

**A REVIEW OF
CHRISTOPHER D. BASS'S
*THAT YOU MAY KNOW: ASSURANCE
OF SALVATION IN 1 JOHN*¹**

EDITOR

I. INTRODUCTION

This book is a revision of the author's doctoral dissertation written at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky under the tutelage of Tom Schreiner, Bruce Ware, and William Cook (p. xiii). Southern has become a 5-point Calvinist school under President Al Mohler. That is evident in this book with its repeated emphasis on the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

**II. THE AUTHOR'S THESIS:
ASSURANCE BY BELIEF AND BEHAVIOR**

Bass' thesis is this: First John teaches that assurance is *grounded in* the cross work of Christ and is *supported by* the lifestyle of believers. This may sound like he is saying that the only condition of assurance of everlasting life is believe Jesus died on the cross for one's sins, but Bass is clearly not saying that. In the first place the author refers to believing in the finished work of Christ on the cross as shorthand. He never specifically says precisely what one must believe.

In the second place, Bass indicates that perseverance in good works is essential in order to get into the Kingdom. Bass repeatedly uses the word *vital* when discussing the works of the believer. He says, "The lifestyle of the

¹ Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2008. 240 pp. Cloth, \$24.99.

believer serves as a vital corroborating support for...assurance” (p. 2). He also says that “assurance of eternal life is *fundamentally grounded* in the work of Christ and supported in a *vital yet subsidiary* way by the lifestyle of the believer (p. 30, italics his). And again, “The new birth brings forth a changed life that can be tested, and such testing serves as a vital support of one’s assurance” (p. 97).

He is even clearer under the heading, “Lifestyle of the Believer as a Vital Support to Assurance.” Bass writes, “John unambiguously teaches that while assurance is grounded in Christ, it is vitally supported by the way one lives his life. Therefore, *a person’s lifestyle serves as vital corroborating evidence as to whether he has truly placed his faith in Christ’s finished work on the cross for his sins*” (p. 185, italics added; see also p. 192, the fourth illustration).

The word *vital* means *essential, indispensable, or necessary*.² By repeatedly using the word *vital* when speaking of the connection between assurance and the lifestyle of the believer, Bass is communicating that faith alone cannot assure anyone. Works are necessary for assurance of everlasting life.

Unfortunately, Bass never discusses how one can know if his works are sufficient to grant assurance. Is there some list in Scripture which indicates that once you have done these things for so many months or years, then you can be sure? There is not. And certainly the so-called *tests of life* in First John do not objectify assurance by works. Subjectivity is inherent in the author’s view. Later we will discuss the five examples the author gives of people struggling with assurance. There he makes clear what is implied throughout the book: *Because our flawed lifestyles are vital to assurance, certainty of one’s eternal destiny is impossible prior to death.*

²See, for example, www.dictionary.com s.v. “vital.”

III. BASS RESPONDS TO ZANE HODGES AND THE FREE GRACE VIEW OF ASSURANCE AND FIRST JOHN

The author is aware of us. He mentions our journal and he calls us “the grace movement” (pp. 27, 27 n 118, 122). He also mentions the views of Zane Hodges on First John in several places, always negatively. Note the pejorative language that he uses concerning Zane Hodges: “rather novel view” (p. 28), “Hodges...*imposes* [his theological construct of assurance] on the text of 1 John by way of *an innovative reading* of John’s tests” (p. 28, italics added), “against the overwhelming majority of New Testament scholars” (p. 28), “fanciful exegesis at a number of places” (p. 29), “against the clear teaching of the passage” (p. 29), “a rather innovative approach” (p. 122), “*completely ignores* the background issues of the letter and therefore *misses the whole point of the epistle*” (p. 123, italics added), “Hodges’ special pleading” (p. 123, n 9).

Such comments are out of character for Bass. He is exceedingly gracious throughout the book—except when talking about the views of Zane Hodges. Those sorts of bombastic statements are not made in dissertations or in scholarly books. Scholars are very deferential to the views of other scholars and avoid the use of any pejorative language—except when it comes to Zane Hodges and those who promote what the academy considers to be pseudo-scholarship.

IV. BASS DENIES THE CLAIM OF ZANE HODGES THAT THE TESTS-OF-LIFE VIEW OF FIRST JOHN RULES OUT CERTAINTY

Of great interest for *JOTGES* readers is that Bass says that Zane Hodges charges that the tests-of-life view of First John means that “one could not be certain of his salvation until death” (p. 29). Bass rejects this view saying,

“Hodges is forced to come up with some fanciful exegesis at a number of places like 2:19” (p. 29).

Yet Bass has dodged the point. The point he is rejecting is that under his view one cannot be certain of salvation until death. Hodges did not prove *that point* by any fancy exegesis of 1 John 2:19 or otherwise. He proved it by logic.

To prove that Hodges actually says that under his view “one could not be certain of his salvation until death,” Bass points the reader to page 51 of *The Gospel Under Siege*. Unfortunately, Bass does not quote Hodges. Here is what Hodges says on that page:

One well-known view of the purpose of 1 John maintains that the epistle offers us “tests of life.” That is, John confronts his readership with question about the quality of their Christian experience from which they may draw conclusions that they either are, or are not, true believers. Should they fail to measure up, they have no reason to think that they possess eternal life.

It would be hard to devise an approach to John’s first epistle more hopelessly misguided or more completely self-defeating. If the premise on which this approach is based were true, it would be quite impossible for either the original audience of 1 John or any of its subsequent readers to possess the assurance of salvation.

Since the writer repeatedly commands the “abiding” life marked by obedience to Christ’s commands, one cannot really be certain that he is saved until death, if “abiding” is a test of salvation. On the view we are discussing, if I stop “abiding” at some point in the future, I was never a Christian at all.³

We might put the argument of Hodges in a logical syllogism:

Major premise: All born again people persevere in good works until death.

³Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, Second Edition Revised and Enlarged (Dallas, TX: Redencion Viva, 1981, 1992), 51.

Minor premise: No one can be sure he will persevere in good works.

Conclusion: No one can be sure he is born again until death.

In order to escape that logic Bass must either deny that he believes in the perseverance of the saints, or, he must assert that it is possible to be sure you will persevere, even though the apostle Paul said that he himself was not sure he would persevere (1 Cor 9:27). Bass is trapped by his own theology. But rather than admit that, he tries a theological sleight of hand, getting the reader's attention away from Hodges's charge and on to what Bass considers a fanciful interpretation of 1 John 2:19.

If, as Bass says, "a person's lifestyle serves as vital corroborating evidence as to whether he has truly placed his faith in Christ's finished work on the cross for his sins" (p. 185), then certainty of one's eternal destiny would only be possible if one's current lifestyle was sinless *and* if he had some special revelation from God that guaranteed him that he would not sin in the future. The word *lifestyle* looks not simply at how one is living currently, but also how one will continue to live in the future. As long as the believer constantly "falls short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23), and as long as he always has sin in his life (1 John 1:8, 10), as Bass admits, then his lifestyle proves he is sinner, not a saint.

Possibly Bass has some explanation of how people who sin many times each and every day, and people who know it is possible they could fall away in the future, can find certainty that they are born again by looking at their lifestyles. But he never once tries to explain this. That is odd for a book entitled, *That You May Know*.

V. BASS ARGUES THE OVERARCHING PURPOSE OF 1 JOHN IS FOUND IN 1 JOHN 5:13, NOT IN 1 JOHN 1:3-4

Bass's argument is that there are five purpose statements in the letter (1:1-3, 4; 2:1, 26; 5:13) and that all five state the purpose for the entire letter (pp. 49 n. 66, 50), though he concedes that "most would argue that [these things in 2:26] refers only to what precedes" (p. 49, n. 66). The last of them, 1 John 5:13, however, is what he calls "the overarching purpose statement" (p. 51) for the whole letter.

I am not sure exactly what he means when he says that all five are the purpose for the whole book and yet one is "the overarching purpose statement." If all five are the purpose of the entire book, then would there not be five overarching purpose statements?

Hodges, on the other hand, says that there are four purpose statements in the letter (1:3-4; 2:1, 26; 5:13) and that the last three state the purpose only for the material in that immediate context. In the view of Hodges, 1 John 1:3-4 alone states the purpose for the whole book.

Bass gives four lines of support for his view that 1 John 5:13 is the overarching purpose statement.

The first proof that 1 John 5:13 is the overarching purpose statement is that the expression "these things I (or we) write (or have written) to you" occurs four times in the letter and always refers to the purpose of the entire letter (p. 50).

If that expression always refers to the purpose for writing the whole letter, then none of the four would refer simply to the verses which precede it. Yet there is ample evidence (see Hodges) that 2:1 looks back to 1:5-10 and that 2:26 looks back to 2:15-25 and that 5:13 looks back to 5:6-12. Since 1:3-4 is at the start of the letter, it is extremely unlikely that that refers to 1:1-2. In addition, as stated above, if there are four statements of the purpose for the whole book, then there are four overarching

purposes, not one overarching purpose. In fact, in a footnote Bass says of his first argument, "To be sure, this is the weakest of the arguments in support of this reading since each particular instance is debated" (p. 50, n. 69). Note that consensus, not context, is what makes him admit the weakness of his first point.

Bass's second proof that 1 John 5:13 is the overarching purpose statement of 1 John is that "the believer's assurance is the focal point of this epistle" (p. 50). This is taking one's conclusion and then using it as proof of your conclusion. While he could be right in this conclusion, he would have to demonstrate that the believer's assurance is the focal point of the letter. He would have to explain why John repeatedly makes statements that indicate that the believers already are born again (1 John 2:12-14, 20, 21, 25, 27; 5:13). Why would John affirm the regenerate status of the readers if he wanted them to look to their lifestyles to see if they were born again?

He would have to explain why doubting one's eternal destiny produces fellowship with God (1:3-4; 2:1) and how it would help the readers fend off false teachers (2:26). Would not certainty of one's eternal destiny (5:9-13) help one continue to walk in fellowship with God (1:3-4; 2:1) and to avoid being misled by false teachers (2:26)? Fellowship, not assurance, seems to be "the focal point of the epistle."

The author's third proof that 1 John 5:13 is the overarching purpose statement is that the purpose statement of John's Gospel is at the end of the book (20:30-31) and 1 John 5:13 is at the end of the letter (p. 51). What is not mentioned or discussed by Bass is that the Gospel of John contains but one statement of purpose. Since First John contains four such purposes, the argument breaks down. One of the four is the purpose of the whole letter and three are the purpose of the section in which they appear. We cannot determine which one is the purpose for the whole letter by comparing First John with the Fourth Gospel.

The fourth proof Bass cites that 1 John 5:13 is the overarching purpose statement of the epistle is that D. A. Carson says that it makes no sense that John waited till the end of the letter to deal with the issue of assurance of everlasting life (p. 51).

Why would Bass cite a comment made by someone else as proof of his own view? Why did he not simply make his own point? It is not as though the point made by Carson is one that Bass could not state just as clearly.

Beside, there are compelling reasons why John indeed waited till the end of the letter to deal with the issue of the continuance of the assurance of the readers. The readers were mature believers. They already had assurance (2:12-27). To suggest that they lacked assurance is a total misreading of the letter.

John's concern was not that they *gain* assurance, but that they *retain* it. He was concerned that they would lose their assurance if they were misled by false teachers. Since retaining assurance of one's everlasting life is crucial to walking in fellowship with God (cf. 2:26), it makes sense that John would deal with this issue. Putting it at the end of the letter makes perfect sense.

I would translate 1 John 5:13 in this way: *I have written these things [5:6-12] to you who believe in the name of the Son of God in order that you might continue to know that you have everlasting life and that you might continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.* The NKJV puts the word *continue* only in the second of the purpose statements in v 13. But it should reasonably be put in both.

Here is how Bass responds to the view of Hodges that First John is about tests of fellowship:

Such an interpretation, however, completely ignores the background issues of this letter and therefore misses the whole point of the epistle. The issue in 1 John is that those who fail the various tests simply demonstrate that their fellowship is momentarily broken, temporarily concealing the fact that they are really believers

[Hodges, *Epistles of John*, 139-46]. On the contrary, John makes every effort to demonstrate that those who fail the tests were neither presently nor previously in fellowship with God because they were liars, antichrists, and sons of the Devil as exhibited by their lifestyle.⁴

Bass misinterprets Hodges here. Hodges says nothing on pages 139-46, or anywhere in his commentary, about “temporarily concealing the fact that they are really believers.” Indeed, on pages 139-46 he repeatedly says that even if a believer is not in fellowship with God, he is still born again.

In Hodges view a person does not demonstrate he is a believer by his lifestyle. In his view he demonstrates he is walking in fellowship with God by his lifestyle.⁵ Hodges says that the way we know someone is born again is by his confession that he believes in the Lord Jesus Christ for everlasting life.⁶

Thus in Hodges view people cannot be not guilty of “temporarily concealing the fact that they are really believers” by failing to live righteously. Since Bass does not provide a single quote that proves that Hodges says that, I am at a loss to figure out how he even came up with this suggestion.

In addition, it is ridiculous to suggest that Hodges “completely ignores the background issues of this letter.” His introduction to the commentary on the Johannine Epistles contains five pages on audience, date, and destination, three pages on its literary character, and five pages on the purpose of the book. In addition, in the commentary itself he devotes three pages to the discussion of 1:3-4; three pages on 2:1; one page on 2:26; and four pages on 5:13. He also devotes three pages to discussing 1 John 2:19, a passage which Bass thinks refers to people

⁴ Bass, *That You May Know*, 123.

⁵ See, for example, Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God's Love* (Grace Evangelical Society: Irving, TX: 1999), 74-92.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 115-19; 228-29.

who left the local church to which he is writing. (See next section.)

It is interesting that Bass himself says of 1 John 1:3, “At least one of the reasons John has penned this letter is so that his readers might have fellowship with him, which is also fellowship with the Father and the Son” (p. 45). Why then not understand that the purpose of the whole letter, what Bass calls “the overarching purpose,” and see the other three as supporting this purpose? The reason seems to be theological, not contextual. His theology tells him that all who are truly regenerate will unfailingly manifest that regeneration by persevering in good works. Since one of the main proofs of the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is First John, it is not surprising that Bass settles on this “overarching purpose.”

VI. WHOSE EXPLANATION OF 1 JOHN 2:19 IS FANCIFUL, BASS’S OR HODGES’S?

Bass is very dogmatic about his understanding of 1 John 2:19. He sees the view of Zane Hodges as being a fanciful one.

First John 2:19 reads:

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.

According to Bass that means:

They went out from you, but they were not of you; for if they had been of you, they would have continued with you; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of you.

In other words, Bass sees the first person plural in 1 John 2:19 as referring *to the readers, not to John and the others in the Jerusalem church.*

This must sound like something I must be making up. How could anyone suggest that when John says *we* he means *you*, especially when in the very next verse he switches to the second person plural?

Here are Bass's own words:

The use of the phrase 'from us' (*ex hēmōn*) demonstrates that those he now refers to as 'antichrists' *were once part of the community to which he is writing.*⁷

The author fails to come right out and say that the first person plural stands for the second person plural here. Nor does he cite any evidence in First John or any of John's writings where *we* stands for *you*. But it is clear that he takes "from us" to mean "from the community to which [John] is writing."

After making this claim, Bass immediately moves on saying, "Those who had departed had probably made a Christological confession, been baptized, and taken on every appearance of one who has been born of God..." (p. 165). Bass simply states as fact the first person plural in 1 John 2:19 refers to the readers.

I find that statement amazing. Whereas the readers themselves do not give "every appearance of one who has been born of God," the antichrists do! Thus in Bass's view, the antichrist's passed John's tests.

Indeed, Bass goes further. He ridicules Hodges for suggesting that "from us" and "of us" refers to the author and the Jerusalem church:

To support [his] view, however, Hodges is forced to come up with some fanciful exegesis of places like 2:19. Against the clear teaching of the passage, he insists that the "us" from which the false teachers have departed was not the community to which John was writing but the apostles themselves. He seems confident that these false teachers 'went out' from the Jerusalem church

⁷ Bass, *That You May Know*, 165, italics added.

as opposed to a secession from the community to which John has written.⁸

Frankly, I do not understand why “from us” and “of us” should or even could mean “from you” or “of you.” Nor do I understand why that is “the clear teaching of the passage” or why Hodges’s was “forced to come up with some fanciful exegesis of 2:19” in order to conclude that “from us” and “of us” means “from us” and “of us.”

Let me reverse Bass’s last paragraph about his understanding of 1 John 2:19, replacing “Hodges” with “Bass” and replacing Hodges’s view with Bass’s view:

To support [his] view, however, Bass is forced to come up with some fanciful exegesis of places like 2:19. Against the clear teaching of the passage, he insists that the “us” from which the false teachers have departed was not John and the Jerusalem church but the community to which John was writing. He seems confident that these false teachers ‘went out’ from the community to which John has written as opposed to a secession from the Jerusalem church.

Bass does not discuss other uses of the first person plural before 1 John 2:19. If he had, he would see that most or all of them refer to the Apostle John and the others in the apostolic circle. Note 1 John 1:1-4 where the first person plural occurs eleven times, always in reference to John and his circle and never to the readers (see esp. 1 John 1:4 where we and you are contrasted).

Note too that in the very next verse, 1 John 2:20, John uses the second person plural twice. That he doesn’t use the second person in v 19, but does in v 20, is very damaging to Bass’s argument and very supportive of Hodges’s.

Since Hodges spends three pages in his commentary explaining 1 John 2:19, I can’t cite all of that here. But Hodges, unlike Bass, actually gives some support for this view. He writes,

⁸ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

The **us** which is repeated four times in this verse [1 John 2:19] obviously is in contrast to the “you” of the following verse [v 20], which is emphatic in Greek. Here we meet for the first time the “we”—“you”—“us” contrast which we also meet in a similar context in 4:4-6.⁹

The shift from the first person singular to the first person plural is a strong argument for Hodges's view that the first person singular refers to the author and the Jerusalem church, not to the readers. Then he adds another argument, “The antichrists had most definitely not left the church or churches to whom John writes, for if they had they would no longer have been a problem!”¹⁰

What Bass expects us to believe is that these false teachers were once part of the church of the readers, left because they did not fit with their theology, and now have returned and are receiving a welcome hearing from the very church from which they seceded over doctrinal grounds. I think it is Bass's view which is fanciful.

VII. FIVE PRACTICAL EXAMPLES OF HOW BASS'S VIEW CAN BE APPLIED IN PASTORAL MINISTRY

The author is a pastor and so he brings practical application. This is very helpful, especially in a book on assurance of salvation.

According to Bass there are at least five different ways in which we should respond to people who express doubts about their salvation to us. He gives the reader five examples which seem to be drawn from his own personal ministry experiences. He calls them “case studies” and says that “each is a real-world situation.”¹¹

⁹ Hodges, *The Epistles of John*, 108.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Bass, *That You May Know*, 189.

A. THE MAN WITH AN INSUFFICIENT AMOUNT OF GOOD WORKS (BUT NOT WITH THE PRESENCE OF SERIOUS MORAL DEFECTION)

First, he speaks about “a man who had been attending your church for several years.”¹² According to Bass he was interviewed when he first came to the church, evidently to determine whether he should be allowed to become a member. The man indicated “that he made a profession of faith when he was 10.” Evidently that explanation, even though it was very unclear, was sufficient for the man to be accepted as a member.

In Southern Baptist circles one way a person can join a church is by his personal profession of faith. The person indicates that he believes in the Lord Jesus Christ now and he tells when he first professed faith in Him. This man fits that profile.

The problem, Bass continues, is this:

As you and your staff have come to know him, it has become clear that there is virtually no evidence [in his works] that he is a believer.¹³

Note that the problem is not what he believes. The issue is in his behavior. Note too that the matter is not completely cut and dry. “Virtually no evidence” is not the same as “no evidence.” It would be impossible, even under Bass’s understanding of assurance, for the leaders of local churches to declare themselves as infallible arbiters of who is born again and who is not based on observing people’s behavior over a few years. Even a born-again person, according to Bass’s view, might go through a time that could last for years where he was not manifesting the abundance of good works that supposedly characterize born-again people.

The problem with this man is not that he is walking in open rebellion against Christ. We are not told about immorality or drunkenness or anything of a negative nature

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 190.

that makes the leaders doubt whether he is born again. The problem is *an insufficient amount of good works*.

The solution in this case, the author says, is to press him “regarding his indifference to living a holy life and [to] query him regarding his salvation.”¹⁴ Now remember that the man had been asked about his salvation several years before when he first came to the church. The answer at that time was sufficient. Now it is time to question him again.

The man's answer this time starts out as unclear as before. He says,

“I have already done that. I've prayed the sinner's prayer, and once you've prayed this, you can never lose your salvation.”¹⁵

Without commenting on that, Bass continues,

Then he looks at you and emphatically tells you, “The Bible clearly teaches that Jesus died for all my sins and I believe that. Moreover, the Bible teaches once saved always saved.”¹⁶

Rather than pointing out that there is no such thing as “the sinner's prayer” and telling the man that he is correct that all who believe in Jesus are saved once and for all, we are to tell him that:

He has overemphasized the atoning sacrifice of Christ *and has completely disregarded* John's teaching *on the necessity of a changed life*... Therefore, the pastor might take him to some of John's tests of life and gently ask, “How do you reconcile your life with these verses?”¹⁷

It is amazing to see a graduate of Southern Seminary suggesting that a Baptist who has assurance based on once saved, always saved, but not based on self-examination of his own works, “has overemphasized the atoning

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., italics added.

sacrifice of Christ and has completely disregarded...the necessity of a changed life.” Works, not faith, for Bass, are the essential (or vital) element in assurance.

So with people who are regular church attenders and who have no outstanding moral failure, but who are not showing what the pastor thinks are sufficient concern about holy living, we need to tell them that a changed life is necessary in order to get into the Kingdom. We should ask them to explain how they reconcile their lives with the personal holiness required to get into the Kingdom.

I fail to see how this would lead the man to gaining assurance of his eternal destiny. If, as the pastor thinks, this man is not born again, then the issue is that he needs to be born again. If this line of questioning convinces the man that he is not really born again, as the pastor thinks, then why doesn't Bass tell us how to proceed? Is it enough to strip church members of their assurance and to leave them afraid they are going to hell? Or after we take away their assurance based on faith in the promise of once-saved, always saved, shouldn't we replace it with the right kind of assurance?

If so, what is the next step with this man? What does he need to do now to gain assurance, that is, to be born again? Bass implies that the solution is in his lifestyle. The man needs to cease being indifferent about holiness. That is, he needs to commit himself to working hard for the Lord. Maybe the solution is that the man needs to increase his church giving, to go on visitation each week, to volunteer regularly in the church's soup kitchen, and to faithfully attend classes on being a better husband and father.

While all of those things are good things, doing those things so that I can get into the Kingdom is to do them for the wrong reason. That is works-salvation thinking.

B. THE PERFECTIONIST WITH YEARS OF WONDERFUL FRUIT WHO NONETHELESS FEARS SHE ISN'T HOLY ENOUGH

A second type of person is a woman whom “you personally led...to the Lord, and you have witnessed wonderful fruit over the course of several years,”¹⁸ Like the man in the first example, you’ve observed her for several years. The difference is that you’ve seen “wonderful fruit” in her life, whereas in his life you saw very little of that.

Another way to join Southern Baptist churches is by professing that you just now have come to faith in Christ. This woman is such a case.

She appears to be a perfectionist who is concerned because “she simply does not think that her life is holy enough.”¹⁹ It would seem this is a great opportunity to point her to the promise of everlasting life to all who simply believe in Jesus as found in John 3:16. This would be a good time to tell her that her works have nothing to do with assurance or with entering the Kingdom and that she indeed will never be holy enough to gain access to the Kingdom by her works. Then we are told that the answer is that “the pastor must encourage her to look to the cross.”²⁰ Of course, in Bass’s view there is no certainty even if the woman looks to the cross, since he teaches that perseverance in a changed life is required to enter the Kingdom. And that is what she is concerned about. How would pointing her to the cross alleviate her doubts?

There are two main differences between the first two examples. First, the woman, in the eyes of the pastor, had wonderful fruit and the man did not. Second, the man lacking wonderful fruit had assurance of his eternal destiny based on once-saved, always saved and the woman with the wonderful fruit did not have assurance.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. 191.

It appears that Bass thinks it is better to lack assurance and to be concerned that you are not holy enough than it is to have assurance based on your faith apart from your works.

C. THE PERSON WHO DOESN'T LIKE SOME OF THE PEOPLE IN CHURCH

Example three concerns a young man who sounds like he has Asperger's Syndrome, agoraphobia, ADHD, or OCD. We are not told how long he has been attending the church, or even if he is a member. Possibly the author is using this young man as an example of one who is merely an attendee, but has not yet actually joined the church.

In any case, Bass says that this young man...

...is bold in his assertion that he loves God. He rarely misses corporate worship, and yet he is always the first to leave when the service is over. In fact, this young man always has an excuse for not engaging in fellowship opportunities, and when you talk with him, he makes clear that he does not want to spend time with people, and even more to the point, there are other believers in the church that he simply does not like.²¹

This leads the pastor to question whether he is born again. The solution Bass gives here is to tell him that unless he loves the brethren he is not born again.²²

No explanation is given as to why *not liking* someone is the same as *not loving* someone. Evidently the author equates the two. One wonders if it is not possible to love people whom you do not like. Isn't that the point of the parable of the good Samaritan?

Does the author actually *like* everyone in his church? Possibly. But I, for one, admit that I do not like every believer that I've ever met. At times I do not even like *myself!* I doubt there is a person on earth who always

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 191-92.

likes himself, his spouse, his own children, or everyone in his church.

I am amazed that a Southern Baptist pastor actually thinks that people who are quick to leave his services give strong evidence that they are not born again. No wonder lots of people in his church appear to struggle with assurance. If the pastor is keeping track of how quickly people leave his services and then is following up with quizzes and lectures about the need to like everyone in the congregation or else you prove you are on your way to hell, it is no wonder that lack of assurance is a major issue he must repeatedly confront.

D. A NEW CONVERT WHO REALIZES SHE STILL SINS

The fourth example is like example two, except she has only been born again for several months, not several years. Bass says:

She is living for God and has experienced some genuine fruit in her life, but she is confronted by the fact that she still sins and wonders whether she is really saved.²³

How does the author know she has experienced “genuine fruit”? I’ve never met a Calvinist who says he can infallibly determine what fruit is genuine and what is not. I am shocked to find Bass using such language. “Genuine fruit” is better than “wonderful fruit” in the second example. Whatever this woman did, it was enough to give the pastor, but not her, absolute certainty that she is born again.

So why does she “wonder whether she is really saved”? Did she expect to be sinless? Or does she fail to see in her life the type of good works that she thinks she should see?

Where did she get the idea that she should look to her works for assurance? Evidently she was taught this by the pastor. Then, rather than taking her to John 3:16; 4:10; 5:24; Eph 2:8-9; or Rev 22:17—all of which teach about

²³ *Ibid.*, 192.

the free gift of everlasting life to all who simply believe in Jesus, the solution is that “she needs to be pointed back to the cross.”²⁴ Of course, if she is a five-point Calvinist as Bass presumably is, then how does she know that Jesus even died for her? She must look to her works to see if she is elect. So she is back at her lifestyle, which she knows to be imperfect.

E. THE UNFAITHFUL HUSBAND WHO QUESTIONS HOW A CHILD OF GOD COULD BEHAVE LIKE THAT

The final example is not a church member or even attendee. Here Bass gives the example of a stranger one meets on an airplane. This traveling businessman indicates he is heading home “in order to see his family and attend his home church where he serves as a deacon.”²⁵ But he then indicates “he has been struggling with his assurance over the course of the past three months.”²⁶ The pastor discovers that the man has been involved in an affair, and “now he is questioning how a child of God can behave in such a way.”²⁷

Bass is convinced that in such cases, where the sin is one that he considers big enough to question the person’s eternal destiny, the issue is not the root, but the fruit. (Unfortunately, Bass doesn’t give us a list of sins that make the issue the fruit. Jealousy? Envy? Strife? Outbursts of anger? Lying? Lust? Cheating on one’s taxes? Drunkenness?) Thus he doesn’t speak to the man about the promise of everlasting life to all who simply believe in Jesus (e.g., John 3:16). Rather,

You exhort him to repent, knowing that the sacrifice of Jesus is sufficient to cleanse such sins. Nevertheless, the caring pastor also reminds him that if he refuses to repent and persists in this lifestyle of sin, his struggles with assurance

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 193.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

could well be God's kindness in showing him that he was never a believer in the first place.²⁸

Bass doesn't even consider the most obvious possibility, that the man isn't born again, but because of this encounter, wants to be. Let's assume the man is convinced, after Bass says this, that he never was a believer in the first place. What would he need to do to be born again now? Presumably he already believes that Jesus died on the cross for his sins and rose from the dead. No one could be a deacon in a Southern Baptist church, as Bass tells us this man is, who didn't believe that. In addition, he almost certainly believes in once saved, always saved, since believing that is also required to be a Southern Baptist deacon.

So what does this man need to do in order to be born again if he isn't already? Bass seems to assume that the man will either repent and prove he is already born again, or not repent and prove he is not. But what if he is not born again and he repents? How does he become born again? The solution seems to be that the man needs to get to work. The man needs to have a godly lifestyle, because his problem is not with what he believes, but with his lifestyle.

F. ALL THESE EXAMPLES UNDERSCORE THE LACK OF ASSURANCE INHERENT IN BASS'S POSITION

The author fails to show how any of these five people could be sure of their eternal destiny by following what he suggests. Indeed, the opposite is surely true. Every one of these five people would leave these encounters convinced that they could not be sure of their eternal destiny until they died.

These applications underscore the dark side of Calvinism: assurance is impossible in this system.

These applications all illustrate something else. The author is clearly well intentioned. He wants what is best

²⁸ Ibid.

for these people. But he views himself as sent by God to be the arbiter of who is likely born again and who is not. Thus with people whom he thinks, based on observation, are really nice folks, he grants them “assurance,” telling them not to be overly concerned about their works, but to look at the cross. To those people he thinks, based on observation, are not nice folks, he tells them to be overly concerned about their works and to avoid thinking that the cross is all they need.

I, for one, am glad that I am not required to look at the works of people in order to determine whether they are born again or not. I think that is a burden that would really eat away at me. What if the pastor is wrong and the really nice lady with the “wonderful fruit” really isn’t born again? Then he has given her false “assurance.” And what if the guy who always is first to leave the service and doesn’t like some of the church members really is born again? Then he has tried to remove the assurance of one who is born again.

Is the pastor to do this with his own children? I have heard Calvinist pastors in open meetings do just that. I heard one pastor at *The Shepherd’s Conference* talk about his teenage daughter and son and publicly say that he thinks it is likely his daughter is really born again but that he has serious doubts about whether his son is the real deal. Imagine having your own Dad questioning whether you are regenerate because he doesn’t think you are holy enough.

I feel sorry for anyone living under such bondage. That Bass thinks that this is the system God wishes for His children is sad. Why would God wish for His children to doubt that they are really His children? Why wouldn’t God want His children to be sure of their standing?

VIII. CONCLUSION

I highly recommend this book to any well-grounded believer. It is a very honest and open portrayal of the Lordship Salvation view of First John, complete with five practical illustrations.

This book also illustrates how Calvinists view “assurance.” For them a godly lifestyle is essential in order to have “assurance.” Of course, since no one’s lifestyle is perfect now, and since no one can be sure what his lifestyle will be in the future, “assurance” under such a system can never be certain. At best one could think it possible he was born again. Even to say it was *probable* would be impossible due to the ongoing presence of sin in our lives.

It is no wonder that people who are pastored by people who hold Bass’s view on assurance constantly struggle with assurance of their eternal destinies.

