

# A Portrait of Christ-Honoring Confidence

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*Is not your fear of God your confidence, and the integrity of your ways your hope? (Job 4:6)*

*Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:16)*

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Nathan sits staring at the phone. With sweaty palms, he has already dialed the first six digits of her number eleven times. Each time he hangs up, goes to the mirror, and rehearses his introductory remarks. He knows she asked her friends to ask his friends to ask him to call her, but still it seems so “risky.” If only he had the nerve to call and ask her out.

Emily has the resume and qualifications to secure a much better job than the one she is currently in. Yet every time she reviews a new position she begins to imagine the more qualified people who must be applying for this job, becomes intimidated, and decides to wait for something that is a “better fit.”

Jerry has never struggled with a lack of confidence a day in his life. Actually, his lack of appropriate inhibition has gotten him into trouble on more than one occasion. Risks are no big deal. He enjoys the thrill. Jerry assumes that if something goes awry he is smart enough, articulate enough, athletic enough, and well-connected enough to get himself out of it.

Nathan, Emily, and Jerry’s struggles appear different: social awkwardness, professional reticence, and flamboyant pride. They vary in ages, gender, and have different roles in life. Yet each needs to understand biblical confidence. In each case an excessive focus on self (either in deprecation or aggrandizement) contributes to a dysfunctional approach to life. Their solution to distorted confidence should involve a radical shift in focus from self to Christ.

## Defining “Biblical Confidence”

**Biblical confidence** is the demeanor that exhibits a positive expectation that God will enable us to accomplish every good work He has ordained for us to do. This demeanor results in an increasingly shorter period of hesitation and anxiety when attempting a task, and a greater degree of joy and fulfillment while planning, carrying out, and evaluating a task.

This article focuses on how to develop this type of demeanor in a Christ-centered fashion. Your goal in reading the rest of the article is to identify beliefs, fears, values, expectations, and interpretations of life which interfere with your experiencing biblical confidence. Questions are provided at the end of the article to assist you in reflecting on the material and gaining personal insight into your struggle with confidence.

This definition of confidence overlaps with other components in this series on a Christ-honoring alternative to self-esteem. Two of the overlapping areas are worth noting.

**Purpose:** Confidence, as defined above, requires knowing the *good works God ordained for you to do*. This is an issue of purpose. Biblical confidence will require some degree of understanding your purpose. For the time being, your sense of purpose may be very broad. The Westminster Confession provides a good starting point, “What is the chief end of man? The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” Whatever specifics God adds to your purpose will emerge from this foundation.

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**Wisdom:** Decreasing the delay and anxiety in acting requires not only the willingness to act, but also the wisdom to know how to act. Ill-advised, blind faith is not biblical confidence. Confidence is only a virtue when it is rooted in understanding. Confidence without wisdom is emboldened foolishness.

### Three Pieces of Confidence

Confidence, as with many virtues, is not a thing that can be attained directly. The more we try to *be* confident, the more we miss the mark. Either the increased effort causes us to fixate on our lack of confidence, or our determination to *not back down* over-rides good judgment.

Confidence is the by-product of three things: having one's faith placed in a trustworthy object, evaluating one's abilities and gifting by the right standard, and contentment with the way God made you. If our object of faith is unreliable, if our assessment of our abilities is askew, or if we lack contentment, we cannot have biblical confidence.

### PIECE ONE: FAITH

According to Hebrews 11:1, "Faith is the *assurance* of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (*emphasis added*) [all scriptural quotations are taken from the English Standard Version]. Therefore the object of one's faith (i.e., "things hoped for") determines the level of one's confidence (i.e., "assurance"). It stands to reason that a lack of confidence likely reveals a faulty object of faith.

High school football provides a good illustration of the various relationships between faith and confidence. Entering the stadium each Friday evening the fans of each school have a varying degrees of confidence based on the merit of their team. Faith can be misplaced. Appropriate confidence does not ensure victory. New uniforms, a good coach, and enthusiastic

cheerleaders can produce high morale, while not necessarily warranting confidence.

"Object of faith" refers to the thing(s) we expect to provide stability to life. God should be the object of one's faith. Yet due to our sinful nature and fickle hearts we often turn to various other inadequate objects of faith as the foundation for our confidence.

- Ability
- Popularity
- Accomplishment
- Power
- Education
- Relationships

As objects of faith these items make promises of fulfillment they can never keep. It is not wrong to be talented, popular, accomplished, influential, educated, or well-connected. It is wrong—even idolatrous—to look for these items to support your confidence.

### Should Confidence Be Constant?

Confidence will not be unwavering, nor should it be. For this reason, it is important to accurately assess whether or not you should have confidence in a particular situation. A lack of confidence may be a mark of maturity even in situations that are not sinful. It is sometimes wise to be cautious when engaging God-honoring activity. It would obviously be wrong to be confident that one could get away with robbing a bank. We often miss the sinfulness of lacking humility in a virtuous area of strength.

Much of the fuel for the self-esteem movement is that people tend to evaluate all of life based on one area of performance. If I get nervous in social situations, I am an inadequate person. If I struggle to recall information at school or work, I am not as good as everyone else. Biblical confidence requires being able to admit weakness (Hebrews 4:16) and vulnerability in order for confidence not to mutate into pride.

Identifying areas in which you lack confidence is not the same thing as listing your deficiencies. It is an exercise in taking a sober assessment of yourself to determine how you can glorify and enjoy God *beginning now*. This is what Paul calls us to do in Romans 12:3, “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”

### **Confidence: Virtue or Vice?**

Confidence is not always a virtue. Confidence is never an excuse to fail to display humility. Our cultural fixation on self-sufficiency leads us to want to say, “Yes, confidence is always a good and right response.”

Psalms 49:13 says, “This is the path of those who have foolish confidence; yet after them people approve of their boasts.” Sometimes confidence is foolishness. My name is Brad Hambrick and I am aesthetically challenged. If I rearrange my office or have a suggestion for how to decorate the house (both of which are rare), I proceed with caution not confidence.

Other times confidence is irreverent and wrong. People sometimes use confidence as a means to justify a lack of brokenness over sin. Lack of respect for authority can also masquerade as confidence. Consider that the rise in self-esteem theory has correlated with the decrease in respect for authority and in the use of sin-language to describe human behavior.

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (*Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*) notes this trend, “Haven't we all noticed that people who prefer not to judge or confess sin will nonetheless concede that some objectionable act was stupid, tragic, shortsighted, mistaken, unfortunate, miscalculated, erring, regrettable, out of line... a 'lapse in judgment,' or 'inappropriate behavior'?” When we make self-love primary, admission of wrong becomes too costly and our vocabulary for side-stepping

responsibility becomes quite sophisticated and elaborate. Sin's innate desire to hide (Genesis 3:8), makes us master defense attorneys who quibble over how to define terms and the nature of the law.

Confidence, however, is often appropriate. In the movie *Chariots of Fire*, Eric Lidell (an Olympic caliber sprinter who has a heart to do missions in China) says, “God made me fast, and when I run I feel His pleasure.” This is God-centered, humble confidence. When we are biblically confident, it should fit this mold. Consider the following passages (*emphasis added*): Proverbs 3:26, “For the Lord *will be your confidence*, and will keep your foot from being caught;” Proverbs 14:26, “*In the fear of the Lord* one has strong confidence, and his children will have a refuge;” and 2 Corinthians 3:4, “Such is the confidence that we have *through Christ* toward God.”

### **Confidence as Cover Up**

Fear of failure often is a disguise for a refusal to admit one's need for help. This is where the label of self-esteem can distract us from considering the motive for our inhibitions. Are we willing to say: if God has not prepared me for this task, then I will fail and that is good because it is God's will?

Biblical confidence will always be realistic. It will never be at odds with humility. If you do not regularly say the words, “I was wrong” without excuse or explanation, this is solid evidence that you lack biblical confidence. Equally, if you wallow in pity after acknowledging your sin, then you err on the other side of confidence. Confidence can be found at the intersection of truth and grace (John 1:14): truth that is honest about my own failures and grace that allows me to be honest without lingering in shame.

Pride is a powerful motivator. When the appearance of competence becomes a demand of our soul—when it becomes the measure of our

worth—then our problem is not a lack of self-love, but an excess of it. We love ourselves too much to place our reputation in the hands of God. Failure is not as problematic when I accept God’s sovereignty over my abilities.

### **God-Exalting Confidence**

Biblical confidence will result in having more to say about God than about ourselves. James 1:17 says, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” Everything that thrills our soul and satisfies our heart is an invitation to draw our attention to the goodness, wisdom, power, and holiness of God.

Unless we overtly acknowledge and appreciate God’s gracious enabling in every good thing that we do, we rob God of the glory due Him. In such cases our confidence’s object of faith has transitioned from God to our self. Such confidence does not have a foundation firm enough to withstand the struggles of life.

A holy pursuit of confidence can never make God peripheral to our effort. Isaiah 64:6 says, “All our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.” Therefore every good work we do is rooted in God’s gracious enabling. Gratitude and praise must be an intricate part of biblical confidence. The source of the good works we could take confidence in is God, not ourselves.

### **PIECE TWO: ABILITY & GIFTING**

The Bible recognizes the fact that people have different abilities. Some people might infer from this that God is not fair. This is only true, if by fair they require that God gift everyone the same. God is not the parent who buys a bag of candy and gives each child ten pieces (two red, two yellow, two orange, two blue, and two purple).

1 Corinthians 12:4-7 says, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there

are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” God distributes gifts and abilities for His purposes and His glory.

Submitting to the Lordship of Christ requires that we learn to see the beauty and wisdom in God’s agenda for how He distributes abilities. Failing to be enthused about how God has gifted us is to sinfully call God into question and will erode a key element of biblical confidence. A constant battle for believers is to not fall more in love with God’s gifts than with God.

### **Personal Inventory**

Biblical confidence requires an accurate self-assessment. Scripture gives lists of spiritual gifts, noble character traits, and vices to provide us with the categories necessary to ascertain our strengths and weaknesses. II Corinthians 13:5 says that we are to “examine ourselves.” Part of this examination would include the gifts and abilities that God has entrusted to you.

Taking a personal inventory should do more than accentuate the positive. It should cause you to reflect upon the goodness of God. The grand question of life is not: what do *I* want to be? This question centers on me and makes my desires the directional compass of life. The grand question of life is: how can I bring glory to God by doing the good works *God* set for me to do?

### **Stewarding Abilities and Gifts**

All ability is not natural or innate. Even spiritual gifts and people with exceptional natural ability (whether that be in athletics, academics, business savvy, or social interaction) refine their skill. Practice, study, and having a mentor are means by which abilities are enhanced.

The level of your gifting is no excuse for laziness in cultivating what God has entrusted to you. We have a moral responsibility to worship God by maximizing the abilities He has given.

Read the parable of the talents from Matthew 25:14-30.

*"For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at*

*my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"*

It is important to note that God rewards all faithfulness equally. This is true regardless of the type or magnitude of the abilities God has entrusted to us. We must also realize that God provides faithful stewards with greater opportunities, and punishes those who refuse to use what He has entrusted to them.

When we taste the fruit of failing to steward our ability, we can grow dissatisfied with its bitter flavor. Low self-esteem can sometimes be a form of grumbling and envy. In our heart we cry, "If I can't have \_\_\_\_\_, then I just won't try. I'll give up." We sulk and muse because God did not give us the ability we desire most. We resent those who have the ability we desire and beat ourselves up for not having it. The issue in such cases is joy and satisfaction with God's sovereign plan, not self-esteem.

### **Right Soldier, Wrong Weapon**

Some people attest to trying to please God, but their effort seems forced, awkward, or unfruitful. This can occur when we are not focused on utilizing the gifts God has given us. If we are not cultivating the abilities God has given us, then it stands to reason that we are either operating outside the scope of God's gifting or we are being lazy.

At times this can be a difficult distinction to make, because we do have to operate outside our strengths. For example, the student who struggles in math cannot say that this challenge indicates that Algebra is not God's will for their life. The student needs to persevere in studying

math as a matter of respect for those in authority over them and a general stewardship of life.

The question for this article, however, is not whether or not to study, but how the struggle in math affects one's level of confidence. It is important to return to our definition of confidence. Biblical confidence is limited to those things God wills that I do. Our mathematically-challenged student can rest in the fact that their mathematical abilities (or lack thereof) were ordained by God, and that God will not ask them to do anything that requires more of them than they are capable (I Corinthians 10:13). Again, this is not an excuse to avoid difficult tasks, but an encouragement that a lack of ability will not prevent us from achieving God's will.

With this in mind, struggle can be separated from confidence. Struggle is used by God to shape our character (Romans 5:3-5). Focusing on our level of self-affection distracts us from the question of what God is doing in our life. This distraction largely guarantees we will not fully appreciate the good thing God works from times of challenge (Romans 8:28).

One fruit of loosing a self-focus is that as the self-esteem mindset diminishes as the focal point of your thinking, the success of others will have an ever decreasing impact upon your biblical confidence. Accomplishing God's will is not a competitive sport. One person's pleasing God does not "raise the bar" for every other Christian. In actuality, the opposite is true. One believer's faithfulness provides an example to follow and creates a climate in which God's kingdom has more momentum.

### **PIECE THREE: CONTENTMENT**

Few nice words are more foreign to an American mindset than contentment. Quite frankly, we don't *get* contentment. Everything in our culture, and sometimes in our church, tells us to want more, do more, go further, work harder, get more members, etc... Yet in Philippians 4:11-12, Paul says, "I have learned in whatever

situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need."

Confidence is rooted in contentment, which may be defined as the enjoyment of performing the task(s) God has called me to do. Contentment is the stabilizing factor in the demeanor of confidence. Contentment prevents our confidence from mutating into selfish ambition or arrogance. Contentment muzzles confidence that might otherwise grow out of control.

### **"Innocent" Daydreams of Grandeur**

Few things disrupt life with a stealth-like quietness more than an undisciplined thought life. It is easy to see how this would work with sins like lust, jealousy, or greed where fantasies seem so overtly evil or manipulative. But with contentment the fantasies seem nobler. The thought, "If only I had \_\_\_\_\_, then I would \_\_\_\_\_ for God's glory (of course)," becomes the Trojan horse of discontentment.

Discontented daydreaming about an ability God has not blessed you with is wrong for several reasons. First, it is a form of passive rebellion against God's wisdom in creation. Second, the wasted time leads to sins of omission. Third, we begin to feel justified in our anger at God. The cumulative effect destroys contentment and thereby takes confidence with it.

The line between discontented daydreaming and aspiration can be thin. Praying for God to change a situation is good. Grumbling to yourself and others is bad. Working to attain a new skill or refine an existing one is good. Dreaming of "making it" without putting forth effort is bad.

Self-esteem theory prevents us from seeing the activity of our heart. We begin to feel like the victim who has not been given what we were due. All the while, we miss the fact that we failed to use the gifts God has graciously

bestowed upon us and our distraction leads us to feel justified in our lack of contribution to God's kingdom.

### **Contentment Doesn't Come in Green**

We live in a competitive society. The language of comparison dominates advertising, politics, social interactions, and often the church. Our measure of quality is phrased in the terms of "bigger—better—best." You do not have to be a competitive person to have caught the contagious mentality it spawns. Even if you do not strive to be the best, you can succumb to a lack of confidence because you believe you are not "as good as" (comparative language) someone else.

Competition and stewardship are significantly different mindsets. Competition cringes at the success of others because it raises the bar for me. Stewardship rejoices at the success of others because it brings glory to God and provides an example for me.

There will be no shortage of crowns in heaven for those who hear the sweet words of Christ, "Well done my good and faithful servant." When you read Matthew 25 you realize that God's evaluation of you has nothing to do with the performance of others. He does not grade on a curve. When we become jealous of the abilities of others it reveals that our life is being ruled by an agenda that is at odds with God's wisdom in creating the world as He did.

### ***Sola Deo Gloria!* (For God's Glory Alone!)**

Biblical confidence involves joy. It is good and right to take satisfaction in bringing glory to God by competently using the gifts and abilities He has given you. John Piper summarizes this principle, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him (*Desiring God*)."

Work without satisfaction decays confidence. Confidence becomes irrelevant in the absence of joy. We begin to believe: it no longer matters if I am good at what I do, because life stinks.

The issue here is joy rooted in contentment with God, not self-esteem. Boredom, monotony, and apathy result in not caring about life. This is true whether I like myself or not. To focus on whether I value myself enough is to distract from the larger issues. Do I take joy in what God has gifted me to do? Am I floundering unaware of God's plan? Am I resentful/dissatisfied with God's plan?

Joy is commanded in Scripture (Philippians 4:4). Joy is a fruit of the Spirit. To not take joy in what God has called and gifted me to do reveals a wrongly prioritized motive in my life. As John Piper says, "Sin is what you do when your heart is not satisfied with God (*Future Grace*)."

### **Conclusion**

A lack of confidence either calls into question God's ability to enable you to do those good works He has prepared for you to do, or your desire to do them. Therefore, it is theologically or morally wrong for a believer to lack biblical confidence. Confidence is rooted in our understanding that we are sinners redeemed and enabled by God's sufficient grace to contribute to His kingdom.

You may have read this article and thought, "This is fine for spiritual stuff, but I want *real* confidence." That perspective reveals a false separation of life: real life versus spiritual stuff. If that is the case you need to consider what you are seeking in life. You may have read this article thinking you were seeking confidence, when in fact you were after autonomy from God. In that case, your struggle is not for confidence but a lack of willingness to joyfully accept God's dominion.

If that is not your attitude, complete the checklist on the next page. It is designed to give you areas of specific application for a balanced and robust biblical confidence. As you evaluate the items on this checklist you should see a portrait of humble, God-centered, contented, stable, joyful confidence emerging.

## Checklist for A Portrait of Christ-Honoring Confidence

For each item place a check in the blank if you can provide evidence that you regularly exhibit this attitude, behavior, or character trait. If you struggle to be able to give a fair self-assessment of an item, ask people who know you well.

- I acknowledge my weaknesses and limitations without beating myself up.
- I am able to respond to mistakes and failures with repentance and hope, because I recognize that God works progressively in my life to refine me.
- I am able to ask for assistance when needed, and will admit that it is needed.
- It seems natural to give God the credit for the good fruit of my labors.
- People rarely tell me I am arrogant, harsh, or over-bearing.
- I am generally relaxed recognizing God accomplishes His purposes through my normal obedience.
- I recognize that self-sufficiency is a sinful demand to be autonomous from God.
- I take great pleasure in doing things God gifted me to do.
- Failure is not terminal for my emotional stability, because I recognize God has not called me to be able to do everything.
- I respect, honor, and submit to those in authority over me.
- I rejoice in the success and maturation of those around me.
- My daydreaming does not center around the phrase, "If only I could / had \_\_\_\_\_."
- I spend regular time refining my talents for God's glory.
- I am a content person.
- I could not feel justified in being angry with God about the way He chose to gift me and the purpose for which He created me.
- I do not get jealous of the gifts, abilities, appearance, or position of others.
- My thinking is not dominated by comparison language.
- I enjoy life and the things that I do.

**Biblical Confidence** is the demeanor that exhibits a positive expectation that God will enable us to accomplish every good work He has ordained for us to do. This demeanor results in an increasingly shorter period of hesitation and anxiety when attempting a task, and a greater degree of joy and fulfillment while planning, carrying out, and evaluating of the task.

\*\*\* The items left unmarked should become your agenda items for developing Christ-honoring confidence.

## Reflective Questions

On a separate sheet of paper answer the following questions. The questions are intended to walk you back through the key concepts of this article while causing you to focus upon your own effort to manifest biblical confidence. For time sake, it may be best to answer these questions in three stages: questions 1-3, questions 4-7, and questions 8-10.

1. Make a list of the situations in your life where you lack confidence. Start by developing a few major headings and then cite specific examples under each heading. What themes or repeated situations/tasks emerge from your list?
2. Is confidence the appropriate response to these situations? In the margin beside your list question one write YES, NO or NOT SURE beside each item. Make the items that you are uncertain about a matter of prayer, reflection, and Bible study. Ask two mature Christian friends or mentors about each.
3. Is your lack of confidence a cover up to ensure that you do not have to ask for help or admit weakness? Place an asterisk (\*) beside any item on your list where you think a lack of confidence could be means of not being transparent about your weaknesses.
4. What abilities, skills, talents, gifts, resources, and personality traits has God blessed you with? Make a list of the things that you do well or strengths that you possess. Again, you may want to use headings and then provide specific examples of each.
5. Do you exhibit a confidence which ignores the gracious enabling of God? When you are successful does God seem irrelevant to the situation? Can you cite specific examples of when you overtly thanked God for the way He gifted and enabled you? How have you used each item from your list in question four to contribute to God's kingdom?
6. Are you being a good steward of the abilities that God has blessed you with? If you struggled to answer question five this question will need extra attention. For each item in your answer to question five write two things: (a) a method of sharpening or enhancing this blessing, and (b) a method for using this blessing for God's glory.
7. Are you trying to live outside the scope of the abilities God blessed you with? If there is stark contrast between your list for questions one and four, then your answer to this question is probably yes. If this is the case the article "A Portrait of Christ-Honoring Purpose" will be important for you to read.
8. What do you daydream about? Do your thoughts naturally drift towards using your current abilities or towards what you could do if you were gifted differently? Review the bulleted points on page two. What is the desire that motivates you to live outside the scope of God's gifting?
9. Do you often get jealous of those who are more capable than you are? Of whom are you jealous? Of what gifts or abilities are you envious?
10. Are you able to praise God at the end of a task and take satisfaction in your work? How frequently? How do you, or should you, express this praise and satisfaction?