

Notes on 1 John

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Introduction

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

This epistle 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.

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 that he knew the churches and Christians in that Roman province well from Revelation 2 and 3. Perhaps his readers lived in that province.

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.² These philosophies extended beyond Asia, but they were present there during John's lifetime.

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 would 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.³ However many conservative scholars believe John wrote this epistle much later. They suggest 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).⁴ I prefer a date in the 90s following the writing of John's Gospel that 1 John seems to assume.⁵ In view of the nature and the conclusion of the Book of Revelation, which seems to be God's final 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

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

²Explanations of these will follow in the exposition.

³See Zane C. Hodges, "1 John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, p. 882.

⁴E.g., B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John*, pp. xxx-xxxii; and F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, p. 31.

⁵Cf. Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, pp. xxii, xxxii.

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

Since John ministered in and around Ephesus later in his life, that 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 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)."⁸

OUTLINE

- I. Introduction: the purpose of the epistle 1:1-4
- II. Living in the light 1:5—2:29
 - A. God as light 1:5-7
 - B. Conditions for living in the light 1:8—2:29
 - 1. Renouncing sin 1:8—2:2
 - 2. Obeying God 2:3-11
 - 3. Rejecting worldliness 2:12-17
 - 4. Keeping the faith 2:18-29
- III. Living as children of God 3:1—5:13
 - A. God as Father 3:1-3
 - B. Conditions for living as God's children 3:4—5:13
 - 1. Renouncing sin reaffirmed 3:4-9

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

⁸Smalley, p. xxiv.

2. Obeying God reaffirmed 3:10-24
3. Rejecting worldliness reaffirmed 4:1-6
4. Practicing love 4:7—5:4
5. Keeping the faith reaffirmed 5:5-13

IV. Conclusion: Christian confidence 5:14-21

- A. Confidence in action: prayer 5:14-17
- B. Certainty of knowledge: assurance 5:18-20
- C. A final warning: idolatry 5:21

Another outline that captures the cyclical pattern of John's thought is the following.⁹

- I. Prologue 1:1-4
- II. First cycle 1:5—2:28
 - A. Righteousness 1:5—2:6
 - B. Love 2:7-17
 - C. Belief 2:18-28
- III. Second cycle 2:29—4:6
 - A. Righteousness 2:29—3:10a
 - B. Love 3:10b-24a
 - C. Belief 3:24b—4:6
- IV. Third cycle 4:7—5:12
 - A. Love 4:7-21
 - B. Righteousness 5:1-5
 - C. Belief 5:6-21

Scholars have struggled to determine the structure of this epistle and have suggested many diverse outlines of the book.¹⁰

⁹Adapted from Robert Law, *The Tests of Life: A Study of the First Epistle of St. John*, pp. 1-24.

¹⁰I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, pp. 22-27, reproduced the outlines of seven influential scholars plus his own, which differ from one another greatly.

Exposition

L. 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."¹¹

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 is possible only to those who have 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.

1:1 The "beginning" (Gr. *arche*) may refer to the beginning of all things (John 1:1) or the beginning of the creation (Gen. 1:1). It could also refer to the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry (i.e., His incarnation; John 1:14), the beginning of the readers' experience as Christians, or the beginning of the Christian gospel. The last option seems most consistent with what John proceeded to say about that beginning (1 John 2:7, 24; 3:11; cf. Mark 1:1-4; Acts 1:21-22). The baptism of Jesus, the start of His public ministry and its proclamation, signaled this beginning.

John's verbs indicate 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 to be genuine fellowship. John used his three basic senses to highlight the reality of the object. He cited personal experience and appealed to empirical evidence to support the humanity of Jesus Christ (cf. Luke 24:39). Some false teachers were denying His humanity.¹² Specific instances of personal encounter with Jesus Christ 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 eyewitness of Jesus Christ. In this epistle John was speaking for others beside himself, and he was seeking to persuade still other believers of something not all of them had experienced or acknowledged (cf. Luke 1:2).¹³

¹¹Ibid., p. 99.

¹²Bruce, pp. 16-17.

¹³D. Edmond Hiebert, "An Expository Study of 1 John," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145:578 (April-June 1988):203.

The "word of life" probably refers to the message about Jesus Christ, namely, the gospel.¹⁴ John referred to Jesus as "the Word" in his Gospel. 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 John wanted to emphasize here 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. It reflects Christian experiences about which John wrote here whereas "Word" (Gr. *logos*) reflects the facts Jesus declared 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.

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, 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 eternity 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. 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*.¹⁵ In John's writings "eternal life" is synonymous with "salvation."¹⁶

- 1:3 "You," the recipients of this epistle, must have been genuine believers (cf. 2:12-14, 21, 27; 5:13). They had not known Jesus Christ in the flesh as the apostles had. John wrote so they could enter into the intimate fellowship with Him that the apostolic eyewitnesses enjoyed.¹⁷

"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.'"¹⁸

¹⁴Westcott, pp. 6-7; C. H. Dodd, *The Johanne Epistles*, pp. 3-6; and J. L. Houlden, *A Commentary on the Johanne Epistles*, pp. 50- 52.

¹⁵G. Goodman.

¹⁶Smalley, p. 10.

¹⁷Westcott, p. 4.

¹⁸Glenn 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."¹⁹

"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."²⁰

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

"It is an interpretive mistake of considerable moment to treat the term 'fellowship' as though it meant little more than 'to be a Christian.'"²¹

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

1:4 Here "we" is probably editorial. "These things" refers to what John wrote in this epistle. Not only would his readers experience full 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 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.²² John wrote this epistle so his readers might join 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."²³

These verses, rather than 5:13, constitute the comprehensive purpose statement of the epistle.²⁴

¹⁹John G. Mitchell, *Fellowship*, p. 14.

²⁰D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Fellowship With God: Studies in 1 John*, p. 77.

²¹Hodges, p. 883.

²²Marshall, p. 107-8.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 105.

²⁴Smalley, p. 15, argued that John's major purpose was "recalling his divided community to the fundamentals of the apostolic gospel, and answering the heretical extremes of those who were taking too

"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."²⁵

II. LIVING IN THE LIGHT 1:5—2:29

"The teaching of 1 John is concerned essentially with the conditions for true Christian discipleship. The two main divisions of the letter set out these conditions and exhort the readers to live in the light (1:5—2:29) as children of God (3:1—5:13)."²⁶

John began his exposition of how his readers could enjoy fellowship with God by introducing the concept of God as light (1:5-7) and then explaining with four conditions what fellowship with God requires (1:8—2:29).

A. GOD AS LIGHT 1:5-7

John began his explanation of what it means to live in the light by emphasizing that God is light.

1:5 This verse provides a basis for what follows in verses 6-10. It gives the standard against which the three following Christian professions fall short.

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 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; 1:35-36, 46; Rev. 21:23).²⁷ 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).²⁸ The light-darkness motif was common in both the Hellenistic and Jewish thought life of

'high' or too 'low' a view of the person of Jesus . . ." Gary W. Derickson, "What Is the Message of 1 John?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150:597 (January-March 1993):89-105, followed Smalley.

²⁵Mitchell, p. 21. Cf. Hodges, pp. 883-84.

²⁶Smalley, p. 17.

²⁷Compare John's other descriptions of God as spirit (John 4:24) and as love (1 John 4:8). All three comparisons of God stress his immateriality and essence.

²⁸Barker, p. 309.

John's day and culture.²⁹ For John these concepts were mainly ethical (cf. Eph. 5:8-14).³⁰

"Whatever other qualities this metaphorical designation 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."³¹

"As darkness has no place in God, so all that is of the darkness is excluded from having fellowship with God."³²

John frequently emphasized his propositions by restating them in a negative form, as he did here.

1:6 John may have used the "If we claim" phrase in verses 6, 8, and 10 to voice the teaching of false teachers.³³

"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."³⁴

John's reminder here is that the Christian who claims to have fellowship with God who is light (holiness) but disobeys Him 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. Action was a very important part of knowledge for John, and it must be for us as well (cf. James).

The Greek word translated "fellowship" (*koinonia*) here means sharing by two or more parties. It does not refer to sharing salvation.³⁵ John earlier said his aim was that his readers, who were Christians (2:12-14, 21, 27),

²⁹Dodd, pp. 18-19; John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, p. 70; Theodor H. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures*, pp. 46, 49-51.

³⁰Westcott, pp. 16-17, wrote a good discussion of God being light.

³¹Hiebert, "An Expository . . .," 145:331.

³²Barker, p. 310.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Marshall, p. 110.

³⁵Some commentators take the phrases "have fellowship with Him" and "walk in the light" as describing salvation (e.g., Lloyd-Jones, pp. 130, 142; Charles P. Baylis, "The Meaning of Walking 'in the Darkness' [1 John 1:6]," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149:594 [April-June 1992]:214-22). Advocates say that if a Christian does not persevere in the faith he or she is not a Christian. This interpretation results in back loading the gospel with works.

should enjoy fellowship with the apostolic eyewitnesses that they did not then share (v. 3).

"... all true 'fellowship' is predicated on apostolic doctrine."³⁶

1:7 Walking in the light means walking according to the light. 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.

"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.³⁷

Two things are equally true of believers who walk in the light according to this verse: we enjoy fellowship with God, and we are experiencing cleansing from every 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.'"³⁸

"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."³⁹

God cleanses us at conversion in the sense that He will never bring us into condemnation for our sins. However, we need continual cleansing from the defilement that 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.⁴⁰

"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,

³⁶Zane C. Hodges, "Fellowship and Confession in 1 John 1:5-10," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129:513 (January-March 1972):52.

³⁷Barker, p. 310; Westcott, p. 20.

³⁸Smalley, p. 24.

³⁹Westcott, p. 21.

⁴⁰A 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.

22), and which takes a leading place among the saving benefits of the redemptive self-sacrifice of Christ."⁴¹

B. CONDITIONS FOR LIVING IN THE LIGHT 1:8—2:29

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.

"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)."⁴²

"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."⁴³

1. Renouncing sin 1:8—2:2

John continued a structural pattern that he established in the previous section (vv. 6-7) in which he used pairs of clauses to present a false assertion followed by his correction.

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.

If a Christian claims to be experiencing fellowship with God, he may think he is temporarily or permanently entirely sinless. 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,

⁴¹Bruce, p. 44.

⁴²Barker, p. 309.

⁴³Hodges, "Fellowship and . . .," p. 48.

sins of omission as well as commission, and sins of nature as well as action.

Some have interpreted the phrase "no sin" to mean no sin nature or no sin principle.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵

God's truth as Scripture reveals it does not have a full hold on us 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 in us as a thread is in a piece of cloth rather than as a coin is in a pocket. 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" (*homologemen*) 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.⁴⁶

"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.'"⁴⁷

If we confess our sins, God will then forgive the sins we confess and will in addition cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Consequently we do not need to worry that He has 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.⁴⁸ This viewpoint fails to distinguish between forensic forgiveness that we receive at conversion and family forgiveness

⁴⁴E.g., Smalley, p. 29.

⁴⁵Law, p. 130.

⁴⁶Westcott, p. 23, wrote that this is public confession, but there does not seem to be good reason to read that into the text.

⁴⁷A. Ross, *The Epistles of James and John*, p. 146.

⁴⁸E.g., Peter E. Gillquist, *Love Is Now*, p. 64.

that we need after conversion. For example, a judge could pay his own son's fine in court but then discipline him when they got home. Jesus instructed His believing disciples to ask the Father for forgiveness (Luke 11:14). The fact that God has removed the penalty for our sins at conversion (Eph. 1:7) does not remove the necessity of confessing our sins frequently (cf. Matt. 6:11-12). Again, the issue is not acceptance by God but fellowship with God. Conversion (forensic) forgiveness makes us acceptable as members of God's family. Continual (family) forgiveness enables us to experience intimate fellowship as sons within God's family.

1:10 The false claim here is that what we have done 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 claimant dismisses His Word as invalid (e.g., Ps. 14:3; Isa. 53:6; John 2:24-25; Rom. 3:23).

Note that 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 false claim follows in the verse immediately after it.

| Truth | False claim |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| God is light (v. 5). | We have fellowship with Him (v. 6). |
| Walking in the light is necessary for fellowship with God (v. 7). | We have no guilt for sin (v. 8). |
| Confession restores fellowship with God (v. 9). | We have not sinned (v. 10). |

"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."⁴⁹

2:1 John's preceding comments on the inevitability of sinful behavior (vv. 6-10) led to his assuring his readers here that he did not want them to sin. Avoidance of sin is important even though it is not entirely possible.

⁴⁹Hodges, "Fellowship and . . .," p. 60.

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. These terms do not require us to conclude that the recipients were necessarily John's personal converts.

"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).

As our Advocate (friend in court, or defense attorney) Jesus Christ pleads the cause of the sinning Christian before God the Father (cf. Heb. 7:25). 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). He called the Holy Spirit another Paraclete like Himself (John 14:16).

"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."⁵⁰

2:2 Jesus Christ did not just make satisfaction for our sins, though He did that. He is the satisfaction Himself. 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 tabernacle connotations. Jesus' death not only expiated (cleansed) sins, but it satisfied God's wrath against sin.⁵¹

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, though it is efficient only for those who trust in Him (2 Cor. 5:14-15, 19; Heb. 2:9; Rev. 22:17). "Our" refers to the

⁵⁰Smalley, pp. 35-36.

⁵¹See 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.

sins of all believers, and the "whole world" means all humankind, not just the elect (cf. John 1:12; 3:16). 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.

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).

2. Obeying God 2:3-11

"The author is explaining to the members of his church, in answer to developing heretical tendencies, the nature of true 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)."⁵²

"Though the immediate effect of the light is to expose sin, its primary purpose is to reveal duty."⁵³

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.⁵⁴ John said similar things about knowing God as he had said about having fellowship with God.⁵⁵ Increased fellowship with God and increased knowledge of God are inseparable.

"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)."⁵⁶

2:3 John proposed a test whereby we can measure our experiential knowledge of God (Father and Son, 1:3). He said, look at your response to God's

⁵²Smalley, p. 42.

⁵³Law, p. 209.

⁵⁴Barker, p. 315.

⁵⁵"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* (experiential knowledge) 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* (knowledge) is absent from this epistle.

⁵⁶Barker, p. 315.

revealed will. All believers know God to some extent (John 17:3). However some know Him more fully 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 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.

"The sign of knowledge of God is obedience to his commands and recognition of the way of life that he expects from his people."⁵⁷

"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."⁵⁸

2:4 The profession in view, in the light of the context (1:6, 8, 10), is evidently another claim to having close relationship with God, not a claim to being saved.⁵⁹ If a person says he knows God intimately but is not obedient to the revealed will of God, he is a liar. Furthermore, God's truth does not have a controlling influence over his life (cf. 1:8, 10).

". . . who is not keeping God's commands does not know God experientially no matter what he claims verbally."⁶⁰

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

⁵⁷Marshall, p. 122.

⁵⁸Smalley, p. 45.

⁵⁹See Zane C. Hodges, "Is God's Truth in You? 1 John 2:4b," *Grace Evangelical Society News* 5:7 (July 1990):2-3.

⁶⁰Robert N. Wilkin, "Knowing God By Our Works?" *Grace Evangelical Society News* 3:10 (October-November 1988):3.

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

"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."⁶¹

2:5a On the other hand the Christian who is careful to observe all of God's Word (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 result in his or her behavior. Our love for God is in view here rather than His love for us (cf. v. 15; 5:3).⁶² Loving God is parallel to knowing God (vv. 3-4).

Bible students have often called John the apostle of love because of his frequent references to love.⁶³ Likewise many have referred to Paul as the apostle of faith and to Peter as the apostle of hope for the same reason.

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. 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). 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."⁶⁴

⁶¹Smalley, p. 59.

⁶²Bruce, p. 51; Stott, p. 91; Dodd, p. 31.

⁶³There 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.

⁶⁴Smalley, p. 52.

Abiding in Christ is another 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.⁶⁵ 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 follow the example of His Son (v. 6).

"We cannot claim to abide in Him unless we behave like Him."⁶⁶

2:7 What commandments did John have in mind? 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).

2:8 In another sense, however, this old commandment was new (fresh, Gr. *kainos*). With the Incarnation, the light of God had entered the world more brightly than ever before (Heb. 1:1-3).

"It is not a recent innovation, yet it is qualitatively new as experienced in Christ."⁶⁷

This light was dispelling the darkness of sin and would continue to do so until the final increase of that light will result 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 His coming as the Light of the World (John 13:34-35).

The new commandment "is true" in Christ and in Christians in this sense: Jesus Christ's obedience to His Father fulfilled it first, and Christians' obedience to God is fulfilling it now.

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 behavior shows is spurious (1:6, 8, 10; 2:4, 6). Hatred of other Christians is a sure sign that one is not walking with God in fellowship.

⁶⁵2:6, 10, 14, 17, 19, 24 (thrice), 27 (twice), 28; 3:6, 9, 14, 15, 17, 24 (twice); 4:12, 13, 15, 16 (thrice).

⁶⁶Stott, p. 92.

⁶⁷Hiebert, "An Expository . . .," 145:422.

"Hate is the absence of the deeds of love. . . . Love unexpressed is not love at all. Love has no neutral capabilities. When it is absent, hate is present."⁶⁸

Obviously genuine Christians have hated other Christians. It is naive to claim that the one 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 probably meant a "brother" Christian rather than a neighbor.⁶⁹

2:10 The cause of stumbling is hatred in the heart. Hatred causes the hater to stumble in his or her walk with God.

". . . 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."⁷⁰

2:11 The hater's sin affects him in three ways. It places him in darkness outside 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. 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 or totally.

John argued that intimate fellowship with God is possible only when a person is obedient to God (2:3-11) as well as renouncing sin in his life (1:5—2:2).

3. Rejecting worldliness 2:12-17

John continued to urge his readers to cultivate intimate fellowship with God who is light. To do so they also needed to reject worldliness.

"The first part of the Epistle (1:5—2:11) involved untrue assertions made by the author's Gnostic-type opponents and provided 'tests' for exposing the false claims as well as for assuring those who walked in the light. The next section is in two parts. The first (2:12-14) contrasts the position of the believer who walks in the light with that of the Gnostics who walk in darkness. The second part (2:15-17) warns the believer not to fall into the trap of worldliness, as the false teachers did."⁷¹

⁶⁸Barker, p. 317.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Smalley, p. 62.

⁷¹Barker, p. 319.

The spiritual condition of the readers 2:12-14

John reminded his readers of their spiritual blessings to motivate them to cultivate intimate fellowship with God.

"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)."⁷²

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 were in their spiritual development children, men, and youths.⁷³ 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 addressed all his readers as little children (cf. John 21:5) and then spoke more specifically to the more mature or older (fathers) and then to the less mature or younger (young men).⁷⁴ Yet what he said to the three groups is so parallel that it seems more likely that he was addressing three distinct groups. It seems best to conclude that John used these three stages of life to describe qualities typical of each age group that ought to characterize all believers.⁷⁵

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.⁷⁶

As children John's readers had known forgiveness by their heavenly Father (cf. 1:5—2:2). As fathers they had experienced fellowship with God through Jesus Christ (cf. 2:3-11). As young men they had known some victory over their spiritual adversary, Satan (cf. 2:15-23). John mentioned these three experiences in their proper experiential sequence in the Christian life. "Him who has been from the beginning" (v. 13a) is Jesus Christ (John 1:1).

⁷²Westcott, p. 57.

⁷³Bruce, p. 58.

⁷⁴Smalley, pp. 69-70. Cf. Barker, p. 319.

⁷⁵Marshall, p. 138; Dodd, pp. 37-39; Westcott, p. 59; James M. Boice, *The Epistles of John*, pp. 72-73.

⁷⁶Smalley, p. 71; Marshall, pp. 136-37.

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 to assure his readers that he was aware of their growth and strength in the faith.

In the first series of three (vv. 12-13b) we have the minimal spiritual experience for each stage of spiritual life. In the second series of three (vv. 13c-14) we have the maximal spiritual experience for each stage. Little children spiritually all know that God has forgiven their sins, but they can advance to intimate knowledge of the Father. Both statements about fathers are identical because there can be no variation here. When one knows the eternal God the only thing one can do to advance is to continue to know Him better. John initially said the youths had defeated the evil one, but he said nothing of their condition after gaining the victory. They could be weak and vulnerable. However the second statement about them adds that they are strong and God's Word continues to abide in them. This is a more robust spiritual condition.

John strengthened the sense of progress in these verses. He used present tense verbs in the first set of sentences (vv. 12-13b) that emphasize ongoing action. Then he used aorist tense verbs in the second set (vv. 13c-14) that point to the end product, 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."⁷⁷

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

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."⁷⁸ However in the verses just considered (vv. 12-14) John did not say he

⁷⁷Bruce, p. 59. 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. See Smalley, p. 75; and E. Malatesta, *Interiority and Covenant. A Study of einai en and menein en in the First Letter of Saint John*, pp. 168-69.

⁷⁸See, 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; and Barker.

was writing to test his readers' salvation. He said he was writing to them because they were genuine believers. John presented tests of fellowship rather than tests of life.

"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 in the requisite obedience. Meanwhile, one must entertain the possibility that he is a suprious 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]!"⁷⁹

The enticements of the world 2:15-17

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

"As often in 1 John, a section of parenthesis follows a series of dogmatic statements."⁸⁰

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

| | | |
|-------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| V. 15 | Love of the world | 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 |

⁷⁹Zane 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, *Fellowship*; 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 Epistle of John," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*; 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. Hodges also advocated this view in "1 John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament, Absolutely Free!* and *The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God's Love*.

⁸⁰Smalley, p. 89.

2:15 The Greek negative prohibition *me* 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. 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).⁸¹

"If" assumes that some Christians will love the world (third class condition in Greek), which is true to reality. "The love of the Father" is probably the believers' love for the Father (objective genitive), not His love for us (subjective genitive). "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. The lust of the eyes is the desire to *have* something apart from the will of God. The pride of life is the desire to *be* something apart from the will of God. The first desire appeals mainly to the body, the second to the soul, 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 (egoism, idolizing power).

"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)."⁸²

"'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]

⁸¹Ibid., p. 87.

⁸²Westcott, p. 62.

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."⁸³

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).

"Morality is not the *grounds* for assurance, but the *fruit* of it."⁸⁴

| THE CHRISTIAN'S THREE-FOLD ENEMY | |
|---|--|
| <u>Problem</u> | <u>Solution</u> |
| The World 1 John 2:15-17 <i>Lust of the Flesh</i> <i>Lust of the Eyes</i> <i>Pride of Life</i> | Flee 1 Timothy 6:11; 2 Timothy 2:22 |
| The Flesh Romans 7:18-24 | Deny Romans 6:12-13; 8:13 |
| The Devil 1 Peter 5:8 | Resist 1 Peter 5:9 |

2:17 Another reason we should not pursue the desires of the world is that this system, along with its desires, is in the process of passing out of existence. Really 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 Pet.).

Notwithstanding, those who do God's will abide (remain, live) forever. Since all Christians will live forever (John 10:28), John was not saying we attain eternal life by our obedience. However, we abide (i.e., enjoy intimate relationship with God, experience our eternal life abundantly) now as well as after death when we obey God.

⁸³Barker, p. 322.

⁸⁴Hodges, *The Gospel . . .*, p. 49. Cf. Eph. 4:1; Col. 3:12-13.

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. Love for the world indicates lack of love for God. It results in consequences that are not what our loving heavenly Father desires for our welfare. It lasts only a short time. It precludes intimate fellowship with God.

4. Keeping the Faith 2:18-29

"Since 1:5 the author has been discussing the conditions for living as a Christian in the world. Starting from the leading statement of the good news that 'God is light' (1:5-7), John outlines four practical conditions whereby believers may practice and test their own spiritual commitment: by renouncing sin (1:8—2:2), by being obedient (2:3-11), by rejecting worldliness (2:12-17), and . . . by keeping the faith (2:18-29). . . . the four conditions described by the writer follow the pattern ABAB, where the generally negative appeals for renunciation and rejection (AA) are followed in each case by the more positive demands of obedience and faith (BB)."⁸⁵

John needed to alert his readers to special deceptions they would encounter to enable them to identify and 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 (vv. 18-19). First, he exposed their method. They lie and deny that Jesus is the Christ (vv. 20, 23).

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 content of verses 18-25, and verses 28-29 summarize the first major section of 1 John and anticipate the second major section respectively.⁸⁶

Signs of the end 2:18-19

2:18 John probably used a different Greek word translated "children" (*paidia*, also in v. 12) because 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 age before the Lord's return as the last hour or the last days. This is the final period before the Lord Himself breaks into history again. Then the first stage of the new age will be judgment (the Tribulation) and the second stage blessing. In the second stage Jesus

⁸⁵Smalley, p. 93.

⁸⁶Ibid.

Christ will rule directly over human beings first in the Millennium and then in the new heavens and the new earth.

The revelation concerning the appearance of the world ruler who will exalt himself against God had reached John's audience (Dan. 11:36-45; 2 Thess. 2:3-5; et al.). 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, not just people who profess to be the Messiah.⁸⁷

2:19 Those who were opposing Christ had gone out from "us." Probably "us" means the apostolic eyewitnesses as 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, claiming that their message was what the apostles endorsed (cf. Acts 15:1; 2 Cor. 11:5). "Us" may include the Christian community at large. 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."⁸⁸

". . . 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."⁸⁹

". . . 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]."⁹⁰

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.

⁸⁷Stott, pp. 104-5; Alfred Plummer, *The Epistles of S. John*, p. 107.

⁸⁸Smalley, p. 101.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 103.

⁹⁰Marshall, p. 152. Perseverance is normal but not inevitable.

Signs 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; 15:26; 16:13; Acts 10:38; 2 Cor. 1:21-22). John said it abode in his readers to teach them and that it was truthful (v. 27). John referred to the Holy Spirit as the anointing. This seems preferable to the idea that the Word of God is the anointing.⁹¹ 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 it 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.

2:22-23 The antichrists lie because they deny that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son and our Savior. This would have been the position of Jews who rejected Jesus as the Messiah and other false teachers whom John alluded to elsewhere. Among these were the Gnostics who believed that anything material was sinful and therefore Jesus could not have been God's Son.⁹² Docetists taught that Jesus was not truly a man and therefore not our Savior. Followers of Cerinthus believed that Jesus was not fully God but that God only came upon Him at His baptism and departed from Him before His crucifixion.⁹³ 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).

" . . . 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 . . ." ⁹⁴

" . . . we deny God by denying him his proper relationship with us." ⁹⁵

⁹¹This 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, n. 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.

⁹²See *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, 1957 ed., s.v. "Gnosticism," by John Rutherford; or for a summary of Gnostic teaching, see Dillow, pp. 158-61.

⁹³See Barker, p. 295; Brown, p. 112.

⁹⁴Smalley, pp. 110-11. Cf. Stott, p. 111.

⁹⁵Barker, p. 326.

Some readers have understood the first part of verse 23 to mean that it is impossible for a true Christian, one who "has the Father," ever to deny the Son. This interpretation seems inconsistent with other Scripture (2 Tim. 2:12) as well as human experience. Genuine Christians have denied Christ, to avoid martyrdom, for example. In the context John wrote about an abiding relationship with God, not just a saving relationship. So another 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 and 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 the verse 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. 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.

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. 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."⁹⁶

⁹⁶Hodges, *The Gospel . . .*, p. 55.

Signs 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 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 them 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; et al.).⁹⁷

The importance of keeping the faith 2:26-27

- 2:26 The "these things" in view probably refer to what John had just written (vv. 18-25).

"The author concludes his attack on the false teachers with a warning and a word of encouragement for his followers."⁹⁸

- 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 us 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. That is not what John said. He wanted his readers to remember that the Holy Spirit was *the* teacher, the real source of illumination. He did not rule 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 taught his readers. His point was that we should not look to other human beings as the ultimate source of our learning, an attitude the false teachers were encouraging. Of course the

⁹⁷This is the only time John used the word "promise" in all his writings.

⁹⁸Barker, p. 327.

Holy Spirit uses the Word of God to teach us (John 16:14-15). John was not saying we can discard our Bibles. Since immature believers need human teachers (Heb. 5:12), though they are not completely dependent on them, John's readers appear to have been 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).

The readers' anointing was real. The false teachers appear to have 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 need simply to abide in God and to respond to the Holy Spirit's ministry to us (cf. John 15:4-7).

John's original readers were doing well in the Christian life. All they needed to do was continue to grow. John began this section of his epistle (2:12-27) by affirming their healthful spiritual condition (2:12-14). He then warned them of the world's enticements (2:15-17) and the false teachers' error (2:18-23). Finally he reminded them of their duty to keep on abiding in God (2:24-27).

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 (2:18-29). In both cases the prophet's concern was that those under their care would be holy as God is holy (Lev. 11:44-45; 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).

Summary exhortation and introductory transition 2:28-29

2:28 John introduced the new idea of the believer's meeting Jesus Christ at death or the Rapture to motivate his readers to continue to cultivate intimate fellowship with God. The prospect of this meeting remained the basis for John's instruction through 4:19.

"If" might better be "whenever." The fact of the Lord's appearing is certain even though its time is indefinite.⁹⁹ John meant that Christ's return for His own might be while his readers were still alive.¹⁰⁰ "Confidence" (Gr.

⁹⁹See Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept from the Hour*, ch. 6: "The Imminency of the Coming of Christ for the Church," pp. 108-37.

¹⁰⁰Westcott, 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; George G. Findlay, *Fellowship in the Life Eternal*, pp. 232-33; Robert S. Candlish, *The First Epistle of John*, p. 213.

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

"This verse makes the transition from concern about false teachers to concern for the children of God."¹⁰¹

2:29 Because God is righteous every abiding child of God will demonstrate righteous behavior. Righteous action is a mark 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 abiding Christians by the righteous works they do. The facts that some unrighteous people behave righteously and some righteous people behave wickedly do not vitiate this point.

III. LIVING AS CHILDREN OF GOD 3:1—5:13

"In the second division of this document (3:1—5:13) John concentrates on the developing spiritual life of his followers, rather than sustaining his attack on the heretics, some of whom have already seceded from his church (2:19). The latter, however, are still in view (cf. 3:4, 7; 4:1-6).

"John's teaching in this new section follows the same literary pattern as before. After an initial statement about the character of God as Father (3:1-3 [cf. 1:5-7]), a number of conditions are set out for living as God's children. These balance almost exactly the conditions for living in the light announced in the earlier chapters. . . . The following table makes the parallels clear:

| <i>"Live in the light (1:5—2:29)</i> | <i>Live as children of God (3:1—5:13)</i> |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| (a) God is light | (a) God is Father |
| (b) 1st condition: renounce sin | (b) 1st condition: renounce sin |
| (c) 2nd condition: be obedient | (c) 2nd condition: be obedient |
| (d) 3rd condition: reject worldliness | (d) 3rd condition: reject worldliness |
| (f) 4th condition: keep the faith | (e) 4th condition: be loving |
| | (f) 5th condition: keep the faith." ¹⁰² |

Other passages that teach the imminency of Christ's return include 1 Cor. 1:9; 4:5; 15:51-52; 16:22; Phil. 3:20; 4:5; 1 Thess. 1:10; 2 Thess. 3:10-12; Titus 2:13; James 5:7-9; Rev. 3:11; 22:7, 12, 17, 20.

¹⁰¹Barker, p. 328. See also Smalley, p. 128.

¹⁰²Ibid., p. 139.

A. GOD AS FATHER 3:1-3

This section introduces John's recapitulation and expansion of his exposition of what is necessary for people to have fellowship with God. He changed his figure from God as light to God as the Father of the believer.

"John begins his description of God as Father (with its correlative: believers are his children) by combining the themes of regeneration (v 1) and parousia (v 2). These twin ideas look back to 2:28-29, where they are found in the reverse order."¹⁰³

3:1 The production of righteous behavior in abiding Christians is evidence of God's great love for us. 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*)."¹⁰⁴

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 (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."¹⁰⁵

". . . the world hates the children of God (3:13), just as it hated Jesus (Jn. 15:18f.), since they do 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."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³Ibid., p. 140.

¹⁰⁴Westcott, p. 96. 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).

¹⁰⁵Barker, p. 330.

¹⁰⁶Marshall, p. 171.

3:2 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 appears and we see Him, we shall experience full transformation (i.e., glorification). Evidently seeing Jesus Christ will fully transform us physically and spiritually (cf. 1 Cor. 13:12).

"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."¹⁰⁷

"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."¹⁰⁸

Note that John's references to the parousia in 2:28 and 3:2 frame his references to the new birth in 2:29 and 3:1.

3:3 In the meantime we anticipate seeing and knowing Jesus Christ fully, and that anticipation has a purifying effect on us now (cf. 2:1, 6, 29; 3:7, 16; 4:17; Matt. 5:8).¹⁰⁹ 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*).

B. CONDITIONS FOR LIVING AS GOD'S CHILDREN 3:4—5:13

Having stated the theme of this section of the epistle in 3:1-3 (cf. 1:5-7) John proceeded to develop his assertion that believers are the children of God through Jesus Christ.

"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."¹¹⁰

1. Renouncing sin reaffirmed 3:4-9

"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

¹⁰⁷Richard C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude*, p. 452.

¹⁰⁸Westcott, p. 97.

¹⁰⁹See Wayne A. Brindle, "Biblical Evidence for the Imminence of the Rapture," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158:630 (April-June 2001):149-50.

¹¹⁰Marshall, p. 175.

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."¹¹¹

3:4 Sin stands in opposition to purity. Furthermore sin is very serious. The use of the Greek word translated "lawlessness" (*anosmia*) carries a connotation of wickedness (cf. Matt. 7:23; 13:41; 24:2; 2 Thess. 2:7). It means rejection of law, flagrant opposition to God, rather than just breaking God's law. 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 sin, and there was no sin in Him. This is a strong assertion of Jesus' sinlessness (cf. 2:1; John 8:31-59; 10:30; 17:22; 1 Pet. 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)."¹¹²

"The dominant thought here is not that of the self-sacrifice of Christ, but of His utter hostility to sin in every shape."¹¹³

3:6 If abiding in God equals being a Christian, this verse appears to contradict what John wrote in 1:8 and 10. There he said that Christians sin (cf. 2a:1; 15, 29; 3:12, 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: "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 John said about the depravity of sinners, even Christian sinners (1:8)? I believe John was claiming that when a Christian walks 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

¹¹¹Smalley, p. 152.

¹¹²Ibid., p. 158.

¹¹³Westcott, p. 103.

Christ (*ho en auto menon*, 'the one who lives in him,' using the present tense) precludes the practice of sin . . ."114

There was no sin whatsoever in Jesus Christ (v. 5). He consistently abode in 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). Others have used it to teach that a Christian does not habitually sin, but this too is contrary to experience and the same Scripture. 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."¹¹⁵

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 *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."

¹¹⁴Smalley, pp. 158-59. Cf. John 15:5.

¹¹⁵Hodges, *The Gospel* . . . , pp. 58-59. See also Smalley, pp. 159-60.

This would imply that occasionally someone might come to God in another way. No orthodox translator would offer that as an acceptable translation 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."¹¹⁶

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.¹¹⁷ 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.

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 apostles said here. John's point was two-fold: conduct manifests spiritual relationship (cf. 2:29), and God hates sin (cf. v. 5).

"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)."¹¹⁸

3:9 Many English translations interpret the Greek present tense as saying no Christian habitually sins.¹¹⁹ However the Greek present tense does not always indicate habitual action.¹²⁰ Frequently it describes absolute action.¹²¹ Since earlier John wrote that the Christian does sin habitually

¹¹⁶Marshall, p. 187.

¹¹⁷Smalley, pp. 161-62, 164, 172.

¹¹⁸Ibid., p. 168.

¹¹⁹The 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."

¹²⁰Marshall, p. 180; Dodd, p. 79.

¹²¹The New King James Version takes the Greek present tense this way and renders the clause, "Whoever had been born of God does not sin."

(1:6-10; cf. 2:1) the idea that the Christian does not sin habitually seems inconsistent.¹²²

The reason one born of God does not sin is he has been born of God. John could say the Christian is sinless 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.¹²³

Again, if we were able to abide in Christ without interruption, we would never sin. The sinless nature of Christ controls the abiding Christian whereas the sinful human nature controls the non-abiding Christian.

"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."¹²⁴

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.¹²⁵

"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 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

¹²²See Robert N. Wilkin, "Do Born Again People Sin? 1 John 3:9," *Grace Evangelical Society News* 5:3 (March 1990):2-3.

¹²³Jesus 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.

¹²⁴Hodges, *The Gospel . . .*, pp. 60, 61.

¹²⁵See Harris, p. 221.

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)."¹²⁶

Note the chiasmic structure of verse 9.

Verses 6 and 9 also form an *inclusio*.¹²⁷

- A No one who abides in Him sins (6a)
- B Everyone who sins . . . (v. 6b)
 - A The one who acts righteously (v. 7)
 - B The one who commits sin (v. 8)
- A No one who is born of God sins (v. 9).

2. Obeying God reaffirmed 3:10-24

This second condition for living as children of God reemphasizes the importance of obedience to God's law, specifically the command to love one another.

The demand for obedience 3:10-11

3:10 The absence or presence of sin in the believer's life gives evidence of his or her relationship to God and Satan. It shows under whose authority we are living. John divided the world into two classes: those whose parentage is either divine or diabolical.

"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."¹²⁸

Christians can and do identify other Christians by their righteous behavior. This is not the same as saying 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

¹²⁶Dillow, pp. 168, 169, 172.

¹²⁷Smalley, p. 171.

¹²⁸Hodges, *The Gospel . . .*, p. 62.

their godly behavior. The sinless behavior produced and perceived is a manifestation of God's love (v. 1).

The absence of righteous behavior in a life indicates the absence of intimacy with God. 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 proceeded to discuss this trait more fully.

"The whole aim of the Gospel is the creation and strengthening of love.¹²⁹

- 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).

Disobedience and obedience contrasted 3:12-15

- 3:12 Cain's murder of Abel evidenced control by Satan rather than by God. Cain was jealous because of Abel's greater righteousness, and this motivated him to kill his brother (Gen. 4:2-7; cf. John 8:40, 42, 44). 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.¹³⁰
- 3:13 If we feel loving concern for one another, it should not surprise us if unrighteous people hate us for being more righteous than they are. 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 they are reacting 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."¹³¹

"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

¹²⁹Westcott, p. 109.

¹³⁰Dodd, p. 82.

¹³¹Hiebert, "An Expository . . .," 146:302.

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)."¹³²

- 3:14 Love for other Christians shows the presence of new life in us. "Death" and "life" are two vastly different spheres of 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 abiding 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 "Every one" includes Christians. Murder is the ultimate outward expression of hatred (cf. Matt. 5:21-22). The key to the apparently inconsistent statement that concludes this verse is the words "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. Obviously some believers have committed murder, but they are non-abiding believers.

The pattern of obedience 3:16-18

- 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, and we ought to lay ours down habitually 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

"Love means readiness to do anything for other people."¹³³

- 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 needs.
- 3:18 The evidence of genuine love is not verbal professions but vital performances, deeds rather than words (cf. 1 Cor. 13:1; James 2:15-16).

¹³²Barker, p. 335.

¹³³Marshall, p. 192.

"The major concern of this passage is to encourage obedient and active love from all those who claimed allegiance to the Johannine church."¹³⁴

The result of obedience 3:19-22

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. They should be a comfort to us when we feel guilty that we have not met many needs, a condition that prevails no matter how generous we may be. We can overcome feelings of false guilt by remembering that God knows our real motives. He does not judge on the basis of appearance as we often judge 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). We then have a smooth transition to verse 21.

"To be sure, the occasion can be generalized. What John says can be extended to any and every occasion when the believer is in doubt about his situation before God."¹³⁵

"We shall then still our heart in whatsoever it may condemn us, because we are in fellowship with God, and that fact assures us of His sovereign mercy."¹³⁶

3:21-22 True love for the brethren demonstrated in deeds of self-sacrifice enables the believer to face Jesus Christ unashamedly whenever He may appear (cf. 2:28). John stressed the importance of a clear conscience again (cf. 1:7; 2:2; Heb. 9:9, 14; 10:2, 22; 1 Tim. 1:19). Shamelessness can give us appropriate boldness to approach God's throne of grace in prayer even now (cf. John 8:28-29). We will receive our requests 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

¹³⁴Smalley, p. 199.

¹³⁵Marshall, p. 199.

¹³⁶Westcott, p. 117.

line with the will of God; and such a conformity of wills is brought about only as the believer lives in Christ."¹³⁷

"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."¹³⁸

The command to love 3:23-24

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 of His name when they prayed to His Father (John 14:12-15; 16:24). This is an added ground for confidence in prayer.

Believing 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."

3:24 Obedience results in mutual abiding, God in man and man in God. God "abides" in every obedient believer, but He indwells every believer (cf. John 15:4-5, 7; Rom. 8:9). The evidence that God's Spirit "abides" in us is our manifestation of faith (4:1-6) and love (4:7-16; cf. v. 23). This is the first explicit reference to the Holy Spirit in 1 John.

3. Rejecting worldliness reaffirmed 4:1-6

"The 'worldliness' in view here, as in 2:12-17, is primarily a wrong *attitude*: a determination to be anchored to a society which does not know God (cf. 3:1 . . .). But whereas in the earlier section John shows that worldly attitudes can be associated with material possessions and ambitions ('the things of the world' as such; cf. 2:15, and the reference to 'pride in one's life style' at v 16), here the writer contrasts God and the 'world' chiefly in terms of truth and error . . ."¹³⁹

"The battlefield is not so much the ecclesial community itself as the heart of the believer."¹⁴⁰

John showed that a Christian's righteous behavior identifies him or her as a Christian (2:29—3:10a) and that love for the brethren and boldness in prayer characterize this

¹³⁷Smalley, p. 205.

¹³⁸Ibid., p. 206.

¹³⁹Ibid., p. 215.

¹⁴⁰Malatesta, p. 283.

behavior (3:10b-24). Next he pointed out that this behavior is a manifestation of God who indwells the believer.

4:1-3 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. False spirits (utterances or persons inspired by a spirit opposed to Christ) result in false teaching. 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—a heresy false teachers were promoting among John's original readers—he has the spirit of 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.

"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."¹⁴¹

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 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. 5:9; cf. Gen. 3; Matt. 4).¹⁴²

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).

"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."¹⁴³

"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"¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹Westcott, p. 140.

¹⁴²"You are from God" is the center of a chiasm that embraces verses 2-6. Smalley, p. 216.

¹⁴³Barker, p. 341.

¹⁴⁴Marshall, p. 209, n. 18.

4:6 "We" probably refers to the apostolic eyewitnesses as elsewhere in this epistle, but it also includes the faithful. Those believers who "know" God intimately respond positively to the teaching of the apostles. By apostolic doctrine we know whether any teaching is truth or error, namely, having its source in the Holy Spirit or Satan. The way to distinguish truth from error is to compare it with what the Scriptures teach.

"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."¹⁴⁵

"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."¹⁴⁶

4. Practicing love 4:7—5:4

"By inserting this condition, John interrupts the symmetry which exists between the two halves of his letter . . .; for the idea of 'love' by itself is not given separate treatment in 1:5—2:29. However, the discussion of love at this point echoes the command to be obedient (by loving) considered at 2:3-11, and the parallel demand for obedient love which the writer sets out in 3:10-24. Indeed, 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."¹⁴⁷

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

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 (one "born of God") who

¹⁴⁵Barker, p. 341.

¹⁴⁶Marshall, p. 210.

¹⁴⁷Smalley, p. 235.

also "knows" God (i.e., has intimate fellowship with Him) loves (cf. 2:3-5).

"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."¹⁴⁸

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

4:8 Absence of love shows that a person does not have intimate fellowship with 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.¹⁴⁹

"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."¹⁵⁰

"'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."¹⁵¹

4:9 The proof of God's love for people 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).

4:10 This was not a response to man's love for God. God took the initiative in reaching out to us (v. 10). Jesus Christ became "an atoning sacrifice" (NIV) 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

¹⁴⁸Bruce, p. 107.

¹⁴⁹God is also spirit (John 4:24) and fire (Heb. 12:29).

¹⁵⁰Dodd, p. 110.

¹⁵¹Marshall, p. 212.

Christ, so He manifests His love among us now as we love one another (vv. 12-13).

4:12 No one has seen God in His pure essence without some kind of filter (cf. John 1:18).¹⁵² 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 in this manifestation of love.

"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."¹⁵³

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."¹⁵⁴

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") 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).

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 with the apostles that God sent Jesus Christ into the world. We can share the apostles' experience that John said was his goal in writing this epistle (1:1-4). We can see God both in the manifestation of His love and in God's life behind that love as we observe

¹⁵²Instances 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.). See *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. "Theophany," by Wick Broomall.

¹⁵³Stott, p. 164. Cf. Westcott, p. 152.

¹⁵⁴Bruce, p. 109.

Christians loving one another. This verse then is a high point in John's argument.¹⁵⁵

4:15 Confessing that Jesus is God's Son is not the only condition for abiding in God. It is one evidence that one is 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).

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 us," as in verse 9.

"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 16a) leads to mutual indwelling between God and the believer. Such a personal relationship is consequently expressed in and perpetuated by 'living in love' (v 16b). 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."¹⁵⁶

John's point in this section was that his readers had seen God in a sense similar to the sense in which 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. Consequently John's readers could bear witness to the truth as the apostles did, and they could enjoy the same intimate fellowship with God as the apostles did.

The practice of love 4:17-20

4:17 Our love becomes complete 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). 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 we become like Jesus Christ our Judge. Therefore to give love is to gain boldness (confidence).

Here John said 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

¹⁵⁵This is the only place in John's epistles where he used the term "savior." It also appears only once in his Gospel (4:42).

¹⁵⁶Smalley, p. 256.

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 have confidence in spite of the world's hostility.¹⁵⁷ Abiding in God gave Jesus confidence, and it gives us confidence too.

4:18 When we love others we have no basis for fear as we anticipate the judgment seat of Christ. 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 meeting his Judge. This fear is a punishment. His guilty conscience punishes him. A Christian who loves others may have other fears, but he need not fear the judgment seat of Christ. The fact that he loves others demonstrates that his relationship with God is essentially what it should be.

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.

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. 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 . . ." ¹⁵⁸

Confidence is one of the great consequences of having intimate fellowship with God. We can have confidence now and confidence to meet Jesus Christ when He returns for us or when we die (2:28). Moreover we can have confidence in prayer (3:21-22) and confidence when we stand before His judgment seat to give account of our stewardship (4:17-19).

¹⁵⁷Barker, p. 346.

¹⁵⁸Smalley, p. 261. Cf. Dodd, pp. 122-23.

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. Love for the unseen God will find expression in 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.

The command to love 4:21—5:4

4:21 Furthermore, God commanded us to love both Himself and our brothers, not just Himself (2:3; 3:23-24; 5:3). Here is another false claim (cf. 1:6, 8, 10; 2:4, 6, 9, 22; 5:10).

"Much verbal expression of devotion for the person of Christ can co-exist with remarkably un-Christian attitudes toward the people of Christ . . ." ¹⁵⁹

"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." ¹⁶⁰

5:1 The first part of this verse is one of the clearest statements in Scripture of what a person has to believe to be saved. 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).

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.

5:2 We must love other Christians to be obedient to God's commandments. Genuine love for God will result in obedience to His commandments. This love expresses itself in action, not just emotion. We love other Christians best when we obey God.

5:3 The fundamental proof of love for 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.

¹⁵⁹Bruce, p. 115.

¹⁶⁰Marshall, p. 226.

Love for God and God's children is essentially obedience to God's commands. It is not so much how we feel about God and other believers but how we choose to relate to them that is crucial.

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).

5:4 Every Christian has overcome the world by his or her initial faith in Jesus Christ. To continue to overcome and obey God all we need to do is continue to exercise faith in God (cf. Rom. 8:27; 1 Cor. 15:57).

5. Keeping the faith reaffirmed 5:5-13

Here John set out his fifth and final condition for living as children of God (cf. 2:18-29).

"We *can* believe, and therefore we *should* maintain the faith."¹⁶¹

In the previous section (4:7—5:4) John wove together the themes of faith and obedient love. In this one he stressed faith and the witness which supports faith. Corollary ideas are victory and life.

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. Furthermore no one can overcome the world unless he or she believes that Jesus is the Son of God. That trust is the key to any and all overcoming. Obviously every believer will overcome the world ultimately when we go to heaven, but that thought is foreign to the context here.

5:6-7 This "water" probably refers to John the Baptist's baptism of Jesus in water. The "blood" probably refers to His death by crucifixion.

"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."¹⁶²

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.¹⁶³ John repeated this teaching in this verse. He considered this teaching untrue because it did not come from the Holy Spirit (v. 7) who is truth (cf. John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13).

¹⁶¹Smalley, p. 274.

¹⁶²Ibid., p. 278.

¹⁶³E.g., Cerinthus and other Gnostics.

- 5:8 Really there are three witnesses to the truth. These witnesses are the Holy Spirit teaching through the apostles and prophets, the water of Jesus' baptism, and the blood of His crucifixion. John personified the latter two in this verse. The testimony of eyewitnesses and prophets as well as that of the historical events affirmed the divine and human character of Jesus Christ.
- 5:9 God gave His witness concerning His Son through the prophets, at Jesus' baptism (Matt. 3:7; John 1:32-33, 34), and at His crucifixion (John 19:35-37). All three witnesses came from God ultimately.
- 5:10 Having spoken of the *character* of the divine witness to Jesus (vv. 6-9) John moved to discuss the *results* of that witness (vv. 10-12). The witness is the truth about Jesus Christ that the indwelling Holy Spirit bears. This may be the objective witness of Scripture, or it may be a subjective witness in the believer's heart. Probably the Spirit witnesses in both ways. If someone does not believe this 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."¹⁶⁴

- 5:11-12 This is the content of God's testimony. Eternal life is inseparable from the person of Jesus Christ.

"'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."¹⁶⁵

Some of the false teachers seem to have tried to separate them (cf. 2:25-26). Jesus Christ and eternal life are one gift from God.

- 5:13 The phrase "these things" evidently refers to what John had just written about God's witness (vv. 9-12) rather than to his whole epistle. The "these things" in 2:1 likewise refer to what immediately precedes in 1:5-10, and

¹⁶⁴Barker, p. 352.

¹⁶⁵Smalley, p. 287.

the "these things" in 2:26 refer to what immediately precedes in 2:18-25.¹⁶⁶ John stated the purpose of the whole epistle in 1:3-4.¹⁶⁷

"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."¹⁶⁸

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 15:12). It rests on God's Word, not on man's works.

John MacArthur claimed to 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.¹⁶⁹ However the following quotation from him 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 prue (3:3)."¹⁷⁰

IV. CONCLUSION: CHRISTIAN CONFIDENCE 5:14-21

John concluded this epistle by discussing the confidence that a Christian can have who walks in the light as a child of God.

A. CONFIDENCE IN ACTION: PRAYER 5:14-17

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

"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 . . ."¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁶See Robert N. Wilkin, "'Assurance: That You May Know' (1 John 5:11-13a)," *Grace Evangelical Society News* 5:12 (December 1990):2, 4.

¹⁶⁷Westcott, p. 188.

¹⁶⁸Hodges, *The Gospel* . . . , p. 51. Cf. Wilkin, "Knowing God . . .," p. 3.

¹⁶⁹John MacArthur, *Faith Works*, pp. 162-66.

¹⁷⁰*Ibid.*, p. 171. The emphasis is his.

¹⁷¹Smalley, p. 295. Cf. Law, p. 301.

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. 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.¹⁷² We know what the will of God is through Scripture.

"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."¹⁷³

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

5:16 John explained that prayer should extend to the needs of others. 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 by inserting the word "premature" before each instance of the word "death." Some sins bring God's swift judgment and result in the physical premature 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).

Under the Old Covenant sinners who repudiated that covenant died 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 judgment with no possibility of repentance (Heb. 6:6; 26-27). Repudiation of the New Covenant

¹⁷²See Thomas L. Constable, "What Prayer Will and Will Not Change," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, pp. 99-113; idem, *Talking to God: What the Bible Teaches about Prayer*, p. 170.

¹⁷³Marshall, p. 244.

involves rejecting Jesus Christ. That may 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."¹⁷⁴

In the case of sin leading to premature 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. We may 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.¹⁷⁵

". . . 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."¹⁷⁶

Many Christians have failed to realize that sinning always leads to dying even among Christians (Rom. 6:23). While it is true that no Christian will ever experience spiritual death (eternal separation from God), we do normally experience the physical consequences of our sinning. The fact that we all die physically is the proof of this. Of course, 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 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.¹⁷⁷ 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)

¹⁷⁴Ibid., p. 249. See also Westcott, pp. 209-14.

¹⁷⁵See 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.

¹⁷⁶Smalley, p. 299.

¹⁷⁷E.g., Stott, pp. 186-91.

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."¹⁷⁸

5:17 Because some sin does not lead to premature death we should pray for our brethren when they sin (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.

We should demonstrate concern about the obedience of others as well as our own obedience. When we become concerned about our obedience we will become concerned about the obedience of our brethren. God gives us eternal life, but we can give physical life to others in some situations as we ask God in prayer to be merciful to them.

B. CERTAINTY OF KNOWLEDGE: ASSURANCE 5:18-20

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.

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. Furthermore because the new man in Christ possesses the sinless nature of the indwelling Christ, John could say that Christ keeps him from sin (cf. John 17:12; Rev. 3:10).¹⁷⁹ In addition, Satan cannot touch him. Evidently John restated this fundamental truth because people always behave in harmony with what they believe themselves to be. Our behavior as Christians will be more holy when we view ourselves as children of God rather than as children of the devil.

5:19 Moreover, we are distinct from the world system that Satan controls 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. Consequently we can come to

¹⁷⁸Marshall, pp. 249-50.

¹⁷⁹Another view is that "he who is born of God" refers to the believer who keeps "himself" from sin. See Marshall, p. 252, n. 37, for further discussion of the problem.

know God intimately and can abide in God and in His Son, Jesus Christ, who is the true God and eternal life (cf. John 14:6).¹⁸⁰

"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."¹⁸¹

C. A FINAL WARNING: IDOLATRY 5:21

John closed with a final admonition. Departure from the true God and His teaching is idolatry. As contradicting God is really calling Him a liar (1:10), so departing from God is really idolatry. Departing from God includes leaving apostolic teaching and practice, 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."¹⁸²

This verse is a New Testament restatement for Christians of the first commandment God gave to the Israelites (Exod. 20:3; Deut. 5:7).

¹⁸⁰Cf. 1:3, the only other site of the full title "His Son Jesus Christ" in the epistle. Thus this title "bookends" the epistle in an *inclusio*.

¹⁸¹Harris, p. 232.

¹⁸²Barker, p. 357.

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