

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 in 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, John gave his readers four answers to the question, "Why should we have confidence?" His reasons were addressed to ordinary Christians like we are. He gave reasons that we can use to build our confidence to eternal life.

How can we have confidence? Reason #1: because of the Spirit He has given.

1 Jn 3:24-4:6 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 it 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.]

We have confidence because of the Spirit. I believe that the Spirit of whom John wrote here (verse 3) refers to the miraculous powers of the apostolic age, specifically to the gift of prophecy, because John's example in verse 1 is of prophets. This is not to discount the Spirit that lives within us. It is not that God does not act today. The New Testament is clear when it tells us about the work of the Spirit that dwells within us, this gift that all Christians share who grants us

wisdom if we ask without doubting (James 1) and who helps us pray (Romans 8) and who provides moral fiber and strength of character. But that indwelling Spirit is not John's subject in this place.

There were those in John's time who spoke by the Spirit of God. Some of what they said has been preserved for us as the New Testament. But, as in every age, there were those who only claimed to speak for God, perhaps by self-delusion, perhaps by design. How were the ordinary Christians of John's time, and of our time, supposed to tell which was which?

History can shed a little light on the situation to which John refers. There were some in John's day who claimed to speak for God, who preached that Jesus had not been real, only a spirit, having no real human body. That led to a whole book of high sounding but totally false conclusions. The early Christians were getting confused. "Who's right?" Their confidence in the simple gospel was being shaken. The false prophets were using that age-old put-down, "You just don't understand."

John told them, "Have confidence in what you have believed. Don't be closed minded, but there must have been good reasons why you believed before. Have confidence while you investigate. Test those who claim to be from God. If they are from God, they will survive the test. The others won't" Apparently, God does not mind at all when we are just a little bit skeptical, when we check the messenger.

Further, John says, "Don't be disturbed by the size of their following. The world wants to hear their kind of message. Have confidence."

That's all very interesting, but what good does that do me? In this age of television evangelists, healers, and self-made prophets with large followings, it is easy to have your confidence shaken. How can I argue against someone who says God spoke to him?

Zechariah 13, Daniel 9, 1 Corinthians 13, and Revelation 11 all say quite clearly that prophets ended with the destruction of Jerusalem. Actually, the confidence builder from John has a lot to do with us. We must still test the spirits to see whether they are from God. We can safely put them off during the investigation because the probability is low that they are true. Of course, we don't want to be like the Pharisees who saw Jesus perform miracles and argued theory. Today's self-proclaimed prophets may have big followings, but that should not shake our confidence. The Spirit of God has spoken and we have His message. Investigate confidently.

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

I Jn 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.

Love is a vague term. It is easy to say, "I love God" or "I love the brethren." Love is hard to measure. When people say they love God, and they teach something different than what I have read in the Scriptures, 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 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. And remember what love is: to do what is best for the other person regardless of how it affects me.

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 Jn 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 in some point in the past, there must have been a basis for that belief. If someone has you questioning now, have confidence that you make 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.

I Jn 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 is not a part of the Christian life; confidence is. And what about that perfect love? John told us what it is back in verse 12, "If we love one another, God abides in us and His love is perfected 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.

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.