

Confidence in Christ

1 John 5:9-15

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Introduction

The infidelity of the Gnostic heretics, which constitutes the setting of John's first epistle, is given one final broadside in chapter 5. In the first 8 verses of the chapter, the apostle discussed some of the practical implications of belief in the Sonship of Christ, as well as some of the evidence of His Deity. In the section to which these comments are devoted the following important topics are discussed:

1. The Father's testimony concerning His Son.
2. The obligation to receive the Divine testimony.
3. A consequence of denying the Divine testimony.
4. The gift of eternal life and the sphere in which it is found.
5. The certainty of God's promise of eternal life.

When these and related topics are studied with some diligence, they render rich spiritual rewards. There are numerous weighty implications of these topics that are worthy of our careful attention. This study will begin with a brief exegesis of 1 John 5:9-13, followed by an exposition of some of its prominent themes.

Exegesis Of 1 John 5:9-15

Verse 9: If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for the witness of God is this, that he hath borne witness concerning his Son.¹

John argued from the lesser to the greater (*a minori a majus*). If men accept the lesser testimony of their fellow men, how much more ought they to accept the greater testimony of God. While faithful men have given (and continue to give) testimony concerning the Son of God, beyond that, God himself has "borne witness concerning his Son."

This testimony has been borne through the promises, prophecies, types, and shadows of the Old Testament. God bore witness in the angelic announcements of the birth of His Son, to both Joseph and Mary (Mat. 1:20-23; Luke 1:26-33). He did so at the Jordan when Jesus was baptized, in the well-known words: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Mat. 3:17). The Father was bearing witness to His Son in all the marvelous miracles Jesus performed (John 20:30-31). At the Transfiguration, God bore powerful testimony to His Son with the same

words He uttered at the Lord's baptism, but with the additional imperative, "Hear ye him" (Mat. 17:5; cf. 2 Pet. 1:17-19).

It was by the "glory of the Father" that Christ was raised from Joseph's new tomb (Rom. 6:4), and this resurrection is the climactic assurance to all men that His Son will judge the world (Acts 17:30-31). The Ascension of our Lord to the Father was further testimony from God concerning His Son. All of the mass of testimony which the Father has borne concerning His Son is recorded in that great book of testimony, the Bible -- the revealed, inspired Word of God. This is the agency by which the Holy Spirit bears witness (1 John 5:8). By this means men have had access to all of the Father's testimony since John laid down his Holy Spirit-directed pen on Patmos to pick it up no more. Verily, the witness of God is greater because He is greater than the best of men whose testimony is believed. Furthermore, the testimony God has given is greater than that which men can give, in quality as well as in quantity.

Verse 10: "He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in him: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he hath not believed in the witness that God hath borne concerning his Son."

One's faith is proof that he has learned of and listened to the evidence concerning Christ at some time in the past. More than this, however, John was saying (by use of perfect tense forms) to Christians who already had come to believe, that one who **continued** to believe in Christ **continued** to have the witness in himself. The Word of God is the basis and source of our faith (Rom. 10:17). The believer demonstrates that he continues to rely upon the evidence (God's Word) which abides in him. The wonderful Word of God is the continual witness of the Son by both the Father and the Spirit.

Those who reject the evidence of the Deity of Christ reject the witness of God. Such is tantamount to saying that God is a liar. God testified that Jesus of Nazareth is His Only Begotten Son. When a man refuses to believe what God said about Jesus, he has implied that God's testimony was false. The infidel says, "God lied about Jesus." Scripture says, "... it is impossible for God to lie" (Heb. 6:18). The unbeliever not only makes God out to be a liar concerning His Son, but since belief in the Christ is the very foundation of Christianity, God is made out to be a liar in every utterance, testimony, prophecy and miracle that relates to Christ and His kingdom. No wonder Jesus declared, "He that believeth on me, believeth not on me, but on him that sent me" (John 12:44).

Verses 11-12: "And the witness is this, that God gave unto us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath the life; he that hath not the Son of God hath not the life."

The end of all of God's testimony concerning His Son is the provision of eternal life for those who become His children. The sphere in which God's gift of eternal life may be found is "in his Son." Without Christ and outside of Christ men have no hope (Eph. 2:12). There could be no stronger or clearer statement of the exclusiveness of the religion of Christ, the religion promised in the Old Testament and revealed in the New Testament. The so-called "great religions" of the world (Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc.) exist only upon human authority. One cannot believe the Bible and believe that there is any spiritual validity in any of them. They can be considered "great" only in the sense that they have many devotees and wield considerable influence. Likewise, those religious groups which give a polite nod to Scripture, but pay no attention to its precepts (Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Protestantism, and cults) are excluded. To reject the Word of Christ is to reject Christ (John 12:48), and to reject Christ is to reject the only source of eternal life.

There is hardly a more persistent New Testament theme than that salvation is found in Christ alone. The angel announced to Joseph that Mary's son would be named "Jesus," which means "Savior" (Mat. 1:21). Jesus declared Himself to be the exclusive access to God (John 14:6). It is "in Christ" that condemnation is removed (Rom. 8:1), one becomes a new creature (2 Cor. 5:17), consolation is found (Phi. 2:1), redemption is accomplished (Rom. 3:24), the love of God is expressed (Rom. 8:39), sanctification is realized (1 Cor. 1:2), we are reconciled to God (Eph. 2:13-16), we have a Mediator with the Father (1 Tim. 2:5), we receive grace (2 Tim. 2:1), and we have salvation (2 Tim. 2:10). Indeed, **every** spiritual blessing is found in Christ (Eph. 1:3), which means that none are found apart from and outside of Him.

One of the great energizing principles of the religion of Christ has always been that it **and it alone** is approved of God. It is upon the complete and exclusive authority of Christ that we are to preach the Gospel to the whole creation (Mat. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8). The Gospel is not to be taken to all men merely because it is one good way among other good ways. Just as Christ is the only way to the Father (John 14:6), so the Gospel is the only way of salvation (Acts 16:17). It alone contains God's saving power (Rom. 1:16). The apostles and other dedicated saints of yore fanned out across the ancient world with the zeal of a people who understood that the message they bore and the author of it were the one and only hope of salvation from

sin. They were bold to proclaim, even before rulers, "And in none other is there salvation: for neither is there any other name under heaven, that is given among men, wherein we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). There is no eternal life apart from Christ!

Verse 13: "These things have I written unto you, that ye may know that ye have eternal life, even unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God."

This verse may be considered as a summary of the purpose of the epistle. There is a striking similarity in this verse to John's statement of purpose in writing his account of the Gospel in John 20:31: "But these things are written that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name." One will note that, while the statements are similar, the stated purposes are not. John wrote his Gospel account to **establish** belief in the Christ. He wrote this epistle to **assure Christians** of the **consequence** of their belief in Christ (eternal life).

The apostle said that saints may "know" that they have eternal life. Gnosticism is generally believed to be the major factor in the background of 1 John. *Gnostic* (lit., "one who knows") and its cognates are based upon the Greek word, *gnosis* ("knowledge"). Gnostics claimed to have a superior, "inside" knowledge of certain spiritual matters, enabling them to sin without guilt. They considered themselves the spiritually "elite." Their doctrines were erroneous and damnable, and they produced utter debauchery and licentiousness in application. Thus, John's reference to knowing certain things (here and elsewhere in his letter) is an example of biting irony and sarcasm directed at the Gnostic heretics. John seems to be saying, "I write that ye may know with a **true** knowledge, not a 'knowledge falsely so called' [1 Tim. 6:20] such as the Gnostics claim."

The subject of "eternal life" was introduced in the immediate context in verses 11 and 12. God testified that He gave unto us eternal life in His Son; the Son and eternal life go together — no one can have one without the other. These verses therefore clearly demonstrate that eternal life is conditional upon being "in the Son." Furthermore, "having the Son" is also conditional. One comes "into Christ" only when one obeys His terms of pardon (Heb. 5:9), which culminate in baptism (Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27). One continues to "have Christ" by faithfully following His Word as a Christian (1 John 1:6; 2:3; 2 John 9). Verse 13 itself shows that eternal life is conditional by indicating that it is given only to those who "believe on the name of the Son of God." God's election of men to eternal life is conditional. Thus, John exposed and refuted the Augustinian/Calvinistic heresy of "unconditional election" long before men first advanced it.

Since eternal life is conditional, the doctrine of "Universalism" is also exposed as utterly baseless and false.

This verse states what is essentially **the major theme** of the New Testament, namely, that only those who believe in Christ have eternal life. There is a parallel between the necessary conclusions from John's statement here and from Luke's in Acts 2:41 and 47. John stated that those to whom he wrote had eternal life and that those to whom he wrote believed "on the name" of Christ. We correctly conclude that only believers in Christ have eternal life. Luke stated that those who were added were the baptized (Acts 2:41) and that those who were added were the saved (v. 47). We correctly conclude that only the baptized were (are) saved.

What is meant by the phrase, *unto you that believe*? Does this mean that all one has to do to have eternal life is merely to give an affirmative nod to the historical and miraculous evidence proving the Deity of Christ? Many so understand this and similar passages from John (e.g., 1 John 5:1, 10) and they vociferously press their conclusion that men are saved at the point of faith without any works of obedience. However, this cannot be John's meaning unless he contradicts himself. John taught that we cannot know Christ unless we keep His commandments (1 John 2:3). Further, he also taught that we cannot **abide** in Christ without keeping His commandments (3:24). Additionally, there is no **proof** of our love for God apart from keeping His commandments (5:3). Since John did not contradict himself, we must understand him to be using *believe* to mean more than mere mental assent to evidences and facts.

Believe is used here in the same sense that *believeth* and *faith* are used in John 3:16 and several other passages. The New Testament writers frequently employed a figure of speech (i.e., "synecdoche") in which a part is made to represent the whole of its class or kind. By this figure of speech Luke referred to both elements of the Lord's supper when he said the disciples met on the first day of the week "to break bread" (Acts 20:7). Paul employed a synecdoche when he told the Athenian philosophers that all men must repent (Acts 17:30), not at all implying that faith, confession, and baptism were unnecessary. John used *believe on the name* here in the same way, including both intellectual faith in Christ and appropriate obedience to the will of Christ demanded by that faith (Jam. 2:20-26).

It will also be helpful to notice that the word for "believe" (*pisteuousin*) is a present tense, active voice participle, meaning belief that had a beginning and was still active – in progress – when John wrote. The sense is: "These things have I written..., even unto you that **are believing**

on the name of the Son of God." John did not write in this passage of a mere one-time, momentary exercise of mental assent to evidence. Rather, the only ones who may know that they have eternal life are only such as **continue to express their faith** by their works. John's own commentary on saving faith is found early in the epistle: "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). Thus, this passage both demonstrates that eternal life is conditional and that the conditions involve a continuous expression of obedient faith rather than a momentary intellectual faith that stands alone.

To what does the *name of the Son of God* refer? *Name*, like *believe*, is a synecdoche, used by John (and other inspired writers) to stand for all of the qualities, traits, and characteristics summed up in *Son of God*. Men can be saved in no other **name** (Acts 4:12). Sins are forgiven through His **name** (1 John 2:12). Gospel preachers go forth for the sake of the **name** (3 John 7). John's reference in this phrase was to those who began to believe and continued to express their faith in Who Christ is and what He did for them. This they did through their loyal obedience to His will. Those *that believe on the name of the Son of God* is actually a description of Christian fidelity. The Lord's own statement of this phrase of the verse is John 8:24: "...except ye believe that I am he, ye shall die in your sins." In contrast to the Gnostics who claimed that Jesus was not the Son of God, as He claimed to be, John wrote that one who refused to so acknowledge Him in word and deed did not and could not have eternal life.

Verses 14-15: "And this is the boldness which we have toward him, that, if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us: and if we know that he heareth us whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions which we have asked of him."

The KJV renders the first clause of this verse, "And this is the confidence we have in him." The conjunction, *and*, with which this verse begins, identifies its thought with the preceding declarations relating to eternal life: (1) God gave those who are in His Son eternal life (i.e., "believers") (vv. 10-11) and (2) believers may know that they have eternal life (v. 13).

The fact that God has been so generous to give us eternal life provokes in us a boldness, confidence, or assurance (*parrhesia*) that He hears us when we pray. Other New Testament writers employ the same word John used to emphasize the confidence and assurance that are ours in Christ. Paul wrote of the **boldness** we have in the Christ and through our faith in Him, because of the Father's eternal purpose of manifold wisdom which He demonstrated through the church (Eph. 3:10-12). The Hebrews writer argued that, because we have an exalted, yet

empathetic, high priest, "Jesus the Son of God," we should "draw near with **boldness** unto the throne of grace" (Heb. 4:14-16, emph. DM).

John's promise concerning boldness in bringing our petitions to God, and that God will hear us when we do, is stated explicitly. However, we must bear in mind the following in considering this wonderful promise: (1) This promise contains a qualification, a condition, or a limiting factor and (2) John's statement here is by no means all that the Bible teaches on the subject of prayer and the conditions of acceptable prayer. The qualification within the passage above is the conditional clause, *if we ask anything according to his will* (emph. DM). God's own Son expressed this very qualification – and He was limited by it – in His thrice-repeated prayer in Gethsemane: "All things are possible unto thee; remove this cup from me: howbeit **not what I will, but what thou wilt**" (Mark 14:36, emph. DM). So ought we always to approach our Father.

Expository Notes On 1 John 5:9-15

1 John – an Arsenal Against both Gnosticism and Agnosticism

John made continual thrusts against Gnosticism and its alleged superior "knowledge" by pointing out various truths that were certain knowledge indeed. John wrote no fewer than 38 times in this epistle about things one can know. He used *ginosko* (in various forms), which refers to knowledge by experience (i.e., "I have been there") twenty-four times. He used *oida* (in various forms), which refers to clear, absolute mental perception (i.e., "I see, I understand") fourteen times. In his repeated references to things a Christian can know John not only exposed the Gnosticism which was rapidly developing in his day, but he also exposed the follies of the more rampant agnosticism of modern philosophy.

While the Gnostics claimed to know things which they did not and could not really know, agnostics claim not to know things they can and should with certainty know.

In fact, the true Agnostic claims that neither he nor anyone else can know **anything** for certain. There is a touch of the Gnostic spirit in some brethren today, particularly those who have adopted a liberal attitude toward Scriptural authority and those who are advocates of the Boston/Crossroads philosophy. However, the greater problem in the Lord's church presently may be a growing agnosticism. The prideful pseudo-sophistication of modern philosophy boasts that it holds no absolutes, either in ethics or knowledge. Some brethren have sat at the feet of such philosophers for graduate and post-graduate studies, and others have read their

writings enough to absorb their agnosticism. The following quotations will provide a small sampling of this growing phenomenon among the brethren:

We are assuming that it [the Bible] is the inspired word of God, though this certainly is also an area in which we should be open to whatever facts are pertinent. Any observer of religion is aware that our problem is a legitimate one.²

And faith, too, is a kind of risk. You can't perfectly prove there is a God. But as Donald Hanke said, "Faith is betting your life on God." Now the odds do seem to some of us overwhelmingly on the side of faith, but the romance of real religion is the romance of a risk. And some of us have flung everything we have into it. Now there are only two alternatives here. God is or He **isn't**. You go one way or the other. And while it's no long shot, it is a risk to believe. But, come to think of it, it is quite a risk not to, isn't it?³

Man can use various scientific tools to understand and reconstruct historical facts, but there is no way by scientific method to **verify** or **disprove** [emp., DM] the accuracy of theological interpretation by the various biblical authors. This must be accepted by faith or rejected by unbelief. The Christian accepts the theological proposition that "all scripture [here meaning the OT, JW] is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16) The Bible claims to be inspired of God (2 Tim. 3:16). There is no **way** to **prove** or disprove **this** claim [emp., DM] absolutely, although arguments have been advanced on both sides of the issue. It must be accepted by faith or rejected by unbelief.⁴

Sensory knowledge (as, seeing a hole in the road and swerving to avoid it) is so reliable one usually takes it for granted. But if one ponders the matter, he would say that such knowledge is not absolute. It is based on assumptions, on steps of faith. Some scientists, spurning and ridiculing faith, boast that they make no assumptions, that they only walk by knowledge, never by faith. Actually, however, before they announce their first example of scientific knowledge, they have taken steps of faith, **assuming without proof** [emp., DM] (1) that the universe is real; (2) that human beings are real; (3) that the assumed human beings have minds; (4) that the assumed minds operate accurately; (5) that nature's laws will be the same tomorrow as today (continuity of uniformitarianism); and (6) that honesty in the laboratory is the best policy. On the personal level, the scientist walks by faith, not knowledge, in pointing out a certain woman as his mother. By knowledge he does not know that he was even born, much less who or what bore him, if anything did.

When Christians claim they have absolute knowledge they make the same mistake as do some scientists. Some are bold to assert that theism is not only the most probable explanation of the universe, but that it cannot possibly be wrong. They are claiming perfect knowledge, a quality belonging only to deity (Job 11:7,8; Psa. 147:5; Rom. 11:33-34). They put themselves in the class with young Elihu ("One that is perfect in knowledge is with thee" — Job 36:4), and in the same class with the "infallible" pope. Intending to be standing forthrightly for the truth, they make themselves vulnerable to unbelievers' ridicule and hurt the cause they love so much.⁵

In the first three quotations such matters as the inspiration of the Bible and the existence of God are thrown up for grabs. Whether or not the Bible is inspired is said to be unprovable. It is left as something that has to be accepted on the basis of "faith," by which is meant assumption. This is at least very near (if indeed it is not the same as) the "leap-in-the-dark" Neo-

orthodox and Existential definition of "faith." Is it only a "probability" that the Scriptures are inspired? Is the very existence of God only a matter in which the odds "...seem to some of us overwhelmingly on the side of faith..."? If these brethren are so uncertain as to say that they **now assume** the Bible to be God's Word, but that they are open to any "pertinent facts" that might indicate otherwise on this "legitimate problem," then their "faith" is shallow and suspect indeed. How better could agnosticism concerning God and His Word be expressed than these brethren have expressed it?

To say that the case for the existence of God or the inspiration of the Bible is unprovable is to say that the evidence is insufficient to warrant either conclusion—for or against. Such prattle is utter blasphemy. Numerous fields of evidence exist, involving both internal and external proofs, which demonstrate by all reasonable and universally accepted criteria that the Bible is not and could not possibly be of human origin. There are likewise many fields of evidence that prove the existence of God beyond any possible doubt.

One cannot read of any such theological mush in the statements of our Lord concerning either the existence of His (and our) Father or of the Bible, as is seen in the exceedingly weak statements on these fundamental matters which appear above. Have some of our brethren forgotten that agnosticism concerning God and the Bible translates directly into agnosticism concerning Christ? Must we merely "assume" that Christ is the Son of God because the "odds seem overwhelming" that He is? Is not the evidence sufficient to provide proof and demonstration beyond mere assumption and a "wishful-thinking" type of "faith"?

If the Lord had been like some brethren, He would have said in John 17:17: "I assume thy word is truth, but I can neither prove nor disprove it. Unless pertinent facts are presented to show otherwise, I will continue in this assumption on this legitimate problem." Again, if the Lord had possessed the kind of "faith" some brethren have expressed, He might have begun the immortal "model prayer" (Mat. 6:9) as follows: "Our Father who I think (but cannot perfectly prove) is in heaven because the odds seem good that thou art and I am willing to take the risk of believing, Hallowed be thy name."

Are we still to "prove all things" and "hold fast to that which is good" (1 The. 5:21)? If so, there must be a proved and provable standard by which to test all things. If this standard is the Bible (which it is), then the Bible itself must be provable as the Word of God (which it is). If I could muster no more certainty of the existence of God and the inspiration of the Bible than

some brethren are now evincing, I think I would just close my Bible and fade quietly into the Secular Humanism that is devouring more and more men.

The fourth quotation above is from a brother who is both beloved and esteemed by this writer. In spite of my affection and respect for him, I believe he has made some statements that are ridiculous at best and confusing and hurtful to the cause at worst. In the article from which his lengthy quotation is taken he must have intended to set forth the means by which we can know that God is (for certainly I know this brother believes this beyond a doubt). It is sad that he ends up arguing the Agnostic viewpoint.

According to him, we can only guess that we live in a real universe, that we ourselves are real, and that we have minds. Further, we must merely assume that we were born and who or what bore us, "if **anything** did"! Now I can't speak for all men, but I would consider myself out of touch with reality if I say that I am not sure that I really exist in an actually existing universe as I sit before a real computer typing these real words on a real keyboard which will soon be printed on real paper! Did I just make up all of these things by "assuming" their existence? Hardly! With all due respect to our brother whose words we are presently analyzing, those who cannot be certain about real things (including the universe, themselves, etc.) are poor souls who often have to be confined both for their own safety and for that of society. Indeed, they need a keeper, a caretaker.

Yet, our brother contends (if I have understood him, and I do not want to misrepresent him) that all of us should hold even the existence of such an obvious and elementary thing as a pothole in the road as a matter of assumption. He suggests that if we "ponder" this matter we might decide that our knowledge of the pothole is not absolute but is based on assumptions. There is a small problem here: while one is pondering whether the pothole is real or merely assumed, he may blow out a tire or lose a wheel in said "assumed" pothole! If we can only "assume" that a pothole is real, what are we to do when it "**looks as though**" a bridge is out? What does this brother do in such circumstances? I **know** what he does.

Our brother sows further confusion by defining "assumptions" as "steps of faith." Biblical faith is not mere assumption. It is conviction resting upon incontrovertible evidence. It relates to actual substance or assurance (Heb. 11:1). Liberal theologians have long defined faith as a mere "leap in the dark," which amounts to no more than an exercise in subjective wishful thinking. The faith men can have in God, His Son, and His Word is not akin to any such philosophical and theological tommyrot. Not only **can** men have an assured faith (conviction,

knowledge) based upon evidence, they **must** have such faith: "And without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing unto him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek after him" (Heb. 11:6). John recorded evidence upon which men could have certain knowledge and assurance of Who Christ was and thereby be saved:

Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name (John 20:30-31).

If we cannot know "beyond the shadow of a doubt" that Christ is the Son of God, how can we know that there is such a thing as salvation or damnation? Why even bother if it is all guesswork?

Agnostic brethren would have preached something different from what Peter preached had they been preaching in Jerusalem on Pentecost. Their statement would have gone something like this: "Let all the house of Israel assume that the supposed God hath possibly made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom (I guess) you may have allegedly crucified." Rather, Peter (speaking by inspiration) conclusively declared: "Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly, that God hath made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom ye crucified" (Act 2:36). *Therefore*, in this passage refers to the irrefutable evidence that had just been presented to the multitude from the signs Jesus wrought among them (v. 22), from His resurrection (vv. 24-33), and from the fulfillment of several prophecies concerning Him (vv. 16-21, 25-35). **Upon this evidence** they could not only know but **know assuredly** that Jesus of Nazareth was (is) "both Lord and Christ." Yes, we can, we must assuredly know at least some things.

Paul did not suggest to the Galatians that they could only **assume** that the Gospel which he preached was of Christ. Rather, he wrote: "For I make known [certify, KJV] to you, brethren, as touching the gospel which was preached by me, that it is not after man" (Gal. 1:11). Nor did he say that, while he couldn't be absolutely sure (after all, we must not claim "a quality belonging only to Deity"), he thought his message did not come from men, but from Christ. Rather, he boldly declared: "For neither did I receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came to me through revelation of Jesus Christ" (v. 12).

Space forbids further multiplication of such statements of Scripture, but they are plentiful. Suffice it to say, the Agnostic position is irrational, irresponsible, and ridiculous, if for no other reason than that it is utterly self-contradictory. It claims to **know absolutely** that no

man can **absolutely know** anything. Or, to put it another way, the only thing that Agnosticism claims one can know certainly is that no can know anything certainly. Let none be scared by the "red herring," "smoke screen" tactic that accuses those who say they can certainly know some things of claiming they can or do know all things. Only a deranged human mind would claim to know all things, because only God is Omniscient. However, one must deny some of the most obvious things pertaining to our existence and some of the most explicit statements of Scripture to deny that we can (yea, must) "know assuredly" **some** things.

"Eternal Life" – Present or Future?

"God gave unto us eternal life" (1 John 5:11). Verse 12 follows by saying that if one has Christ, he has the life and vice versa. Further, verse 13 continues by saying that believers may know that they have eternal life. To what extent (if any) do men have eternal life now? Some claim that God's children have possession of the fullness of eternal life in this present world. Based in part upon this view of this passage (and similar passages), John Calvin arrived at his doctrine of unconditional election and its necessary corollary, the impossibility of apostasy (i.e., if one ever has eternal life, he can never lose it). Several years ago, some brethren adopted the view that we have eternal life now with absolute certainty and that it is sinful to even entertain a fear that we might possibly be lost. I have difficulty seeing much difference in the two positions.

There are other brethren, loved and respected by this writer for their soundness in the faith, who hold the view that, while the fullness of eternal life is yet to come, the Christian enjoys eternal life in a limited sense in this life. These brethren correctly understand (and teach) that there will be no future eternal life without one's living a faithful life on earth. While we continue to enjoy fellowship with them, we respectfully disagree with this viewpoint.

They point out that God **gave** (aorist, past tense) eternal life to believers and that the believer **hath** (present tense) the life. While admitting all of this, it is not convincing to this scribe when compared with like Scriptural phraseology. Numerous times Isaiah (chap. 53) used both the past and present tense to speak of things pertaining to the Lord as if they had already occurred, when they would actually not occur for some seven centuries. They were so certain to occur that God's prophet could speak as if they had already occurred. Could this not be the case with 1 John 5:11-13 and similar statements (e.g., 3:15) concerning eternal life?

Some argue that the "newness of life" (Rom. 6:4) which characterizes one after baptism embraces "eternal life." However, this is merely an assertion. This may simply refer to the new

way of life that results from the sinner's cessation from sin and to the fact that there is a new relationship with God and Christ due to one's being cleansed from sin. Indeed, the context (Rom. 6:1-11) would seem to warrant only this understanding of "newness of life."

These brethren argue that there is a parallel between one's being in God's kingdom now (cf. Col. 1:13) and yet expecting to be in it in a fuller sense later (cf. 2 Pet. 1:11). However, the parallel breaks down when it is seen that the church is definitely identified in Scripture as the kingdom on earth (Mat. 16:18-19; Heb. 12:23, 28, et al.) which Christ will eventually deliver up to the Father (1 Cor. 15:24) to be glorified (Rom. 8:17). There is no such definite identification of the present possession of eternal life, except it be based upon the tenses of the verbs relating to its possession in 1 John 5:11-13 and similar passages. However, I believe I have already dealt adequately with the contention based upon the tenses. Indeed, all the passages that would seem to make of eternal life a present possession of the believer may be understood in such a way as not to demand a present possession, and without doing violence to them.

Many explicit passages (of which we will notice only a few) teach that eternal life is ours now in promise and that it will be realized after the judgment. We have the **promise** of eternal life in the **world to come** (Mark 10:29-30). Flesh and blood cannot inherit the eternal kingdom wherein is eternal life (1 Cor. 15:50-54). We have an **earnest** of our eternal inheritance now, but not the inheritance itself (Eph. 1:13-14). We have the **hope** of eternal life because of God's promise (Tit. 1:2). The incorruptible (eternal) inheritance is not ours now but is **reserved in heaven** for us (1 Pet. 1:4).

John clearly tells us in his first epistle that eternal life is a promise rather than a reality: "And this is the promise which he promised us, even the life eternal" (1 John 2:25). Again, he wrote: "Be- loved, now are we children of God, and it is not yet made manifest what we shall be. We know that, if he shall be manifested, we shall be like him; for we shall see him even as he is" (1 John 3:2). That which is yet a promise is that which has not been received. That which is not yet made manifest is yet in the future. However, the promise of God is so certain to be fulfilled to the faithful that John could speak of it in chapter 5 as having already been given!

A Brief Excursus on Prayer

God's Word sets forth several qualifications for acceptable prayers in addition to that stated by John above. We are to pray:

1. To the Father in the name of His Son (John 14:13; 15:16b; 16:23-24, 26; Eph. 5:20; Col. 3:17).
2. In faith, believing God will hear and answer (Mark 11:24; Jam. 1:6; 5:15).

3. With righteous lives (Psa. 66:18; Pro. 15:8-9; 28:9; John 9:31; Jam. 4:3; 5:16).
4. With the right motive (Mat. 6:5; Luke 18:9-14; 20:47b; Jam. 4:3, 6).
5. Persistently (Luke 11:5-9; 18:1-7; Rom. 12:12; Eph. 6:18; Col. 4:2; 1 The. 5:17; Jam. 5:18).

The Bible repeatedly teaches that God is attentive to the supplications of His faithful children. David stated this treasured promise in beautiful terms: "The eyes of Jehovah are toward the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry" (Psa. 34:15). In spite of this promise, even the Lord's people at times express doubt that God consistently responds to their supplications. Such doubts may in part be explained by failure to distinguish between God's "hearing" prayers and "answering" prayers. In His omniscience, our benevolent Father most certainly "hears" (in the sense of being aware of) every prayer offered (even the prayers of unbelievers and of His reprobate children).

But does God "answer" (in the sense of responding to) every prayer of His righteous people? Many who pray somehow seem to think that if God does not respond in the exact manner and at the very time they expect in their preconception, He is not responding at all. This attitude seeks to impose upon God one's own human inability to know and weigh all of the factors that might be involved in the preconceived fulfillment. We should take note that God, in His unfathomable wisdom, omniscience, and power, responds to prayer in various ways, as indicated in the following:

He may reply with a prompt "Yes." God apparently responded positively and promptly to Elijah's prayers concerning drought and then rain upon Israel (Jam. 5:17-18). Hezekiah (2 Kin. 20:1-7, 11), Daniel (Dan. 2:23), Ezra (8:21-23), Zacharias (Luke 1:13), the saints at Mary's house (Acts 12:12-17), and others all received such a response to their prayers. In some cases, he immediately answered prayers by means of miraculous intervention, but at other times He did so through non-miraculous providence. The age of miracles has ended (1 Cor. 12-13), but God is still mindful of His faithful saints, and He works through natural and providential means at times to respond (sometimes quickly) to our petitions.

He may answer with an absolute "No." This is His consistent answer to those who are living in rebellion to His Word, whether they are Christians or unbelievers (Pro. 28:9; John 9:31; Jam. 4:3-4; et al.). Sometimes He gives a clear negative response to His faithful ones, also. Paul was a righteous man as he earnestly prayed three times that God would remove his "thorn in the flesh." God answered "No," apparently for the apostle's spiritual welfare (2 Cor 12:7-10). The Father did not grant the thrice-repeated prayer of His sinless Son, though He offered them

“with strong crying and tears” (Mat. 26:39–44; Heb. 5:7). On this occasion the Father placed sinful mankind’s redemption above the immediate pleas of His Son, an action with which our Savior fully agreed: “Not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Mat. 26:39). Although our Lord in His infinite wisdom and omniscience knew there was no other means of reconciliation apart from His shed blood, in His finite humanity He pleaded to be spared the extreme suffering, humiliation, and agony of His trials and crucifixion.

Mere human beings cannot see the things God can see. He alone knows what is best for us and for all others who might be affected by the fulfillment of our prayers. Many of us can recall times when we earnestly prayed for a certain circumstance to occur, but were later able to see that God blessed us by saying “No.” When we receive a “No” from God, ultimate trust in Him will cause us to thank Him in submission and humility.

He may say, “Wait awhile.” What we think is a “No” may turn out in time to have been a delay in God’s response. Israel cried to God for deliverance from Egypt through several generations, and many must have concluded that God’s answer was “No.” The Bible reveals that His answer was “Wait awhile.” When the time was right by God’s calendar, He sent Moses to deliver Israel (Exo. 3:9–10). We do not know why it was necessary for their deliverance to be so long delayed, but He Who is infinitely wise and knowledgeable and Who “doeth all things well” deemed it necessary.

Revelation 6 tells us of the pleas of the martyred souls, crying, “How long...dost thou not judge and avenge our blood...?” (v. 10). God did not turn a deaf ear to these faithful ones, but he responded that other events must transpire (of which the martyrs were unaware) before their pleas could be fully satisfied (v. 11). God told them, “Wait awhile.”

If God does not immediately fulfill our petitions, there is a reason, though seldom will we be able to perceive except through hindsight. We may first need to attain greater maturity. Perhaps it is not the place, time, or circumstance. It may be that some other events need to occur first (as with the martyrs of Rev. 6). Maybe God is trying to teach us patience. If the aim of our prayer is worthy, we should continue to pray, even if we never learn the reason(s) for having to wait. The Lord teaches us that we “ought always to pray, and not to faint” (Luke 18:1).

He may say, “It all depends.” God must sometimes say “maybe,” even when the person praying is righteous and when the prayer is in harmony with His will. We are all creatures of free will, which, among other things, means that God will never force His will on any person.

The classic example is that of Abraham's six intercessions for Sodom. God's response was "conditional," depending completely on the choices of the residents of Sodom. Each time Abraham prayed, God answered: "Yes, but it all depends..." (Gen. 18:23-32). When we pray for civil authorities that we might "lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and gravity" (1 Tim. 2:2), the outcome rests not only with God, but with the hearts of our rulers. God "would have all men to be saved" (v. 4), but the outcome of my prayer that a specific unbeliever will be saved involves the free will of that sinner. If he cannot be brought to repentance, it is impossible for God to answer my prayer for him because God will not force anyone to be saved. The same is true of every prayer that involves our supplications regarding the behavior of others (e.g., prayers of parents that their children will remain faithful, that abortion will be ruled illegal, that our nation may regain the respect for the Bible that once prevailed, that liberals in the church will repent, et al.). It is impossible for God to answer any such prayers – by His self-imposed limitation – that would require Him to override man's free will.

Let us ever be slow to accuse our loving, gracious Creator of not answering or responding to our prayers. He not only hears, He also responds to the prayers of His faithful children, but He does so in a variety of ways.

Conclusion

What a marvelous God we have who sent His Son into this world for sinful men and gave sufficient testimony to provoke belief in Him in any honest heart. What a wonderful Savior we have, the One alone in Whom we may have eternal life. What ironclad certainty of eternal life we have if we faithfully serve Him. What a precious promise we have that our God, through the name of His Son, hears and responds to the prayers of His faithful children.

Endnotes

1. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
2. Harold Hazelip, Herald of Truth TV sermon no. 986 ("The Search for Truth"), quoted by B.G. Clinton, Hoyt M. Blodgett, Jim F. Harper, "Highland Report," *Contending for the Faith*, ed. Ira Y. Rice, Jr., 4 (Nov. 1973): 7.
3. Lynn Anderson, tape of radio program (June 16, 1981), Abilene, TX, quoted by Pat McGee, "Lynn Anderson on the Existence of God," *Contending for the Faith*, ed. Ira Y. Rice, Jr., 12 (Nov. 1981): 1.
4. John T. Willis, *The World and Literature of the Old Testament*, ed. John T. Willis (Austin, TX: Sweet Pub. Co., 1979), pp. 7, 11.
5. Hugo McCord, "Faith and Knowledge," *Gospel Advocate*, ed. Furman Kearley, (Aug. 2, 1984): 457.

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