an essential part of the message.

Conclusion

John sought to prevent leaders of congregations from developing spiritual-amnesia. If they were to forget that they are God's children who have everlasting life, they would join the false teachers in undermining the congregation's certitude of everlasting life. Let us not forget that God testifies through His crucified and resurrected Son that the life He promises is everlasting—guaranteed forever. The promise is at the heart of the message of life that leaders (and congregants) should proclaim.

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1. Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles of John* (Denton, TX: GES, 1999), 94-101, argues that little children = fathers = young men. *Each* term addresses every leader. Similarly, Paul calls the Galatians *brethren* (3:15; 4:12, 28, 31; 5:11, 13; 6:1, 18), *foolish Galatians* (3:1), and *my little children* (4:19).

Alternate terms (at times) do designate an entire audience, not diverse segments. All Scripture translation, unless otherwise noted, is the author's.

2. Hodges, *Epistles*, 27, emphasis added.

3. The preceding shows that the readers were leaders in whom God's word abides and who had overcome the evil one. These leaders had not succumbed to false teachers, so this is preventative, not corrective.

4. My translation adds [seek to].

5. If false teachers seek to deceive leaders, they certainly sought to deceive whole congregations.

6. The uses of [continue] do not rest solely upon these being present subjunctives. Rather, the basis for this is that the addressed leaders have God's word abiding in them and have overcome the evil one. They have not caved in to false teaching. John desires that their certainty of everlasting life would continue.

A careful look at 5:10 helps. A believer who has lost certainty that Christ has guaranteed him/her everlasting life still possesses it. Though true, this truth is not the point affirmed by 1 John 5:10. Instead, the verse's assertion, "has the testimony in himself," means, "can himself testify." One who has lost assurance could no longer truthfully testify, "I have everlasting life," despite still possessing it. This understanding of 5:10 supports adding [continue] twice in 5:13.