

1 John 4

How Do We Have Confidence?

Confidence. How do we have confidence? In every facet of our lives, confidence plays a big part. We can be paralyzed to a standstill for a lack of confidence. We can proceed and succeed because of confidence. Confidence is often the deciding factor between success and failure. In fact, oftentimes people with confidence succeed despite the fact they are wrong. Those with good ideas often fail for lack of confidence.

For that reason, John the apostle wrote 1 John: to build confidence in his readers. Throughout the letter, John reminded them and built them up to give them confidence. He does not speak to them as those in need of correction, but as those who already know the truth, who had been acting on that truth, but who had had their confidence shaken, perhaps by the false messiahs of whom he wrote, or because of strange doctrines in general, or just from those nagging second thoughts that can get us doubting ourselves until nothing sounds right.

John recognized how important confidence is. Coaches work very hard at instilling in their players that confidence that they can win, and sometimes they win because of that confidence. Children sometimes never realize their potential because of a lack of confidence; they believe that they cannot, so they cannot. Many people live their lives totally in the control of others because they haven't the confidence to make decisions on their own.

In all areas of life, confidence can make or break your chances. In religion, the results are more important and more permanent - heaven or hell - often decided on confidence.

In 1 John 4 (along with the last two verses of 1 John 3), John gave his readers four answers to the question, "Why should we have confidence?" 1 John 3:19 – 23, John introduced a fifth reason to have confidence: when we see ourselves being consistent from thoughts to actions, which is one of the jobs of the indwelling Spirit, we know that God must approve of our faith because only those with God's type of faith receive that Spirit.

How can we have confidence? Reason #1: because you know how to tell fact from fiction because of that indwelling Spirit.

1 John 3:23-4:6 And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment. And the one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And we know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us. Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; and this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now is already in the world. You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God; 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.

[A side note for those still looking for the antichrist. The apostle John said that the antichrist came nearly 2000 years ago.]

John says that we, the ordinary faithful, have been given the ability to sort out fact from fiction. That is quite a promise. Just look around us. People are taken in by scammers, con men, salesmen, and politicians every day. We are promised the ability to overcome the deception, if we will just believe the promises of God and ask for that wisdom.

Of course, we can read about many occasions in the 1500-year history of Israel and the first 30 or so years of the church when false prophets were rampant. And religion does not have a corner on that market. But, it is not that we become so cynical that we don't believe anything, rather, we are given the ability to sort them out.

John's example refers to a popular bad teaching of the day, sometimes attributed to gnosticism. Transliterating the name of the sect makes it sound more important than it was. Actually, they called themselves "the knowing ones." Sounds arrogant, right? It was. They won converts from among the weak-minded who had no confidence in their own ability, promised through the indwelling Spirit, to see the holes in the arguments. One of the doctrines was that the Son of God did not really come to earth in human form, as a flesh-and-blood person. (John 1:14, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.") There were several variations on that theme. The basic idea was centered around the assumption that God cannot die, which, of course, messes up the whole redemption purpose of God coming to earth as a man. One group of gnostics said that Jesus was just an apparition, not a real person. Another group said that there was a real person named Jesus, but the Spirit of God took over His body at the baptism by John, and departed from that physical body on the cross, before He died, as evidenced by Jesus crying out, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" By the way, there is an easy explanation for that line from Jesus. He was quoting Psalm 22, pointing out how several of its descriptions were coming true at that moment, but that God had not, in fact, forsaken Him, as stated plainly in Psalm 22:24.

The fact that John chose to describe them as antichrists is only mysterious and frightening to us because of centuries of complex and misguided teaching. All it means is that there were those who supposedly were Christians but actually were against (anti) Jesus. That is only natural because they had their own versions of the Messiah, and it wasn't Jesus. John gave a longer description in 2:18 – 23.

So what good does that do us, nearly 20 centuries later? Gnosticism has largely fallen apart, although Scientology adopted many of their tactics. First, we are promised, in verse 4, that we can overcome this kind of high-sounding but ridiculously misguided teaching. Satan was alive and well and doing bad stuff during the early part of the first century (although he was locked up some time in the late 60's of the first century, as predicted in Zechariah 13:2 and confirmed in 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6). But when John wrote, that had not yet happened. And what was Satan's major weapon? Deceit. If the early Christians were able to overcome Satan's deceptions back then (as promised in Ephesians 6:11, James 4:7, 1 John 3:8 and here in 4:4), the deceptions we face should be a piece of cake. Pressure, hardship, and empty promises cannot overcome us, not because we are so smart and so strong, but because the indwelling Spirit develops and repairs our characters. It's a promise, if we will only act on it.

John reminds us the popular is rarely right. If the vast majority think one way, reality is probably in the other direction. In verse 6, the part about "hearing" us, does not mean that people must park their brains and just accept what we say. That's what the gnostics wanted. John's idea of "hearing" us is that thinking people will be open to considering what we have to say, they will be open to discussion. Those who are not are already in the clutches of the outside world, and there is not much we can do about that. John's point in this paragraph is to remind

the readers that they have, through the indwelling Spirit, the ability to think plainly and simply, and to see through deceitful rhetoric. That should give us confidence that we can find truth, even if we are not there yet.

John's second reason to be confident: because we love one another.

1 John 4:7-12, 19-21 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has beheld God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us. . . . We love, because He first loved us. If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.

Have confidence that you know God because you love.

In common English, love is a vague term. It is easy to say, "I love God" or "I love the brethren." Once we understand the original meaning of that agape word, "doing what is best for another without regard to the effect on me," we begin to see why Peter, in the scene in John 21:15 – 17, was so reluctant to assert that he had this depth of selflessness. Two different words were both translated "love" in that paragraph, so we can easily miss the point. Here's the short version, using love for agape and like for phileo. Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me more than these other disciples?" Peter answered, "Yes, Lord, You know I like you." Jesus asked again, without the comparison, "Simon, do you love Me?" Peter answered, "Yes, Lord, You know I like you." So Jesus changed up the question, "Simon, do you even like Me?" That's why Peter was grieved.

Even knowing the depth of selflessness implied by agape, love is hard to measure, either in oneself or in others. When people say they love God, and they teach or behave in a way that I have always thought to be wrong, my confidence can waver. "Am I really right? This person says he loves God. Maybe I'm wrong and he's right." The natural humility of Christians does that.

John gives a test for love. Do they actively love (are they selfless toward) the brethren. Notice it does not say, "Do they care for the poor, the hungry, the huddled masses of the world." Those are good things, but they are not part of this test.

I have confidence that I am on the right track if I practice love for the brethren. Why does that give me confidence? In Romans 5:5, Paul wrote, "Now hope does not disappoint, because the love (agape) of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us." When we see ourselves being surprisingly selfless, we know where that ability came from: the indwelling Spirit, who is only given to those whom God has deemed faithful.

And notice how John gave an example of what this love for one another is. It is not to smile cordially, be friendly, spend time together, speak well of each other. Those are good things, but John's test of love is of a completely different sort, "Do I show the kind of love for the brethren that God showed by sending His Son?" That's John's measure of love. "Does my love for the brethren result in giving myself up for them before they love me, the way Jesus did for us?" Love the brethren.

But this confidence test, love the brethren, can be uncomfortable for some. To those who are focused on the purity of doctrine, to those who measure rightness or wrongness with God by the rituals we perform and the principles we teach, this can be a very disturbing concept. But it works like this; if I practice the kind of love Jesus did, selfless love for those who show little in return, if I set my mind to Jesus' kind of love, my heart will be in the right place to understand the will of God from the Scriptures and do what they say. The doctrine will come out right because I will have the mind of Jesus. Like 1 John 1:7, "If we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another." Our fellowship is not based on rules or personal relationships. Our fellowship is a natural result of having a common goal.

That is a scary thought for those who measure orthodoxy by rituals and doctrines, like the Pharisees did. John starts at the other end. If you love one another, you will do what is right.

If I look back and say, "I have made an honest effort at loving the brethren. I have acted in their best interests," then I can have confidence that I am headed in the right direction. Perfect? No. Forgiven? Yes. Forgiven because (1:9) we confess our sins. We make no excuses.

A third reason to be confident: because we have a faith built on facts.

1 John 4:13-16 By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. And we have beheld and bear witness that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. And we have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

There are many other ideas in that paragraph that I have already touched on. But I want to focus on one particular thought, in 4:14. "We beheld and bear witness" or "We have seen and testify." The 'we' there is John and his fellow apostles and prophets. John's point is that we may have confidence because our religion is not based on philosophy, ancient myths, traditions, or majority rule. Our religion is not based on unprovable claims or unsupportable assertions. Our religion is based on, as John began this letter, "what we saw, heard, touched, and handled." John's gospel was built on real events.

That's how God deals with people: in the realm of reality, not fantasy. Think about how God should communicate with His creation. How is God going to communicate with people so that the message will be unmistakable? How can God make His message stand out from whatever people can create?

God's message cannot be founded on superior logic, because people can play with logic well enough to fool each other. People can be very convincing with words.

God's message cannot be founded on how each person feels because people are masters at fooling themselves and twisting their understandings to conform to how they want it to be. No, God's message must be founded on two things: (1) that which is concrete, measurable, that can be seen, heard, touched, and handled, and (2) God's message must be founded on real events that are beyond human ability to perform, namely, miracles. People cannot restore a withered arm instantaneously, give sight to the blind without surgery, or raise the dead at all.

John gave confidence to all the generations of Christians that followed him by reminding them that (1) what was preached in the first century was preached by eye-witnesses; thousands saw the evidence, (2) John and others preached that miraculous message. We do not believe in something today that was embellished over the years. We are not believing in fireside tales gone

to seed, and (3) John reminds us that, if we had confidence at some point in the past, there must have been a basis for that belief. If someone has you questioning now, have confidence that you made a responsible decision back then. Not that you should ignore new ideas, or you will never learn anything, but have confidence that can carry you through until you straighten out the present confusion. Have confidence in the gospel because it is based on facts.

And a fourth reason to have confidence: because we imitate Jesus.

1 John 4:17-18 By this, love is perfected with us, that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.

This confidence builder is similar to the one about "we have confidence because we love one another." But that previous one rested on the idea that we love as God loved, giving up His Son before we loved Him. The previous idea (in verses 7-12) was that if we display that selfless love of God, we may have confidence. That was the previous idea. But this idea comes from a little different angle. We may have confidence about Judgment Day if we act like Jesus did when He was on earth.

Do you know people who are unconfident about Judgment Day? They say, "I hope I'll go to heaven. I pray I might make it." What an introduction to give Christianity, "Are you worried about going to hell? Well, come down to church and worry with the rest of us." Maybe they do not want to sound arrogant by saying, "Yes, I am confident of eternal life." But Paul was confident, "There is laid up for me a crown of righteousness." (2 Tm 4:8) Peter was confident for his readers, "As long as you practice these things, you will never stumble." (2 Pt 1:10) John is confident for us. He speaks of confidence from the first chapter to the last: how to be sure. Here he says, "Walk as Jesus walked." He's already qualified it back in chapter 1, knowing that we will still sin, but showing us also how our sin is overcome and forgiven.

He says, "Perfect love casts out fear." Fear of Judgment, fear of death are not a part of the Christian life; confidence is. And what about that consistent love? John told us what it is back in verse 12, "If we love one another, God abides in us and His love is made consistent in us."

It is true that God has used fear at times to get people's attention, but fear is not how God wants to relate to us. God wants to have a loving relationship with His creation. Like Romans 2:4, "Do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?"

But people take advantage of loving people. So, occasionally, God has resorted to fear to wake people up, because He loves them. God has used fear to turn people around, not as a way of life. It's like childrearing. Fear is needed; love is the goal. You want your children to obey out of love, but sometimes they need that fear of God.

John wants us to progress beyond the fear of condemnation, the fear of failure, the fear of sin, the fear of death, because fear is self-centered; fear thinks only of what will happen to me.

Our confidence that our love for the brethren, our imitation of Jesus, is what God wants will let us live in hope, serving the needs of others, confident that eternal life is laid up for us.