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Is Anyone Truly a Christian?

Non-Christians generally accept a person's claim to be a Christian without hesitation. If a person claims that he or she is a Christian, non-believers typically take their word for it. And rational individuals usually grant that other adults are mature enough to identify themselves accurately and honestly upon first meeting them. And generally speaking, Christian believers themselves are happy with this situation: they typically expect non-Christians to accept their self-identification as Christians at face value.

Christians themselves, however, are not nearly so accepting. To be sure, they expect others to accept their own self-identification as Christians. But they are not always so accepting of the claims of other individuals to be Christians as well. Internal squabbles among Christians, complete with accusations of heresy and denunciations of deviant practice, are commonplace and have colored the landscape of Christendom since its earliest days. Even in his letters to the churches he had planted, the apostle Paul warned Christians of imposters, contributing from Christianity's first moments to the "who can you trust?" atmosphere of Christian "fellowship."

A House Divided

Hopelessly splintered and fragmented into warring factions divided by doctrinal schisms, competing interpretations, divergent eschatological speculations, even differences on which apologetic method is proper, the "body of Christ" which is the church (cf. I Cor. 12:27 et al.) is anything but a unified whole. Even if a non-Christian were curious about becoming a Christian, how would he determine which version of Christianity is authentic, especially given the irreconcilable differences between many of those versions, and the claims they make to enjoying exclusive authorization from on high? Mark 3:25 puts the following words into Jesus' mouth:

if a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand.

As prophecy, this statement surely fails, for the "house" of Christianity has persisted for some two thousand years - it has *stood* - not simply *in spite of* its internal divisions, but very probably *because of* the ambiguities in its teachings which have not only enabled those divisions, but which have allowed Christianity to assimilate a broad spectrum of cultures.

The irreversibly fractured condition in which we find Christianity today does not deter its members from actively seeking to increase the fold with new converts. From street preachers ranting at intersections to missionaries traveling into remote corners of the earth, from televangelists fortified with call centers to internet apologists looking to pick a fight, Christianity's hucksters are never in short supply.

Apologists for Christianity usually acknowledge the internal divisions within Christianity when prompted, but hasten to chalk them up to concessions to "sin" on the part of the offending sects' enthusiasts. Of course, apologists can be expected to distance themselves from the baddies. There is only one "true Christianity," and - *Whew!* - the apologist you've stumbled upon just so happens to adhere to that single version which is blessed with the Lord's stamp of approval. Implicit in all the criticisms, condemnations and sniping which apologists will hurl against competing forms of Christianity, is the unstated assurance that the apologists issuing those negative appraisals are endowed with an understanding bearing divine authorization. We are to assume that they are "certified pure," as it were. When a Calvinist, for instance, pens a lengthy polemic against Arminian policies, the Calvinist naturally expects his readers to assume that his version of Christianity is biblically authentic. With all the faults cited against the opposing version of Christianity, it is likewise expected to be assessed as unauthorized and contrary to the true message of the biblical text. Practitioners of the offending version of Christianity, then, tend to be viewed as at-best misguided believers, even heretics of a sort, actively distorting the "Word of God" and inducing unsuspecting newcomers to a false religion.

"You were never a Christian"

A vast number of those who are critical of Christianity, considered themselves at one time in their lives to be Christians as well. They were raised in a church, or in their teens or twenties had a conversion experience which sometimes led to a prolonged period of indoctrination and immersion within a community of believers. Such critics have the advantage of informing their objections against the Christian worldview with firsthand experience as an insider.

However, those who are presently Christian insiders are typically anxious to discount a defector's qualifications as a one-time genuine insider. Believers will happily report that you weren't really a Christian all those years after all. (Somehow he knows this, even though he was never there.) This denial serves two immediate purposes for the believer. First, it gives him license to discredit the critic's understanding of Christian doctrine and, by extension, his objections to the faith, by reasoning that his involvement in Christianity was inauthentic, superficial, or tarnished by false doctrine (there are so many of these that such speculations have a high initial likelihood in his mind). Second, it helps the believer squelch any fears that he may have that one day he, too, may depart from the faith. The believer, we shall find, is in fact so riddled with anxiety about his own standing in the faith that any conjecture plausibly assuaging his salvation doubt, even if only momentarily, is welcome. The very existence of non-believers is sufficiently discomfiting for the believer; the existence of those who have defected from the faith is near intolerable, and discrediting them is of utmost importance.

When defenders of Christianity gleefully tell former Christians who are now critical of Christianity, that they really weren't Christians after all, the immediate evidence which they cite to support this denunciation is their present state of non-belief, even their antagonism toward the Christian worldview. To justify this move, apologists will point to I John 2:19, which states:

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.

The thinking here seems to be that, if one were truly a Christian in the past, he would not have turned from Christianity and taken up a critical view of "the Lord." This perspective in turn implicitly affirms the "once saved always saved" conception of Christian soteriology. In Calvinism, this belief corresponds to the doctrine known as the "perseverance of the saints." But this raises a question which, for the believer, hits too close for comfort.

The Question of One's Assurance of Salvation

Implicit throughout all of this is the underlying implication that, on Christianity's terms, a person can *believe* that he is saved *without truly being saved*. In other words, a person can believe that he is a Christian when in fact, according to all the doctrinal hair-splitting of the Christian tradition's many gatekeepers, he is not a Christian at all. Apologists who rely on this strategy to dismiss criticisms of their worldview open a can of worms that will come back to haunt him. The root issue here is not the solvency of the former believer's understanding of Christianity, but a believer's *assurance of salvation*. If the former Christian's objections can be defused by arguing that he wrongly believed that he was a genuine Christian way back when, it is equally plausible to suppose that the apologist wrongly believes that he is saved, and that his defenses of Christianity are consequently defective. Since defenders want to make the matter personal, we have every right to ask what assurance the apologist provides us that *his* salvation is biblically secure.

The topic of the believer's assurance of salvation is a mainstay of the preacher's pulpit. Assurance of one's salvation is a persistent problem for believers, and it is a matter with which pastors must continually wrestle. Pastor Tim Conway, whose YouTube sermon "[Do You Want Assurance of Salvation?](#)" was endorsed on the blog [Grace in the Triad](#), discusses the matter at length. Reacting to the mind-shattering reverberations which believers experience as a result of salvation doubt, Conway states (7:36 - 9:13):

...the truth is, when assurance is lacking, life here on earth is anything but sweet. Right? I mean, if you've ever lacked assurance, you know that to be true. Or if you've ever watched somebody that lacks assurance, you just see the kind of misery written all over their face. You don't need to be a

Christian long, you don't need to look far, before you run into somebody that does lack assurance. In fact, I believe that we may be in somewhat of an assurance crisis today. I mean, I get emails and I get phone calls on a regular basis from people who are struggling with assurance. ...It seems to me that it's a problem. I don't think it's new to our generation. I think it's actually one that the church has known throughout the centuries, and even the millennia. I believe that because, why in the world would Thomas Brooks have even written a book like he did 360 years ago on Christian assurance... unless it was his pastoral juices flowing towards those that he saw were struggling, and so he put his pen to paper in an attempt to help them. And that's probably what was happening. And you know what the reality is? The reality is that anybody who professes to be a Christian, their assurance is gonna get tested by the Word of God itself! Right? This is a very common text, "but not everybody who says to me 'Lord, Lord' is gonna enter the kingdom of heaven, but the ones who the will of my father in heaven."

So according to Conway, assurance of salvation among Christians is in crisis today, and probably has been since the inception of Christianity. (Indeed, a close reading of the New Testament epistles will reveal that challenges to maintaining faith among believers are nothing new.) Notice that immediately Conway points out that the first thing that will challenge the believer's assurance in his own salvation is the bible itself. The dirty little secret is that assurance of salvation is something which every believer desperately yearns for, but can never attain, for the biblical text - particularly in the New Testament - is strewn with devices which will only sabotage one's religious confidence.

"Right from the Garden of Eden," writes Edmund D. Cohen in his book *The Mind of the Bible-Believer*

we find concern expressed about God's children's failure to get it through their heads that God means what he says, that they are to suffer when they neglect to take him at his word, and if they keep it up flagrantly enough for long enough some foreign aggressor will be empowered by God to bring them under captivity. (pp. 270-271)

If "God's children" have had a history of failing "to get it through their heads that God means what he says" since Adam and Eve, how much more urgent is the issue of determining *what* "God means" when the texts supposedly representing its will are so stubbornly resistant to clear and accessible interpretation? Realizing that the Christian god means what it says is one thing, but understanding what it says is where the problems really begin to bubble up for the individual believer. And with so many competing interpretations and rivaling theologies carrying the banner of Christianity, the urgency of this matter cannot be overemphasized.

So naturally the believer, particularly if he is conscientious about his faith, is going to be concerned about whether or not he is fulfilling any requirements which the bible places on him for being saved. So the first order of business for him in this interest is determining what if any requirements for salvation are laid out in the bible. The search for a "salvation formula" in the biblical text yields some perplexing if not disquieting discoveries. Does one merely need to "confess with [his] mouth the Lord Jesus" and "believe in [his] heart that God hath raised him from the dead" (Rom. 10:9) to be saved? Does one merely need to "call upon the name of the Lord" in order to "be saved" (Rom. 10:13)? Does one need to be "baptized... in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and... receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 2:38)? Neither of these passages mention repentance. But in Acts 3:19, we read: "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord." Does one need to "confess [his] sins" in order to be "forgiven" and "cleansed" of "all unrighteousness" (cf. I John 1:19)? Is one to be "baptized in the name of the Lord" (Acts 10:48), "baptized with the Holy Ghost" (Acts 11:16), or baptized "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Mt. 28:19)? What exactly is the proper formula for attaining salvation, or is there a formula to begin with?

Contributing to the salvation doubt which the believer hopes effectively to conceal from others (from both believers and non-believers), is the tension which he will continually experience between the lofty promises of salvation on the one hand, and the mentally destabilizing undercurrents of numerous biblical passages vying against his assurance of those promises. He will frantically scour his life in search of evidences confirming his salvation, but in doing so he will only find telltale signs that his salvation is in jeopardy. When he searches the bible for reassurance, he finds warnings which only increase the sting of his doubts. When he prays to his savior, he is overcome with overwhelming confabulations of inferiority, privately wondering how he - a pathetic puny human being still soiled with the indelible residue of Adam's sin - can approach the imaginary

throne of Christ without having been fully cleansed of past stains and lingering offenses. Pleas for purification are uttered to something the believer only imagines, so naturally the lack of a verbal response will leave the believer wondering and unsatisfied. His doubts will only continue to haunt him as a result.

Compounding this tension is the effort which maintaining the Christian worldview requires the believer to expend in order to straddle two horns of a fundamental moral contradiction: on the one hand, he champions a worldview which excoriates selfishness, while on the other hand this worldview compels the believer to waste precious psychological energy continually worrying about himself, particularly his standing with “the Lord” and his eternal destiny. How can he know *for sure* that his name is written in the Book of Life? With numerous points of psychological tension conflicting the believer at various levels of his inner personal experience, both conscious and unconscious, the believer’s entire psyche is haunted by pangs of guilt which occupy his awareness whose causes he labors in futile effort to outrun.

In wrestling with the issue of assurance of salvation, Conway draws attention to various points which are apparently supposed to help lift the believer out of the pit of his crisis. Sadly, nothing Conway says is up to the task. For example, one point which he emphasizes to believers is the premise that the believer’s assurance has an object. He states (32:32 - 36:10):

Observation six. There is an object of our assurance. Notice it. Back to Hebrews 6:11. “We desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end.” Now this is where we begin to get to the meat of the matter. Biblical Christian assurance has an object. The object according to Hebrews 6:11 is hope. Now, now stay with me here. You don’t want to miss this. What is hope? Hope? Hope is always looking future. Hope isn’t about what we have already. Hope isn’t about what we see. Hope isn’t about what we possess. Hope is future-oriented. Hope has to do with something future, something out there. Hope in the eyes of the world... Think with me about hope, when the world says that they hope for something. That hope is nothing more than their desire. “I hope I win the lotto.” It’s their desire, often a corrupt one, which is couched in uncertainty. When they say “I hope I win the lotto,” and you ask them, “Do you really think you’re gonna?” “Well, I hope it won’t rain next week.” You see, there’s no certainty in that. It’s not built on anything that’s gonna give you real confidence that it’s gonna happen. “I hope brother Tim won’t preach long today.” I mean, there’s no certainty that’s gonna happen, right? But that’s the way the world tal... We talk that way a lot. And we use the word often that way. But it expresses uncertainty. But when we talk... Listen, when the Bible talks, you got hope, and what’s... what’s comin’ like the engine before it? Hope is the caboose here. It’s being towed along by full assurance. You don’t find any... any notion of uncertainty in this. And even if the full assurance wasn’t there, hope in the bible is hope with a certainty. It’s hope with expectation. It’s not these uncertainties. Brethren, there’s a basis of expectation, there’s a basis for the hope of what we have. Brethren, I mean think with me here. Isn’t ... Can you see a difference between “Well, we’re havin’ a company picnic next Tuesday, this coming Tuesday, and I see there’s a thirty percent chance of rain. I hope it won’t rain.” But it’s not like, it’s not like there’s any expectancy, it’s not like they have any power, or know anybody with pow... - unless of course they know the Lord - but, there’s no certainty in that. There’s a difference for the Christian saying, “I have a hope of being saved to the uttermost.” There’s certainty in that. You say, “What’s the certainty?” Brother, that’s what this book of Hebrews is all about! You find Christ the radiance of the glory of God. You find him creating. You find him sustaining. You find him the exact image. You find him calling God. Your throne O God is forever and ever...

Throughout this entire speech, Conway provides an exquisite example of someone desperately trying to find his way out of a maze and continually stumbling into its booby traps. His stated aim is to prove that one’s salvation can be assured, that one can be certain that he is saved. He starts off in this section by saying that one’s assurance has an object, and that this object is *hope*. Sadly, he has already left the believer behind, because his crisis is that he is not certain in his salvation, not yet anyway. But now the believer is being told that the object of this certainty, the object of the assurance of salvation which the bible offers, is merely a hope. Immediately Conway sabotages his own efforts here by pointing to what the world means by hope, and showing that there’s no certainty in it. But Conway assures us that biblical hope is somehow different. How is it different? Conway does not make this clear at all. In fact, it is troubling how flustered Conway comes across in reaction to the problem he’s made of the matter, going as he does by the bible’s own self-sabotaging prompts. Even Conway’s metaphor of hope being the caboose and assurance being the engine fails to deliver:

it only shows how viciously circular the whole affair is. But even this metaphor, whatever its supposed value, is nullified when he says “even if the full assurance wasn’t there, hope in the bible is hope with a certainty.” This just leaves us with the image of a caboose with no engine to pull it, as though it weren’t needed after all. The real aim here is not to satisfy a rational need, but simply to keep a fantasy alive, and that is why the project which Conway set out to tackle is doomed to failure.

The only way that Conway can find out of the mess he has created here, is to whip up the crowd in a fervent, firey frenzy, thus redirecting attention away from the matter he is speaking on - namely assurance of salvation - to a rallying fit of emotionalism, all the while hoping that no one notices that he has more pieces than he started out with. I can only suppose that any believers really paying attention to what Conway said here, must have really felt let down by it all. For after all the whooping and jubilation of calling out to the Christian god, the problem of assurance of salvation remains, and with no solution in sight.

The Apologist’s Hope in Pretense

Now of course, apologists anxious to win arguments and prevail in debates, are not likely to admit that they wrestle with salvation doubt. To do so would undermine the assurance which they strive to project in the face of opposition to their god-belief. It certainly would not work to the apologist’s advantage to come clean about his own doubts in the heat of debate. He’s not likely to say, “Yes, you have a point there about evil indiscriminately preying on believers and non-believers alike, and while I’ve wrestled with this problem psychologically for many years, I still have not found a satisfying answer to this problem.” Rather, he can be expected to fault *you* for some moral indiscretion which he will only identify in such general terms that it seems plausible in his mind, never really answering the objection that you’ve raised (and never letting on that he has no answer to it).

To maintain his participation in his religion, the believer must maintain an exterior which masks and conceals a turbulent inner psychological experience which involves traumatic levels of uncertainty and anxiety. Cohen observes:

All the while that the believer is “witnessing” and “testifying” to the effect that his religion has given him something to hear, see, touch or handle, or something even better in lieu of those, he is stifling in inner apprehension that he has had no such thing. The more he stifles it, the worse the irritation of nagging bad conscience gets, since stifling that sense of bad conscience without coming consciously to terms with its cause is inherently a dishonest thing to do. So he stifles it all the harder, to keep the apprehension down, out of awareness. This self-generating, “vicious cycle” is greatly amplified by the presence of lurid, scandalous implications in the pertinent biblical content. By having the biblical content implicate not only otherwise neutral matters made taboo by biblical prohibitions but aspects of one’s own personality that would be taboo in any civilized society as well, an immensely powerful dissociation (or repression) pertaining to those ideas, avoiding unsettling conscious confrontation with their implications, can be triggered. (*The Mind of the Bible-Believer*, p. 249)

Over time, the believer can become quite skilled at carrying on airs, at outwardly projecting pious confidence in his religious beliefs and assurance of his salvation while doing his best to repress within the private confines of his psychology the unquenchable doubts upon which the entire project of his faith-preserving efforts relentlessly teeters.

When confronted with non-believers, the believer already has at his disposal a scheme by which he aims to dispel criticisms of his religious belief system. Broadly speaking, he seeks to characterize non-believers as having a “problem” - i.e., a congenital disorder inherent in non-belief as such, one which is not fundamentally philosophical, but which rather stems from the depravity inherent in the non-believer as an unregenerate “image-bearer.” “The problem of unbelief,” writes Chris Bolt in [this blog entry](#), “is first spiritual, then moral, and only then intellectual.” Presuming this to be the case underlying “unbelieving thought” as such, and therefore underlying any criticism of the biblical worldview, allows the believer to avoid handling criticisms of Christianity in a sustained philosophical manner. As Cohen points out,

The substance of the non-biblical view confronting the believer becomes completely irrelevant. Inasmuch as all merely human views are inherently defective, the *argumentum ad hominem* becomes a

fair argument, and the blow is softened by that argument's equal validity and "impartial" applicability against all, including the Christian if he weakens and lets his thinking stray outside biblical premises. Critical thinking about human affairs is simply despised of as futile. (*The Mind of the Bible-Believer*, p. 179)

Bolt himself offers a poignant example of this in action in the very blog entry cited above. He writes:

A former classmate who serves as a professor at the college level sometimes has students who come to his office expressing doubt about the existence of God. Before engaging them in any sort of intellectual conversation, he wisely asks such students, "What sin are you currently struggling with?"

When it comes to the question of the Christian god's existence, the believer is to treat all instances of doubt as indicative of the presence of "sin," even if it is he who is experiencing such doubts, thus allowing him to defuse the philosophical gravity of any objection that might be thrown up against belief in the Christian god's existence and shift the focus of attention on the personal affairs of the individual expressing or contemplating the doubts in question. Objections, then, are never to enjoy a fair hearing in the believer's court, for they are presumed to be invalid and arising from depravity from the very start. In the same blog entry, Bolt offers the following rationale for relying on *ad hominem*:

the problem is with the unbeliever. It is not with the evidence. More evidence will not change a thing. Only repentance from sin and trust in Jesus Christ. That includes sins of the intellect. The whole person must turn from evil to good, for Christ is Lord and Savior of the whole person.

By framing the issue in terms of the non-believer being evil and needing to "turn from evil to good," the believer cons himself into imaging his own self as some kind of soldier in a cosmic battle between good and evil, thus allowing him to ignore the philosophical content of a critic's objections, since there's something far more important going on here, at least in his mind. The rational integrity of one's ideas is of no concern; being on the right side of the war between supernatural good and this-worldly evil is vastly more important. Unfortunately for the believer, this means that the notion of "sins of the intellect" includes applications of this-worldly means of knowledge (i.e., *reason*), which is condemned in the biblical text (cf. I Cor. 3:19 et al.), especially if it leads a thinker to anti-biblical conclusions (which it does time and time again).

As Cohen rightly points out:

While the Bible does not explicitly say that independent thinking is the cardinal sin - to do so would give away the game - ... it is the crux of any biblically authentic definition of sin, one particularly incompatible with doing the devotional program. (Op. cit., p. 179)

Apologists like to maintain that there is more than sufficient evidence for their god's existence, but the non-believer's own depravity prevents him from recognizing it as such. Believers may be happy to congratulate themselves for the apparent cleverness of such maneuvers, but in fact their implementation only highlights the philosophical insecurity of their god-beliefs: if the philosophical integrity of their worldview were in fact as unimpeachable as apologists style it, it seems that they would be more willing to recognize that an individual's personal affairs are irrelevant to the question of a particular objection's claim to validity. But apologists won't have any of that.

When it comes to discussions of evidence, however, we must ask: what evidence does the apologist have to inform his own sought-after assurance of his own salvation? On this question the bible is especially unhelpful. One cannot point to "works" ("lest any man should boast" - Eph. 2:9), or "fruits" ("ye shall know them by their fruits" - Mt. 7:16), for salvation is not preconditional to either "works" or "fruits," and they can be outwardly mimicked by non-Christians, whether it be almsgiving, prayer, fellowship (think of Judas before he defected), church attendance, etc. Even "speaking in tongues," which in itself is a controversial topic among various denominations, fails as an indicator of salvation for it does not produce actual language, but rather inarticulate vocalizations seemingly approximating the rhythm of speech, but no more meaningful than grunting and groaning. The Christian bible even includes examples of marvels who were not "of Christ." So what evidence assures us that any particular person is truly saved?

In answer to this question, Cohen makes the following point:

What does the Bible have to say about indicators of salvation? It cannot be emphasized too strongly that the Bible gives only this, for a working definition, as a criterion observable or distinguishable by the believer: "...he that shall endure unto the end, the same will be saved." [Mt. 24:13] The point that a true saint of the church can be known only when the entire span of his life is known is made numerous times in the New Testament. Apparently, one cannot measure a saint until he is dead. Examples in the early church of individuals who wanted to be Christians, but turned out in the long run to lack the right stuff, include Judas, Ananias, Sapphira, and Simon the Sorcerer; in the later church period, whole ostensible churches, or even the majority of them, outwardly professed faith but were condemned. (*The Mind of the Bible-Believer*, p. 20)

(Passages which Cohen cites in regard to a saint being known qua saint "only when the entire span of his life is known," are: Matt. 10:22; 24:12-51; 25:1-13; Mark 13:13, 35-37; Luke 12:35-40, 42-48; 21:19; Rom. 2:7; 8:25; I Thess. 5:2-8; I Tim. 4:16; 2 Tim. 2:12; 4:7; Heb. 3:12, 14; James 1:12; 5:11; Rev. 2:17; 3:3-13; 13:10, and 16:15. Passages which Cohen cites regarding "whole ostensible churches, or even a majority of them" being "condemned" are: 2 Cor. 22:13-15, 26; Phil. 1:15, 17-18; 1 John 2:19; and Rev. chaps. 2 and 3.)

If a believer's salvation cannot be assured until his whole life has passed, then assessing the security of his salvation will never be conclusive so long as he remains among the living. So long as a believer is still living, the possibility remains, regardless of how improbable he might want to characterize it, that he may defect from the faith sometime in the future. And should he depart from the faith, this can only mean, on his own reasoning, that he was never truly a Christian, for we are reminded of what I John 2:19, states, the very passage which the apologist himself cited in discounting a critic's claims to being a former Christian:

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.

Neither the believer nor Christianity's critics can say with any assurance that the believer will *not* depart from Christianity at some future point in his lifetime. And since many, many self-professed Christians have defected from the faith in the past (high-profile examples include everyone from Dan Barker to Farrell Till to Michael Sudduth, etc.), the possibility of departure from Christianity cannot be denied on the part of any believer who has not yet died. So the only assurance we have on this matter seems to be the assurance of uncertainty in regard to any particular believer's actually being saved.

But even in the case of deceased believers, do we have any assurance that any of them were truly saved? What evidence do we have that another self-professing Christian, now passed on, "endured to the end"? It is believed that the apostle Paul died in Rome under Caesar's orders. But how do we know that Paul did not renounce his faith while awaiting execution, or even before this, or that he only *believed* that he was saved when in fact he really wasn't? How about John Calvin? What assurance do we have that he "endured to the end" in the faith and was really saved? How about Charles Hodge, the 19th century Presbyterian theologian and a leading proponent of Calvinism in America? What assurance do we have that he was truly saved and "endured to the end"? We can ask the same questions about Cornelius Van Til and Greg Bahnsen, both champions of presuppositional apologetics. How can we be sure that these individuals were truly saved and actually numbered among "the elect"? If they didn't, how can one have any confidence in their teachings? If we cannot be assured of their salvation, how can we be assured of the authenticity of their teachings? Do those who initially promoted Michael Sudduth's book *The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology* still go around touting it as a great scholarly work? Or, is it now soiled given the present state of Sudduth's personal affairs?

Conclusion

Remember that it is the apologist who wants to make matters personal. He wants to reserve the right to discount what a critic says about Christianity on the assumption that, as a non-Christian, he has internal spiritual, moral and intellectual problems which he cannot overcome and which discolored his ability to think straight on such matters. Unfortunately, the apologist himself cannot give us any assurance that he himself is immune to these same forces (let alone legitimate evidence that they exist), for he cannot give us any assurance of his own soteriological security or spiritual integrity. The bible's own prescription for assessing whether or not one has truly been saved - namely knowing if a saint has "endured to the end" (Mt. 24:13) - only secures doubt, not assurance.

So if the apologist tells you that you were never truly a Christian, point out that the reasoning underlying his denial implies that we have no certainty that *he* is truly a Christian as well. Numerous factors vie against his claim to being certain of his Christian inheritance, none of which he can overcome. For instance, given the vast number of schisms, factions, divisions and conflicting interpretations and schools of thought within Christianity, many of which are incompatible with others, we have no reason to suppose that the apologist just so happens to adhere to the proper version of Christianity (for Christians going back to the apostle Paul do insist that there is such a thing). So far as the apologist himself knows, it is possible that he has fallen under the spell of some rogue interpretation which departs from the will of the Christian god. Since he believes that supernatural forces can and do influence human thinking, even to the point of deceiving them, he has no way of proving that he has not himself been so deceived.

Moreover, given the fact that the bible itself undermines assurance of salvation through the use of a multitude of devices which keep the believer continually off-balance (we sampled only a few above), and since the bible's only recommended form of evidence vouching for a believer's salvation is "enduring to the end," no apologist can say with any certainty that he is truly saved or that he will not depart from the faith sometime in the future, as many have, and as many will. If "enduring to the end" is the only sure evidence of salvation, the apologist has no proof that he is saved so long as he is living. And if departing from the faith voids the claim to ever having been a Christian to begin with, then so long as there remains any possibility that the apologist will defect from Christianity at some point in the future, we have no certainty that he is saved even now. Such a possibility is, as Alvin Plantinga might put it, "inscrutable" (*Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 240). His insistence that he will not leave Christianity in the future may have its sentimental charm, but it is the same report many former believers made while they were yet in the clutches of the faith. So such insistence is worthless.

I'm glad these aren't my problems.

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [6:00 AM](#)