

Notes on 1 John

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Introduction

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

This epistle, like Hebrews, does not contain the name of its writer, but from its very early history the church believed the Apostle John wrote it. Several ancient writers referred to this book as John's writing.¹ Though modern critics have challenged this view, they have not destroyed it.²

Neither is there any reference to who the first recipients of this epistle were, or where they lived, other than that they were Christians (2:12-14, 21; 5:13). They may have been the leaders of churches (2:20, 27). According to early church tradition, John ministered in Ephesus, the capital of the Roman province of Asia, for many years after he left Palestine. We know from Revelation 2 and 3 that he knew the churches and Christians in that Roman province well. Perhaps his readers lived in that province.³ This was probably a letter designed to circulate among several congregations, in contrast to having been intended for only one.⁴ By way of contrast, John's second and third epistles contain the name of the writer, the recipient, and greetings.

The false teachers and teachings to which he alluded suggest that John wrote about conditions that existed in Asia: Judaism, Gnosticism, Docetism, the teachings of Cerinthus (a prominent Gnostic), and others. Explanations of these will follow in the exposition. These philosophies extended beyond Asia, but they were present there during John's lifetime.

¹E.g., Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian.

²See Charles C. Ryrie, "The First Epistle of John," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, pp. 1464-65, for a concise discussion of views of authorship; and see Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 4:1:159-65, for a longer discussion.

³Robert W. Yarbrough, *1—3 John*, pp. 16-21. See also Alford, 4:1:169.

⁴Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, pp. 4, 8, 15.

"The heresy which occasioned 1 and 2 John cannot be parallel with any other manifestation of heresy known from that era. Yet it has affinities with more than one such movement."¹

This is one of the most difficult of all the New Testament books to date. One of the few references in the book that may help us date it is 2:19. If John meant that the false teachers had departed *from among the apostles*, a date in the 60s seems possible. This could place it about A.D. 60-65, before the Jewish revolts of A.D. 66-70 scattered the Jews from Judea. In this case, John may have written from Jerusalem.² However, many conservative scholars believe John wrote this epistle much later, between about A.D. 85 and 97, when he evidently wrote the Gospel of John (ca. A.D. 85-95) and the Book of Revelation (ca. A.D. 95-96).³ I prefer a date in the 90s, following the writing of John's Gospel, that 1 John seems to assume.⁴

"Indeed the Epistle throughout has the Gospel as its background and is hardly intelligible without it."⁵

In view of the nature and the conclusion of the Book of Revelation, which seems to be God's final revelatory word to humankind, I think John probably composed his epistles before that book. So a date for 1 John in the early 90s, A.D. 90-95, seems most probable to me.⁶

Since John ministered in and around Ephesus later in his life, Ephesus seems to be the most probable place from which he wrote this epistle.⁷

"The writer of 1 John was thus addressing a community, made up of a number of house-churches in and around Ephesus ..., which was split in three ways. It consisted of the following: (a) Johannine Christians who were committed to the apostolic

¹Rudolf Schnachenburg, *The Johannine Epistles*, p. 23.

²See Zane C. Hodges, "1 John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, p. 882; idem, "The First Epistle of John," in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, 2:1192.

³E.g., B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John*, pp. xxx-xxxii; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, p. 31; and Yarbrough, p. 17.

⁴Cf. Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, pp. xxii, xxxii; Donald A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 676-77; and G. G. Findlay, *Fellowship in the Life Eternal*, p. 49.

⁵David Smith, "The Epistles of St. John," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, 5:154.

⁶See Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 3:205-6.

⁷See D. Edmond Hiebert, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 3:191-97.

gospel of Jesus as they had received it; (b) heretically inclined members from a Jewish background; (c) heterodox followers from a Hellenistic (and/or pagan) background. The problems relating to the two 'heretical' groups, (b) and (c), were primarily theological and (by extension) ethical; although related difficulties concerning eschatology and pneumatology may have been present also (see on 2:18 and 4:1 ...). ...

"To complete the picture, it should be noted that the life of the Johannine community was marked by the presence of a fourth group of people: the secessionists. Whereas the members of the first three groups could be found within John's circle, the anti-Christian secessionists had begun to break away from it. These were heretically inclined adherents of the Johannine community. In some cases they may have been genuine, if uninformed, believers. But in other instances they perhaps never properly belonged to John's church (although they thought they did), because they never really belonged to God (see on 1 John 2:18-19; cf. also 2:22-23)."¹

CHARACTERISTICS

"The Epistle is not a polemic primarily, but a letter for the edification of the readers in the truth and the life in Christ. And yet the errors of the Gnostics are constantly before John's mind."²

"John is contemplative rather than argumentative. He presents truths as they come by intuitive perception rather than by reasoned conclusion. He is mystical rather than logical. He sees the confirmation of truth in one's *experience* of it rather than in demonstration by argument."³

"John's pen is a surgeon's knife, not a philosopher's quill."⁴

¹Smalley, p. xxiv.

²A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6:200. Cf. Findlay, pp. 59, 69.

³J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, 6:321.

⁴*Ibid.*, 6:324.

"St. John has no liking for progress along an unending straight road; he loves a circling flight, like his symbol, the eagle."¹

"... we should read 1 John, not trying to discern the flow of the argument as we would in a Pauline letter, but rather recognizing that it is, in its structure and rhetorical form, a piece of epideictic rhetoric."²

OUTLINE

John's style of writing makes it difficult to outline this book. He flows from one subject to another so smoothly that it is often difficult to see clear breaks in his thought. In contrast, Paul typically identified changes in his subject matter clearly. Consequently, in the outline below, some divisions occur at unusual places in the text: not necessarily chapter divisions or even verse divisions. The following outline reflects the structure of a typical deliberative oration that was common in John's world.³

- I. Introduction: the purpose of the epistle 1:1-4
- II. Living in the light of fellowship with God 1:5—2:11
 - A. Staying on the path by walking in God's light 1:5—2:2
 - B. Reaching the goal by knowing the God of light 2:3-11
- III. Resisting enemies 2:12-27
 - A. Appreciating spiritual advances 2:12-14
 - B. Recognizing spiritual adversaries 2:15-27
 - 1. Overcoming the world 2:15-17
 - 2. Resisting the antichrists 2:18-27
- IV. Living in anticipation of Christ's judgment seat 2:28—4:19
 - A. Abiding to face Christ confidently 2:28
 - B. Learning to recognize God's children 2:29—3:10a

¹Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, p. 401.

²Kruse, p. 31.

³See Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles of John*, pp. 31-33, who followed George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*.

- C. Learning to recognize Christian love 3:10b-23
 - 1. What love is not 3:10b-15
 - 2. What love is 3:16-18
 - 3. What love does for believers 3:19-23
- D. Learning to recognize the God of love 3:24—4:16
 - 1. God's indwelling affirmed 3:24
 - 2. God's Spirit recognized 4:1-6
 - 3. God's indwelling recognized 4:7-16
- E. Having boldness at Christ's judgment seat 4:17-19
- V. Learning how to live obediently 4:20—5:17
 - A. The meaning of brotherly love 4:20—5:3a
 - B. The empowerment of brotherly love 5:3b-15
 - C. The consequences of brotherly love 5:16-17
- VI. Christian certainties 5:18-21

Ron Bigalke saw the structure of 1 John as being chiastic:

- "A Prologue: Eternal Life (1:1-4)
 - B Three Witnesses (1:5—2:2) (to deny sin is to make God a liar) (walk)
 - C The love of God and the believer (2:3-17)
 - D False christs (2:18-27)
 - E Believer's confidence (2:28—3:10) (*do not sin*)
 - F Love proves abiding (3:11-18)
 - E' Believer's confidence (3:19-24) (*do keep God's commands*)
 - D' False prophets (4:1-6)
 - C' The love of God and the believer (4:7-21)

B' Three Witnesses (5:1-12) (to deny Jesus is to make God a liar) (testimony)

A' Epilogue: Eternal life (5:13-21)"¹

MESSAGE

If I were to boil down the message of this epistle into one sentence, it would be this: "Fellowship with God is the essence of eternal life." Paul wrote in Philippians 3:7-14 that his relationship with God was the most important thing in his life—by far. John wrote this epistle to enable believers to appreciate their "fellowship with God," and he wrote to deepen that fellowship.

"It would not be inappropriate to write over this epistle as a whole, THE GATEWAY TO FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD."²

Both the Gospel of John and the First Epistle of John deal with the subject of eternal life.³ John wrote his Gospel so that his readers might "believe that Jesus is the Christ, and that believing they might have life through His name" (John 20:31). John wrote this epistle to Christians so that they could "have fellowship" with the apostles, with God the Father, and with Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3). He wrote it so that we might enter into the *fullness* of the eternal life that we possess (cf. John 10:10). However, the subject of this epistle is not eternal life, but fellowship with God. *Fellowship with God* is the essence of eternal life (cf. John 17:3).

This epistle grew out of Jesus' Upper Room Discourse (John 14—17). Similarly, James' epistle grew out of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5—7), Peter's first epistle grew out of Jesus' Discipleship Discourse (Matt. 10), and the Book of Revelation grew out of the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24—25). In the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus explained what the apostles'

¹Ron J. Bigalke, "Identity of the First Epistle of John: Context, Style, and Structure," *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 17:50 (Spring 2013):43.

²Baxter, 6:329.

³See the tables of corresponding expressions in John's Gospel and his First Epistle in B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John: The Authorised Version with Introduction and Notes*, pp. lxi-lxiii.

relationship to God would be after He sent the Holy Spirit to indwell them (John 14:16-17). John expounded that revelation in this letter.

There are several terms in this epistle that John used as synonyms: "fellowship with God," "knowing God," "abiding in God," and "seeing God." These terms all describe the experience of Christians. They all describe our relationship with God in varying degrees of intimacy.

Our relationships with people vary. Some are more, some less, intimate. Fellowship with God is also a matter of greater or lesser intimacy. When we speak of being "in fellowship" or "out of fellowship," we are oversimplifying our relationship to God. For example, a child's fellowship with his or her parents is rarely either perfect or non-existent; it is usually somewhere between these extremes, and it may vary from day to day.

John's purpose in writing was to motivate his readers to cultivate greater intimacy with God. The greater the intimacy, the greater our "fellowship," the better we "know" God experientially, and the closer we "abide" in Him (cf. John 14:21-24). The greater our intimacy with God, the more we will experience the life that is eternal. All Christians *possess* eternal life, but not all *experience* that life as God intended us to enjoy it (John 10:10). Similarly, all living human beings *have* life, but not all live an *abundant* life.

This letter reveals two things about the life of fellowship. First, it reveals the resources of this life. There are two resources:

The first resource is objective. God has provided a *pattern* for the life of fellowship, and that pattern is Jesus Christ. In Christ, we have personified two qualities that are characteristics of God—that should also characterize us as the children of God.

The first of these qualities is "light." Jesus Christ constantly walked in the light of God's holiness (1:5-6; 2:6). He never hid from God. He also conformed to the light of God's will perfectly. He was submissive, sinless, clean, and consecrated. The second of these qualities is "love." Jesus also constantly manifested the love of God (cf. 4:10). In His attitudes and activities Jesus always demonstrated perfect love. His words and His deeds were a revelation of God's love. Jesus put others before Himself. He was selfless as well as holy.

The second resource of the life of fellowship is, according to this epistle, subjective. God has not only provided a pattern for the life of fellowship,

He has also provided the power. Jesus Christ is not only an external example for us to imitate. More helpfully, He is an internal power whom God has placed within us, who is at work in our lives. With eternal life we get Jesus (5:11-12). And with Him come two things.

First, we get light. We see spiritual things that we never saw before (2:20). We see how we ought to walk (2:27). We become sensitive to sin. Second, we get love. We see the need of other people who are groping in darkness, and we desire to reach out to them in service, and to bring them into the light (4:7). As soon as we share God's life, we begin to love with God's love. We can quench love, but every person who has eternal life has love within him or her.

To review, this letter reveals two things about the life of fellowship: first the resources of this life, which are an external pattern and internal power. Both of these come from Jesus Christ.

This letter also reveals the results of a life of intimate fellowship with God. These are two also:

First, there is *value for the Christian*. This value is that we realize life as God intended people to live it. We can experience life as God meant it to be when He first made man. We achieve our potential as human beings to the degree to which we walk in fellowship with God (i.e., abide in Him). Our intimacy with God perfects our personalities.

Second, there is also *value for God*. God enjoys fellowship with man. God's purpose in creation and redemption was to have fellowship with man. God finds in every person, who walks with Him in intimate fellowship, a person through whom He can manifest Himself, an instrument through whom He can accomplish His purposes. The *abiding* believer reveals God to those around him or her. God does not have to work on abiding believers with chastening, but He can work through them in blessing others and themselves.

John also called on his readers to fulfill their responsibilities in the life of fellowship. Regarding the light, we have two responsibilities:

First, we must *obey the light* (1:7). That means responding positively to the knowledge of God's will that we gain. We can become calloused to the truth. This is a special danger when one spends a lot of time dealing with

spiritual matters. Believers need to cultivate their relationship with God daily. We all need to keep weeding the gardens of our spiritual lives.

Second, we must *seek the light* (1:9). We need to forsake the darkness of sin and keep walking in the light. The circle of God's light may move. We may gain new understanding of His will. When that happens, we need to move into that light in obedience (cf. Ps. 119:105).

Regarding love, we also have two responsibilities:

First, we must *yield to its impulse*. We can destroy our capacity to love by not expressing love when God moves us to do so. We can lose our passion for the lost by resisting the Holy Spirit's promptings to reach out in love. We need to be ready to sacrifice rather than to put self first. However, if we yield to the impulse of love, to serve others, our love will deepen and intensify. We must not quench the Spirit if He is prompting us to reach out to someone with love.

Second, we must also *guard love's purity*. We need to watch out for false charity. True love never sacrifices principle. God never loved at the expense of light. Love never justifies sin.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest two applications of the message of this epistle, one to the individual and one to the church.

First, let me make one application to us as individual Christians. We can easily test whether we are living in close fellowship with God. Check the light and the love that is in your life. Is the light of holiness shining clearly, or are you walking in darkness? Is your love still burning brightly, or has your life deteriorated to the level of only learning God's Word? "Learning" is only one means to the end of living—living in intimate fellowship with God. What do you want people to remember you for, your knowledge or your love? In view of 1 Corinthians 13, I want to be remembered for my love more than for my knowledge.

Second, let me make one application to us as the church of Jesus Christ. We need to keep our priorities in line with God's. Intimacy is His goal for us. God prefers a few committed disciples to a multitude of compromising disciples (cf. Jesus' 12 disciples). A pure church is more important to Him than a large church. Pastors should not draw back from urging people to walk in the light, and to walk in love, just to increase the size of their congregation. They need to make as broad an appeal as possible without

"pulling their punches" in ministry. I am referring here to the church's ministry of equipping the saints. In presenting the gospel, we should make as broad an appeal as possible.¹

¹Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 2:2:177-93.

Exposition

I. INTRODUCTION: THE PURPOSE OF THE EPISTLE 1:1-4

"This writing begins without any of the formal features characteristic of a letter, such as we found in 2 John and 3 John. Since the conclusion also lacks any typical features of a letter, we must conclude that the writing is not so much a letter as a written sermon or address."¹

John began this epistle by explaining to his audience why he wrote. He said he wrote so his readers would enjoy the fellowship with God, that before this was possible only to those who had seen Him. This fellowship, he explained, rests on the reality of Jesus Christ's incarnation, and it results in *full joy* for those who experience it.

"No writer in the New Testament holds with greater intensity the full reality of the incarnation."²

1:1 The "beginning" (Gr. *arche*) may refer to the beginning of all things (2:13-14; John 1:1), or the beginning of the creation (3:8; Gen. 1:1), or to Jesus' incarnation (v. 2; cf. John 1:14). It could also refer to the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry (Acts 1:22-24), the beginning of the Christian gospel (Mark 1:1-4), or the beginning of the readers' experience as Christians (2:7, 24; 3:11). The beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry, specifically the beginning of His teaching ministry, seems most consistent with what John proceeded to say about that beginning (cf. vv. 1b, 3a).

"... he [John] proclaims a message that has been embodied in a person—the person of Jesus Christ."³

"The phrase 'from the beginning,' frequently used in 1 John [2:7, 13, 14, 24 (twice); 3:8, 11; cf. 2 John 5, 6], refers for the most part to the

¹I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, p. 99. Cf. Carson and Moo, p. 669.

²William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude*, p. 17.

³Kruse, p. 53.

doctrine proclaimed at the beginning (2:7, 24; 3:11) and is intended to move the readers to remain faithful to that doctrine as against the teachers of heresy who appeared only later."¹

"The source of spiritual life to men is that which was, in the first instance, the source of natural life to all creatures. Here lies the foundation-stone of the Johannine theology. It assumes the solidarity of being, the unity of the seen and unseen. It rules out from the beginning all dualistic and Docetic conceptions of the world."²

John was probably referring to all that the apostles had experienced with Jesus from the time they first became His disciples. John's verbs—"heard ... have seen with our eyes ... looked at and touched with our hands"—indicate a progressively closer approach to the object of investigation. The essence of fellowship is increasing intimacy. Our fellowship with God must involve drawing closer to Him, and viewing Him more intently all the time, in order for it to be genuine fellowship. The same is true of fellowship on the human level.

"To look, saves; to gaze, sanctifies."³

John used three of his basic senses—hearing ("heard"), eyesight ("have seen"), feeling ("examined and touched")—to highlight the reality of the object, so his readers would know that he was not speaking metaphorically. He cited personal experience and appealed to empirical evidence to support the humanity of Jesus Christ (cf. Luke 24:39). Some false teachers denied His humanity.⁴

"Extreme Docetism [i.e., Docetic Gnostics] held that Jesus was not human at all but was merely a prolonged theophany, while moderate Docetism

¹Schnachenburg, p. 57.

²Findlay, p. 86.

³J. Vernon McGee, "The First Epistle of John," in *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 5:757.

⁴Bruce, pp. 16-17.

[i.e., Cerinthian Gnostics] considered Jesus the natural son of Joseph and Mary, upon whom Christ came at the time of baptism."¹

Specific instances of personal encounter with Jesus Christ (cf. Luke 24:39) had left a continuing impression on John, as is clear from the verb tenses (perfect in the Greek text).

John may have used "we" editorially to represent himself personally, or "we" may include all Christians. It is more likely, however, that "we" represents John and the other eyewitnesses of Jesus Christ: Jesus' apostles.² In this epistle, John was speaking for others besides himself, and he was seeking to persuade still other believers of something not all of them had experienced or acknowledged (cf. Luke 1:2).³

The "word of life" probably refers to the message about Jesus Christ, namely, the gospel.⁴ John referred to Jesus as "the Word" in his Gospel, and he described Jesus claiming to be "the life" (John 14:6). The phrase "word of life" seems more likely to describe the message about the Person who is and who personifies life (cf. v. 2; Phil. 2:16; Acts 5:20). John probably spoke of Christ as "what," rather than "He," because here he wanted to emphasize the content of the message about Christ—rather than the person of Christ.

1:2 "Life" is a title of Jesus Christ, here, as "Word" is in John's Gospel (John 1:1). It ("Life") reflects the Christian experiences about which John wrote here, whereas "Word" (Gr. *logos*) reflects the facts that Jesus declared, and that John recorded in the fourth Gospel. *Grace* and *truth* explain the "Logos" in John's Gospel (John 1:14), but *light* and *love* clarify "Life" in his epistles.

¹Ryrie, p. 1464. Cf. Robertson, 6:200.

²Findlay, p. 70.

³D. Edmond Hiebert, "An Expositional Study of 1 John," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145:578 (April-June 1988):203.

⁴Westcott, *The Epistles ...*, pp. 6-7; C. H. Dodd, *The Johanne Epistles*, pp. 3-6; J. L. Houlden, *A Commentary on the Johanne Epistles*, pp. 50- 52; Findlay, p. 83.

In verse 1, the progression in the series of verbs (heard, seen, beheld, and handled) reflects increasingly intent attention to Jesus as the essence of fellowship. The progression in the verbs in verse 2 (manifested, seen, bear witness, and proclaim), shows the result of contemplating Jesus Christ and enjoying His fellowship, namely: bearing witness. One first sees the manifested Christ. Then, having seen, he or she is able to bear witness. Finally, one feels impelled by what that one has seen to announce to others the message of life.

There is a strong stress on the *eternality* of the "life"—*Jesus Christ*—in this verse. The emphases on the quality of the life (eternal) and its equality with the Father make this point (cf. John 1:2). The Incarnation is in view.

Eternal life is such a dominant theme in this epistle that one writer even entitled his commentary on 1 John, *The Epistle of Eternal Life*.¹ In John's writings, "eternal life" is also synonymous with "salvation."²

1:3 "You," the recipients of this epistle, must have been genuine believers in view of how John referred to them (cf. 2:12-14, 21, 27; 5:13). They had not known "Jesus Christ in the flesh" as the apostles had. John wrote to them so they could enter into, and continue to enjoy, the intimate fellowship with Him that the apostolic eyewitnesses enjoyed (cf. Acts 10:40-41).³

"This verse introduces the purpose of the Epistle: 'that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.'"⁴

¹G. Goodman.

²Smalley, p. 10.

³Westcott, *The Epistles ...*, p. 4.

⁴Glenn W. Barker, "1 John," in *Hebrews-Revelation*, vol. 12 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 307.

"The main theme of the Epistle is fellowship with God."¹

"As a basis for comparison it is important to recognize that 1 John can express its favorite ideas in various ways. Alongside of 'to have fellowship with God,' which sounds general enough and is only found in 1:3 and 6, one of the commonest phrases is 'to be in God' (2:5; 5:20) or 'to abide' (2:6, 24; 3:24; 4:13, 15, 16). ... Another expression for fellowship with God found only in John is 'to have God (or the Son)' (1 John 2:23; 5:12; 2 John 9). Finally, 'to know God' comes to the same thing. It occurs in the perfect tense in 2:3 (cf. 2:5); 2:13, 14 (cf. 1:3) with the same meaning."²

"Here we are given, without any hesitation, a description, the *summum bonum*, of the Christian life; here, indeed, is the whole object, the ultimate, the goal of all Christian experience and all Christian endeavour. This, beyond any question, is the central message of the Christian gospel and of the Christian faith."³

Fellowship requires and rests on information, a common body of knowledge, and mutual acceptance of that data. John wrote to share this information with his readers.

"Thus two fundamental truths, which the philosophical heresies of the age were apt to obscure or deny, are here clearly laid down at the outset: (1) the distinctness of personality and equality of dignity between the Father and the

¹John G. Mitchell, *Fellowship*, p. 14. Cf. Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Practical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, p. 1495; G. Campbell Morgan, *The Unfolding Message of the Bible*, p. 363-64; idem, *An Exposition of the Whole Bible*, p. 527; Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, pp. 34, 50; idem, "The First ...," 2:1192, 1194; Ryrie, p. 1466; Schnachenburg, pp. 63-64; Kenneth G. Hanna, *From Gospel to Glory*, p. 451.

²Schnachenburg, pp. 63-64.

³D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Fellowship With God: Studies in 1 John*, p. 77. Cf. Findlay, p. 134.

Son; (2) the identity of the eternal Son of God with the historical person Jesus Christ."¹

"It is an interpretive mistake of considerable moment to treat the term 'fellowship' as though it meant little more than 'to be a Christian.'"²

False teachers were preaching information about Jesus Christ that was not true. John also wrote to combat their deception (2:26).

"... the epistle ... is written to a believing community that is dealing with fallout from the departure (2:19) of persons with beliefs and practices the author cannot endorse."³

"Only when we think aright of Jesus Christ, are we in unison with God. Only when we think aright of Him and are rightly disposed toward Him, can we have fellowship with each other; only on this condition can we work together with God for the world's redemption ..."⁴

1:4 Here "we" is probably editorial. "These things" refers to what John wrote in this epistle. Not only would his readers experience full ("complete") "joy," but so would John, as the readers entered into and continued in intimate fellowship with God (cf. 3 John 4). Joy is the product of fellowship with God. When there is no joy, there is no fellowship (cf. John 15:11; 16:24).

In summary, John wrote as an apostolic eyewitness. He identified two dangers to readers that are still prevalent in the church today. One is the assumption that Christian fellowship is possible without common belief in Christ. The other is the assumption that someone can have a relationship with God without a relationship with Jesus Christ.⁵ John wrote this epistle

¹Alfred Plummer, *The Epistles of S. John*, p. 20.

²Hodges, "1 John," p. 883. See 3:24.

³Yarbrough, p. 29.

⁴Findlay, p. 91.

⁵Marshall, p. 107-8.

so his readers might join and continue in the fellowship with God that is possible only for those who have seen God, as the apostolic eyewitnesses of the incarnate Christ had done.

"He has the heart of a pastor which cannot be completely happy so long as some of those for whom he feels responsible are not experiencing the full blessings of the gospel."¹

These verses, rather than 5:13, constitute the comprehensive purpose statement of the epistle. There are five purpose statements in 1 John (1:3, 4; 2:1, 26; 5:13) plus 10 imperatives (2:15, 24, 27, 28; 3:1, 7, 13; 4:1 [2 times]; 5:21), any of which could possibly provide John's purpose for writing. But 1:3 and 4 give his most comprehensive primary and secondary purposes in writing.²

"It is usually true that in the introduction to a book we find the key to that book. In the first four verses of this Epistle we find the key."³

II. LIVING IN THE LIGHT OF FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD 1:5—2:11

"Since the apostle's expressed concern is that his readers might have fellowship with the apostolic circle and thus also with the Father and the Son (1:3), it is reasonable to specify what this fellowship is really like. So, as an introductory section to his epistle, John discusses the nature of true fellowship with God"⁴

A. STAYING ON THE PATH BY WALKING IN GOD'S LIGHT 1:5—2:2

John began his explanation of what it means to "live (walk) in the light" of God's fellowship, by stressing the importance of *continuing* to walk in God's

¹Ibid., p. 105.

²Yarbrough, p. 46. See also Smalley, p. 15; and Gary W. Derickson, "What Is the Message of 1 John?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150:597 (January-March 1993):89-105.

³Mitchell, p. 21. Cf. Hodges, "1 John," pp. 883-84.

⁴Idem, *The Epistles ...*, p. 57.

light. Some antinomian Gnostics believed that knowledge was superior to virtue and morality, and John's revelation here countered that error.

"The sum and substance of true religion is fellowship with God. Hence any number of men claim to have such fellowship, in particular the heretics who deny that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that his blood alone places us into and maintains us in fellowship with God."¹

"If the readers are to have fellowship with the Father and with the Son (v. 3), they must understand what makes this possible. They must know who God is in himself and, consequently, who they are in themselves as creatures of God. So the author first describes the moral character of God in terms of light (v. 5) and then goes on to deny three claims made by those who falsely boast of their knowledge and fellowship with God. The false positions are (1) moral behavior is a matter of indifference in one's relationship to God (v. 6); (2) immoral conduct does not issue in sin for one who knows God (v. 8); and (3) the knowledge of God removes sin as even a possibility in the life of the believer (v. 10). True 'tests' or evidence of fellowship with God or walking in the light are (1) fellowship with one another (v. 7), with subsequent cleansing by the blood of Christ; (2) confession of sin, (v. 9) which brings both forgiveness and cleansing; and (3) trusting that if we sin we have Jesus Christ as an advocate and sacrifice for our sins (2:2)."²

J. Sidlow Baxter noted seven contrasts in this epistle, and he believed a key clause is: "Hereby we know":³

- The light versus darkness (1:5—2:11)
- The Father versus the world (2:12-17)
- Christ versus the Antichrist (2:18-28)
- Good works versus evil works (2:29—3:24)
- The Holy Spirit versus error (4:1-6)
- Love versus pious pretence [*sic*] (4:7-21)

¹Richard C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude*, p. 382.

²Barker, p. 309.

³Baxter, 6:323.

- The God-born versus others (5:1-21)

1:5 This verse provides a basis for what follows in verses 6-10 and, in a sense, the whole rest of the letter. Schnachenburg saw it as the message of 1:6 through 2:17.¹ Yarbrough regarded this verse as the main burden of the epistle.² It gives the standard against which the three following Christian professions fall short.

"Nothing has ever given such relief to the human mind as the announcement of the simple truth of this verse."³

The "message" is the truth that Jesus Christ, the first "Him," revealed to the apostolic eyewitnesses.

The figure of "light," that John used to describe God, emphasizes both His ability to reveal, and His ability to deal with what the light of His holiness reveals (cf. John 1:4-5, 7-9; 3:19-21; 8:12; 9:5; 12:35-36, 46; Rev. 21:23). John elsewhere described God as "spirit" (John 4:24) and as "love" (1 John 4:8). All three comparisons of God stress His immateriality and essence. God exposes and condemns sin (called "darkness" in John 1:5; 3:19; 12:35 [twice], and in 1 John 1:5-6; 2:8-9, 11 [twice]). The "light" figure emphasizes these qualities in God: His splendor and glory, His truthfulness, His purity, His self-communicative nature (cf. Ps. 27:1; 36:9; Isa. 49:6; John 1:9), His empowering activity (cf. John 8:12; 12:35; Eph. 5:8-14), and His right to demand (cf. John 3:19-21).

"A God that is not infinitely above finite comprehension is *not* God. To reduce God to the range of finite thought is to produce a mental idol."⁴

¹Schnachenburg, p. 71.

²Yarbrough, p. 46.

³Findlay, p. 97.

⁴Lenski, p. 384.

The *light/darkness* motif was common in both the Hellenistic and Jewish thought life of John's day and culture.¹ For John, these concepts were mainly ethical (cf. Eph. 5:8-14).

"Whatever other qualities this metaphorical designation [i.e. light] may include, it clearly involves the intellectual and moral—*enlightenment* and *holiness*. Just as light reveals and purifies, so by His very nature God illuminates and purifies those who come to Him. His nature determines the conditions for fellowship with Him."²

"As darkness has no place in God, so all that is of the darkness is excluded from having fellowship with God."³

"As all material life and growth depends on *light*, so all spiritual life and growth depends on God."⁴

John frequently clarified and emphasized his propositions by restating them in terms of *what they are not*, as he did here.

1:6 John may have used the "If we claim" phrase in verses 6, 8, and 10, in order to voice the teaching of false teachers.

"It is probable that these claims were real statements made by people in the church to which John was writing, and that they reflect the outlook of the people who were causing trouble in the church."⁵

¹Dodd, pp. 18-19; John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, p. 70; Theodor H. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures*, pp. 46, 49-51; Schnachenburg, p. 73.

²Hiebert, "An Expository ...," 145:331.

³Barker, p. 310. See Westcott, *The Epistles ...*, pp. 16-17 for a good discussion of God being light.

⁴Jamieson, et al., p. 1497.

⁵Marshall, p. 110. Cf. Barker, p. 310.

The Nicolaitans, a group of antinomians, made such claims.¹ In our day, any person who claims that it is not important to do the will of God, as expressed in Scripture, makes this claim.

"John is concerned to alert his readers to approaches to human wrong and wrongdoing that are—or are not—commensurate with God's brilliant character as revealed in his Son."²

John's claim here is that the Christian who professes to "have fellowship with God (Him)" who "is Light" (holiness), but disobeys Him (*walks in* "darkness"), is lying. A practicing sinner cannot have close fellowship with a holy God, though he can have a relationship with God (i.e., be a true Christian). God revealed this truth throughout Scripture. We do not need to reestablish our *relationship* with God every time we sin, though we do need to reestablish our *fellowship* with Him. Faith in Christ results in our becoming the children of God and obtaining *eternal* life. Action, specifically obedience, was a very important part of true knowledge for John, and it must be for us as well (cf. James).

The Greek word translated "fellowship" (*koinonia*) here means sharing things in common by two or more parties. It does not mean sharing *salvation*, which is individually experienced.

Some commentators take the phrases "have fellowship with Him" and "walk in the light" as describing salvation.³ Advocates of this view say that if a Christian does not persevere in the faith, he or she is not a Christian. This interpretation may result in *backloading* the gospel with works.

One writer held that "walking in the light" describes the criteria for access to the Father. The criterion for validation that one is "walking in the light," according to this view, is not good works, but believing the revelation of imputed righteousness and forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ, which John defines as "the light" (revelation). Thus, one "walks in the

¹Smith, 5:171.

²Yarbrough, p. 59.

³E.g., Lloyd-Jones, pp. 130, 142.

light" if he or she believes in Jesus Christ. If one "walks in darkness," he or she does not believe in Jesus Christ and thus has no access to the Father.¹ I do not support this view.

John earlier said his aim was that his readers, who were Christians (2:12-14, 21, 27), should enjoy fellowship with the apostolic eyewitnesses that they did not then share (v. 3).

"... all true 'fellowship' is predicated on apostolic doctrine."²

1:7 Walking "in the light" means walking in the sphere that the light of God's will prescribes. Here "light" does not mean God Himself, as in verse 5, but the sphere in which God lives and operates. The idea is more *where* we walk than *how* we walk. Had John said "according to" the light rather than "in" the light, he would have been requiring sinless perfection for fellowship with God. We must be open and responsive to the light that we have, which increases as we grow in our knowledge of God's will.

"How do we do this? If I enter a lighted room and walk around in it, I am walking in the light; I am moving in a sphere which the light illuminates as it shines not only on me but upon everything around me. If I were to personalize the light, I could also say that I was walking *in the presence of* the light. Since according to this passage God not only *is* light (verse 5), but He is also *in* the light, to walk in the light must mean essentially to live in God's presence, exposed to what He has revealed about Himself. This, of course, is done through openness in prayer and through openness to the Word of God in which He is revealed.

¹Charles P. Baylis, "The Meaning of Walking 'in the Darkness' (1 John 1:6)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149:594 (April-June 1992):214-22.

²Zane C. Hodges, "Fellowship and Confession in 1 John 1:5-10," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129:513 (January-March 1972):52.

"By contrast, to 'walk in darkness' (verse 6) is to hide from God and to refuse to acknowledge what we know about Him."¹

"One another" evidently means God and us, rather than our fellow believers and us, in view of the context. We share the light in which God dwells. Another view is that John meant that we cannot enjoy fellowship with God if we neglect fellowship with other Christians.²

Two things are equally true of believers who "walk in the light," according to this verse: we enjoy "fellowship" with God and others, and we are experiencing *cleansing* from every ("all") "sin."

"This ["every sin"] refers to man's sinful nature in general, although it may include the wrong acts which can occur even when a Christian is living 'in the light.'"³

"The thought is not of the forgiveness of sin only, but of the removal of sin. The sin is done away; and the purifying action is exerted continuously."⁴

God "cleanses" us at conversion, in the sense that He will never bring us into condemnation for our sins (cf. Rom. 8:1; 1 Cor. 6:11; Eph. 1:7). However, we need *continual* cleansing from the defilement that sinful daily living brings, because it hinders our fellowship with God (cf. John 13:10). The "blood of Jesus" is a metonymy for the *death* of Jesus.⁵ A metonymy is a figure of speech in which a writer uses the name of one thing for that of another associated with it or suggested by it. It is the power of Jesus' *blood-sacrifice, the pouring out of His blood*, in Christ's *death*, that cleanses us (cf. Heb. 9:22), not Jesus'

¹Idem, *The Epistles ...*, pp. 60-61.

²Barker, p. 310; Westcott, *The Epistles ...*, p. 20.

³Smalley, p. 24.

⁴Westcott, *The Epistles ...*, p. 21.

⁵Ryrie, p. 1467.

physical blood that cleanses us by some magical and literal cleansing process.

Some Christians believe that Jesus' *physical blood* is literally what cleanses people when they sin, but this is not supported in Scripture. Some believe His literal blood was transported to, and has been kept in, heaven—and is supernaturally applied to believers from there—concluded from a literal interpretation and inference made from Heb. 9:24-25, which passage they believe says that Jesus entered into heaven *with His own literal physical blood*. *Spiritually*, on the other hand, we believe that Christ's historical, physical blood-sacrifice *continues to cleanse* believers from the defilement of sin, and this cleansing process is absolutely necessary for believer's continued fellowship with God.

In Old Testament Israel, believers had to offer sacrifices repeatedly in order to keep themselves clean before God, but Jesus Christ's perfect sacrifice has that lasting (unbroken, uninterrupted) effect for the believer who walks in the light.

"What John has in mind here is the cleansing of the conscience from guilt and moral defilement which is so insisted on in the Epistle to the Hebrews (Heb. 9:14; 10:2, 22), and which takes a leading place among the saving benefits of the redemptive self-sacrifice of Christ."¹

1:8 This second claim (cf. v. 6) is more serious, and its results are worse: we do not just "lie," but we "deceive ourselves." The claim in verse 6 seeks to bring God down to our level, whereas the claim in verse 8 seeks to bring man up to God's level.²

If a Christian claims to be enjoying fellowship with God, he may think he is temporarily or permanently entirely sinless. Yet our sinfulness exceeds our consciousness of guilt. We have only a very limited appreciation of the extent to which we sin. We commit sins of thought as well as deed, sins of omission as

¹Bruce, p. 44.

²McGee, 5:762.

well as commission, and sins that spring from our nature as well as from our actions. This verse warns against all forms of the heresy of perfectionism.

Some have interpreted the phrase "no sin" to mean no sin nature or no sin principle.¹ However, this seems out of harmony with John's other uses of "to have sin" (cf. John 15:22, 24; 19:11). Rather, it probably means to have no guilt for sin.²

God's truth, as Scripture reveals it, does not have a full hold on us, is not controlling our thinking, if we make this claim. "In us" suggests not that we have the facts in our mental grasp, but that they have control over us. They are (i.e., our true inner condition is) in us as booze is in the belly (like shown in a breathalyzer test), rather than as a penny is in a pocket; it influences how we behave. The same contrast exists between intellectual assent and saving faith.

1:9 This verse is the converse of verse 8. Acknowledging the sins of which we are aware is opposite to saying we are not guilty for sinning. The Greek word translated "confess" (*homologeō*) literally means to say the same thing. Confessing, therefore, means saying about our sins what God says about them, namely, that they are indeed sins, offenses against Him, and not just mistakes, blunders, or errors. One scholar wrote that this is public confession.³ But there does not seem to be good reason to read that into the text.

"'He who confesses and condemns his sins,' says Augustine, 'already acts with God. God condemns thy sins: if thou also dost condemn them, thou art linked on to God.'"⁴

"If we confess our sins," God will then "forgive" the sins we confess and will, in addition, "cleanse us from *all*

¹E.g., Smalley, p. 29.

²Robert Law, *The Tests of Life: A Study of the First Epistle of St. John*, p. 130; Robertson, 6:208.

³Westcott, *The Epistles ...*, p. 23

⁴A. Ross, *The Epistles of James and John*, p. 146.

unrighteousness" (emphasis added). Consequently we do not need to worry that He might have failed to forgive us for sins of which we are unaware! Sin incurs a debt to God, but forgiveness (Gr. *aphiemi*) cancels the debt and dismisses the charge. Sin also pollutes the sinner, but God's cleansing (*katharizo*) removes the stain so we can be holy again. God absolutely promises forgiveness that is consistent with His justice (because Jesus Christ paid the penalty for *all* our sins).

Some expositors teach that this verse cannot apply to Christians, since God has already forgiven Christians, and therefore we do not need to ask for what we already have.¹ This viewpoint fails to distinguish between *forensic* forgiveness, that we receive at conversion, and *family* forgiveness, that we need after conversion. For example, a judge could pay his own son's fine in court, but still discipline him when he got home. Jesus instructed His believing disciples to ask the Father for forgiveness (Matt. 6:12; Luke 11:4).

The fact that God has removed the penalty for our sins at conversion (1 Cor. 6:11; Eph. 1:7; 4:32; Col. 2:13) does not remove the necessity of confessing our sins frequently. Again, the issue is not *acceptance by* God, but *fellowship with* God. *Conversion* (forensic, positional) *forgiveness* makes us acceptable as members of God's family. *Continual* (family, practical) *forgiveness* enables us to experience intimate fellowship as sons within God's family.

"Sin interrupts fellowship but cannot change relationship."²

"The status just described is analogous to God's full acceptance of Israel, as expressed in Balaam's inspired utterance: 'He has not observed iniquity in Jacob, nor has He seen wickedness in Israel'

¹E.g., Peter E. Gillquist, *Love Is Now*, p. 64.

²*The New Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 1342.

(Numbers 23:21). Yet, on a *practical* level, Israel was full of failures!"¹

Must confession include turning away from sin (repentance) in order to be true confession? Since true confession involves saying the same thing about our sin that God does, it must include repentance. God not only said that sin is wrong, but He also said that we should turn from it. If we only label a particular act of sin as sin, we are not really saying the same thing about it as God says. We must be willing to say that we will turn from it if we want to say about our sin what God says about it.

"Confession of sin to God and to one another (James 5:16) is urged throughout the N.T. from John the Baptist (Mark 1:5) on."²

"Keep short accounts with God. Do not wait until Sunday morning to confess a sin."³

Another view is that this verse explains how to distinguish a teacher of the truth from a false teacher. Thus this verse is not a promise as much as it is a test. True teachers confess their sins, but false teachers do not.⁴ This interpretation arises out of the conviction that the main purposes of the epistle were to identify reliable teachers (2:26), and to confirm believers in their faith (5:13).

1:10 The false claim here is that the sin we have committed is *not really sin*. This is the third and most serious charge (cf. vv. 6, 8). It puts God's revelation of sin aside, and makes man the authority for what is and what is not sin. This claim says God is wrong in His judgment of man, and is therefore "a liar." The

¹Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 67. For further discussion of this verse see Ed Glasscock, "Forgiveness and Cleansing in 1 John 1:9," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166:662 (April-June 2009):217-31.

²Robertson, 6:208.

³Mitchell, p. 42. Italics omitted.

⁴See James Allman, "First John 1:9: Confession as a Test, but of What?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 172:686 (April-June 2015):203-21.

claimant dismisses His Word as invalid (e.g., Ps. 14:3; Isa. 53:6; John 2:24-25; Rom. 3:23).

Each of these three false claims in verses 6, 8, and 10 is a denial of the truth that immediately precedes it in verses 5, 7, and 9—respectively. The corrective to each of the first two false claims follows in the verse immediately after each claim.

Truth	False claim
God is light (v. 5).	We can have fellowship with Him even though we walk in darkness (v. 6).
Walking in the light is necessary for fellowship with God (v. 7).	We are not guilty when we sin (v. 8).
Confession is necessary to restore fellowship with God (v. 9).	We have not sinned (v. 10).

"It would be difficult to find any single passage of Scripture more crucial and fundamental to daily Christian living than 1 John 1:5-10. For here, in a few brief verses, the 'disciple whom Jesus loved' has laid down for us the basic principles which underlie a vital walk with God."¹

"What then is the principle of fellowship with God? Succinctly stated, it is openness to God and full integrity in the light of His Word."²

"The Christian religion is the religion of sinners. The Christian life is a life of continued repentance,

¹Hodges, "Fellowship and ...," p. 48.

²Ibid., p. 60. Cf. Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, p. 482.

of continual faith in, thankfulness for, and love to the Redeemer."¹

2:1 John's preceding comments on the inevitability of sinful behavior (vv. 6-10) could have led his readers to two conclusions. Either: it is useless to strive against sin, since we can never in this life be done with it; or, if escape from sin is so easy, why dread falling into it?² John proceeded to assure his readers here that he did not want them to sin at all (cf. John 5:14). This was one of his purposes in writing this epistle, and it is the third of John's five purpose statements (cf. 1:3, 4). Avoidance of sin is important, even though it is not entirely possible.

"Thus far John's epistle has announced its purpose (1:1-4), affirmed God's character as light (1:5), and explored implications of God's character for life in the Christian community (1:6-10), focusing on appropriate and inappropriate responses of the mouth and heart. In the present section [2:1-8] John turns directly to his readers with the first of numerous poignant appeals growing out of the broad yet surprisingly deep foundation he has laid in such short compass."³

John used the Greek word translated "children" here (*teknia*) as a family term of endearment. It means "little born ones" (2:12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21; John 13:33; cf. Gal. 4:19). "My" adds a further note of tenderness. (Compare the "we" statements in chapter 1.) These terms ("my little children" and "I") do not require us to conclude that the recipients were necessarily John's personal converts, but they were very dear to him. Since this letter indicates that they were mature Christians, they may have been the leaders of various house-churches in Asia Minor.

¹Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 1956.

²Smith, 5:173.

³Yarbrough, p. 70.

"Let me remind you that 1 John is a *family* epistle; it emphasizes the relationship of the family of God."¹

"May not sin" does not mean "may never ever sin again." Sinning is inevitable for sinners, even forgiven sinners, but in every instance of temptation there is always the possibility that we will not fall (1 Cor. 10:13). "If" introduces a condition assumed to take place for the sake of the argument (a third class condition in Greek).

It is hard to strive for greater intimacy with God when our lives are moving along without major problems or sins. It is easy to be content with mediocrity in our relationship with God. Nevertheless, God wants us to be holy as He is holy, not just holy enough to muddle through life without making major blunders. Only He can give us the desire and the ability to *pursue* holiness as a goal in life (Phil. 2:13).

As our "Advocate" (friend in court, mediator, or defense attorney), "Jesus Christ (the righteous)" pleads the cause of the sinning Christian before God the Father (cf. Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25; 9:24). This ministry appears to be broader than simply aiding the sinner after he or she sins. It evidently includes pleading the sinner's cause with the Father whenever that becomes necessary, as when Jesus prayed that Peter's faith would not fail (Luke 22:31-32). Here, however, the emphasis is on Jesus Christ's help after we have sinned. Since Jesus Christ is "righteous," He is the *perfect* Advocate with God (cf. Acts 3:14; 7:52).

The Greek word translated "Advocate" is *parakleton*, that transliterated into English is "Paraclete." It means one who gets called to the side of another to help. Jesus used this word four times in the Upper Room Discourse to describe the Holy Spirit (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7).² He called the Holy Spirit

¹McGee, 5:765.

²See John R. Yarid Jr., "Reflections of the Upper Room Discourse in 1 John," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160:637 (January-March 2003):65-76.

"another Paraclete" like Himself (John 14:16). This is the only other place in the New Testament where "Paraclete" appears.

"Demosthenes uses it [the word *parakleton*] to designate the friends of the accused who voluntarily step in and personally urge the judge to decide in his favor. That is the sense of this word here because 'with the Father' as well as 1:9 refer to God as the Judge in the case. In John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7, where the Holy spirit is the Paraclete, we have a different case, for the term is there used in the nonforensic, the wider sense of one who come to our aid."¹

"The Holy Spirit is our Comforter down here, and Christ is our Comforter up there."²

"Whereas in the first part of this v[erse] John is anticipating too *lenient* an attitude toward sin, in the second half he is countering the possibility of too *harsh* a view."³

"As a physician might say to his patient: 'Your trouble is obstinate; the poison is in your blood, and it will take a long time to eradicate it. But I do not tell you this to discourage you or make you careless; no, on the contrary, to make you watchful and diligent in the use of the remedy' ..."⁴

2:2 Jesus Christ did not just *make* satisfaction for our sins, as a priest, though He did that. He *is* the satisfaction Himself, as a sacrifice (cf. Rom. 3:25). The Septuagint translators used the same Greek word translated "propitiation" here (*hilasmos*, satisfaction, cf. 4:10) to translate the "mercy seat" on the ark of the covenant. Jesus' body was the site where God placated His wrath against sin. Verses 1:5—2:2 all have Old Testament

¹Lenski, p. 398.

²McGee, 5:766.

³Smalley, pp. 35-36.

⁴Smith, 5:173.

tabernacle connotations. Jesus' death not only expiated (cancelled, dismissed, waived) "our sins," but it provided cleansing from their defilement, and satisfied God's wrath against sin with an acceptable offering.¹

This verse provides strong support for the fact that Jesus Christ died for *all* people (unlimited atonement). In His death, the Lord Jesus provided salvation that is *sufficient* for all ("the whole world"), though it is *efficient* (or *efficacious*) only for those who trust in Him (2 Cor. 5:14-15, 19; Heb. 2:9; Rev. 22:17). In other words, Christ's death made eternal life available for all, but not automatic for all. "Our" refers to the sins of all believers, and the "whole world" means all humankind, not just the elect (cf. 4:14; John 1:12, 29; 3:16).² Those who hold to "particular redemption" (i.e., that Jesus died only for the elect) limit the meaning of the "whole world" to the world of the elect.

"Johannine thought and terminology leave absolutely no room for any such concept as 'the world of the elect.'"³

John reminded his readers in this section (1:8—2:2) that fellowship with God is possible only when we deal with sin in our lives. This is true of believers (1:5—2:1) as well as unbelievers (2:2). John articulated four fundamental principles that underlie fellowship with God to facilitate his readers' experience of that fellowship. One must renounce sin (1:8—2:2), obey God (2:3-11), reject worldliness (2:12-17), and keep the faith (2:18-29) to live in the light of God's presence.

B. REACHING THE GOAL BY KNOWING THE GOD OF LIGHT 2:3-11

"The author is explaining to the members of his church, in answer to developing heretical tendencies, the nature of true

¹See Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, pp. 125-85; W. Hall Harris, "A Theology of John's Writings," in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, p. 215; Yarbrough, pp. 77-81; and James E. Allman, "*hilaskesthai*. To Propitiate or to Expiate?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 172:687 (July-September 2015):335-55.

²See Kruse, p. 74.

³Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 71. See also Yarbrough, p. 80.

Christian belief and practice, and the way in which these interact. To do this he first chooses as his theme and for his exhortation the necessity of 'living in the light' (1:5-7). The first (negative) condition required for a genuinely Christlike existence, the writer suggests, is the renunciation of sin (1:8—2:2). The second (positive) condition he now proceeds to discuss: it is obedience, especially to the law of love (2:3-11)."¹

"Though the immediate effect of the light is to expose sin, its primary purpose is to reveal duty."²

From his comments on *fellowship* with God, John moved to a discussion of *knowing* God. He did so to enable his readers to appreciate the fundamental importance of knowing God, as well as having intimate fellowship with God. These concepts are virtually synonymous.³ John said similar things about knowing God to what he had said about having fellowship with God. Increased fellowship with God and increased knowledge of God are inseparable. Fellowship with God should always lead to more perfect knowledge of God; this should be its result.

"Fellowship" (Gr. *koinonia*) is the less common term, occurring only four times in 1 John: 1:3 (twice), 6, 7. "Know" is more common. *Ginosko* (to know experientially) appears 24 times: 2:3, 4, 5, 13 (twice), 14, 18, 29; 3:1 (twice), 6, 16, 19, 20, 24; 4:2, 6 (twice), 7, 8, 13, 16; 5:2, 20. *Oida* (intellectual knowledge) appears 15 times: 2:11, 20, 21 (twice), 29; 3:2, 5, 14, 15; 5:13, 15 (twice), 18, 19, 20. The noun *ginosis* (experiential knowledge) is absent from this epistle.

"Again the false claims to knowledge by the opponents are stated first, this time introduced by the clause 'he who says' (cf. vv. 4, 6, 9). Each of these claims is again denied and the evidence or 'tests' of the true knowledge of God is set forth: obeying his commands (v. 5), walking in his likeness (v. 6), and loving one's brother (v. 10)."⁴

¹Smalley, p. 42.

²Law, p. 209.

³Barker, p. 315.

⁴Ibid.

2:3 John proposed a test whereby we can measure our experiential knowledge of God (Father and Son, 1:3), how well we really know Him. He said, look at your response to God's revealed will: How well do you "keep His commandments"? To "keep" His commandments means to "observe" or "guard" (Gr. *tereo*) them, to not throw them away (cf. v. 4; 3:22; 5:3). In other words, we are to obey them.

"A study was released by the University of Southern California indicating that one-third of the medical patients in this country ignore what doctors tell them to do. ...

"The situation is not much different when it comes to the believer doing what God tells him [or her] to do."¹

All believers know God to some extent (John 17:3). However, some know Him more fully and intimately than others do (John 14:7-9, 21-23). Occasionally a person who has been married for a long time, and then gets a divorce, will say of his or her spouse, "I never really knew her (or him)." Obviously they knew each other in one sense, but their knowledge of one another was not very complete or intimate. John's point was that our personal experiential knowledge of God will affect the way we live, and the way we live, obediently or disobediently, will reveal how well we really know God.

"To know God was not merely to know Him as the philosopher knows Him; it was to know Him as a friend knows Him. In Hebrew the word *to know* is used of the relationship between husband and of [*sic*] wife, and especially of the sexual act, the most intimate of all relationships (cp. *Genesis* 4:1)."²

"This verse is often taken as a way of knowing whether or not we are really *saved*. But that view

¹J. Allen Blair, *The Epistles of John*, p. 59.

²Barclay, p. 64.

flies directly into the face of all Johannine theology, according to which we are saved by believing in Christ for eternal life (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:35 and *passim*; the references are numerous).

...

"The idea that a Christian can believe in Christ, without knowing whether he or she has *really* believed, is complete nonsense. Of course we can know whether or not we believe. That we can know this is both common sense and completely biblical [cf. John 9:35-38; 11:25-27]. ...

"Thus the test suggested by 1 John 2:3 is not of the *saving* knowledge of God or of Christ, but of the *experiential* knowledge of God and His Son. To get this wrong, as many commentators have, is to lay the groundwork for a complete misreading of the epistle! Such a misreading is indeed common in the commentaries today and may be traced back primarily to Robert Law's study on this epistle."¹

"The sign of [experiential] knowledge of God is obedience to his commands and recognition of the way of life that he expects from his people."²

"In other words, to 'know' God is not a matter of correct thought-processes, but of a genuine spiritual *relationship*. The knowledge of God, and fellowship with him, are complementary aspects of Christian experience."³

2:4 The profession in view, in the light of the context (1:6, 8, 10), is evidently another claim to having a close relationship with God, not a claim to being saved.⁴ If a person says he knows

¹Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, pp. 75-77. See also idem, "The First ...," 2:1198.

²Marshall, p. 122.

³Smalley, p. 45.

⁴See Zane C. Hodges, "Is God's Truth in You? 1 John 2:4b," *Grace Evangelical Society News* 5:7 (July 1990):2-3.

God intimately but is not obedient to the revealed will of God, he is a liar; he does not know God intimately, and does not have a close relationship with God. Furthermore, God's truth does not have a controlling influence over his life (cf. 1:8, 10).

"We may not like John's verbal style [i.e., his hateful-sounding denunciation; e.g., 4:20], but he may simply be stating a fact in God's sight as a pastoral messenger to God's people who need a wakeup call."¹

Jesus used similar language in Matt. 23:13-33 and John 8:55, and John was one of two "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17).

"... who is not keeping God's commands does not know God experientially no matter what he claims verbally."²

"St. John never uses the word *nomos* ["law"] for the rule of Christian obedience: this word is reserved for the Mosaic law, John i. 17, 46, and in all fifteen times in the Gospel: but almost always *entolai* ["commandment"] ..."³

Verses 4, 6, and 9 contain three more claims (cf. 1:6, 8, 10).

Claim	Condition
"I have come to know Him" (v. 4; cf. John 17:3).	He "keeps His word" (v. 5).
"[I abide] in him" (v. 6; cf. John 15:4).	He "walk[s] ... as He walked" (v. 6).
"[I am] in the light" (v. 9; cf. John 12:46).	He "loves his brother" (v. 10).

¹Yarbrough, p. 85.

²Robert N. Wilkin, "Knowing God By Our Works?" *Grace Evangelical Society News* 3:10 (October-November 1988):3.

³Alford, 4:2:434.

"The three assertions about knowing God, abiding in him, and being in the light (as he himself is in the light, v 7), are parallel versions of a single claim to be in a right relationship with the Father through the Son."¹

2:5a On the other hand, the Christian who is careful to observe all of God's "[W]ord" (not just His commandments, v. 4), gives evidence that he has come to understand and appreciate God's love for him. God's "love" is "perfected ... in him" in the sense that the Christian has perceived it, has responded to it, and it is having its intended effect in his or her behavior. Our love for God is in view here, rather than His love for us (cf. v. 15; 4:12; 5:3).² Loving God is parallel to knowing God (vv. 3-4). When a Christian moves beyond simply obeying God and desires to please Him, God's love in him or her has reached its desired effect: it "has truly been perfected."

"... the perfect observation of His commandments is the perfection of love to Him."³

"The expression **in Him** (*en auto*) is not equivalent to Paul's concept of being 'in Christ' (*en Christo*). In light of Christ's teaching in John 13—17 (esp. 15:1-8), the words *in Him* refer to the 'abiding' Teacher/disciple relationship."⁴

Bible students have often called John the "apostle of love" because of his frequent references to love. There are no fewer than 46 references to love in 1 John. The verb *agapao* appears 28 times in these verses: 2:10, 15 (twice); 3:10, 11, 14 (twice), 18, 23; 4:7 (twice), 8, 10 (twice), 11 (twice), 12, 19 (twice), 20 (thrice), 21 (twice); 5:1 (twice), 2 (twice). The noun *agape* occurs 18 times: 2:5, 15; 3:1, 16, 17; 4:7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 16 (thrice), 17, 18 (thrice); 5:3. Likewise, many have

¹Smalley, p. 59.

²Bruce, p. 51; Stott, p. 91; Dodd, p. 31; Kruse, p. 80.

³Alford, 4:2:435.

⁴Hodges, "The First ...," 2:1199.

referred to Paul as the "apostle of faith," and to Peter as the "apostle of hope," because of their major emphases.

"Love for Christ and obedience to *His word* are in no way a test of saving faith, despite the repeated claim of many that they are. Instead, they are tests of genuine, heartfelt discipleship to Jesus."¹

2:5b-6 John's use of the phrase "in Him" is different from Paul's. Paul used this phrase to describe every believer's relationship to Christ because of his or her justification. The unsaved are not "in Christ." However, John used "in Him" as Jesus did—in the Upper Room Discourse—to describe, not all believers, but the group of believers who abide in Christ (John 15:1-8). In John 15:8 Jesus said, "By this [abiding] is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit. So you will be my *disciples*." To abide in Christ means to obey Him (John 15:10).

"Thus the test of 'abiding' in him is, as before, whether or not the claimant is living a life of obedience to God."²

The term or expression "abiding in Christ" is a synonym for having an intimate relationship with Him, as are "having fellowship with God" and "knowing God experientially." John's point was that a believer who is abiding in God will obey God, just as Jesus Christ abode in God and gave evidence of that by obeying His Father. John used the word translated "abide" (Gr. *meno*) 24 times in 1 John (2:6, 10, 14, 17, 19, 24 [thrice], 27 [twice], 28; 3:6, 9, 14, 15, 17, 24 [twice]; 4:12, 13, 15, 16 [thrice]). This indicates a major emphasis on the believer's abiding relationship in this epistle. The obligation of every Christian is not just to obey God's orders (vv. 4-5), but also to "walk in the same manner as He walked," to follow the example of His Son (v. 6).

¹Ibid., 2:1198.

²Smalley, p. 52.

"We cannot claim to abide in Him unless we behave like Him."¹

"To walk as He walked is something we cannot accomplish in our own strength. It is supernatural. It is impossible for a man to imitate Christ."²

Rather, we must allow Christ to manifest His life through us.

"Johannine imitation means to follow as a disciple, a completely dedicated adherent and advocate."³

The next few verses explain what it means to behave as Christ did.

2:7 What other possible commandments did John have in mind (vv. 3-4)? He explained in this verse that he referred to no new responsibility with which his readers might be unfamiliar. He referred to "the old commandment" they had known about from *the beginning of their experience as Christians* (i.e., the command to love each other, vv. 9-11; cf. John 13:34-35).⁴ The command to "love one another" appears at least a dozen times in the New Testament: John 13:34; 15:9, 12, 17; Romans 13:8; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; 1 Pet. 1:22; 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11-12; and 2 John 5.

"The life of Christ was one of self-sacrificing love; therefore, the proof of imitating him is exhibited in love. Love is that which seeks the highest good in the one loved; and since the highest good is the will of God, love is doing the will of God."⁵

2:8 In another sense, however, this old commandment was "new" ("fresh," Gr. *kainos*). John often wrote in terms of black or white contrasts in this epistle (*either or*), but in verses 7 and 8 he spoke of *both and*. With the Incarnation, the light of God

¹Stott, p. 92.

²Mitchell, p. 60.

³Yarbrough, p. 90.

⁴See Hodges, "The First ...," 2:1199.

⁵Ryrie, p. 1468.

had entered the world more brightly than ever before (Heb. 1:1-3). This was a *new* commandment in that it belongs to the New Era that Jesus had inaugurated (John 14:6).

"It is not a recent innovation, yet it is qualitatively new as experienced in Christ."¹

The new commandment "is true" (Gr. *alethes*, "revealed") in Christ and in Christians in this sense: Jesus Christ's obedience to His Father demonstrated it first, and Christians' obedience to God is demonstrating it now. Christian love is truth manifested, both in Jesus who modeled it, and in His disciples who follow His example.

This "true Light" (the gospel of Christ) was dispelling "the darkness" of sin, and would continue to do so until the final increase of that light results in the complete annihilation of darkness. When Jesus Christ issued the "great commandment" anew, He called it a "new commandment," even though God had given it previously (Lev. 19:18). Now it was important in a new sense, due to Christ's coming as the Light of the World (John 13:34-35).

2:9 This verse contains a concrete example of what John had been talking about. It is another claim to intimate fellowship with God that a person's behavior reveals as spurious (1:6, 8, 10; 2:4, 6). Hatred of other Christians is a sure sign that one is not walking with God in close fellowship.

Obviously genuine Christians have hated other Christians. It is naïve to claim, as some expositors have, that the one who is hating must be an unbeliever. Moreover, John regarded the "hater" and the "one hated" as brothers. In this letter, the community of Christians is in view, so John meant a "brother" Christian, rather than an unsaved neighbor.²

"If the Bible taught that feelings of hatred were a sure sign of an unsaved condition, then virtually

¹Hiebert, "An Expository ...," 145:422.

²Barker, p. 317; Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 86.

no one in the whole church would be saved! But the Bible does not teach this."¹

However, it is likely that John was speaking of hatred in a comparative sense, as Jesus sometimes did (Matt. 6:24; 24:10; Luke 14:26; 16:13; cf. Deut. 21:15-17; 2 Sam. 19:7; Prov. 13:24; Mal. 1:2-3; Rom. 9:12). Hyperbolically, to fail to show love is to demonstrate hate.

The person who makes this claim is "in the darkness." He is not enjoying intimate fellowship with God, who is "light." "Until now" implies that this condition can end.

2:10

"... whoever loves his brother remains in the light; and being in the light he can both see where he is going, and therefore avoid yielding constantly to temptation, and also (as a result) avoid causing others to fall."²

"... the Gospel light not only illumines the understanding, but warms the heart into love."³

"Want of love is the most prolific source of offenses."⁴

The cause of "stumbling" is hatred in the heart. Hatred causes the hater to stumble in his or her walk with God (cf. John 11:9).

2:11

The hater's sin affects him in three ways. It places him "in [the] darkness," outside of God's fellowship. It leads to aimless activity in which he is in great spiritual danger, and in which there is the possibility of a fall (cf. John 9:41). It also results in mental confusion (cf. John 12:35). The Christian who hates his brother loses his sense of spiritual direction in life—partially

¹Ibid., p. 87.

²Smalley, p. 62.

³Jamieson, et al., p. 1500.

⁴Westcott, *The Epistles ...*, p. 56.

or totally. No course of life is more dangerous for a Christian than one that includes hatred toward another believer.

"By saying that someone walks in darkness, John means that his or her ethical and spiritual life is benighted."¹

"The penalty of living in the darkness is not merely that one does not see, but that one goes blind."²

John argued that intimate fellowship with God is possible only when a person is obedient to God (2:3-11) and has renounced sin in his or her life (1:5—2:2).

III. RESISTING ENEMIES 2:12-27

"In this section ... John refers to the Revisionists directly. In so doing he makes clear the overall purpose of the epistle. The appearance of these 'antichrists' on the scene is what has occasioned this letter. Appropriately, the apostle's concern is with the threat they constitute to the readers' continuing fellowship with God (cf. 1:3). Of course, no matter how much the readership might be misled, there was no danger to their eternal salvation; although, as we shall see, there *was* a threat to their *assurance* of salvation."³

A. APPRECIATING SPIRITUAL ADVANCES 2:12-14

John began this section by affirming the spiritual competence of his readers. He reminded them of their spiritual blessings, in order to motivate them to cultivate intimate fellowship with God.

"Verses 12-14 clearly reveal that John does not regard his readers as 'false professors.' Viewing this epistle as presenting

¹Yarbrough, p. 105.

²Smith, 5:176.

³Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 93.

'tests' by which to determine the genuineness of a person's salvation misreads the epistle."¹

"Because his readers are Christians and have in part experienced the power of their faith he moves them to nobler efforts; his object is that their 'joy may be fulfilled' (cf. 1. 4)."²

This pericope contains two series of three sentences. Each sentence begins, "I am writing to you ... because ..."

2:12-13b Who did John have in mind when he addressed his readers as "little children," "fathers," and "young men"? Perhaps he meant those who physically fell into these categories. If he did, what about his female readers, and others who were not in these categories? Perhaps he was thinking of those in his audience who—in their spiritual development—were children, men, and youths.³ If this is what he meant, why did he address them in this unnatural order? We could ask the same question about the first possibility also.

Perhaps John first addressed *all* his readers as "little children" (vv. 1, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21; cf. John 21:5), and then spoke more specifically to the more mature or older (fathers), and lastly to the less mature or younger (young men).⁴ Yet what he said to the three groups is so parallel that it seems more likely that he was addressing three distinct groups. It may be that John used these three stages of life to describe qualities typical of each age group that ought to characterize all believers.⁵ I think he was addressing the children (newer believers), fathers (mature believers), and young men (less mature but not new believers) among his readers in terms of their spiritual development.

¹Idem, *The First ...*, 2:1200.

²Westcott, *The Epistles ...*, p. 57.

³Bruce, p. 58; McGee, 5:772.

⁴Smalley, pp. 69-70. Cf. Barker, p. 319; Mitchell, p. 64; Yarbrough, p. 114-21; Findlay, p. 178-91; Kruse, p. 93.

⁵Marshall, p. 138; Dodd, pp. 37-39; Westcott, *The Epistles ...*, p. 59; James M. Boice, *The Epistles of John*, pp. 72-73; Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 94.

Another problem is whether John meant that he was writing *because* the stated condition was true of each group, or *so that* the condition might become true of them. The Greek particle *hoti* can have either sense: causal or declarative, and John could have intended both meanings. However, the causal meaning seems a bit stronger.¹

The spiritual "children" (new believers) among John's readers had known forgiveness by their heavenly Father (cf. 1:5—2:2). Forgiveness is one of the first things that a new believer appreciates about his or her salvation.

The "fathers" had experienced fellowship with God through Jesus Christ (cf. 2:3-11). "Fathers" connotes someone who has had some fellowship with Christ ("Him who has been from the beginning"; cf. John 1:1), not Christians who had led others to faith and were therefore their spiritual fathers.

The spiritually "young men" among the readers had known some victory over their spiritual adversary, Satan (cf. 2:15-23).² John mentioned these three experiences in their proper experiential sequence in the Christian life. That is, a Christian typically appreciates forgiveness as a new believer, then appreciates having fellowship with Christ, then overcomes "the evil one."

"The designation *young men* follows *fathers* because the readers' invaluable experience as *little children* (the forgiveness of sins) and as *fathers* (the knowledge of God) renders them vigorous *young men* prepared to do battle with Satan."³

2:13c-14 John then proceeded to point out other characteristics of his readers again, using the same three stages of life to illustrate their progress. Perhaps John repeated the cycle of descriptions

¹Smalley, p. 71; Marshall, pp. 136-37; Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 95.

²Mitchell, p. 66.

³Hodges, "The First ...," 2:1201.

to assure his readers that he was aware of their growth and strength in the faith. This would have encouraged them.

In the first series of three (vv. 12-13b), we have the minimal spiritual experience for each stage of spiritual growth. In the second series of three (vv. 13c-14), we have the more advanced spiritual experience for each stage. The spiritually "little children" (Gr. *teknion*, "born ones") know that God has forgiven their sins, but "children" (Gr. *paidion*, "taught ones") can advance to "know" the Father. John implied that the new Christians among his readership had advanced from just appreciating that God had forgiven their sins. They had been taught, and had learned, to "know" God the Father to some extent.

Both statements about "fathers" are identical, because there can be no variation here. When one knows Christ, the only thing one can do to advance is to get to know Him better.

John initially said the "young men" had defeated the evil one, but he said nothing of their condition after gaining the victory. They could have become weak and vulnerable. However, the second statement about them adds that they "are strong," and that God's Word continues to "abide" in them. This is a more robust spiritual condition. They had grown strong by abiding in God's Word.

John strengthened the sense of progress in these verses. He used present tense verbs in the first set of sentences (vv. 12-13b), which emphasize ongoing action. Then he used aorist tense verbs, in the second set (vv. 13c-14), that imply a state of greater spiritual maturity.

"In all the main Johannine writings—Gospel (John 16:33), First Epistle (1 John 4:4; 5:4-5) and Revelation (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 5:5; 12:11; 15:2; 21:7) alike—the theme of overcoming is present, and in all it is through

Christ, the supreme Overcomer, that His people overcome."¹

Of the 28 occurrences of the verb *nikan* ("to conquer") in the New Testament, 24 are in John's writings, and the noun *nike* ("victory") appears only in 5:4 in the New Testament. Thus the victory motif is peculiarly Johannine.²

In this section, John was not saying that his readers were all immature or all mature. He was acknowledging their spiritual state and their progress, in order to encourage them to press on to know the Lord better and to pursue more intimate fellowship with Him.

As noted before, a popular interpretation of 1 John that many commentators have advocated, is that John wrote this epistle to enable his readers to determine whether they were true believers. The questions John raised throughout the epistle, they say, were "tests of [the presence of spiritual] life."³ However, in the verses just considered (vv. 12-14), John did not say he was writing to test his readers' salvation. He said he was writing to them because they were genuine believers. John challenged his readers with tests of fellowship rather than with tests of regeneration.

"It would be hard to devise an approach to John's first epistle more hopelessly misguided or more completely self-defeating [than the 'tests of life' approach]. If the premise on which this approach is based were true, it would be quite impossible for either the original audience of 1 John or any of its subsequent readers to possess the assurance of salvation. Since the writer repeatedly enjoins the 'abiding' life marked by obedience to Christ's commands, one cannot really be certain until the end of his earthly experience whether he has abided or persevered

¹Bruce, p. 59.

²See Smalley, p. 75; Jamieson, et al., p. 1500; and E. Malatesta, *Interiority and Covenant. A Study of einai en and menein en in the First Letter of Saint John*, pp. 168-69.

³See, for example, Raymond Brown, *The Epistles of John*; John Calvin, *The First Epistle of John*; D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Non-Pauline Epistles and Revelation*; idem, "An Expository Study of 1 John," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (April 1988-July 1990); Law; John F. MacArthur Jr., *The Gospel according to Jesus*; Marshall; Stott; Westcott; Dodd; Boice; Bruce; Barker; and Wiersbe.

in the requisite obedience. Meanwhile, one must entertain the possibility that he is a spurious Christian!

"Few errors of contemporary exposition are more blatant than this one. Not only does John *not* say that he is writing to 'test' whether his readers are saved or not, he says the reverse [in 1:3-4]!"¹

B. RECOGNIZING SPIRITUAL ADVERSARIES 2:15-27

Having encouraged the readers with affirmations that their spiritual condition was very good (2:12-14), John turned next to the enemies they must face: the world (2:15-17) and the antichrists (2:18-27).

1. Overcoming the World 2:15-17

"'Love the Father' (v. 5), 'love the brethren' (vers. 9-11), is the sum of St John's exhortations; 'love not the world' is the key-note of his warnings and dehortations."²

John warned his readers of worldly dangers that face the Christian as he or she seeks to get to know God better. He did this to enable them to prepare for and overcome these obstacles with God's help.

"The author is convinced that his readers have fellowship with God. He forcefully reassures them that they are in a state of grace. At the same time, however, he is aware of the temptations they are still exposed to from the world."³

¹Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, pp. 47-48. Other commentators who hold that 1 John offers tests of fellowship rather than tests of life are J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Joy of Fellowship*; Mitchell; idem, *An Everlasting Love*; Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, pp. 156-75; Guy H. King, *The Fellowship*; Charles C. Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*; idem, "The First ...," p. 1466; J. W. Roberts, *The Letters of John*; and Karl Braune, *The Epistles General of John*, in *Lange's Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, 12:15.

²Findlay, p. 195.

³Schnachenburg, p. 119.

"As often in 1 John, a section of parenthesis [reminders of what the readers already knew or were doing or of what they knew they should avoid] follows a series of dogmatic statements."¹

The New Testament uses the term "world" (Gr. *kosmos*) in at least three ways. Sometimes "the world" refers to planet earth, the physical world (e.g., Acts 17:24). Sometimes it refers to humankind, the human world (e.g., John 3:16), and sometimes it refers to human culture as influenced by Satan, the world system (here).

John again presented three pairs, as he did in verses 12-14.

V. 15	The love of the world ...	The love of the Father ...
V. 16	... comes from the world.	comes from the Father.
V. 17	The world passes away.	The one who obeys God remains forever.

2:15 The Greek negative prohibition *me*, occurring with the present active imperative verb, means either *stop* doing something, or *do not have* the habit of doing it. The "world" (*kosmos*) represents the system of values, priorities, and beliefs that unbelievers hold that excludes God (cf. John 14:30; Gal. 6:14; Eph. 2:2; 2 Pet. 2:20). In this context, it does not refer to the world of creation or the world of humanity in general, which God loves (John 3:16).

"The *cosmos* means to him [John] the prevailing spiritual and moral order of human affairs; and this system of things is hostile to God and alien from His love, and therefore radically evil and doomed to perish."²

¹Smalley, p. 89.

²Findlay, p. 197.

"The world is that organized system which acts as a rival to God."¹

It is a moral and spiritual system designed to draw people away from God. It is a seductive system that appeals to all people, believers as well as unbelievers, and calls for our affection, participation, and loyalty (cf. John 3:16-17, 18-19; James 4:4). Satan controls this system, and believers should shun it (cf. 5:19; John 12:31; 14:30). Here *kosmos* does not refer primarily to the created order, though that order is also passing away (1 Cor. 7:31; 2 Pet. 3:7-13; Rev. 21:1-4).²

"It is the *Father* who is in opposition to the *world* (1 John 2:15). ... It is the *Spirit* who is in opposition to the *flesh* (Gal. 5:16, 25; Rom. 8:12, 13). It is *Christ* who is in opposition to *Satan*, or antichrist (1 John 3:8; Heb. 2:14, 15; 1 John 4:2, 3)."³

"If" assumes that some Christians will love the world (third class condition in Greek), which is unfortunately often true to reality. One writer responded to the question of many, "What's so bad about the world?"⁴ "The love of the Father" is probably the believers' love for the Father (objective genitive), not His love for us (subjective genitive).⁵ "In him" again reflects a controlling influence (cf. 1:8; 2:4).

2:16 John summarized the appeal of the world system as three-fold. Here is a picture of the infernal trinity, the three faces of the world, three sources of worldly temptation (cf. Gen. 3; Matt. 4). *Lusts* are cravings or desires, and in the context they are *evil* because they are not in harmony with God's will.

The "lust of the flesh" is the desire to *do* something apart from the will of God. It includes all corrupt bodily desires and every sinful activity that appeals to the sinful hearts of people. The

¹Ryrie, "The First ...," p. 1469. See also Schnachenburg's excursus on the "world" in verses 15-17, pp. 125-28.

²Smalley, p. 87.

³Mitchell, *Fellowship*, p. 69.

⁴Yarbrough, pp. 128-37.

⁵Robertson, 6:214; Schnachenburg, p. 120.

"lust of the eyes" is the desire to *have* something apart from the will of God. Whatever is appealing to our senses, but is not properly ours to desire or obtain, falls under this category. The "pride of life" is the desire to *be* something apart from the will of God. It refers to boastful pretension in earthly matters.

The first desire appeals mainly to the body, the second appeals to the soul (mind or intellect), and the third to the spirit. Perhaps the most common manifestation of the "lust of the flesh" in modern western civilization is illicit sex (hedonism, idolizing pleasure). Perhaps the most common manifestation of the "lust of the eyes" is excessive buying (materialism, idolizing possessions). Perhaps the most common manifestation of the "pride of life" is trying to control people, circumstances, history, or even God (egoism, idolizing power).

Matthew Henry called the lust of the flesh "luxury," the lust of the eyes "covetousness," and the pride of life "ambition."¹ Zane Hodges defined the lust of the flesh as "every illicit physical activity that appeals to people's sinful hearts," the lust of the eyes "whatever is visually appealing but not proper to desire or obtain," and the pride of life "the vain display of earthly life ... (arrogance, pretentiousness, or boasting about self, possessions, or accomplishments)."²

"The 'wants' which man feels can be divided into two great classes. Some things he desires to appropriate personally: some things he desires to enjoy without appropriation. The desire of the flesh embraces the one class (*e.g.* gratification of appetites); the desire of the eyes the other (*e.g.* pursuit of art as an end)."³

"Pride is a perverse attitude of mind making us forget our dependence on God and leading to self-

¹Henry, p. 1957.

²Hodges, "The First ...," 2:1202.

³Westcott, *The Epistles ...*, p. 62.

glorification. At the same time it prevents people from paying attention to their fellows."¹

"'Pride of life' will be reflected in whatever status symbol is important to me or seems to define my identity. When I define myself to others in terms of my honorary [or earned] degrees, the reputation of the church I serve, my annual income, the size of my library, my expensive car or house, and if in doing this I misrepresent the truth and in my boasting show myself to be only a pompous fool who has deceived no one, then I have succumbed to what John calls the pride of life."²

"The 'vainglory of life' that St John ascribes to 'the world,' is therefore an ostentation of worldly possessions or advantages, the disposition to 'show off' and to make other people look small."³

"The same three foes appear in the three classes of soil on which the divine seed falls: the wayside hearers, the *devil*, the thorns, *the world*, the rock underoil, *the flesh*."⁴

These three basic desires come "from the world" system, not "from the Father," and the believer should separate from them. The *Father* desires our welfare, but the *world* will destroy us (v. 17).

"'From the Father' (Greek *ek* with genitive) does not denote origin, but as often in John, nature. It does not mean that everything in the world comes *from* it; rather it means that evil behaviors are

¹Schnachenburg, p. 122.

²Barker, p. 322.

³Findlay, p. 207. Cf. Ryrie, "The First ...," p. 1470.

⁴Jamieson, et al., p. 1501.

altogether worldly and as such are contrary to what God wills."¹

"Morality is not the *grounds* for assurance [of salvation], but the *fruit* of it."²

THE CHRISTIAN'S THREE-FOLD ENEMY	
The Problem	The Solution
<p>The World</p> <p>(1 John 2:15-17)</p> <p>Lust of the flesh</p> <p>Lust of the eyes</p> <p>Pride of life</p>	<p>Flee</p> <p>(1 Tim. 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:22)</p>
<p>The flesh</p> <p>(Rom. 7:18-24)</p>	<p>Deny</p> <p>(Rom. 6:12-13; 8:13)</p>
<p>The devil</p> <p>(1 Peter 5:8)</p>	<p>Resist</p> <p>(1 Peter 5:9)</p>

John not only helped us identify the "infernal trinity" (in Revelation), but he also gave much revelation (in this epistle) about "how each Person of the Godhead works with and through the others to accomplish God's plan of salvation for us."³

¹Schnachenburg, p. 123.

²Hodges, *The Gospel ...*, p. 49. Cf. Eph. 4:1; Col. 3:12-13.

³*The Nelson Study Bible*, p. 2148.

THE TRINITY IN 1 JOHN		
"God the Father	God the Son	God the Holy Spirit
Through Christ, we have fellowship with the Father (1:3).	Jesus is called 'the Word of life' (1:1).	The Spirit indwells us and gives assurance of salvation (3:24).
God is light (1:5).	Jesus' blood cleanses us from sin (1:7).	The Spirit causes us to confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (4:2).
The Father has great love for His children (3:1).	Jesus is our Advocate with the Father (2:1).	The Spirit is the gift of God to all believers (4:13).
God is 'greater than our heart, and knows all things' (3:20).	Jesus is the propitiation for our sin (2:2).	The Spirit bears witness to the truth and to Jesus Christ (5:6).
God is love (4:8).	Jesus is sinless (3:5).	The Spirit is one with the Father and the Son (5:7, 8).
God 'sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins' (4:10).	The Son of God destroyed the works of the devil (3:8).	
God abides in believers, and they in Him (4:15).	Jesus has come in the flesh (4:2).	
God is the Giver of eternal life through Jesus Christ (5:11).	The Son is the Savior of the world (4:14).	

	The Son is the source of eternal life (5:11).	
	Believing in the Son of God is necessary for us to inherit eternal life (5:13)." ¹	

2:17 Another reason we should not pursue the lusts of the world is that this system, along with its desires, is in the process of "passing" out of existence. Actually we are living in what John called the "last hour" of the world's existence (v. 18). The world is only temporary and ephemeral (cf. 1 Peter).

In spite of this, those who do God's "will" *abide* (*continue and endure*, "live") "forever." Since *all* Christians will "live forever" (John 10:28), John was not saying we *attain* eternal life by our obedience. However, we also *abide* (i.e., *enjoy* an intimate relationship with God and abundantly experience God's eternal life) *now*, not just after death, when we obey God.

"Just as Abraham through obedience to God obtained the title 'the friend of God' (cf. James 2:21-23), by which he is known today in three world religions and will be known forever, so too the obedient Christian can attain this same identity by obedience (John 15:14-15). Likewise, it would be reasonable to conclude that the Christian's identity in eternity will be determined by obedience to God in time. And since all lives of obedience are unique in their particulars, each eternal 'identity' will be as unique as the snowflakes that fall from heaven."²

Resisting the appeal of the world is difficult for every believer. John urged his readers—in view of its attractiveness—to understand the avenues of its temptation, and to remember four things: (1) Love for the world

¹Ibid.

²Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 105.

indicates lack of love for God (v. 15). (2) It results in consequences that are not what our loving heavenly Father desires for our welfare (v. 17). (3) It lasts only a short time (v. 17), and (4) it precludes intimate fellowship with God (v. 15).

2. Resisting the Antichrists 2:18-27

John needed to alert his readers to the special deceptions they would encounter, in order to enable them to identify, and to defend themselves against, these temptations. Previously John had been less direct in dealing with false teachers who perverted the truth about intimacy with God. Now he became more direct and labeled them "antichrists."

John again used a three-fold structure at the beginning of this section of the text. He described three signs or marks: of the end (vv. 18-19), of the believer (vv. 20-23), and of living in the light (vv. 24-25). Verses 26-27 recapitulate and develop the revelation in verses 18-25.

A sign of the end 2:18-19

2:18 John probably used a different Greek word translated "children" (*paidia*, also in v. 12), because here it implies a child who learns. His readers needed to learn what he now revealed.

In the drama of human history, all of John's readers, including ourselves, play our part in the last act. Throughout the New Testament, the writers regarded the present inter-advent age, after the Incarnation and before the Lord's return for His own, as the "last hour" or the "last days." This is the final period before the Lord Himself breaks into history again and raptures the church. Then, the first stage of the New Era will be judgment (the Tribulation), and the second stage, blessing. In the second stage, Jesus Christ will rule directly over human beings, first in the Millennium, and then in the new heavens and the new earth.

"*The hour* is a term repeatedly used in the Gospel of John for the crisis of the earthly course of Jesus, the supreme epoch of His death and return to the Father. This guides us to St John's meaning

here. ... The 'last hour' closes a succession of hours; it is the end of an expiring day."¹

The revelation concerning the appearance of the world ruler ("antichrist") who will exalt himself against God was familiar to John's audience (Dan. 11:36-45; Matt. 24; Mark 13; 2 Thess. 2:3-5; 2 John 7; Rev. 12—13).² However, even as John wrote, "many" *little* "antichrists," people who exalt themselves against God, had arisen. John saw this as evidence that the appearance of *the* Antichrist was not far away. "Antichrists" are those who oppose Jesus Christ and His teachings, and or people who profess to be the Messiah.³ The first "beast" in Revelation 13 will profess to be the Messiah, and the second "beast" in that chapter will oppose Christ.⁴

"*Anti* ["against"] can mean substitution or opposition, but both ideas are identical in the word *antichristos* (in N.T. only here, 2:22; 4:3; II John 7)."⁵

"The enemy of the young men is the world, and the enemy of the babes in Christ is the false teacher."⁶

"The important advice to the babes in Christ is to feed on the Word of God [cf. Heb. 5:12-14; 1 Pet. 2:2]."⁷

2:19 Those who were opposing Christ had gone "out from *us*." "Us" may mean the apostolic eyewitnesses, as it is often used elsewhere in this epistle (cf. 1:1-5; 4:6). This would mean that these false teachers had gone out from among the apostles, not that they were apostles themselves necessarily, claiming that their message was what the apostles endorsed (cf. Acts

¹Findlay, p. 215.

²See Kruse, pp. 99-100, for a chart of the major New Testament antichrist passages.

³Stott, pp. 104-5; Plummer, p. 107; Barclay, p. 73.

⁴Cf. McGee, 5:776.

⁵Robertson, 6:215.

⁶Mitchell, *Fellowship*, p. 71. Cf. Findlay, p. 218.

⁷Mitchell, *Fellowship*, p. 72.

15:1; 2 Cor. 11:5). "Us" elsewhere in this epistle refers to the believing community (cf. 1:6—2:2), and I think it probably means that here. Some false teachers evidently had been members of local house-churches, and then left them because of doctrinal differences. The *physical* separation of these men from the apostles and the faithful eventually illustrated their *doctrinal* separation from them.

"From other references to 'antichrists' in this letter it is evident that when the writer uses this term he means the heterodox ex-members of his own community: those who, in one way or another, were denying the true identity of Jesus, and the fact of God's saving activity mediated to the world through him."¹

"... it is possible, in this instance, that those who later allowed their heretical thought and actions to run away with them (when it could obviously be said, *ouk esan ex emon*, 'they were not of us') were in the first place believers with a genuine, if uninformed, faith in Jesus."²

"If you will investigate the history of the false cults and antichristian religious systems in today's world, you will find that in most cases their founders started out *in a local church!* They were 'with us' but not 'of us,' so they went out 'from us' and started their own groups."³

"... a person who makes a genuine confession can be expected to persevere in his faith, although elsewhere John warns his readers against the danger of failure to persevere [cf. v. 24; 2 John 8]."⁴

¹Smalley, p. 101.

²Ibid., p. 103. Cf. Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, pp. 109-10.

³Wiersbe, p. 499.

⁴Marshall, p. 152.

Perseverance in faith and good works is *normal* for a Christian, but it is not *inevitable*. Hence we have all the warnings and exhortations to continue in faith and good works in the New Testament.

Whereas divisions within Christendom create obvious problems, God causes some good to come out of them, by using these divisions to clarify doctrinal differences and deviations from the truth.

A sign of the believer 2:20-23

2:20-21 In contrast to the heterodox secessionists (v. 19), the faithful believers within the community were "keeping the faith." The "anointing" referred to is evidently the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus gives to each believer at conversion (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 12:13; cf. Luke 4:18; John 6:69; 14:17, 26; 15:26; 16:13; Acts 4:27; 10:38; 2 Cor. 1:21-22). John said this anointing abode in his readers to teach them, and that it was truthful (v. 27).

"Anointing designates something for sacred use."¹

John referred to the Holy Spirit (sent "from the Holy One," i.e., from Christ) as the "anointing" (cf. John 14—16), ascribing a teaching role, which is a personal function, to Him. This seems preferable to the idea that the Word of God is the anointing.² John previously spoke of Jesus Christ as the life (1:2). The presence of the Holy Spirit in every believer enables him or her to perceive the truth of the gospel, and to distinguish truth from error (John 14:26; 16:13).

Of course, some Christians have more perception than others, due to God-given ability, Satanic blindness, the influence of human teachers, sin in the life, etc. The knowledge that John

¹Ryrie, "The First ...," p. 1470.

²This is a view proposed by Dodd, p. 63, but refuted by Hodges, "1 John," p. 892, and Simon Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle of James and the Epistles of John*, p. 279, footnote 55. Marshall, p. 155, proposed a similar view, namely, that the Word applied by the Spirit constitutes the anointing, which Smalley, pp. 106-7, followed. Yarbrough, p. 149, viewed the anointing as the effect of the apostolic message the readers had received (i.e., the truth).

believed his readers had was evidently the knowledge of the truth about the Person and work of Christ, in view of the context.

2:22-23 The antichrists lie because they *deny* "that Jesus is the Christ," God's Son and our Savior (cf. John 11:25-27). This would have been the position, not only of the Jews who rejected Jesus as the Messiah, but of other false teachers to whom John alluded elsewhere. Among these were the Gnostics, who believed that anything material was sinful, and therefore Jesus could not have been God's Son.¹ They considered "Jesus" and "Christ" as two distinct entities.²

Docetists taught that Jesus was not truly a man, and therefore could not be our Savior.

Followers of Cerinthus believed that Jesus was not fully God, but that God only *came upon Him* at His baptism, and later departed from Him before His crucifixion.³

These false teachers all claimed to have the truth from God. However, John pointed out that since the Son and the Father are one, a person cannot deny the Son without denying the Father as well (cf. Matt. 10:32-33; Mark 8:38; John 12:44-45; 14:10-11).

"... anyone who claims to know God, but disobeys his orders, is 'a' liar (... 2:4); but the person who denies that Jesus is the Christ must be regarded as *the*—archetypal—liar ..."⁴

"... we deny God by denying him his proper relationship with us."⁵

Some readers have understood the first part of verse 23 to mean that it is impossible for a true Christian, one who "has

¹For a summary of Gnostic teaching, see Dillow, pp. 158-61; and Barclay, pp. 8-15.

²Ryrie, "The First ...," p. 1471.

³See Barker, p. 295; and Brown, p. 112.

⁴Smalley, pp. 110-11. Cf. Stott, p. 111.

⁵Barker, p. 326.

the Father," ever to deny the Son. This interpretation seems inconsistent with other Scripture (2 Tim. 2:12), as well as human experience. But some genuine Christians have denied Christ in order to avoid martyrdom, for example. In the context, John wrote about an *abiding* relationship with God, not just a saving relationship.

So a second explanation is that John meant that whoever denies the Son does not have the Father *abiding in him*. In this view, one who denies the Son does *not have an abiding relationship* with the Father. This describes all unbelievers as well as those believers who are not abiding in God.

A third explanation is that John was describing what is typical: typically those having the Father do not deny the Son, though there may be a few exceptions. However, the broad "whoever" in this verse seems to imply that what John wrote is true of all. I prefer view two.

The second part of verse 23 is the positive corollary to the first part. *Confessing* the Son is the opposite of denying Him. Confessing the Son results in the Father abiding in the confessor. Confessing the Son involves a public profession of faith in Him, not just exercising saving faith in Him (cf. Rom. 10:9-10; 2 Cor. 4:13). Belief in the heart results in imputed righteousness, and confessing with the mouth results in "salvation" (lit. "deliverance," namely, from the consequences of being a secret, non-confessing, believer).

A *non-abiding* Christian might not "confess" Christ, even though he or she believes in Him. Both denying Christ and confessing Christ deal with giving personal testimony to one's faith in Him; they do not determine salvation. Thus, denying Christ cannot result in the loss of eternal salvation, nor can confessing Him obtain it.

Yet if John meant that no genuine Christian can deny the Son, the corollary is that every genuine Christian must confess the Son. That would make public confession of Christ a *condition* for salvation *in addition to* trusting in Him, but this lacks biblical support.

To summarize, John warned his readers of the danger to their intimate fellowship with God that the teaching of those who denied that Jesus is the Christ posed. If they rejected the Son, they could not expect an intimate relationship with the Father.

"The principle source of confusion in much contemporary study of 1 John is to be found in the failure to recognize the real danger against which the writer is warning. The eternal salvation of the readership is not imperilled [*sic*]. It is not even in doubt as far as the author is concerned. But seduction by the world and its antichristian representatives is a genuine threat which must be faced."¹

A sign of living in the light 2:24-25

John now called on his readers to abide in the true doctrine of Jesus Christ to enable them to abide in fellowship with God.

2:24 Christians should not reject the truth that they believed, which they "heard from the beginning," that resulted in their salvation (cf. the warning passages in Hebrews). Such faithfulness enables us to continue to abide in fellowship with God. John used "abide" in the same sense in which Jesus did in the Upper Room Discourse. Abiding refers to an intimate relationship with God, determined by the extent to which we walk in the light of God's will that we have. Abiding, fellowship, and knowing God refer to the same thing, and we experience fellowship by degrees, rather than either completely or not at all (John 15:1-8). John's insistence that his readers *really did know* God and His truth, would have strengthened them to resist the false teachers (vv. 12-14, 21).

2:25 Our "eternal life" is not in question when we believe that Jesus is the Savior, as some of the antichrists then and now suggest that it is. It is secure because it rests on God's "promise": "He who believes on the Son has life" (John 3:36; 6:47; et al.). This is the only time John used the Greek word *epaggelia*, "promise," in all his writings.

¹Hodges, *The Gospel ...*, p. 55.

The importance of keeping the faith 2:26-27

2:26 The "these things" in view probably refer primarily to what John had just written (vv. 18-25), though one of his concerns in the whole letter was to warn his readers about false teachers.

"The author concludes his attack on the false teachers with a warning and a word of encouragement for his followers."¹

"*You* indicates that it is possible for believers to be deceived by false teaching."²

James Allman believed that this verse, along with 5:13, articulates John's purposes in writing this epistle: "to show readers how to identify reliable teachers, and to confirm believers in their faith."³

2:27 The "anointing" is the Holy Spirit (cf. v. 20). The readers had the Holy Spirit within them, Whose ministry it is to *guide* believers into *all* the truth, and to "teach" them what God has revealed (John 14:26; 16:13). Consequently they were not dependent on other human teachers, especially the false teachers.

From this verse, some Christians have concluded that we should not listen to any human teacher ("you have no need for anyone to teach you"). That is not what John meant or was saying. He wanted his readers to remember that the Holy Spirit was *the* Teacher, the ultimate source of illumination. He was not ruling out secondary teachers through whom the Holy Spirit works in teaching. If that had been his view, he would not have written this epistle in which he himself taught his readers.

John's point was that we should not look to other human beings as the *ultimate source* of our learning—an attitude the

¹Barker, p. 327.

²*The Nelson ...*, p. 2143.

³Allman, p. 220.

false teachers were encouraging. Of course the Holy Spirit uses the Word of God—as His Textbook—to teach us (John 16:14-15). So John was not saying we can discard our Bibles. Since immature believers *do* need human teachers (Heb. 5:12), though they are not completely dependent on them, John's readers apparently were fairly mature in the faith. God has given human teachers as a gift to His church (Eph. 4:11; 1 Cor. 12:28; cf. Rom. 12:7).

"John obviously uses slight irony here. ... John means that what he is urging on them is fairly self-evident ..."¹

The readers' anointing was real ("true"). The false teachers probably claimed that God had inspired them, but He had not. John was warning his readers about false teachers who claimed revelation beyond what Jesus Christ and the apostles had taught. We simply need to "abide in God (Him)," and to respond positively to the Holy Spirit's ministry to us (cf. John 15:4-7).

John's original readers were doing well in their walk with God. John began this section of his epistle (2:12-27) by affirming their healthful spiritual condition (2:12-14). He then warned them of their spiritual adversaries (2:15-27): the allurements of the world (2:15-17) and the enticements of false teachers (2:18-27).

There is a parallel between what John urged his readers to do, in this section of his epistle, and what Moses commanded the Israelites to do. In both cases, the holiness of God demanded that those who came into the closest and most intimate contact with God, in the Tabernacle and in the church, be holy. Moses advocated renouncing sin, obeying God, rejecting worldliness, and keeping the faith in the "Covenant Code" (Exod. 20—23; 25—31), the "Priestly Code" (Exod 35—Lev. 16), and the "Holiness Code" (Lev. 17:10—25:55). John similarly urged his readers to renounce sin (1:8—2:2), to obey God (2:3-11), to reject worldliness (2:12-17), and to keep the faith (2:18-27). In both cases, the prophet's concern was that those believers under their care would be holy as God is holy (Lev. 11:44-

¹Yarbrough, pp. 166-67.

45; 19:2; 20:7; 1 Pet. 1:15-16). Holiness is imperative for God's people to "know," "see," and "have fellowship with" a holy God (cf. Heb. 12:10-14).

IV. LIVING IN ANTICIPATION OF CHRIST'S JUDGMENT SEAT 2:28—4:19

"The warning against the antichrists or, as we have called them, the Revisionists, is now finished. The apostle's burden has been to affirm the high spiritual caliber of his readership and to urge them to continue to live the 'abiding' life, which they are currently doing. In the face of the false teaching of the Revisionists, they are to cling to the truth they have heard from the beginning and to allow that truth to shape them inwardly. To go the direction of the antichrists is to forfeit all the rich experience which abiding in the Son and in the Father makes possible.

"But what exactly is the abiding experience like: Although John has already pointed out that it involves a Christlike walk (2:6), he has said little about its exact character. Yet it is already clear that it involves obedience to the command to love one another (cf. 2:7-11). Beginning at this point in the epistle, love becomes a controlling and overriding theme."¹

The section before us (2:28—4:19) constitutes the body of the letter. That it is a unit is clear from the structural *inclusio*. Note the statements, in 2:28, "that ... we may have confidence ... at His coming," and in 4:17, "that we may have confidence in the day of judgment," that bracket the unit.

"From 1.5 onwards to 2.27 St John has been working out and expanding his conception of the fellowship with God, and in God, that is realized through the message brought by Jesus Christ, under the conception of dwelling and walking 'in the light.' ... But from this paragraph [2:28-3:3] forwards the fellowship of the soul and God takes on a more intimate

¹Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 123.

character, a more vivid colour and a warmer tone, as it opens out into sonship toward God and brotherhood toward men."¹

A. ABIDING TO FACE CHRIST CONFIDENTLY 2:28

John introduced the new idea of the believer's meeting with Jesus Christ at death or the Rapture, to motivate his readers to continue to cultivate intimate fellowship with God. The prospect of meeting Jesus remained the basis for John's instruction through 4:19. Verse 28 is the theme verse, because it sets the agenda for what follows in this major portion of the epistle. This verse is also a *janus* that looks in two directions: backward to summarize the preceding section,² and forward to introduce the following section. "Janus" was the Roman god of beginnings and endings who supposedly guarded portals. He had two faces, one on the front and the other on the back of his head. The month of January gets its name from him. It is the month in which we look backward on the past year and forward to the new year.

"Abide" (Gr. *meno*) appeared no less than seven times in 2:12-27. The exhortation to abide, here in verse 28, is the outworking of John's concern to abide in 2:12-27. "If" might better be translated "whenever." The fact of the Lord's *appearing* is certain, even though its time is indefinite.³ John meant, by "when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink ...," that Christ's return for His own might be while his readers were still alive.⁴

Other passages that teach the imminency of Christ's return include 1 Corinthians 1:8; 4:5; 15:51-52; 16:22; Philippians 3:20; 4:5; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 2 Thessalonians 1:10-12; Titus 2:13; James 5:7-9; and Revelation 3:11; 22:7, 12, 17, 20. "Confidence" (Gr. *parresia*) is freedom or boldness of speech that comes as a result of a clear conscience. John's idea was that if we walk in fellowship with God, *now*, we will not feel embarrassed to meet Him *whenever* we see Him (cf. Mark 8:38). The

¹Findlay, p. 231.

²Alford, 4:2:457.

³See Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept from the Hour*, ch. 6: "The Imminency of the Coming of Christ for the Church," pp. 108-37.

⁴Westcott, *The Epistles ...*, p. 81. See also A. E. Brooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, p. 65; Charles H. Spurgeon, *12 Sermons on the Second Coming of Christ*, p. 134; Findlay, pp. 232-33; and Robert S. Candlish, *The First Epistle of John*, p. 213.

prospect of seeing Jesus Christ one day *soon* should motivate us to abide in Him *now* (cf. James 5:8).

"There is nothing that will affect your life as much as the knowledge that you are going to stand in the presence of Christ and give an account of your works."¹

"Even though eternal salvation is an entirely free gift which can never be lost, the New Testament makes plain that the believer must give an account of his or her Christian life in the presence of Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:10; Romans 14:10-12). As is shown by the texts just cited, as well as by 1 Corinthians 3:11-15, this judgment is not merely a review of our good deeds, but a comprehensive review that embraces both 'good and bad' (2 Corinthians 5:10). Therefore, shame is decidedly possible at the Judgment Seat. This is all the more true since Christians at that time will have their eternal bodies. Thus sin will no longer inhibit appropriate regret and embarrassment about those things in one's earthly life that did not please the Lord."²

Does "we" refer to John and the other apostles or to all Christians generally? If John was referring to the apostles, he meant that the *apostles* would not be ashamed at the Judgment Seat of Christ—if the readers continued to abide in Christ.³ If he was referring to all Christians generally, he meant that *believers* would not be ashamed if they continued to abide in Christ. In either case, the point is clear: abiding in Christ precludes shame when Christ appears.

B. LEARNING TO RECOGNIZE GOD'S CHILDREN 2:29—3:10A

John began a new line of thought to develop the theme of preparing to meet the Lord unashamed, indicated in the Greek text by the absence of a connective (*asyndeton*). The theme of this section is "manifestation," which begins it, in 2:28, and ends it, in 3:10a (an *inclusio*).

¹McGee, 5:785.

²Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 125.

³Arno C. Gaebelin, *The Annotated Bible*, 4:2:146-47.

2:29 Because God is "righteous," every child of God will normally demonstrate righteous behavior ("everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him"). Righteous action is a mark (a telltale sign or family trait) of the Father that God reproduces in every abiding Christian, just as surely as every child does some things like the physical parent he or she seeks to imitate. We intellectually know that God is righteous from Scripture. However, we experientially come to know that certain people are Christians by the righteous works they do. The facts that some unrighteous people behave righteously, and some righteous people behave wickedly, do not destroy this point.

"We must not make this verse say more than it does. John certainly does *not* say, 'Whoever does *not* do righteousness is *not* born of Him.' That would be an inference in no way justified by John's statement. He is not talking here about how we can decide if a person is saved. If we know that a person *believes* (cf. 1 John 5:1 ...), we can know he is saved. But here, John is clearly concerned with the deduction which we can make if we know that God is righteous. If *that* is known, it follows that one who to any extent reproduces His righteous nature is actually *manifesting* that nature and can rightly be *perceived* as born of Him."¹

"This verse does not say that everyone who is born of God practices righteousness. Believers can walk in darkness and sin (1:6, 8; 2:1). The point here is that when a child exhibits the nature of his or her father, he or she is perceived as the child of the father."²

Practicing righteousness is normal—but not inevitable—for one who is truly born of God. Such behavior identifies one as a Christian.³ However, not everyone who practices righteous

¹Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 127.

²*The Nelson ...*, p. 2144.

³See Lenski, p. 447.

behavior is a Christian, because non-Christians can behave righteously, and Christians can walk in darkness. Therefore, we should not judge a person's salvation by his or her behavior.

3:1 The Holy Spirit's production of righteous behavior in Christians is evidence of God's "great ... love" for us. John used love language more frequently in 1 John (46 times) and in his Gospel (44 times) than any other New Testament writer. Paul used it the third most frequently, in Ephesians (20 times).¹ Scripture calls us God's "children" (Gr. *tekna*) because that is what He has made us. The name simply expresses the reality.

"The thought here is of the community of nature with the prospect of development (*teknon*, comp. 2 Pet. 1. 4), and not of the position of privilege (*huios*)."²

John never used the title *huios*, "son," to describe the relation of Christians to God. He reserved *huios* to describe the relation of Jesus to God (cf. 3:2, 10; 5:2).

Unbelievers cannot fully comprehend the children of God. The reason for this lack of perception is their failure to comprehend God fully. Since they do not "know" the Parent, they do not "know" the children, either (cf. John 1:12-13; 5:37; 7:28; 16:3).

"The author wants his readers to know that approval by the world is to be feared, not desired. To be hated by the world may be unpleasant, but ultimately it should reassure the members of the community of faith that they are loved by God, which is far more important than the world's hatred."³

"... the world hates the children of God (3:13), just as it hated Jesus (Jn. 15:18f.), since they do

¹See Yarbrough, pp. 174-75 for a graph and a table of the occurrences in all the New Testament books.

²Westcott, *The Epistles ...*, p. 96.

³Barker, p. 330.

not belong to the world. This very fact is a further proof that the readers are children of God: the way in which the world does not recognize them as being on its side is proof that they belong to God."¹

3:2 "Having spoken of our present dignity, the Apostle goes on to speak of our future destiny."²

Even though we are presently God's "children," we do not yet fully reflect His image as we shall. However, "when (not "if," another third class condition) Jesus Christ (He) appears" and we see Him, "we will" experience full transformation ("be like Him"; i.e., glorification). Evidently, just seeing Jesus Christ will fully transform us physically and spiritually (cf. 1 Cor. 13:12).

"Can you think of anything more wonderful than seeing Jesus? We have sung about Him, talked about Him, studied about Him, communicated with Him, but the grand climax will be when we see Him."³

"A child of God is here and now, indeed, like a diamond that is crystal white within but is still uncut and shows no brilliant flashes from reflected facets."⁴

"He will not be anything essentially different hereafter, but he will be what he is now essentially more completely, though in ways wholly beyond our powers of imagination."⁵

John's references to the appearing, in 2:28 and 3:2, frame his references to the new birth in 2:29 and 3:1. Every true Christian will participate in this appearing.

¹Marshall, p. 171.

²Smith, 5:183.

³Blair, p. 92.

⁴Lenski, p. 452.

⁵Westcott, *The Epistles ...*, p. 97.

3:3 In the meantime, we anticipate seeing and knowing Jesus Christ fully, and that anticipation ("hope") has a purifying effect on us now (cf. 2:1, 6, 29; 3:7, 16; 4:17; Matt. 5:8).¹ Similarly, in the future, seeing and knowing Christ will have a completely purifying effect on us (cf. 2 Cor. 3:18). The believer's hope is not "in him" (AV and NIV; i.e., "within himself"), but "on Him" (NASB; i.e., "set on Christ"; Gr. *ep auto*).

"John states two reasons why the Christian ought to be pure. One is related to a past work of God and the second to a future work."²

"Relationship [to God] does not change. Fellowship [with God] does."³

3:4 "In the preceding section John has been stressing the importance of continuing in Christ, doing what is right, and purifying oneself in anticipation of his coming. Now he deals more closely with the negative side of all this, the need for believers to abstain from sin and the possibility of their doing so."⁴

"The present vv, 3:4-9, form six strophes, each of which divides ... roughly into half. The two halves of the strophes balance one another; for the second part of the v provides a development of the first part (vv 4, 5, 7), or a parallel (vv 6, 9) or a contrast (v 8) to it."⁵

"Sin" stands in opposition to purity. Furthermore, sin is very serious. The use of the Greek word translated "lawlessness" (*anomia*) carries a connotation of *wickedness* (cf. Matt. 7:23; 13:41; 24:12; 2 Thess. 2:7). It means rejection of law in its

¹See Wayne A. Brindle, "Biblical Evidence for the Imminence of the Rapture," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158:630 (April-June 2001):149-50.

²Ryrie, "The First ...," p. 1472.

³Mitchell, *Fellowship*, p. 84.

⁴Marshall, p. 175.

⁵Smalley, p. 152.

broadest concept, flagrant opposition to God, rather than just breaking specific laws.

"He [who acts lawlessly] acts without curb; for sin is the acting without the curb of law or restraint of another's authority, acting from our own will."¹

Evidently the false teachers had a soft view of sin (cf. vv. 7-8).

3:5 Two more facts believers know highlight the seriousness of sin: Jesus Christ became incarnate "to remove (take away) sin(s)," and there was "no sin ... in Him." This is a strong assertion of Jesus' sinlessness (cf. 2:1; 3:3; Matt. 3:14; John 8:31-59; 10:30; 17:22; Acts 2:27; 3:14; 4:30; 7:52; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 1 Pet. 1:19; 2:22)

"Because Jesus was holy, and without sin, this can become the character of those who abide in him (cf. Heb 2:10—4:16; 5:9)."²

"The dominant thought here is not that of the self-sacrifice of Christ, but of His utter hostility to sin in every shape."³

3:6 If abiding in God equals being a Christian, as many interpreters believe,⁴ this verse appears to contradict what John wrote in 1:8 and 10. There he said that Christians sin (cf. 2:1; 15; 3:18; 5:16, 21). It also seems to contradict personal experience, since genuine Christians *do indeed* sin.

The key to understanding this statement, I believe, lies in the other terms that John used in the verse: "abides," "has seen," and "knows." John used these words throughout this epistle to refer to a believer who is walking in intimate fellowship with God (1:7; 2:3, 10). Still, does this view not contradict what

¹J. N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, 5:511.

²Smalley, p. 158.

³Westcott, *The Epistles ...*, p. 103.

⁴E.g., Lenski, p. 429.

John said about the depravity of sinners, even Christian sinners (1:8)?

I believe John was claiming that while a Christian is walking in close fellowship with God, he *does not sin*. The abiding believer never repudiates God's authority over him by doing anything that resists God's law or will—*while he is abiding in Christ*. If he does, his fellowship with God suffers; He no longer "knows" God in that intimate sense. He no longer "sees" God because he has moved out of the light into darkness.

"John is thus saying that (translating the Gr. literally) 'everyone who lives in him (Jesus) does not sin'; and by this he means that an intimate and ongoing relationship with Christ (*ho en auto menon*, 'the one who lives in him,' using the present tense) precludes the practice of sin ..."¹

"In so far as he abides in Christ, so far is he free from all sin. The ideal of the Christian."²

"... he [John] shapes v. 6 to say that freedom from sin is the hallmark of those who are really in fellowship with Christ, and who have actually seen and know him."³

There was no sin whatsoever in Jesus Christ (v. 5). He consistently abode in (obeyed) the Father (cf. John 14:9). The Christian who consistently "abides" in a sinless Person does not sin (v. 6). If we could abide in Christ without interruption, we would be sinless. Unfortunately, we cannot do that.

Some Christians have used this verse to support the theory that Christians are sinless and perfect. Scripture and experience contradict this position (e.g., 1:8-9; et al.). Others have used it to teach that a Christian does not habitually sin,⁴ but this too is contrary to experience and the same Scripture.

¹Smalley, pp. 158-59. Cf. John 15:5.

²Jamieson, et al., p. 1504.

³Schnachenburg, p. 172.

⁴E.g., Lenski, p. 458.

Advocates of this second view usually support it with the present tense of the Greek verb (*harmartanei*), that they take to mean "keeps on sinning."

"In modern times a popular expedient for dealing with the difficulties perceived in 1 John 3:6, 9 is to appeal to the use of the Greek present tense. It is then asserted that this tense necessitates a translation like, 'Whoever has been born of God does not *go on* sinning,' or, 'does not *continually* sin.' The inference to be drawn from such renderings is that, though the Christian may sin somewhat (how much is never specified!), he may not sin regularly or persistently. But on all grounds, whether linguistic or exegetical, the approach is indefensible.

"As has been pointed out by more than one competent Greek scholar, the appeal to the present tense invites intense suspicion. No other text can be cited where the Greek present tense, unaided by qualifying words, can carry this kind of significance. Indeed, when the Greek writer or speaker wished to indicate that an action was, or was not, continual, there were special words to express this."¹

"The perfect tense in Greek signifies a state of affairs. It is not concerned with the past occurrence of the event but with its reality, its existence."²

"The perfect tense here is not intended to categorize a person as either saved or unsaved, since even believers sin (1:8). Instead, the statement is intended to stigmatize all sin as the

¹Hodges, *The Gospel ...*, pp. 58-59. See also Smalley, pp. 159-60; Yarbrough, p. 183; Kruse, p. 131.

²J. P. Louw, "Verbal Aspect in the First Letter of John," *Neotestamentica* 9 (1975):101.

product, not only of not abiding, but also of ignorance and blindness toward God."¹

If we were to translate 1:8 and 5:16, where the present tense also occurs, "do not continually have sin" and "continually sinning a sin" respectively, these verses would contradict 3:6. It would involve no self-deception to say that we do not *continually* have sin (1:8), since whoever is born of God does not *continually* sin (3:6). Furthermore, if one born of God does not *continually* sin (3:1), how could a Christian see his brother Christian *continually* sinning (5:16)?

Suppose we translated the present tense in John 14:6 the same way: "No one *continually* comes to the Father except through Me." This would imply that occasionally someone might come to God in another way. No orthodox translator would offer that as an acceptable rendering of John 14:6, and it is not acceptable in 1 John 3:6 either.

"... it is not surprising that commentators have attempted to water down John's teaching to refer merely to the believer's freedom from habitual sin. But we must not misinterpret the text for pastoral reasons. Properly interpreted, the text remains a source of comfort."²

Another view takes John to mean that no one who abides in Christ has the power to sin, or, to put it positively, Christians who abide in Him have the power not to sin.³ Yet this is an idea that the reader must import into the verse. While it is true that Christians who abide in Christ have the power not to sin, this does not seem to be what John meant here. He seemed to link abiding and not sinning in a more direct cause and effect relationship.

It seems to me that those teachers, who say that this verse means that true believers will not practice sin *habitually*, are either naïve or have very little appreciation of the depth of

¹Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 136.

²Marshall, p. 187.

³Smalley, pp. 161-62, 164, 172.

human depravity. Any sensitive Christian, who is honestly trying to live a holy life, will admit that he or she sins repeatedly every day. *Every* Christian is guilty of sins of omission, of motivation (actions and responses that often arise from unconscious pride and selfishness), and of ignorance, as well as deliberate sins.

Genuine Christians have even confessed to habitually practicing *gross* sins for *extended periods* of time. Every Christian is a habitual sinner, and we will be until the Lord takes us to glory. Obviously, this does not mean that we should resign ourselves to sinning (cf. 2:1; Rom. 6:1); we should wage war against it (cf. Eph. 6:10-18), but we will never be completely free from its degrading influence in this life.

Verse 4 sets forth the essential character of sin, verse 5 relates it to the person and work of Christ, and verse 6 relates it to the whole human race.

3:7-8 Evidently the false teachers were in danger of deceiving John's readers, by telling them the opposite of what the Apostle John taught here. John's point was two-fold: conduct manifests spiritual relationship (cf. 2:29), and God hates sin (cf. v. 5). A sinner's sinning has its source in "the devil."

"By saying that the person who is a determined sinner (in the sense suggested by v 6) 'belongs to the devil,' John is in the first place drawing on the background of Gen 3 (1-15), where the power of evil is represented as a serpent who tempts the woman (and, through her, the man) to disobey God (the reference to Cain and Abel in v 12 confirms the suggestion that this section of the OT is in mind here)."¹

"John does not, however, say, 'born of the devil. [*sic*]' as he does 'born of God,' for 'the devil begets none, nor does he create any; but whoever imitates the devil becomes a child of the devil by

¹Ibid., p. 168.

imitating him, not by proper birth' [Augustine, *Tract*, 4. 10]."¹

Obviously John did not mean that by sinning a person demonstrates that he or she is unsaved, since he earlier wrote that Christians sin (1:7-10).

3:9 Many English translations interpret the Greek present tense as saying no Christian habitually sins, as in verse 6. For example, the NASB has, "practices sin;" the Living Bible, "does not make a practice of sinning;" the Amplified Bible, "[deliberately and knowingly] habitually practices sin;" and the NIV, "continues to sin."

However, the Greek present tense does not always indicate habitual action, as pointed out previously.² Frequently it describes absolute action. The New King James Version takes the Greek present tense this way, and renders the clause: "Whoever had been born of God does not sin." The NET Bible is inconsistent: it translates verse 6, "does not sin," but verse 9, "does not practice sin." Since, earlier, John wrote that the Christian *does* sin habitually (1:6-10; cf. 2:1), the idea that the Christian does *not* sin habitually is unacceptable.³

"... the 'tense solution' in 1 John 3:9 is in the process of imploding in the current literature. It was shrewdly questioned by C. H. Dodd in his commentary in 1946 and dealt a major blow by S. Kubo in an article entitled, "1 John 3:9: Absolute or Habitual?" published in 1969.⁴ It has since been given up by the three major critical commentaries published since Kubo's article; namely, I. Howard Marshall (1978), Raymond E. Brown (1982); and Stephen S. Smalley (1984). It seems quite clear

¹Jamieson, et al., p. 1504.

²Marshall, p. 180; Dodd, p. 79.

³See Robert N. Wilkin, "Do Born Again People Sin? 1 John 3:9," *Grace Evangelical Society News* 5:3 (March 1990):2-3.

⁴Footnote 16: Sakae Kubo, "1 John 3:9: Absolute or Habitual?" *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 7 (1969):47-56.

that the 'tense solution' as applied to 1 John 3:9 is an idea whose time has come—and gone!"¹

The reason one "born of God does not (cannot) sin" is that he has been born of God. John could say the Christian is *sinless* in this sense, because a sinless Parent has begotten the Christian. The Christian becomes a partaker of God's divine sinless nature when he or she experiences the new birth. The Christian sins because he also has a sinful human nature. However, in this verse, John was looking only at the *sinless nature* of the indwelling Christ that we possess. Jesus told Nicodemus that people need to experience a second birth (John 3:5-7). Every Christian has been born twice, once physically and once spiritually. John was looking at the consequence of our second birth in 1 John 3:9.

"As a total person, we do sin and can never claim to be free of it, but our 'inward self' that is regenerated does not sin. ...

"Sin does exist in the Christian, but it is foreign and extraneous to his regenerated inner self, where Christ dwells in perfect holiness. Put into Johannine terms, since Christ is eternal life (1 John 5:20), the one who possesses that life cannot sin because he is born of God."²

"A child of God is given a new nature, and that new nature does not and will not commit sin. The reason that the Prodigal Son could not stay in the pigpen is that he was not a pig. He was a son of the Father, and he longed for the Father's house."³

"The germ of the divine life has been implanted in our souls, and it grows—a gradual process and subject to occasional retardations, yet sure, attaining at length to full fruition. The believer's

¹Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 144.

²*Ibid.*, p. 141.

³McGee, 5:792. See also Gaebelien, 4:2:149.

lapses into sin are like the mischances of the weather which hinder the seed's growth. The growth of a living seed may be checked temporarily; if there be no growth, there is no life."¹

The "seed" probably refers to the Holy Spirit (cf. 2:27; 3:24).²

Again, if we were able to abide in Christ without interruption, we would never sin (cf. v. 6). The sinless nature of Christ controls the abiding Christian, whereas the sinful human nature controls the non-abiding Christian (cf. Rom. 6:16).

"That is, sin is never the product of our abiding experience. It is never the act of the regenerate self per se. On the contrary, sin is the product of ignorance and blindness toward God [cf. 3:6b].

"To view sin as intrinsically foreign to what we are as regenerate people in Christ is to take the first step toward spiritual victory over it."³

"There is obviously a certain idealism in the Apostle's sweeping assertions. His dictum in verse 9 applies in its absolute truth to the 'perfect man' in Christ Jesus."⁴

John was saying that when a Christian abides in God, he will behave as his heavenly Father, and others will recognize that he is a child of God.⁵

"If someone says, 'A priest cannot commit fornication,' one cannot deny that as a man he can commit it; but priests, functioning as priests, do not do those things. The Bible uses language in a similar way, 'A good tree cannot produce bad

¹Smith, 5:185. See also Jamieson, et al., p. 1505.

²Findlay, p. 266; Schnachenburg, p. 175.

³Hodges, *The Gospel ...*, pp. 60, 61.

⁴Findlay, p. 267. Cf. Schnachenburg, p. 175.

⁵See Harris, p. 221.

fruit' (Mt. 7:18). Of course a good tree can produce bad fruit, but not as a result of what it really is, a good tree. Also Jesus said, men 'cannot' fast while the bride groom is with them (Mk. 2:19). They can fast, but to do so is incongruous and unnatural.

"Similar notions are found in Pauline thought. Paul says, 'I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and delivered Himself up for me' (Gal. 2:20). If a Christian sins, his sin cannot be expression [*sic*] of who he really is, because his true life is that of Christ in him [cf. Rom. 7:20-25].

"... when a Christian sins (and John believes he can and will, 1 Jn. 2:1), in that act he is behaving like a child of Satan. Who he really is is not being made evident. To use Paul's phrase, he is walking like a 'mere man' (1 Cor. 3:3)."¹

A different explanation, and one that is commonly held, though it is inconsistent with both what John wrote earlier (1:6-10; 2:1) and with experience, is the following.

"Only the unconverted and the counterfeit will practice a self-seeking, self-asserting life of sin."²

Note the chiasmic structure of verse 9. Verses 6 and 9 also form an *inclusio*.

- "A No one who abides in Him sins (6a)
- B Everyone who sins ... (v. 6b)
- A The one who acts righteously (v. 7)

¹Dillow, pp. 168, 169, 172.

²Gleason L. Archer, *An Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, p. 429.

B The one who commits sin (v. 8)

A No one who is born of God sins (v. 9)."¹

John laid out five reasons why his readers should not sin: (1) because they needed to be ready to meet the Lord (v. 3); (2) because sin is illegal (v. 4); (3) because it is unchristian (vv. 5-7); (4) because it is diabolical (v. 8); and (5) because it is unnatural in a child of God (v. 9).²

3:10a

The absence or presence of sin in the believer's life gives evidence of his or her relationship to both God and Satan. It shows under whose authority we are living at any particular time in our lives. John divided the world into two classes: those whose parentage is either divine or diabolical. Those who are of the devil, either saved or unsaved, do the devil's work by opposing the truth (cf. Matt. 13:38; 16:23; John 8:44; Acts 13:10; 2 John 9). Saved people are "of the devil," in the sense that sometimes they follow the devil's leading and do his work, though they no longer belong to the devil. An example of those who are of the devil is the "antichrists" (plural) John previously warned about (2:22-23). Jesus called the unbelieving Jews the children of "your father the devil" (John 8:44).

"The key word here is 'manifest.' A sinning Christian *conceals* his true character when he sins and *reveals* it only through holiness. On the other hand, a child of Satan *reveals* his true character by sin."³

Christians can and do identify other Christians by their righteous behavior. This is not the same as saying that every true Christian, without exception, will produce good works (cf. John 15:1-8). Christians who are abiding in God will produce good works, and others can identify them as Christians by their godly behavior. The sinless behavior produced and made apparent is a manifestation of God's love (v. 1). John was not suggesting that our behavior is a test of our salvation. His only

¹Smalley, p. 171.

²Findlay, pp. 254-67.

³Hodges, *The Gospel ...*, p. 62.

test of salvation was faith in Jesus Christ (5:1, 9-13). He was talking here about how God's children manifest themselves.

The first part of verse 10 concludes the preceding discussion about "manifestation." Verse 10 is another *janus* verse (cf. 2:28): one that looks in two directions, backward and forward.

C. LEARNING TO RECOGNIZE CHRISTIAN LOVE 3:10B-23

John has made clear that the only basis on which a Christian can be identified (manifested) as such is by his or her righteous behavior. Christians are *not* manifested by the absence of sin in them; he never says this. The next question that John proceeded to respond to is: "How can we identify 'righteousness'?" John's response was: "It is not seen in morality—unbelievers can be moral—but in brotherly love." In this section, as in the one preceding it and in the one following it, the theme, brotherly love, opens and closes the section, forming an *inclusio*.

1. What Love Is Not 3:10b-15

John began this part of his argument by explaining what love is not.

3:10b The *absence* of righteous behavior (the "practice" of "righteousness") in a life indicates the absence of intimacy with God. Such a person is not manifesting the life of God, but the life of his other parent (the devil). Likewise, the *absence* of "love" for one's "brother" Christian shows that the individual "who does not love" has little fellowship with God. "Love" is the most important particular manifestation of righteous behavior (John 13:34-35; cf. Matt. 22:37-39). John proceeded to discuss this trait more fully.

"The whole aim of the Gospel is the creation and strengthening of love.¹

"The NIV rendering here, 'Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God,' is a classic example of theologically motivated translation run amuck. It not only paraphrases the text but

¹Westcott, *The Epistles ...*, p. 109.

misinterprets it at the same time! There is nothing in this text about not being a child of God. How could there be? One *must be* a child of God before one could hate *his* brother. An unsaved man has no Christian brother to hate ..."¹

The unloving Christian is "not of God" in the sense that God is not animating what he is doing. This believer is not on *God's side*; he is doing the *devil's work* rather than God's.

3:11 The "message" that John and his faithful followers had "heard from the beginning" was Jesus' command to His disciples to "love one another" as He had loved them (John 13:34-35; 15:12).

"When differences arise within a community, hard feelings can be the result."²

3:12 Cain's murder of "his brother" Abel evidenced control by Satan ("the evil one"), rather than by God. Cain was envious because of Abel's righteousness, and this motivated him to kill his brother (Gen. 4:3-8; cf. John 8:40, 42, 44).

"Let me give you a definition of *envy*: 'discontent or uneasiness at the sight of another's excellence or good fortune, accompanied with some degree of hatred and a desire to possess equal advantages.'"³

Often our pride tempts us to dislike those who are more righteous than we are, because they make us feel guilty by comparison. This is the only Old Testament reference in John's epistles, and the only proper name, except for names of God, in 1 John. *Love* and *hatred* are typical forms of *righteousness* and *sin*, respectively.⁴

¹Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 152.

²Yarbrough, p. 197.

³McGee, 5:794.

⁴Dodd, p. 82.

Saying that Cain was *unsaved*, and therefore an unsaved person must be in view here, will not work. The Bible does not say that Cain was unsaved. Furthermore, Christians have committed murder, as Cain did. Peter warned his readers, "Let none of you suffer as a murderer ..." (1 Pet. 4:15). Christians are capable of any and every type of gross sin. It should be obvious that a true believer can hate his brother Christian.

3:13 If we as Christians feel or demonstrate loving concern for one another, it should not surprise us if unrighteous people hate us for being more righteous than they are. Apparently John's first readers could not understand why the world hated them, because he wrote, "Stop marveling," or, "Do not be [*so*] surprised!" (emphasis added). Christians are to the world what Abel was to Cain, so we should not be surprised if the world hates us. Sometimes unbelievers who become angry with us, for example, are reacting more against *God in us* than against *us personally*.

"Of central importance for victory when a Christian is subjected to the world's hatred is the recognition that hatred is the natural response of the sinful world toward righteousness."¹

"The author does not say that the world always hates believers. It did not always hate Jesus. But whenever the community of faith acts so as to expose the greed, the avarice, the hatred, and the wickedness of the world, it must expect rejection; and if it should go so far as to interfere with its evil practices, as Jesus did in the temple, it may expect suffering and brutal death (cf. John 15:18-19, 25; 17:14)."²

3:14 "Love" for other Christians shows the presence of new (eternal) "life" of Christ in us, not the hatred ("death") of the world (v. 13), and is a secondary ground for assurance (cf. 5:13). "Death" and "life" are two vastly different spheres of

¹Hiebert, "An Expository ...," 146:302.

²Barker, p. 335.

existence. The contrast shows the great change that has taken place in the believer's life. The one "who does not love" *at all* is the person who is "abid[ing] in death" rather than in eternal life. John made the case extreme to make his point clear. His contrasts are death and life; hatred and love; darkness and light.

- 3:15 "Everyone" includes Christians. *Murder* is the ultimate outward expression of hatred (cf. Matt. 5:21-22). The key to the statement that concludes this verse is the phrase "abiding in him." John evidently meant that no Christian whose eternal life (i.e., Jesus Christ; 1:2) has control of him, who is walking in fellowship with God, will commit murder. Some believers have committed murder, but they were not abiding believers when they did so (cf. John 15:4). The NIV paraphrase "no murderer has eternal life in him" is misleading.

2. What Love Is 3:16-18

If hatred of a brother Christian is the antithesis of love, what does true Christian love look like? John proceeded to explain.

- 3:16 In contrast to the murderer Cain's act, we see love in Jesus Christ's "[laying] down His life" for us (cf. John 10:11). This is the opposite of taking another person's life, as Cain did. Jesus Christ "laid down His life" *once*, but we ought to "lay down our lives" *repeatedly*, in self-sacrificing love, as the tenses of the Greek verbs suggest.

"Most people associate Christianity with the command to love, and so they think that they know all about Christianity when they have understood its teaching in terms of their own concept of love. John found it necessary to explain clearly to his readers what he meant by love . . .

"It is easy to 'lay down one's life': martyrdom is heroic and exhilarating; the difficulty lies in doing the little things, facing day by day the petty

sacrifices and self-denials which no one notices and no one applauds."¹

"Love means readiness to do anything for other people."²

3:17 We may not have the opportunity to save a brother's life by dying in his place. Nevertheless, we can and should do the next best thing, namely, sustaining his life when he has material needs. When I give to a brother "in need" what might keep me alive, I have followed the Lord Jesus' example of self-sacrificing love.

"Our love for God is manifested by obedience, but our love for other Christians is manifested by sacrifice."³

3:18 The evidence of genuine love is not verbal professions, but vital performances, *genuine* "deed[s]" rather than *empty* "word[s]" (cf. 1 Cor. 13:1; James 2:15-16).

"The major concern of this passage is to encourage obedient and active love from all those who claimed allegiance to the Johannine church."⁴

3. What Love Does for Believers 3:19-23

The practice of such self-sacrificing love for the brethren can give us boldness in God's presence, now, as we pray, and in the future, when we stand before Him at His judgment seat.

3:19-20 "By this" refers to what John said in verses 17-18. Tangible demonstrations of love for the brethren show the believer's true character ("we will know by this that we are of the truth"), his righteousness. They should be a comfort to us when we

¹Smith, 5:186.

²Marshall, p. 192.

³Mitchell, *Fellowship*, pp. 128 and 136.

⁴Smalley, p. 199.

feel guilty that we have not met many needs, a condition that prevails no matter how generous we may be.¹

"*Assurance* is designed to be the ordinary experience and privilege of the believer."²

The Greek word *peitho*, translated "to assure" (NASB, NKJV), "to reassure" (ESV), "to set at rest" (NIV, TNIV), "to convince" (NET), and "to persuade" (NASB margin), can also mean "to quiet."³ The meaning is that, by demonstrating love (vv. 17-18), we both gain assurance that we are walking in the truth, and we quiet our hearts when they accuse us of being guilty for not doing more.

We can overcome feelings of false guilt ("in whatever our heart condemns us") by remembering that "God," who "is greater than our [guilty] heart," "knows" our real motives ("all things"). He does not judge on the basis of appearance, as we often judge (condemn) ourselves.

"This phrase ["before Him," v. 19] could refer to standing in the presence of God on the day of judgment (4:17), an occasion which might well fill the heart of a man with foreboding. But the context here is one of prayer: dare we approach God with our requests if we feel guilty before him? On the whole, it seems more likely that this is what is in John's mind (cf. 1 Thess. 1:3; 3:9[-10]). We then have a smooth transition to verse 21.⁴

3:21-22 True love for the brethren, demonstrated in deeds of self-sacrifice, enables the believer to face Jesus Christ unashamedly and with "confidence"—whenever He may appear (cf. 2:28). John here stressed again the importance of a clear conscience (cf. 1:7; 2:2; Heb. 9:9, 14; 10:2, 22; 1 Tim. 1:19). Shamelessness (a clear conscience) can give us an appropriate

¹See James E. Allman, "Suffering in the Non-Pauline Epistles," in *Why, O God? Suffering and Disability in the Bible and Church*, pp. 195, 198-200.

²Jamieson, et al., p. 1506.

³Schnachenburg, p. 185.

⁴Marshall, p. 199.

boldness to approach God's throne of grace ("confidence before God")—*in prayer*—even now (cf. John 8:28-29). We will receive our requests ("whatever we ask we receive from Him") *if such is the will of God*. John did not state this condition here, but he mentioned it later (5:14-15).

"There is nothing mechanical or magical about prayer. For it to be effective, the will of the intercessor needs to be in line with the will of God; and such a conformity of wills is brought about only as the believer lives in Christ."¹

"Obedience is the first condition for answered prayer, when that prayer is offered by a child of God. The second, related condition is willing service: the determination to 'do' always (*poioumen*, present) what pleases God."²

3:23 Jesus taught the apostles to trust in Him and to love each other. This is the distillation of His teaching. Specifically, He taught them to trust in the *efficacy* (effective power) of *His name* when they prayed to His Father (John 14:12-15; 16:24). This is an added ground for confidence in prayer.

"There are frequent points of contact between this Epistle and the words of Jesus in John 13 to 17."³

"Believe" in this verse probably refers to believing for eternal salvation, rather than to believing after we are Christians. The tense of the Greek verb (aorist) points to this, as does the object of belief, namely, "the name of His Son Jesus Christ."

"To believe in the name of Jesus Christ is to accept Jesus Christ for what He really is."⁴

¹Smalley, p. 205.

²Ibid., p. 206.

³Robertson, 6:228.

⁴Barclay, p. 104.

"The Christian who hates his brother acts utterly out of touch with God, exemplifies the murderous spirit of Cain, and is 'abiding' in the sphere of death (verses 10b-15). By contrast, the loving Christian takes Christ's own self-sacrificing love as the model by which he himself should love in actual deeds and in accord with the truth (verses 16-18). If he does so, he can quiet a guilt-ridden heart, achieve a superb confidence before God in prayer, and expect answers to his prayers precisely because he is pleasing God (verses 19-23)."¹

D. LEARNING TO RECOGNIZE THE GOD OF LOVE 3:24—4:16

Another *inclusio* helps us identify the theme of this section: God's abiding in believers (3:24; 4:16). God abiding in us, as well as our abiding in Him, are essential to our having confidence as we anticipate the judgment seat of Christ (2:28; 4:17-18). Having confidence as we anticipate the judgment seat of Christ is the subject of the body of this epistle (2:28—4:19).

1. God's Indwelling Affirmed 3:24

Obedience results in mutual abiding, God in man and man in God. God "abides" in every *obedient* believer with His presence, fellowship, power, and blessing (cf. John 15:10-11, 14), but He "indwells" (*lives in*) every believer (cf. Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 12:13). The evidence that God "abides" in us is the manifestation of His Spirit in and through us. This is the first explicit reference to the Holy Spirit in 1 John.

"Thus, the sentence is a definition of abiding. To abide is to keep his commandments."²

2. God's Spirit Recognized 4:1-6

The mention of the Holy Spirit in 3:24 caused John to pause briefly to sound a warning. God's *Spirit* is not the only *spirit* manifested in the world. Some people naïvely think that any manifestation of a spiritual presence

¹Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 169.

²Ryrie, "The First ...," p. 1474.

has to be an indication of the Holy Spirit. The apostle explained how to distinguish the *Holy Spirit* from other *spirits* at work in the world.

"In chapter 3 we studied the contrast between two families, the children of God and the children of the devil. Here we find a contrast between two spirits, the spirit of Christ and the spirit of antichrist."¹

4:1-3 John wrote, "Stop believing." Evidently some of his first readers were believing false teaching.

"Credulity means gullibility and some believers fall easy victims to the latest fads in spiritualistic humbuggery."²

It is necessary to distinguish the "Spirit of God" from *false* "spirits" (i.e., spirits advocating falsehood), "because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (cf. 2:18-27). *False spirits* (utterances or persons inspired by a spirit opposed to Christ) produce false teaching. John was speaking here of the "false prophets" as the mouthpieces of the spirit that inspired them, not as the foretellers of future things.³

"To 'test the spirits' is to make a choice from among competing claims."⁴

John's test question, whereby one can determine whether the Spirit of God or a spirit of falsehood possesses a person, was this: What does the person believe about Jesus Christ? If a person denies the incarnation of "Jesus Christ" (that He "has come in the flesh")—a heresy false teachers were promoting among John's original readers—he has the "*spirit* of [the] antichrist" (cf. 2:18-27). That is, a denial of the doctrine of Christ as the apostles taught it, deviation from orthodox Christology, evidences a spirit opposed to Jesus Christ.

¹Mitchell, *Fellowship*, p. 113.

²Robertson, 6:229.

³Alford, 4:2:484.

⁴Yarbrough, p. 192.

"The test of the presence of the Divine Spirit is the confession of the Incarnation, or, more exactly, of the Incarnate Saviour. The Gospel centres in a Person and not in any truth, even the greatest, about the Person."¹

Notice that John did not say we can tell false spirits by their *works*. He said we can identify that they are false spirits by their *message*. This was the acid test of a false prophet under the Old Covenant as well (Deut. 13:1-5).

"According to the Lord Jesus, false prophets were to be tested 'by their fruits' (cf. Matthew 7:16-20). Contrary to popular interpretation, this does *not* mean that they were to be tested by their *works*. On the contrary, as Matthew 12:33-37 proves, their fruits are their *words*! Indeed, as the Lord Himself said, they 'come to you in sheep's clothing' so that they look like sheep when in reality they are 'ravenous wolves' (Matthew 7:15). Their *behavior* does not set them apart from the sheep, but their *message* does!"²

John did *not* say that every spirit that *denies* Jesus, but every spirit that *does not confess* Jesus (v. 3). Often heretical teaching masks its deviations from the truth by simply failing to affirm important biblical truth. Rather than proclaiming, "Jesus is *not* the Christ," they fail to affirm that He *is* the Christ.

4:4 John's readers had so far overcome these opponents of Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit who indwelt them ("He who is in you;" cf. 3:24; 4:2, 13). The Holy Spirit is stronger ("greater") than Satan ("he who is in the world"). We "overcome" Satan, his agents, and his influence—as we resist his temptations to doubt, deny, disregard, and disobey the Word of God (1 Pet.

¹Westcott, *The Epistles ...*, p. 140.

²Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 176.

5:9; cf. Gen. 3; Matt. 4). "You are from God" is the center of a chiasm that embraces verses 2-6.¹

4:5 The antichrists' teachings have an appeal to worldly minds because they come "from the world," and share the viewpoint of "the world" (cf. John 3:31). *Heterodoxy* has a greater appeal than *orthodoxy* because many religious movements are composed mainly of unsaved people who find false doctrine appealing.

"I do not care whether several thousand people come to your church—that is not the important thing. I am interested in the message. Is the Word of God being given out? Is it given out in the power of the Spirit so that the Spirit of God can take it and use it?"²

"How can a man whose watchword is competition even begin to understand an ethic whose key-note is service?"³

"The term 'world' (*kosmos*) is probably to be understood in two ways: as a system of thought antithetical to Christian belief and as a description of those members of the community who were led astray by the false teachers. That some members of the community were easily persuaded to forsake the truth of the gospel should not bewilder the faithful."⁴

"The word 'world' has several nuances of meaning; in verse 3 it means more the area inhabited by men, but in verse 4 it refers rather to sinful mankind, while in verse 5 the stress is more on the sinful principle found in such people"⁵

¹Smalley, p. 216.

²McGee, 5:803.

³Barclay, p. 113.

⁴Barker, p. 341.

⁵Marshall, p. 209, footnote 18.

4:6 "We" (and "us") probably refers to the apostolic eyewitnesses, as in 1:1-4, but it probably also includes all the faithful. Those believers who "know" God intimately respond positively to the teaching of the apostles.

"God did not give us the Bible merely to teach us something, but to make us something."¹

By comparing teachings with apostolic doctrine, we can determine whether any teaching is "truth" or "error," namely, having its source in the Holy Spirit or Satan, the motivating spirit of the world. The way to distinguish "truth" from "error" is to compare the teaching with what the Scriptures teach. John is here opposing one set of teachers to another.²

"When people confess that Jesus came in the flesh, when they hear God speak to them in the gospel of his Son and are obedient to it, then the 'Spirit of truth' has been present and active. When people deny the gospel, when they will not hear it as God's Word and will not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, then 'the spirit of falsehood' has been at work."³

"Since John issues warnings to his readers against being taken in by the false teachers (2:24; 2 Jn. 7-11), he appears to have reckoned with the possibility of true believers going astray."⁴

"The Apostle is giving a test to distinguish, not the children of God from those who are not children of God, but the spirit of truth from the spirit of error, as is clear from the words following. And this he does by saying that in the case of the teachers of the truth, they are heard and received

¹Blair, p. 126.

²Alford, 4:2:487.

³Barker, p. 341.

⁴Marshall, p. 210.

by those who apprehend God, but refused by those who are not of God."¹

3. God's Indwelling Recognized 4:7-16

John now left behind his warning about false spirits that his readers might mistake as the Holy Spirit, spirits that lure believers onto worldly paths. He returned to one of his central themes, namely, love for the brethren. As 1 Corinthians 13 contains Paul's great statement on God's love, so 1 John 4:7-16 contains John's.

"All St John's arguments lead to one conclusion, all his appeals have one intent: 'Beloved, let us love one another.'"²

"... the present section spells out precisely the nature of the love which is demanded from every believer, and may thus be viewed as an extension of the teaching contained in 2:3-11 and 3:10-24. Earlier, John has related the love command to the 'real light' which is already shining (2:8, 10), and to the 'eternal life' of which love is the evidence (3:14-15). Now he relates the requirement of Christian love to the very nature of God himself. We are to love as a response to God's own love, and to his loving activity in Christ and in the Church."³

This pericope contains a comprehensive treatment of the nature of true love.

"There is considerable pastoral wisdom in John's summons to mutual love immediately after a warning to be on the alert against deceiving spirits. He knows he must anticipate possibly deleterious effects of his own counsel as readers take it to heart."⁴

The source of love 4:7-10

4:7 "Love," as well as faith (i.e., acknowledging the true doctrine of Christ, vv. 1-6), is a product of God's Spirit. The believer

¹Alford, 4:2:487.

²Findlay, p. 327.

³Smalley, p. 235.

⁴Yarbrough, p. 234.

(one "born of God"), who also "knows" God (i.e., has intimate fellowship with Him), "loves" (cf. 2:3-5). "Us" and "we" in this verse and the following verses (vv. 8-14) refer to the readers along with the apostles.

"The love which the New Testament enjoins involves a consuming passion for the well-being of others, and this love has its wellspring in God."¹

"A little boy, upon returning from his first day in kindergarten, was asked by his mother what he learned. His reply was, 'We learned to play with kids we don't like.' Probably this is one of the most significant lessons this child will ever learn. ... Would it not be advisable for some of our believers to return to kindergarten! They have not yet learned this invaluable lesson of how to love those they don't like."²

This verse is a concise summary of the argument of this whole epistle.

4:8 Absence of love shows that a person "who does not love" does not have intimate fellowship with ("know") God. It does not necessarily show that he was never born of God. Because God is light, those who abide in Him walk in His light (1:5, 7). Because God is righteous, those who abide in Him practice righteousness (2:29). Just so, "God is love," and those who abide in Him manifest His loving character. God is also light (1:5), spirit (John 4:24), and fire (Heb. 12:29). These are all metaphors that emphasize certain characteristics of God.

"In asserting that 'God is love,' the Apostle does not mean that He is love and nothing more; this attribute does not make up the sum of the Infinite ..."³

¹Bruce, p. 107.

²Blair, pp. 132-33. Paragraph division omitted.

³Findlay, p. 331.

"All His activity is loving activity. If He creates, He creates in love; if He rules, He rules in love; if He judges, He judges in love. All that He does is the expression of His nature, is—to love."¹

"'God is love' is rightly recognized as one of the high peaks of divine revelation in this Epistle. Logically the statement stands parallel with 'God is light' (1:5) and 'God is spirit' (Jn. 4:24) as one of the three great Johannine expressions of the nature of God. ... 'God is spirit' describes his metaphysical nature, while 'God is light' and 'God is love' deal with his character, especially as he has revealed himself to men."²

"The absence of the article (God is *the* love) indicates that love is not simply a quality which God possesses, but love is that which he is by his very nature. Further, because God is love, love which he shows is occasioned by himself only and not by any outside cause. The word **God** is preceded by an article, which means that the statement is not reversible; it cannot read, 'Love is God.'³

"John does not say that love is God, but only that God is love."⁴

4:9 The proof of God's love for people ("by this the love of God was manifested") is that He "sent" His "only begotten Son" (lit. "only born one") to provide eternal life for us (cf. John 1:14, 18; 3:16).⁵ If we ever doubt God's love for us, we need to meditate on this great verse. I take it that "that we might

¹Dodd, p. 110.

²Marshall, p. 212.

³Ryrie, "The First ...," p. 1475.

⁴Robertson, 6:232.

⁵For a good explanation of why a loving God allows people to go to hell, see Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 184.

live through Him" includes both the fullness of life now (cf. John 10:10) and eternal life forever.

- 4:10 This was not a response to man's love for God ("not that we loved Him"). God took the initiative in reaching out to ("but that He loved") "us" (v. 10). Jesus Christ became "an atoning sacrifice" (NIV), "the propitiation for our sins."

The inspiration of love 4:11-16

- 4:11 That demonstration of "love" by God is our model for showing love to others. As God manifested love in (among) us *then*, by sending Jesus Christ, so He manifests His love among us *now*, as we "love one another" (vv. 12-13).

"Since no one in all humanity is beyond the reach of our Savior's sacrificial death, no brother or sister should be beyond our sacrificial love."¹

- 4:12 No one has seen God in His pure essence without some kind of filter (cf. John 1:18). Instances in which the biblical writers said that people saw God were *theophanies*, manifestations of God in human or angelic form (e.g., Gen. 18:1-22; Exod. 33:18-23; et al.).²

Whenever we love one another, we make it possible for God to "abide" in close fellowship with us. Furthermore, God's love reaches a fullness and depth in us, that is possible *only* when we "love one another." It attains its full flower (v. 19).

There are three stages of God's love in 1 John. These stages are: love manifested to the world (4:9), love given to the family of God (3:1), and love perfected in a smaller group within this family (i.e., those who abide in God, 4:12). The love of God does not reach perfection until it finds objects of love beyond itself. When it does, God, whom no one has seen, will be visible (apparent) in this manifestation of love.

¹Ibid., p. 187.

²See *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. "Theophany," by Wick Broomall, pp. 520-21.

"God's love for us is perfected only when it is reproduced in us or (as it may mean) 'among us' in the Christian fellowship."¹

The same phenomenon occurs in human families. When a child says or does something just like one of his or her parents, we "see" the parent in the child's behavior (cf. 3:9).

"The love of God displayed in His people is the strongest apologetic that God has in the world."²

John insisted that Christians love their brethren. One reason for this emphasis was undoubtedly his pastoral concern for the welfare of his readers. Another may be that, as believers love one another, we make the invisible God visible to the world.

4:13 A believer's abiding in God and God's abiding in him or her become evident by the demonstration of love that comes "of" (lit. "out of") "His (God's) Spirit." The *Holy Spirit* is the source of the abiding believer's love, just as He is the source of our obedience (cf. 3:23-24).

"Him [God] we cannot see: has He given us any testimony of His presence in us? He has given us such a testimony, in making us partakers of His Holy Spirit."³

4:14 God's presence is observable in the midst of Christians who love each other. God produces that love. Most of John's readers had not, and all of us have not, "seen" Jesus Christ *in the flesh* as the apostles did. However, we can "see" God too, and can bear witness ("testify") with the apostles, that God sent Jesus Christ into the world "to be the Savior." We can share (*fellowship in*) the apostles' experience, that John said was his goal in writing this epistle (1:3-4). We can see God, both in the manifestation of His love, and in God's life behind

¹Stott, p. 164. Cf. Westcott, *The Epistles ...*, p. 152.

²Bruce, p. 109.

³Alford, 4:2:492.

that love, as we observe Christians loving one another. This verse then is a high point in John's argument.

This is the only place in John's epistles where he used the term "Savior." It also appears only once in his Gospel (John 4:42).

The Church has no more effective way to testify to *the world* about the Saviorhood of Jesus than by the *re-display* of the Savior's love in the fellowship of His disciples."¹

"No verse in 1 John is more critical to understanding the epistle than this one."²

4:15 Confessing that "Jesus" is God's "Son" is not the only *condition* for abiding in God. It is one evidence that someone might be abiding. One not abiding may or may not make this confession. Confession is the last step, the step of bearing witness (cf. 1:9; 2:23; 4:3; Rom. 10:9-10).

"The notion of God 'abiding' in someone has rich associations with John's Gospel, where *meno* occurs more than three dozen times. The word can mean simply to dwell somewhere; one's domicile is where one 'abides' (John 1:38, 39a; 2:12; 4:40 [2x]; 7:9; 8:35 [2x]; 10:40; 11:6, 54). But there is a fuller sense. God's Spirit descended and 'remained' on Jesus, according to John the Baptist (1:32, 33). The Spirit was Jesus's constant companion. To 'remain' or 'abide' in Jesus's teaching is to be his true disciple (8:31). A disciple will be informed and steered by all that Jesus commanded and taught. God the Father 'remained' or 'abode' with Jesus during his earthly days (14:10). The Father was the source of the very words he spoke, and Jesus 'remained' continually in the Father's love (15:10b. 'Abiding'

¹Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 192.

²Idem, *The First ...*, 2:1218.

describes a reality involving Father, Son, and Spirit."¹

In this context, "abides" refers to *salvation*, rather than to the *fellowship* that results from salvation.

4:16 This verse summarizes this section (3:24—4:16; cf. John 6:69). John was speaking of intimate knowledge ("come to know") and intimate fellowship ("abides"). "We" includes the readers with the apostles. "For us" should be "among (or in) us," as in verse 9.

"No body of believers will really be any stronger than the extent to which they manifest God's *love* by loving one another."²

"The stages in John's thought at this point have now emerged clearly. Faith (acknowledging Jesus as God's Son, v 15; and trusting in the love which God has for us, v 16*a*) leads to mutual indwelling between God and the believer. Such a personal relationship is consequently expressed in and perpetuated by 'living in love' (v 16*b*). The believer's love, for God and for other people (or for God in other people, cf. v 12), is to be active and sustained."³

John's point was that his readers had personally "seen" God in a sense similar to how the apostles had seen Him. The apostles had seen God in that they had seen Him in His Son, Jesus Christ. God had revealed His love to the apostles through Jesus Christ. The readers had seen God in that they had seen Him in His Spirit-indwelt abiding believers who loved one another. Consequently, John's readers could bear witness to the truth as the apostles did, and they could enjoy the same intimate fellowship with God that the apostles did.

¹Yarbrough, p. 252.

²Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 197.

³Smalley, p. 256.

"Too much 'witnessing' today is a mere mouthing of words. People need an expression of love."¹

E. HAVING BOLDNESS AT CHRIST'S JUDGMENT SEAT 4:17-19

John drew a conclusion from what he had written about the importance of believers abiding in God. It is the conclusion that he introduced in the theme verse of the body of the epistle: "And now, little children, abide in Him, so that whenever He should appear, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming" (2:28).

"How can a believer know that his love for the Father is being perfected? This paragraph of 1 John [4:17—5:5] suggests four evidences [namely, confidence (4:17-19), honesty (4:20-21), joyful obedience (5:1-3), and victory (5:4-5)]."²

4:17 Our "love" becomes complete ("is perfected"), in the sense that we can now have "confidence" as we anticipate our "day of judgment" (i.e., the evaluation of our works at Christ's judgment seat; 1 Cor. 3:12-15; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:10-12). The characteristic of God and Christians in view here is our love. We do not need to fear the judgment seat of Christ if we have demonstrated love to others. By loving God and others, we demonstrate our likeness to Jesus Christ our righteous Judge ("as He is, so also are we"). Therefore to give love is to gain boldness (confidence).

Here John said that God's love reaches perfection "with us" (Gr. *meth hamon*), whereas in 4:12 he wrote that His love reaches perfection "in us" (Gr. *en hamin*). When it reaches perfection *in* us, a proper relationship to other people exists, namely, no hate. When it reaches perfection *with* us, a proper relationship to God exists, namely, no fear.

As Jesus abode in His Father, and consequently had confidence in the face of trials and death, so we can abide in Christ, and

¹Wiersbe, p. 520.

²Ibid., p. 521.

have confidence in spite of the world's hostility. Abiding in God gave Jesus confidence, and it gives us confidence too.

"Jesus is in the world unseen, and our office is to make Him visible. We are to Him what He was to the Father in the days of His flesh—'Dei inaspecti aspectabilis imago' ["the visible image of the invisible God"]."¹

4:18 When we love others, we have "no" basis for "fear" as we anticipate the judgment seat of Christ (cf. Rom. 8:15; Heb. 2:15). The person who loves is, of course, the person over whom God is exercising His controlling influence (i.e., an abiding Christian). A believer who does not love others feels guilty, and fears (dreads) meeting his Judge, perhaps subconsciously if not consciously. This fear is a punishment. His guilty conscience punishes him.

"Fear, by anticipating punishment, has it even now; bears about a foretaste of it and so partakes of it ..."²

"... fear is the product of the observation that Christians have in fact not yet realized all the potential of their fellowship with God. There is still much of the unredeemed state about them."³

Christ's death for us frees us from the fear of condemnation at the Great White Throne judgment (Rom. 8:1). Our abiding life frees us from the fear of shame at the judgment seat of Christ (cf. 2:28).

A Christian who loves others may have other fears, but he need not fear (dread) the judgment seat of Christ. The fact that he loves others demonstrates that his relationship with God is essentially what it should be.

¹Smith, 5:192.

²Alford, 4:2:495.

³Schnachenburg, p. 224.

John was using love for God and other people here as he did elsewhere in this epistle (e.g., 2:3-11). He meant that it is the *most important* manifestation of a proper relationship with God, not the only manifestation. Throughout this section, John used the Greek word *agape* ("love," i.e., doing what is best for the other person).

On the human level, only total acceptance of another person will remove the "fear in love." For example, in marriage, a love relationship that is *free of fear*, is one in which there is a commitment to demonstrate total acceptance of the mate. *Total forgiveness* is also necessary for a transparent relationship (Eph. 4:31-32).

4:19 Our ability to "love," and our practice of "love," come from God's love for us ("He first loved us"). We need not fear standing before our Judge, because we love Him and He loves us. This verse is the climax of the body of this epistle.

"The ultimate ground of Christian assurance (including confidence on the judgment day, v 17) is not to be found in *our* loving, however 'complete' (v 18), but in God's prior love for us ..."¹

"God always makes the first move in the game of love."²

Someone has said that humans were made to run on love, just like cars were made to run on gasoline, and they do not function well on anything else but love.

John used various forms of the word "love" totaling 46 times in this short epistle.³

Confidence is one of the great consequences of having intimate fellowship with God. We can have confidence both now, and confidence to meet Jesus Christ when He returns for us or when we die (2:28). Moreover, we can

¹Smalley, p. 261. Cf. Dodd, pp. 122-23.

²G. S. Sloyan, *Walking in the Truth*, p. 49.

³*The Nelson ...*, p. 2144.

have confidence in prayer (3:21-22) on earth, and confidence when we stand before His judgment seat to give account of our stewardship (4:17-19).

V. LEARNING HOW TO LIVE OBEDIENTLY 4:20—5:17

"John no doubt intended his letter to be read publicly to all the members of each congregation—even if the addressed readers of First John were the elders, or leaders, of the church or churches to which this letter went. This public reading would have a twofold effect. First, it would buttress the authority of the local leadership so that they could stand more effectively against the Revisionists. Since the author was an apostle, his endorsement both of their doctrine and personal qualifications (cf. 2:12-14) was vital. But second, it would make the letter a teaching vehicle to all the Christians who heard it, and later to untold millions who would read, study, and hear it preached.

"Since the apostle John was unquestionably one of the greatest teachers the church has ever had, he must have known perfectly well that the level of experience he described might seem hard to some of the less mature in his audience. In the final segment of his epistle, which serves as a conclusion to all that has gone before, the writer addresses the practical concerns that his teaching on Christian experience might raise."¹

A. THE MEANING OF BROTHERLY LOVE 4:20—5:3A

John proceeded to clarify how to love our brethren. In the process, he dealt with potential excuses for not loving them.

4:20 A claim to "love God" is a poor substitute for genuine love of the brethren. Verse 19 left open the possibility of such a claim. John therefore clarified that a claim to love God is not a *true demonstration* of love. In John's hyperbolic parlance, failing to love is *to hate*. Love for the *unseen* God will find expression in

¹Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 209.

love for our brethren—whom we *can see*. It is easier to love someone we can see than it is to love someone we cannot see. Here is another false claim (cf. 1:6, 8, 10; 2:4, 6, 9, 22).

"The eye is wont to affect the heart; things unseen less catch the mind, and thereby the heart."¹

This is the last of seven tests in this epistle.

"In the first [1:6] the religious professionalist is not honest with *others*. In the second [1:8] he is not honest with *himself*. In the third [1:10] he is not honest with *God*. In the fourth [2:4] he is not honest with *Christ*. In the fifth [2:6] he is not honest with the *world*. In the sixth [2:9] he is not honest with his Christian *brother*. In the seventh [4:20] he is by implication (ponder it and see) false to *all*."²

4:21 Furthermore, God commanded us to love *both* Himself *and* our "brother[s]," not *just* Himself (2:3; 3:23-24; 5:3).

"Much verbal expression of devotion for the person of Christ can co-exist with remarkably un-Christian attitudes toward the people of Christ ..."³

"It is easy to have a kind of love for God which does not recognize the obligation to love one another. Such love for God falls short of being real love for him, since it fails to obey his commandments."⁴

5:1 The first part of this verse is one of the clearest statements in Scripture of what a person has to do to be saved (cf. John 20:31). There is no other way that John ever defined a

¹Henry, p. 1961.

²Baxter, 6:328.

³Bruce, p. 115.

⁴Marshall, p. 226.

Christian. We must "believe" that Jesus of Nazareth is "the Christ" (i.e., "the Anointed One," whom God promised to provide as a substitute sacrifice for the sins of the world). What defines a Christian is his or her *faith in Jesus Christ*—not lifestyle, good works, or obedience to God.

Our brothers and sisters are those who "believe that Jesus is the Christ." Even though we may have little in common with some Christians, we can still "love" them—because we share the same Parent and are members of the same family.

How can we love another Christian when we do not particularly like the person? The key is the meaning of "love." Loving our brethren means doing what is best for them (Gr. *agape*). It does not mean feeling affection for them, though feelings of affection frequently follow a commitment to do what is best for another person. God does not require us to feel equally affectionate toward all of our brethren, but He does require us to do what is best for them.

5:2 We must "love" other Christians by being obedient to God's commandments. Those who genuinely "love God" will obey "His commandments." This love expresses itself in action, not just emotion. We love other Christians best when we obey God.

5:3a The fundamental proof of "love for (of) God" and man is obedience to the Word of God. This must include willingness to sacrifice for our brethren (cf. 3:10-17). It is very easy to test our love for God. How committed are we to being completely obedient to His will? That is the measure of our love. "Love of God" here refers to our love of God (objective genitive), not the love of God for us (subjective genitive).

Love for God and God's children, in this verse, is essentially defined by obedience to (keeping) God's commands. It is not so much how we feel about God and other believers, as how we choose to relate to them that is crucial.

B. THE EMPOWERMENT OF BROTHERLY LOVE 5:3B-15

If love for our brethren really boils down to keeping God's commandments, how can we do that? It sounds difficult, even impossible. John proceeded to respond to this concern.

5:3b God's commands are "not burdensome" (oppressive, so as to crush love), because every believer has already exercised the faith in God that is essential for obedience (cf. Matt. 11:30; 1 John 4:4).

"The reason why God's commandments are not heavy is the power that comes with the new birth from God."¹

5:4 Every Christian has "overcome the world" by his or her initial "faith" in Jesus Christ. This is the positive side of 3:9: "No one who is born of God sins." To continue to overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil, all we need to do is continue to *exercise* "faith" in God (cf. Rom. 8:37; 1 Cor. 15:57). Thus God's commandments are not oppressive because the Holy Spirit enables us to obey God.

"It is striking that John does not say 'whoever' but 'whatever' (Greek: *to gegennemenon*, neuter gender). This suggests that there is something inherently world-conquering in the very experience of being born of God. We are now immediately told what this is: 'and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.'"²

5:5 Continuing to overcome is not automatic for the Christian. Not all Christians continue to overcome the world (cf. 2 Tim. 4:10). Only those who continue to live by faith (i.e., trust and obey God) do. However, no one can overcome the world unless he or she "believes that Jesus is the Son of God." It is in this sense that John refers to "overcomers" here; every Christian

¹Robertson, 6:238.

²Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 216.

overcomes essentially because he or she believes in Jesus Christ.

5:6 This "water" probably refers to John the Baptist's baptism of Jesus in water. The "blood" probably refers to His atoning death by crucifixion.¹

"Apparently the heretics attached a certain importance to Jesus' baptism."²

"John is correcting the false teacher Cerinthus, who claimed that the Spirit came on Jesus at His baptism but left Him before His death (see 4:2, 3)."³

Another view is that the water refers to the Word of God, and the blood refers to Christ's death.⁴ A third view is that the "water" refers to the reception of divine life and moral cleansing through the Word, and the "blood" refers to judicial cleansing that gives the Christian his or her standing before God through the shed blood of Christ.⁵ Another view is that the water refers to Jesus' ministry of baptism and the water to His ministry of saving.⁶ Still other views are that the water and blood refer to Christ's incarnation, to what flowed from Jesus' side when He was crucified, and to baptism and the Lord's Supper.

"... baptism attests to us that we have been cleansed and washed; the Eucharistic Supper, that we have been redeemed. In water, washing is represented; in blood, satisfaction. These two are found in Christ '... who,' as John says, 'came in

¹See Alford, 4:2:501-2; Smith, 5:195; Jamieson, et al., p. 1509; Morgan, *An Exposition ...*, p. 529; Lenski, p. 526; Ryrie, "The First ...," p. 1476; Blair, p. 174.

²Schnachenburg, p. 233.

³*The Nelson ...*, p. 2147.

⁴McGee, 5:816.

⁵Mitchell, *Fellowship*, pp. 144-45.

⁶Kruse, p. 178.

water and blood [1 John 5:6]; that is, to wash and to redeem."¹

Some false teachers in the early church taught that the divine Christ descended on the human Jesus at His baptism, but left Him before His crucifixion—for example, Cerinthus and other Gnostics.² John referred to this teaching in this verse. He considered this teaching untrue. Jesus Christ, one Person, came at His first advent not just to experience baptism in water, but also to die.

"The true identity of Jesus, the writer appears to be saying, is only to be discovered by looking at the whole of his life, including its end."³

- 5:7 The Holy Spirit is an additional witness, along with those just mentioned. He *testified* to the identity of Jesus as God's Son at His baptism (Matt. 3:17). Cerinthus taught that the Spirit was "the divine Christ," or "God's anointing," which descended on Jesus then.⁴ John corrected this error by pointing out that "the Spirit" was *a witness* to Jesus' identity; He was not *the Christ*. John further stressed the reliability of the Spirit's witness, by reminding his readers that "the Spirit is truth" (v. 6). The Spirit's testimony about Jesus' identity at His baptism was true because the *Spirit Himself* "is truth," and is *even God Himself* (cf. John 14:6; 15:26; 16:14).
- 5:8 Actually there are three witnesses to the truth (cf. Deut. 19:15; Matt. 18:16; John 8:17-18). These witnesses are: "the [Holy] Spirit" at Jesus' baptism, and subsequently through the apostles and prophets, "the water" of Jesus' baptism, and "the blood" of His crucifixion. John personified the latter two in this verse: "Water" and "Blood." The water of Jesus' baptism witnessed to His true humanity and His identification with humankind. The blood of Jesus' crucifixion witnessed to His complete obedience to His Father. The testimony of

¹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4:14:22.

²See Barclay, p. 10.

³Marshall, p. 278.

⁴See Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 219, footnote 10.

eyewitnesses and prophets, as well as that of the historical events, affirmed the divine and human character of Jesus Christ.

"In the water and the blood we have testimony of cleansing and redemption. But the Spirit, the primary witness, makes us certain of such testimony. This lofty mystery has been admirably shown us in the cross of Christ, when water and blood flowed from his sacred side [John 19:34]."¹

A few late manuscripts of 1 John insert other witnesses between the words "bear witness" and "the Spirit." Erasmus included these "witnesses" in his edition of the Greek New Testament, and the translators of the AV (KJV) followed his example.² The addition (in italics to highlight) reads: "... bear witness *in heaven—the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit—and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit ...*"

"Not a single manuscript contains the Trinitarian addition before the fourteenth century, and the verse is never quoted in the controversies over the Trinity in the first 450 years of the church era."³

- 5:9 God gave His witness concerning His Son at Jesus' baptism (Matt. 3:17), at His crucifixion (Matt. 27:51-53), and through His apostles (John 19:35-37). The apostles' witness, ultimately, came from God.
- 5:10 Having spoken of the *character* of the divine witness to Jesus (vv. 6-9), John moved on to discuss the *results* of that witness (vv. 10-12). The witness ("testimony that God has given") is the truth about Jesus Christ that the indwelling Holy Spirit bears. This may be the objective witness of Scripture, or it may be the objective presence of the Spirit in the believer's heart ("testimony in himself"). The *Spirit* witnesses in both ways,

¹Calvin, *Institutes of ...*, 4:14:22. Cf. Findlay, pp. 382-88.

²Hodges, "The First ...," 2:1224.

³Ryrie, "The First ...," p. 1477. Cf. Alford, 4:2:504.

though I think the second explanation is preferable. If someone does not believe the Spirit's testimony, he is saying that God has lied (cf. 1:10). John clarified the implications of rejecting the gospel in stark terms.

"The writer, then, cannot allow that one can profess belief in God, as did his opponents, and yet reject God's testimony to his own Son. Such rejection cannot be excused on the basis of ignorance. The evidence is too clear and too weighty. Rather, it is deliberate unbelief, the character of which in the end impugns the very being and character of God. If Jesus is not God's own Son in the flesh, then God is no longer the truth. He is the liar."¹

Believing *in* the Son of God is the same as believing *that Jesus is* the Christ (cf. v. 1; John 3:15-16, 18; 20:30-31).

"There is nothing here about 'head or heart belief,' or about a 'faith that yields to God as over against mere intellectual assent,' etc. The Bible does not complicate faith like that. Once we have understood the message, the issue is: Is it true or false? Do we believe it, or do we not?"²

5:11-12 "This" is the content of God's "testimony": "Eternal life" is inseparable from the person of Jesus Christ ("this life is in His Son"). Some of the false teachers seem to have tried to separate them (cf. 2:25-26). Jesus Christ and eternal life, together, are *one gift*, "given" from God.

"'Eternal' life is qualitative, not quantitative; it is the highest *kind* of spiritual and moral life, irrespective of time, which God enables the believer to share in relationship with Jesus."³

¹Barker, p. 352.

²Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 224.

³Smalley, p. 287.

"Some years ago, a blood specimen was taken from an African national in Lagos, West Africa. As a result, ever since, millions of people all over the world have been protected from yellow fever. All of the yellow fever vaccine produced has been derived from this original strain of virus obtained from this one African. It has given immunity to millions of people in many countries.

"To be saved from yellow fever, one must receive an application of the vaccine that originated from one man. To be saved from the judgment of God, one must receive an application of the unique precious blood that was shed by the Son of God alone."¹

Verse 12 is not an offer of eternal life, such as John 20:30-31, but a confirmation of what God had done for the readers, as the next verse verifies.

5:13 The phrase "these things" evidently refers to what John had just written about God's witness (vv. 6-12), rather than to his whole epistle. The "these things" in 1:4 refers to what was previously written in 1:1-3, the "these things" in 2:1, likewise, refers to what immediately precedes in 1:5-10, and the "these things" in 2:26 refers to what immediately precedes in 2:18-25.² John stated the purpose of the whole epistle in 1:3-4.³

"This assertion [i.e., v. 13] is very frequently, and wrongly, taken as a statement of purpose for the entire epistle But this is contrary to the writer's usage."⁴

Our assurance of salvation rests on the testimony of God, His promise (v. 12). It does not rest on the presence of spiritual fruit (cf. John 15:8). It rests on God's Word, not on man's

¹Blair, p. 175.

²See Robert N. Wilkin, "'Assurance: That You May Know' (1 John 5:11-13a)," *Grace Evangelical Society News* 5:12 (December 1990):2, 4.

³Westcott, *The Epistles ...*, p. 188.

⁴Hodges, *The Gospel ...*, p. 51. Cf. Wilkin, "Knowing God ...," p. 3.

works. Therefore, we can be sure ("know that") we "have eternal life"—if we have believed on Jesus Christ.

Some interpreters believe that the Christian's assurance of salvation rests on *both* God's *objective promises* in Scripture and on the *subjective evidence* of the believer's works.¹ However, the following quotation from one commentator seems to ground our assurance only on subjective evidence:

"Those who cling to the *promise* of eternal life but care nothing for Christ's holiness have nothing to be assured of. Such people do not really believe. Either their professed 'faith' in Christ is an utter sham, or they are simply deluded. If they did truly have their hope fixed on Christ, they would purify themselves, just as He is pure (3:3)."²

"Those who are willing to look at themselves with complete honesty will find more grounds to doubt their salvation than to be assured of it. Some even teach that this uncertainty is healthy! But this does not reckon with the fact that the apostle John expected his readers to know that they had eternal life. The irony is that once Christian experience is made the grounds for assurance, as some hold First John does, John's statement in this verse about *knowing* becomes a complete impossibility!"³

"But if we *have* eternal life, it is certainly well that we should *know* it; that is the normal and fitting experience of those who are in Christ."⁴

5:14-15 *Prayer* is another expression of the believer's trust in Jesus Christ and "confidence" toward ("before") God (cf. 3:21). To

¹E.g., Calvin, *Institutes of ...*, 3:24:4; and John MacArthur, *Faith Works*, pp. 162-66.

²Ibid., p. 171. The emphasis is his.

³Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 229.

⁴Findlay, p. 398. See Kruse, pp. 198-200, for "A Note on the Bases of Assurance" in 1 John.

do something "in the name of" another means to act on the authority of that person (cf. John 5:43; 10:25).

"Prayer is not a battle, but a response; its power consists in lifting our wills to God, not in trying to bring his will down to us ..."¹

"Jesus teaches us to pray: 'Thy will be done,' not, 'Thy will be changed.'"²

In the preceding context, the subject is mainly obedience to the will of God (vv. 3b-13). John's point is that whenever we need help, but particularly help in obeying God, we can "ask" for it, in prayer, *confidently* (cf. 2:28; 3:21; 4:17). He conditioned the promise "whatever" (v.15) with "according to His will" (v. 14). God "hears" *all* prayers, of course, because He is omniscient, knows everything. However, He "hears" them in the sense that He hears them *favorably*—because we are His children asking for help to do His will. He will always grant that kind of request.³

"He always hearkens; He is not like man, often occupied so that he cannot listen, or careless so that he will not."⁴

"The fact that we as true believers and God's children will never come face to face with him and ask what is against his will is in a way self-evident; hence it is not mentioned in so many of the promises of Jesus regarding prayer nor in 3:21, 22."⁵

We know the most important aspects of the will of God through Scripture.

¹Smalley, p. 295. Cf. Law, p. 301.

²Barclay, p. 136.

³See Thomas L. Constable, "What Prayer Will and Will Not Change," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, pp. 99-113; and idem, *Talking to God: What the Bible Teaches about Prayer*, p. 170.

⁴Darby, 5:537.

⁵Lenski, pp. 532-33.

"In so far as God's will is not our will, we are not abiding in faith, and our prayers are not accepted."¹

"But, if prayer is to be made according to God's will, why pray at all? Surely his will is going to be accomplished, whether or not we pray for it to be done? To speak in such terms is to assume that God's will must be understood in a static kind of way, as if God has made a detailed plan beforehand of all that is going to happen—including the fact that we are going to pray in a particular way and at a particular time. But while the Bible does speak of God's plan and purpose for the world, to speak in such deterministic terms is inconsistent with the freedom which the Bible itself assigns to God's children, and it wreaks havoc upon the biblical idea of the personal relationship which exists between God and his children."²

Trust in Jesus Christ is therefore as basic to success in living the Christian life as it is to obtaining eternal life.

C. THE CONSEQUENCES OF BROTHERLY LOVE 5:16-17

Although as believers in Jesus Christ, we have every right and obligation to be concerned about our own obedience, we cannot truly love our brethren unless we have concern for their obedience, too. Prayer *according to God's will* is not only a resource for us that helps us love one another, but prayer is also a resource whereby we can obtain help for our brethren and their needs.

"Join together the confidence concerning prayer just expressed, and the all-essential Christian principle of brotherly

¹Jamieson, et al., p. 1510.

²Marshall, p. 244.

love, and we have following, as matter of course, the duty, and the practice, of intercession for an erring brother."¹

5:16 John explained that prayer should extend to the needs of others (cf. 1 Tim. 2:1). He did this to clarify further what loving one's brethren involves. The general subject of this verse is prayer for a *sinning* Christian. We can clarify the sense of this verse, and the next one, by inserting the words "premature physical" before each instance of the word "death."

Some writers wrote that the assumed modifier of "death" should be "eternal."² This interpretation may result in concluding, erroneously I believe, that the brethren in view were either never saved in the first place or lost their salvation.

Other interpreters believe that "What God does when He gives life for these sinners is to strengthen their damaged, declining *spiritual* life ..."³ In this case, it seems that the death would be spiritual death. But how could a "brother" die spiritually (eternally)? He might get sick spiritually, but he would not die spiritually.

I believe this verse is teaching that some sins bring God's swift judgment, and result in the premature physical death of the sinner (e.g., Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor. 5:5; 11:30). Others do not. The fact that it is very difficult, if not impossible, for us *today* to distinguish these types of sins, should not lead us to conclude that a distinction does not exist (cf. Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-29).

"The Old Testament already recognizes a difference between lesser (unpremeditated) and greater (deliberate) sins (see Lev. 4:2ff.; 5:1ff.; Num. 15:22ff., in contrast to Num. 15:30f.). Mortal sin originally meant a sin incurring the

¹Alford, 4:2:509.

²Randall K. J. Tan, "Should We Pray for Straying Brethren? John's Confidence in 1 John 5:16-17," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45:4 (December 2002):599-609; and Yarbrough, pp. 306-13.

³Lenski, p. 535. Italics added.

penalty of physical death (see Num. 18:22; Isa. 22:14)."¹

According to the "eternal death" view, the sin unto death is a reference to failure to believe in Christ (cf. John 3:18-19; 8:24; 9:39).² "Sin[s] not leading to [eternal] death" are those that will not result in a person's damnation, because "God will give [eternal] life" to that one in answer to the prayer offered by the intercessor. "Sin[s] not leading to [eternal] death" could also refer to sins that do not *irrevocably* separate the believer from God, for which forgiveness is possible. It is true that failure to believe in Christ results in eternal death, but that does not seem to me to be the "sin unto death" that is in view in this verse.

"There are two ways of killing the soul: (1) The numbing and hardening practice of disregarding spiritual appeals and stifling spiritual impulses... (2) A decisive apostasy, a deliberate rejection. This was the case of those heretics. They had abjured Christ and followed Antichrist."³

Under the *Old Covenant*, sinners who repudiated that covenant died *physically*, because their repudiation represented a major rejection of Yahweh's authority. The writer to the Hebrews warned his readers that repudiation of the *New Covenant* would result in inevitable, "severer judgment" (*physical death plus some form of "spiritual death," such as loss of reward for believers, or the second death for unbelievers*)—with no possibility of repentance (Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-27). Repudiation of the New Covenant involves rejecting Jesus Christ. That could be the "sin leading to death" that John meant here.

"The early church took much more seriously than we do the possibility that a person may sin beyond hope of redemption."⁴

¹Schnachenburg, p. 249.

²E.g., Findlay, p. 406.

³Smith, 5:198.

⁴Marshall, p. 249. See also Westcott, *The Epistles ...*, pp. 209-14.

In the case of sin leading to premature physical death, John revealed that prayer will not avert the consequences. Therefore praying in these situations will not avail. However, John did *not* say we should refrain from praying about them.¹ We might not know if a sin is one that God will judge with premature death. In such cases, we can pray that God will bring His will to pass for a sinning Christian.²

"We are to do the praying, and God will do the sorting."³

Jeremiah, out of love for his brethren, continued to pray for the apostate Israelites, even though God told him that his prayers would not avail, because their doom was sealed (Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:11-12).

"... John's warning against sin, and the failure to maintain orthodox faith (2:24; 2 John 8-9), shows that while he expected his readers to walk in the light as sons of God (1:7; vv 18-19), he did not ignore the possibility that some believing but heretically inclined members of his community might become apostate."⁴

Many Christians have failed to realize that sinning always leads to some type of dying, even among Christians (Rom. 6:23). While it is true that no Christian will ever experience the second death (eternal separation from God), we do normally experience the physical and spiritual (loss of fellowship) consequences of our sinning. The fact that we believers must all die physically, except for the raptured, is the proof of this. Again, the exception is Christians whom God will translate when the Lord Jesus returns for His own.

"A further question is whether the sin that leads to death can be committed by those who are truly

¹Robertson, 6:244.

²See W. Robert Cook, "Hamartiological Problems in First John," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 123; 491 (July-September 1966):257-59; and C. Samuel Storms, *Reaching God's Ear*, pp. 241-53.

³Blair, p. 190.

⁴Smalley, p. 299.

God's children. ... A number of scholars have tried to show that this could not have been John's meaning. Thus it has been argued that the people in question had merely masqueraded as believers but had never at any point truly believed in Jesus. Consequently, the sin that leads to death is to be understood as a sin of unbelievers which believers cannot in principle commit.¹ However, this point must remain doubtful. The fact that John needed to warn his readers against the possibility of sinning and failing to continue in the truth and in the doctrine of Christ (2:24; 2 Jn. 7-11) suggests that he did not altogether exclude the possibility that a person might fall away from his faith into apostasy [cf. Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-31]. Nevertheless, it was his clear expectation that his readers would continue in their faith without falling away from it."²

"I think that if a child of God goes on disgracing the Lord down here, the Lord will either set him aside or take him home by death. God doesn't mind doing that. I think He does it in many instances."³

5:17 When a brother or sister has committed a sin "not leading to" premature physical "death," we in the church should pray for that individual (cf. 1:9). Prayer for a sinning Christian is a concrete demonstration of love for that brother or sister (3:23).

These verses are not distinguishing between mortal (unpardonable) and venial (pardonable) sins, as Roman Catholic theology uses these terms.

"So long as a man in his heart of hearts hates sin and hates himself for sinning, so long as he *knows*

¹Footnote 27: Stott, pp. 186-91.

²Marshall, pp. 249-50.

³McGee, 5:820.

that he is sinning, he is never beyond repentance, and, therefore, never beyond forgiveness; but once a man begins to revel in sin, and to make sin the deliberate policy of his life, and loses all sense of the terror and the awfulness of sin and also the feeling of self-disgust, he is on the way to death, for he is on the way to a state where the idea of repentance will not, and cannot, enter his head."¹

Spiritual death is in view.	Physical death is in view.
The offender is a brother.	The offender is a brother.
The sin <i>not</i> unto death = any sin other than unbelief in Christ	The sin <i>not</i> unto death = any sin that does not shorten one's life
God will grant spiritual life to the guilty in answer to prayer. (Prayer is never a guarantee of eternal life.)	God will grant extended physical life to the guilty in answer to prayer. (God did this for King Hezekiah; cf. James 5:15.)
The sin unto death = unbelief	The sin unto death = serious sin that shortens physical life
John did not commend prayer for the person who commits the sin of unbelief. (One would think that he would commend it; cf. Rom. 10:1.)	John did not commend prayer for the person who commits sin that shortens physical life. (Evidently he believed such praying would be useless; cf Jer. 7:16.)

We should demonstrate concern about the obedience of others as well as our own obedience. When we become truly concerned about our own obedience, we will also become concerned about the obedience of our brethren. God gives us *eternal* life, but we who are believers can "give" extended physical life to others, in some situations, when we ask God in prayer to be merciful to them.

¹Barclay, p. 143.

VI. CHRISTIAN CERTAINTIES 5:18-21

John concluded this epistle by synthesizing the major thoughts he had presented—to reinforce and review them for his readers. "We know" many things as a result of what Jesus taught and what John taught.

"The writer's fundamental thought here is that if the readers perceive the truths he mentions, they will be fortified against the allurements of the idolatrous pagan practices around them."¹

5:18 "We know" introduces this verse and the following two verses. John probably meant: "We apostles know (understand), and now you readers also know—in view of what I have written in this epistle."

As in 3:9, John affirmed that the basic nature of one who has God for his spiritual Parent is not to sin ("no one who is born of God sins").² The regenerate person *as such* is incapable of any sin.

"That new man cannot sin because it is born of God. God is righteous, and that which is born of God cannot sin, nor can the wicked one touch that which is begotten of God."³

One interpretation is that because the new man in Christ possesses the sinless nature of the indwelling Christ, John could say that *Christ* ("He who was born of God") "keeps him" from sin (cf. John 17:12; Rev. 3:10). Another, better, view is that "he who is born of God" refers to *the believer* who keeps "himself" from sin.⁴ Elsewhere in this epistle, "born of God" refers to the believer (3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4).

In addition, Satan cannot ("the evil one does not") "touch him." This does not mean that Satan cannot attack or

¹Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 241.

²See John A. McLean, "An Exegetical Study of 1 John 5:18-21," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 169:673 (January-March 2012):68-78.

³Mitchell, *Fellowship*, p. 163.

⁴See Marshall, p. 252, footnote 37, for further discussion of the problem.

physically hurt a spiritual and abiding Christian (cf. Job), but rather that he cannot destroy the spiritual and abiding Christian in his or her faith and testimony. Evidently John restated this fundamental truth, because people normally behave in harmony with what they believe themselves to be ("as he [a person] thinks in his heart, so is he," Prov. 23:7). Our behavior as Christians will be more holy when we view ourselves as "children of God," rather than as children of the devil (cf. 3:10).

5:19 Moreover, we are distinct from "the world" system, that Satan controls ("the whole world lies in the power of the evil one"), since we are God's children (5:9-13). We need not accept the worldly teachings of antichrists (3:7-8), nor capitulate to worldly lusts (2:15-17).

5:20 Finally, we have spiritual "understanding" through our *anointing* with the Holy Spirit (2:20), whom Jesus Christ sent (cf. 1 Cor. 2:15-16). Consequently we can come to "know" God intimately, and can *abide* in God ("we are in Him") and "in His Son, Jesus Christ," who is "the true God and eternal life" (cf. John 14:6). Darby considered the last part of this verse as the key to this epistle.¹ The full title "His Son Jesus Christ" appears only at 1:3 and here, in this epistle, providing bookends for what John wrote (another *inclusio*). This verse contains one of the clearest announcements of the deity of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

"Eternal life, for John, is a relationship with the Father and the Son. It begins in the present when a person comes to faith in Jesus Christ, but it continues uninterrupted into the age to come."²

Findlay summarized the three things that "we know," in verses 18-20, as: "the apostolic creed": "I believe in holiness." "I believe in regeneration." "I believe in the mission of the Son of God."³

¹Darby, 5:510.

²Harris, p. 232.

³Findlay, p. 415.

5:21 John closed with a final admonition. Departure from the true God and His teaching constitutes idolatry. As contradicting God is the same as calling Him a liar (1:10), so departing from God amounts to idolatry. Departing from God includes leaving apostolic teaching and practice, and behaving as a child of Satan rather than as a child of God.

"False teaching is ultimately 'apostasy from the true faith.' To follow after it is to become nothing better than an idol worshiper, especially if it is a matter of the truth of one's conception of God. The author is blunt. The false teachers propose not the worship of the true God, made known in his Son Jesus, but a false god—an idol they have invented."¹

This verse is a New Testament restatement—for Christians—of the first commandment God gave the Israelites in the Decalogue (Exod. 20:3-5; Deut. 5:7-9).

"High birth demands high bearing [*Noblesse oblige.*]"²

¹Barker, p. 357. Cf. Lenski, p. 545; Benjamin L. Merkle, "What Is the Meaning of 'Idols' in 1 John 5:51?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 169:675 (July-September 2012):328-40.

²Findlay, p. 425.

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