

New Testament Studies

Letters of John

(RVS Notes)

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General Introduction—

Author and recipients—Unlike Paul’s epistles, which abound with references to known people, places, and events, the letters of John lack identifiable historical markers. Tradition, uncontested until modern times, attributed these letters to John the apostle, recognized Ephesus as their place of publication, and identified the churches in Asia Minor or individuals in those churches as the recipients. Some have noted a zoom-in effect in the recipients of John’s three letters. 1 John could be addressed to any church. Indeed, it was relevant to any number of churches. 2 John was written to a particular church. 3 John was written to a particular church leader.

1 John plainly states that the author is an eyewitness to the life of the Lord Jesus (1:1-3; 4:14). The tone of the letter rings with apostolic authority. There is nothing tentative or apologetic about the way the author writes. His statements and commands are dogmatic (1:5; 2:8, 23; 3:6, 9; 4:8; 5:12). He does not hesitate to call people liars (2:4, 22), deceivers (1:8; 2:26), and antichrists (2:18-19, 22; 4:2-3). He supplies definite tests (truth, love, obedience) by which everyone can be sorted into one of two categories.

The style and vocabulary of the letters are like that of John’s gospel and most scholars acknowledge that the same person probably wrote these books. The author of each had the same love of opposites set in stark contrast to each other, light and darkness, life and death, love and hate, truth and falsehood. People belong to one or the other of the two categories, with no fudge factor or third alternative offered. They are children of God or children of the devil, know God or do not know him, have life or do not have life. Both are written with the same simple construction, the same Hebrew love of parallelism.

Critics have noted minor stylistic differences and purported to see different theological outlooks in the two. Those points are weak. Stylistic differences can be easily explained by noting the differences in an epistle and a gospel. As to alleged differences in outlook, one needs only point out the different situations addressed.

Some reject the common authorship of the Gospel and the letters and believe that the epistles were written by John the elder or presbyter as distinguished from John the apostle. The only basis for such a distinction is the ambiguous statement of Papias, a second century Christian leader, as quoted by Eusebius, a fourth century church historian: “If anyone came who had followed the presbyters, I was accustomed to inquire about the sayings of the presbyters, what Andrew or what Peter had said, or Philip, or Thomas or Jacob or John or Matthew or any other of the Lord’s disciples, and what Aristion and the presbyter John, the disciple of the Lord, say.”

The statement quoted above certainly allows the possibility that there were two disciples named John. However, his statement does not establish that the presbyter John, whom he identifies as the disciple of the Lord, is different from John the apostle. We have no historical evidence connecting the writings of either the gospel or the epistles to any John other than the son of Zebedee.

Destination, milieu, and date—Two lines of tradition support Asia Minor as the destination of John’s letters:

- Irenaeus’ statement that John wrote the letter(s) while living at Ephesus in Asia;
- The earliest known references to the letter(s) are by church leaders in Asia Minor.

The churches in Asia Minor were confronted by false teaching which arose within the churches

themselves (1 Jn. 2:19), promoted by teachers who were deliberately trying to lead the faithful astray (1 Jn. 2:26; 3:7). Specifically, these teachers denied that Jesus was the Christ (1 Jn. 2:22) and that Christ came in the flesh (1 Jn. 4:2-3; 2 Jn 7). The philosophical background of these teachers may have been a syncretistic blend of very early forms of Gnosticism, Docetism, and Adoptionism.

Gnosticism as it developed in the second century and beyond was based on two central principles: (1) the impurity of matter and (2) the supremacy of knowledge. It taught that matter was inherently evil and spirit inherently good and immaterial. The Gnostics despised the material world and particularly the body, which they saw as the tomb of the human spirit. That spirit was the seed of God, and the goal of life was to liberate the divine seed from the clutches of the body. This was achieved through enlightenment or knowledge (in Greek *gnosis*), hence the term Gnosticism. This enlightenment came by imparting esoteric knowledge or secret initiation ceremonies or rites known only to the Gnostics. The spiritually initiated ones were *pneumatikoi* (the spirit ones), who looked down on the *psuchikoi* (the soul ones), doomed to mere animate life on earth and who would never know what real religion was. Since matter did not matter, the secret knowledge created a spiritual elite who were above the normal distinctions of right and wrong. The better Gnostic systems combined these notions with asceticism, but other Gnostics and their precursors treated morality as a matter of indifference (if matter does not matter, then enjoy your matter!) leading to examples of deplorable conduct and complete disregard for Christian ethics.

Another variation of Gnostic ideas of the impurity of matter was Docetism. This word comes from the Greek word *dokeo*, meaning to seem or to appear. These people believed that Christ only seemed to have a human body. The result of their teaching was the denial of the Incarnation.

Tradition tells us that a man named Cerinthus, an early Gnostic resident of Ephesus, was a contemporary and an opponent of the apostle John. Cerinthus thought that Jesus was not born of a virgin but was the natural son of Joseph and Mary. After Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, the divine Christ descended on the man Jesus, giving him power to proclaim the unknown Father, perform miracles, and to conduct his public ministry. The divine Christ departed from the human Jesus before his death, always remaining impassable, a quality Gnostics presupposed to be true of all spiritual beings. In short, the essence of the Cerinthus' error was the severance of the man Jesus from the divine Christ. This was an early version of adoptionism, which has flared up in church history from time to time.

These three influences, early versions of Gnosticism, Docetism, and Adoptionism, combined to create an atmosphere where the Incarnation and Messiahship of Jesus was denied, a loveless arrogance was fostered by a spiritual elite, who alone had come to know "the depths", and where ethical conduct was treated as a matter of indifference or even of prideful defiance. In rebuttal, John emphasizes holding on to the truth, loving the brethren, and obeying the commandments of God.

Traditional scholars vary in their opinions as to the date of composition of these letters. A date prior to 70, perhaps as early as 60 to 65, has been suggested. Most think the epistles were written later in the first century, prior to Domitian's persecution of the Christians in the mid-90s. The latter date seems probable given the subtlety of the opposition to the truth.

1 John—Knowing You Have Eternal Life

Introduction—Many Christians wrestle with assurance of their salvation. They believe God’s Word, have trusted Christ, and seek to follow Him. However, the grind of daily living, the knowledge of their propensity to sin, the realization of the depths of their self-life, the actuality of repeated spiritual failure, and missed opportunities too numerous to remember mount up and tempt them to wonder if God can possibly work with them. John writes this letter that his readers might know that they have eternal life, and that this confidence might not be presumptuous but properly based on the finished work of Christ and expressed in a life of devotion and service.

The controlling theme of this letter is fellowship with God (1:3) and the certainty of that fellowship (5:11-13). John focuses his writing on tests by which a person can know that they are in fellowship with God and walking with Him: (1) adherence to the truth (2:18-27; 4:1-6; 5:1-5); (2) love for the brethren (2:7-17; 3:11-24; 4:7-21); and (3) obedience to God’s commands (2:3-6; 2:28-3:10; 5:1-5). He draws these tests from the character of God. God is light (1:5), so walk in the light of the truth. God is righteous (2:29), so obey his commands. God is love (4:8), so love his family. These tests specifically contradict the syncretistic teaching current in John’s day, which denied the incarnation, arrogantly presumed a spiritual superiority based on esoteric knowledge, and regarded Christian ethics as unnecessary baggage.

Author and recipients—See separate introduction to John’s Letters.

Guiding concepts:

Tests of fellowship—Discerning true spirituality is not a laborious exercise for John. Holding to the truth, obeying God’s commands, and loving the brethren are repeatedly stressed.

Person of Christ—The main attack of the false teachers was on the person of Christ. John has much to say about our Lord:

- He was from the beginning, the Eternal one (1:1, 2, 14).
- He is the unique Son of God (4:15; 5:5).
- He is the Christ, the long-expected Messiah (2:22; 5:1).
- He is truly and fully human (1:1-3; 4:2-3).
- He came to deliver us from our sin problem, being our Advocate (2:1) and our atoning sacrifice (2:2; 4:10).
- In Him people have life (4:9; 5:11-12). He is the Savior of the world (4:14).

Holy Spirit—The function of the Holy Spirit is stressed in this letter. He makes us conscious of God’s abiding presence (3:24; 4:13). His anointing enables us to know the truth (2:20, 27). He enables us to acknowledge the truth of Christ’s claims (4:2) and bears witness to the authenticity of the Lord’s life and message (5:6, 8).

World—The world system is characterized by sensuality, materialism, and egotism (2:15-17). Those of the world do not know or sympathetically recognize us because they did not know or recognize Christ (3:1). They hate us just as they hated Him (3:13). The world system is the pawn of the evil one (5:19); it hears and follows him and his false teachers (4:1-3). The spirit of antichrist is now in the world (4:3). However, Christians have overcome the world by faith in Christ (5:4, 5) and must be vigilant to guard our affections from seduction by the world’s charms (2:15-17). The world is passing away and a new

order is inaugurated by Jesus Christ, who is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world (2:2) and as the Savior of the world (4:14).

***Summary Outline:* 1 John—Knowing That You Have Eternal Life**

- I. Word of Life: Source and Basis of Fellowship (1:1-4)
- II. Light's Implications for Christian Living: Purification from Sin (1:5-2:2)
- III. Tests of Fellowship in Three Cycles (2:3-5:5)
 - A. Tests of fellowship: First cycle (2:3-27)
 - Obedience to commands as indicative of knowing God (2:3-6)
 - Love for the brethren as indicative of those in the light (2:7-17)
 - Knowing and remaining in the truth as indicative of fellowship with God (2:18-27)
 - B. Tests of fellowship: Second cycle (2:28-4:6)
 - Obedience and confidence: Continuing in righteousness (2:28-3:10)
 - Love for one another as indicative of belonging to the faith (3:11-24)
 - Truth and error: Discerning the spirits (4:1-6)
 - C. Composite tests of fellowship: Love as focal (4:7-5:5)
 - First composite test: Love for the brethren as sourced in and reflective of God's love (4:7-21)
 - Second composite test: Belief, obedience, and love (5:1-5)
- IV. Threefold Witness that Results in Assurance (5:6-15)
 - A. Threefold witness: Water, blood, and Spirit (5:6-8)
 - B. Greater testimony of God (5:9-12)
 - C. Resultant assurance of the believer (5:13-15)
- V. Concluding Affirmations and Exhortations (5:16-21)

1 John—Knowing You Have Eternal Life

I. Word of Life: Source and Basis of Fellowship (1:1-4)—John emphasizes the source and basis of fellowship with God and the mediatorial role of the apostolic witness. John proclaimed the message from first-hand experience (1:2) for he saw. Heard, and touched the Lord Jesus, God in the flesh. This initial segment of the text notes three things about the Lord Jesus: he was from the beginning, the pre-existent one (1:1); in him the eternal God entered the world as the incarnate Son (1:2); and through him the word of life came to people (1:3).

We have fellowship (*koinonia* = a sharing in common) with God himself and with our fellow believers. This deep inner sharing of life between Father and Son has been extended to all those who come to know, love, and trust the Lord Jesus. This is the life, eternal life, which John wants his fellow believers to know that they have (5:13-15).

1:2-3—The emphasis on Christ's material manifestation to human ears, eyes, and hands is directed primarily against the people troubling the church. They may have been Docetics, so spiritually minded that they insisted that the Lord Jesus never had a physical body but was only a phantom in human form. This emphasis on the historical, material manifestation of God in the flesh is still needed today, for the naturalistic scientist trained in the empirical method, for the radical critic who regards the Bible to be a collection of myths, and for the mystic who is so preoccupied with his or her religious experience as to neglect God's objective revelation.

1:3-4—One of the purposes of this epistle is fellowship with one another based on our fellowship with the Father and the Son. The word fellowship (*koinonia*) appears here and in 1:6 and means a sharing in common. Hellenistic literature used this word to describe partners in business, joint owners of property, or shareholders in a common enterprise. Joy is found in this fellowship created by the proclamation of the gospel as energized by the Spirit. The immediate purpose of the proclamation is the establishment of fellowship; the ultimate purpose is the completion of our joy. The divine order is proclamation, fellowship, joy. People who come to church looking for fellowship often end up leaving. People who come hungry for the Word and its proclamation and zealous for the glory of God, find deep fellowship and affection in the gospel.

II. Light's Implications for Christian Living: Purification from Sin (1:5-2:2)

John moves from abstract ideas of fellowship to specific behavior by relating walking in the light to keeping the commandments. The three "if we claim (say)" sentences of 1:6-10 make it clear that fellowship with God does not obviate sin in the believer. The claims of those who falsely boasted of their knowledge of and fellowship with God were threefold:

- Moral behavior was a matter of indifference in one's relationship with God (1:6);
- Immoral conduct is not sin for one who knows God (1:8); and
- Knowledge of God removes sin as a possibility in the life of the believer.

Contrary to these claims, John points to threefold evidence of walking in the light:

- Fellowship with one another with the cleansing by the blood of Christ (1:7);
- Confession of sin which yields forgiveness and cleansing (1:9); and
- Trusting that if we do sin, we have the Lord Jesus as an advocate and sacrifice for our sin (2:1-2).

In this confession and forgiveness, there needs to be balance. When we sin, we need to come, confess, and be forgiven by the rich mercy of God. However, forgiven sinners must remember who they are in

Christ and realize that ready forgiveness is not a reason to sin and live beneath our privileges and our new identity in the Lord Jesus.

1:5—The phrase “God is light” is absolute; light is his very character. Light appears here as both an intellectual and ethical idea, speaking to us of the nature of God. He is splendor and glory itself, self-revealing, pure, and holy. It is he who provides guidance; his very presence has a revealing and exposing quality to it. Those who claim to have fellowship with the light must reflect that claim in their behavior.

1:6-2:2—Note the symmetry of these verses. John introduces false teaching with the words “if we say.” Next, he contradicts it with the unequivocal “we lie” or a similar expression. Finally, he makes a positive and truthful statement relating to the error he is refuting. The three errors he treats relate to sin in our conduct, sin’s origins in our nature, and sin’s consequence in our relationship with God. These highlight the misconceptions of people who want fellowship with God on easy terms.

1:9—Walking in the light is demonstrated by confessing and abandoning sin, not by denying it. Confess (*homologomen*) means to “say the same thing.” To confess sin is to say the same thing about it that God says. In response to this confession, God is faithful and just to forgive us. He is faithful to forgive because he has promised to do so. He is just in forgiving because his Son died for our sins. The justice of God also points to his new covenant (Heb. 8) and to the attributes of God from which forgiveness flows. Forgiveness (*aphiemi*) has its roots in the idea of cancellation of debts or the dismissal of charges.

2:1—One of John’s purposes in writing is that the believers will not sin. However, acts of sin are entirely possible in the lives of believers. When or if we do sin, we have an advocate (*parakletos*) with the Father. *Parakletos* is someone called alongside for a reason; one who lends his presence to his friends. This advocacy is by Jesus Christ the righteous, a composite expression indicating his humanity (Jesus), his messianic office (Christ), and his righteous character. Only through a righteous Savior can we be cleansed from all unrighteousness (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pt. 3:18).

2:2—The advocate does not maintain our innocence but confesses our guilt and enters his plea to the Father on our behalf based on his own atoning sacrifice (*hilasmos*). This noun only occurs twice in the New Testament and both instances are in 1 John (2:2; 4:10). The verb *hilaskesthai* occurs in Luke 18:13 and Hebrews 2:17 while the noun, *hilasterion* occurs in Hebrews 9:5, translated “mercy seat” and in Romans 3:25 either in the same sense or as signifying a means of propitiation. The normal use of the verb *hilaskomai* carries the idea of an offering made by a guilty person to placate or appease the person offended. The English word “propitiate” is used to render this meaning. It alludes to the sacrifices offered for atonement in the Old Testament.

This atoning sacrifice is for the sins of the entire world. This verse is debated among those addressing the extent of the atonement of the Lord Jesus.

III. Tests of Fellowship in Three Cycles (2:3-5:5)—John’s threefold test of fellowship (holding to the truth about the Lord Jesus, obeying the commandments of God, and loving the brethren) reflects the threefold error of the opponents. First, they denied that Jesus was the Christ (2:22) or, more specifically, that he was God in the flesh (4:2-3). John stresses that the message of truth has an incarnational focus. Second, the opponents’ denial of sin (1:6, 8, 10) led to an antinomian stance. Living right was not important for the enlightened ones. John emphasizes the ethical demands of faith. Believers are to keep the commandments. Finally, the opponents may have emphasized a secret knowledge for the spiritual elite which bred an unloving arrogance that looked down on the uninitiated. John tells the believers that they know the truth and that the truth is necessarily relational. The

members of God's family must reflect his love.

A. Tests of fellowship: First cycle (2:3-27)

1. Obedience to commandments as indicative of knowing God (2:3-6)—The previous section (1:5-2:2) indicated that there were those who either were denying that sin existed in one who had fellowship with God or that if sin did exist in believers, it did not matter. This led to an antinomian spirit that denied that Christians needed to obey the commandments. John's first application of his threefold test begins with obedience. Walking as Jesus walked provides an observable model for knowing God, allowing Christians to assure his or her own heart of being in the truth.

These verses make two assertions: those who know God, obey him; and those who live in the Lord Jesus, must live as he did. Each of these statements begin with "we know" followed by an application in the singular "the man who says" and "whoever claims" in 2:4, 6. The first of these illustrates a spurious claim, while the second reveals an obligation which alone establishes a claim to be true.

What about Paul's extended arguments in Galatians and Romans and elsewhere about being freed from the burden of the law? In those passages the point is that the law showed us that we could not keep the law and thus pointed us to our need for forgiveness and mercy in Christ. In this text, the commandments serve as a kind of advance signpost, a sketch of what a genuine, fruitful human life should look like.

2. Love for others as a sign of living in the light (2:7-17)—The essential command is to love one another. Believers are to love the brethren who are from God rather than the world system which is not from God. The juxtaposition of 2:9-11 and 2:15-17 implies that lovelessness is related to worldliness.

2:7-11—These verses enjoin love for the brethren, John gives three reasons Christians should love one another, progressively unfolded in his three cycles:

- God has commanded us to love (2:7-11);
- We have been born of God and God's love now lives in us (3:11-24);
- God first revealed his love to us (4:7-21).

Our love is rooted in God's unwavering love.

2:7-8—Christian love is the substance of both old and new commandments. The command for people to love God and each other is not a new thing. Jesus himself combined the commandment to love God with all your heart, mind, and soul (Deut. 6:5) with the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18). He said that these two commands summarized all the Law and the Prophets (Mk. 12:28-34). While the idea of brotherly love is not new, Jesus did invest it with a richer and deeper meaning. He gave it a new emphasis by insisting that the teaching of the Law and the Prophets hung on it. He brought an entirely new quality to it by pointing to a new standard of love—the disciple was to love as Jesus himself loved (Jn. 13:34; 15:12, 17). The commandment took on a new extant in that the neighbor we must love is anyone who needs our compassion and help, irrespective of race or rank. Finally, the commandment is new because it belongs to a new age ushered in by the shining of the true light.

2:12-14—These verses clarify the purpose of the tests. Their function is not to threaten believers but to assure them while undermining the false confidence of the opponents. John speaks to children, young men, and fathers in this segment. He is not speaking of chronological age here, but of spiritual development. Little children are those newborns in Christ. The young men are more developed Christians, strong and victorious in spiritual warfare. The fathers possess the depth and the stability of

ripe Christian experience.

Newborn Christians rejoice in the forgiveness of their sins through Christ and in the fellowship they now have with God. Little children know God as Father, the fathers know him who is from the beginning. This is a reference to the eternal God who does not change. Time's winged chariot hurries on, but in all generations, mature believers find a refuge in him who is from everlasting to everlasting (see Ps. 90:1-2). The young men gain their victory through Christ's death and follow the Lord in establishing his reign over the world and the devil. This victory does not remove them from the heat and peril of the battle but assures the Lord's faithful ones that they will overcome the evil one.

2:15-17—These verses proscribe loving the world. The segment bars rivals for the believer's heart. The word world (*kosmos*) appears six times in this passage. *Kosmos* is used in a variety of ways in the New Testament:

- Of the physical earth;
- Of the human race;
- Of temporal possessions (see Mt. 16:26);
- Of a temporal mode of life (see 1 Cor. 7:31);
- Of human affairs that are opposed to God and alienated from him and from his purposes.

The last meaning is John's meaning here. John sees the world as human society organized on wrong principles, characterized by base desires, false values, and egotism. He sees the world as an evil system under Satan's control (see 5:19; Jn. 12:31; 14:30).

The love described here is the type of love that entices the allegiance of the heart by evil desire or base appetite. At issue here is the world's ability to seduce believers and to draw them away from the love of the Father by bogus and idolatrous substitutes. John gives two reasons for his command not to love the world:

- The incompatibility of love for the world and love for the Father (2:15-16);
- The transience of the world contrasted with the eternity promised to the one who does the will of the Father (2:17).

2:15—Some have puzzled over the command not to love the world. How can it be reconciled with God's love for the world as stated in John 3:16 and manifested elsewhere in the Scripture? The command not to love the world does not refer to the physical stuff of creation but to the world system in rebellion against God; the world as a combination of things that draw us away from pleasing the Father.

2:16—Love for the world is described in a triad that includes human cravings, visual desires, and the pride of life. The cravings of sinful people speak of the desire of our fallen nature in all its sensuality (see Phil. 3:18-19; 2 Pt. 2:18-19). The lust of the eyes is being drawn to appearances without considering true worth. The tendency to lust after what one sees. It is the spirit that sees nothing without wishing to acquire it, and upon acquiring it, flaunt it.

2:17—The term the boastful pride (*alazoneia*) of life only occurs here and in James 4:16. It describes a pretentious hypocrite who glories in himself or his possessions. The *alazon* was a braggart, constantly elevating himself without any basis for doing so.

3. Knowing and remaining in truth as indicative of fellowship with God (2:18-27)—John confronts the opponents by labeling them as antichrists (2:18-19). They exhibit the spirit of antichrist by departing from the community, by denying that the Lord Jesus was God in the flesh, and by attempting to deceive the believers and shipwreck their faith. John exposes their methods in lying and

denying that Jesus is the Christ (2:20-23). True believers should hold to the teaching, confident that their anointing enables them to understand the truth. They were to hold to the objective safeguard of the Word of God and the subjective safeguard of the Holy Spirit's illumining ministry. Furthermore, all Christians have received the Word of God and God's Spirit and therefore, there is no room for spiritual cliques claiming superior illumination (2:20, 27).

2:18-19—The term antichrist (*antichristos*) occurs only in John's epistles (2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 Jn. 7). It describes:

- A spirit in the world that opposes or denies the Lord Jesus Christ;
- False teachers who embody this spirit;
- A person who will head up the final world rebellion against the Lord Jesus Christ (see 2 Thess. 2:1-12).

Thus, the idea of antichrist encompasses both opposition to the Lord Jesus and a lying pretender posing as a substitute for the Lord Jesus Christ.

2:20—Some Gnostic sects boasted of a special sacrament of anointing granting them special insight into the "deep truths." John insists that all true believers have an anointing from God, the indwelling Spirit who is our teacher (see 2:27; Jn. 14:26; 16:13). The reference to anointing reminds us of the Old Testament practice of pouring oil on the head of a person being set apart for service. Thus, priests (Ex. 28:41), kings (1 Sam. 15:1; 1 Ki. 19:16), and prophets (1 Ki. 19:16) were anointed. Christians are anointed, not with literal oil, but by the Spirit of God, an anointing that sets us apart for a ministry as one of the Lord's believer-priests (see 1 Pt. 2:5-9).

2:22-23—To deny that Jesus is the Christ is the master lie, the lie par excellence, the lie of all lies. The opponents' theology is not just defective, it is diabolical. The denial is that Christ came in the flesh (see 4:2-3; 2 Jn. 7); the error involved the person of Christ himself.

Some commentators think that the error was Cerinthianism, the belief that after Jesus' baptism, the Christ descended on him and empowered his life before withdrawing from him just before his death. The Christ, being spiritual, was unable to suffer. This was a form of the Ebionite error, a group that drew its name from the word for poor men in Hebrew (*'ebyonim*). This group was operative from about 70 until the fourth century. Others think that since the opponents arose from within the community of faith (see 2:19), their Christology was not so defective as that of Cerinthus. They think the error included ideas that the true Christ, who was preexistent, merely appeared in human form and that that human existence was without real significance. It was not in his human life as Jesus of Nazareth that eternal life came but in his divine glory as the preexistent and eternal Christ. This is a form of the docetic (*dokeo* = seems to be; appearing to be) error that denies the true humanity of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The New Testament makes it clear that these theories are entirely bankrupt. The Lord Jesus Christ, the God-man, is indeed the Son of God (see Mt. 16:16; Jn. 9:35-38), Lord (Phil. 2:11), and Messiah (2:22). He is God in the flesh, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father.

2:24-27—If John's readers are to stand against error, they must abide in the Word of God which they heard from the beginning and in the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

2:27—John's statement in this text has been taken as asserting that true believers have no need of any teacher at all. It is true that the Holy Spirit is our adequate teacher, and we must retain our right of private judgment by his illumination of the Word of God. However, the context of this text is John providing instruction to those who, he says, have no need of instruction! He is not saying that teaching is unnecessary. He is contradicting the over-reaching claims of the false teachers to special knowledge

and insight. Note other passages in the New Testament that refer to the general teaching ministry of the church (see Acts 5:28, 42; 2 Tim. 2:24) and especially to the presence of gifted teachers in the church (1 Cor. 12:29; Eph. 4:11).

B. Tests of Fellowship: Second Cycle (2:28-4:6)—The main themes of this portion of the book is to provide assurance that as believers continue in Christ, they can know that they are children of God. The threefold test of fellowship is applied, focusing on the origin of sin, lovelessness, and falsehood. The children of God are contrasted with the children of the devil, Christ with Cain, and the Spirit of truth with the spirit of error. This portrait is not one painted in shades of gray. John sees conduct in terms of its origin.

1. Obedience and confidence: Continuing in righteousness (2:28-3:10)—The thought of manifestation or appearance occurs six times in this passage, either as a noun, adjective, or verb. Four of these refer to Christ, two referring to his future appearance (2:28-3:3) and two to his past appearance (3:5, 8). The theme is that unrighteous conduct is unthinkable in the believer who has grasped the purpose of the Lord's two appearances. How can a believer go on living in sin if the Lord Jesus appeared first to "take away our sins (3:5) and "to destroy the works of the devil (3:8) and will appear again so that "we shall see him as he is" and that "we shall be like him"? If we are to be loyal to his first coming and ready for his second appearance, we must purify ourselves as he is pure.

2:28-3:3—These verses relate to the Lord Jesus' future appearance and the motivation that supplies for believers to continue in righteousness. The question posed and answered in this portion of the text is how we can have confidence at his coming. The practice of right living, not just knowledge of right teaching, is the mark of one born of God. The child exhibits the parent's character because he shares the parent's nature. For John, the proof of the reality of the life of God in a person is that he or she keeps God's commands, particularly the command to love the brethren. This teaching is in stark contrast with the claims of the opponents who emphasized knowledge and treated sin as either impossible or irrelevant.

3:1-3—The first motivation for purity is born of the Father's adoptive love (3:1). A believer enters the family of God by a deliberate adoptive act on the part of God (Rom. 8:14-17). Then John says that we will be like Jesus when he appears (3:2). This hope is the motive for living purely (3:3). We will be like Jesus, and we should make every effort to be pure now as he is pure. Purity is born of the Spirit and the realization of the great future our Father has in store for us. In this true perception of reality, disobedience does not make sense. This is the necessary prelude to the section on not continuing in sin (3:4-10).

3:4-10—These verses speak of the past appearance of the Lord Jesus as supplying our ability to continue in righteousness. John's argument for the necessity of holy living is drawn from the purpose of the Lord's first appearance, which was to remove sin and destroy the works of the devil. John's opponents were making vile, habitual sin a matter of indifference. They taught that the body was evil and that there was no harm in satisfying its lusts because what happened to us physically was of no importance. A truly spiritual person was so enamored with the Spirit that they could sin without incurring lasting harm. Some later Gnostic groups went further, saying that the true believer was under obligation both the scale the heights and plumb the depths so that they might truly know all things. John questions the authenticity of the conversion of those who so cavalierly continue in sin. This segment is not addressed to those of tender conscience who constantly grill themselves over failure in their lives but at the hard-hearted know-it-alls who say that the way you behave does not matter.

Note the structure of John's argument. The paragraph has two symmetrical sections (3:4-7 and 3:8-10).

Each begins with a statement of the gravity of sin (3:4—its lawless nature; 3:8—its diabolical origin). Each continues with reference to the purpose of Christ’s appearing (3:5—to take away sins; 3:8—to destroy the works of the devil). Each concludes with a moral deduction (3:6—the incompatibility of continuing in sin for one who knows God; 3:9—the impossibility of continuing in sin for one who truly knows God).

This section tells us much about sin. What sin is—the deliberate breaking of God’s law. Sin is doing what you want (lawlessness) rather than what God wants. What sin does—it undoes the work of Christ. Why sin is—it comes from the failure to abide in the Lord Jesus. From whence sin comes—from the devil who sins incessantly and on principle. How sin is conquered—by abiding in the Lord Jesus who conquered sin by destroying the works of the devil.

There is a progressiveness in the author’s thought on sin. He begins with the sinfulness of sin—it’s lawless, rebellion against God (3:4). Next, he shows sin’s incompatibility with Christ (3:5) and therefore its incompatibility with anyone who lives in Christ (3:6). Finally, he reveals the diabolical nature of sin—its source is the devil who “has been sinning from the beginning” (3:8).

This passage has occasioned much discussion. Some commentators see this teaching of not continuing in sin as ideal in nature. We are sinless to the extent that we truly abide in Christ. Others see it as potential, that one can live sinlessly. Others think that John is turning the claims of the false teachers and their followers (1:8, 10) against them. Unlike the false teachers, who claim to be sinless or that habitual sin does not matter, true believers do not live in habitual sin. The present continuous tense of “going on sinning” in the passage suggests habitual sinning as the usual way of life. This is different from living righteously but sometimes succumbing to temptation or deception and genuinely repenting.

3:6—This verse teaches the utter incongruity of a believer continuing in sin. To sin continuously is to deny that one knows and is vitally related to the sinless One and to reveal that one is not abiding in Christ. Sin and Christ are at enmity with each other. This text does not contradict 1:6, 8, 10. The author faced two different problems with the false teachers simultaneously. There were those who claimed to be sinless by nature. They thought they were unable to sin because they were born of God. John points out that we all sin and that to deny that we sin is to breathe the lie. There were others who admitted that they sinned but treated it as a matter of indifference. In their dualistic thinking, what you did with your body did not affect your spirit. John 1 deals with the problem of claiming sinlessness; John 3 fronts the problem of supposed irrelevant sinfulness.

3:8—John moves on to make another observation about sin. Sin is not only lawless (3:4), incongruous with Christ (3:5) and with the one claiming to live in Christ (3:6), it also originates with the devil (3:8). Those continuing in sin, like John’s opponents derived their character and sinful inclination from the devil.

3:9—First, John says that a believer born of God does not continue in sin. The phrase “born of God” is in the perfect tense, indicating past completed action with continuing results. “Commit sin” is present tense, conveyed a settled character of sinning like that of the devil who has been sinning since the beginning. The one who is born of God does not go on sinning because God’s seed remains in that person. The implication here is this:

- The new birth involves the acquisition of a new nature through the implanting within us of the life-giving power of God.
- Birth from God is a deep, radical, inner transformation of a person.
- The new nature exerts strong internal pressure towards holiness.

It is the abiding influence of God’s life-giving power within the true believer that enables John to

affirm that a true believer cannot continue in habitual and persistent sin (see 2 Cor. 5:17; 2 Pt. 1:4). Believers sometimes sin knowingly and willfully, but that brings a sense of deep grief and repentance (see Psalm 51). The entire direction of the believer's life is towards God and holiness.

3:10—John concludes his argument from origins. Truth and falsehood, good and evil, right and wrong, God and the devil are irreconcilable opposites. Our parentage is either divine or diabolical. We can know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are. God's children obey God and love one another. Righteousness and love are inseparable since they are inseparable in the character of God. The love of Christian for Christian, resting on the sense of divine fellowship (see 1:3), carries forward to its loftiest embodiment of righteousness that human beings can reach. The next section (3:11-24) builds on this thought.

2. Love for one another as indicative of belonging to the faith (3:11-24)—As the knowledge of God is tested by conduct, whether one walks in the light (1:5-2:11), so being born of God (2:29) is tested by righteous action and the love of the brethren. The command to love the brethren was first introduced in 2:9-11 as a test of whether one is walking in the light. Here it is the sum of the new life in Christ. In the former instance, it was primarily a charge against John's opponents. Here it is addressed to the church for its encouragement and its admonition. Perhaps the opponents' disregard for love caused a lessening of its emphasis within the community of faith. John presents his case first by Cain's negative example (3:12-15) and then by the positive example of the Lord Jesus (3:16). John examines love and lovelessness through the lens of origins. Those who pass from death to life move in their behavior from hatred to love.

3:11-18—After reminding us of the duty of reciprocal love (3:11), John's focuses on Cain's hatred as the prototype of the world (3:12-13). Hate originates with the devil, issues in murder, and is evidence of spiritual death. Then John centers on the love of Christ, which should be seen in the church (3:14-18). Love originates from God, issues in self-sacrifice, and is evidence of eternal life.

3:11-13—Cain became the Jewish stereotypical prototype for wickedness. The first century author, Philo, used Cain repeatedly as a symbol of wayward self-love and a standing example of "the worse attacks the better."

3:16-18—The essence of love is self-sacrifice, which is perfectly manifested in the Lord Jesus and should characterize the lives of his followers. Love is positive, seeks the other person's good, and leads to activity for him or her, even to the point of self-sacrifice. Love often involves the denial of self for another's gain. John develops the ultimate contrast: Cain's hatred issuing in murder, Christ's love issuing in redemptive sacrifice.

True love can be demonstrated through significant sacrifices as well as smaller acts of giving. Few people are required to make significant sacrifices, but many of us have regular opportunities to assist those in need by sharing resources (see 3:17; Jas. 2:15-16). If such a minimal response to the law of charity is absent, then it is idle to pretend that we share the heritage of God himself, the realm in which love is operative as the principle and token of eternal life.

3:19-24—These verses focus on assurance, a needed remedy for condemning hearts. This section is particularly apropos when doubts come. When they do come, look at the faithful character of God and trust him. When considering yourself, look at your entire history and not just your recent failures. Assurance grows out of knowing the truth, obeying the commands, and loving the brethren.

3:19-20—How do you know that you belong to the truth? By showing your love with your deeds (3:18) and by God himself assuring you of your standing (3:20). God is greater than our hearts and he knows all things. He not only knows of our sins; he also knows of our love, our longings to obey, our

noble aspirations that never fully work themselves out, and our penitent hearts. He knows that we are under construction. The divine sympathy is deep and broad, wide and forgiving, encouraging and urging his children on.

3:21-22—Those whose hearts do not condemn them will have confidence not only at his appearing (2:28) but in the ordinary times of this earthly pilgrimage as we relate to our Father, especially in prayer. An uncondemning heart gives us confident access to God in prayer and the confidence that he hears and answers us. Such prayer must be—

- According to his will (5:14);
- Offered in the name of the Lord Jesus (Jn. 16:23-24);
- Of someone cleansed from sin, forgiven and forgiving others;
- From one believing God's promises (Mt. 21:22; Jas. 1:5-7);
- From one obeying God's commands (3:22).

3:23-24—No one can claim that they abide in Christ and Christ in them unless they obey the three fundamental commands John expounds: believing the Lord Jesus (3:23), loving the brethren (3:23), and obeying the commands (3:24).

3. Truth and error: Discerning the spirits (4:1-6)—This passage parallels 2:18-27, where John warns against the presence of antichrists among those who had gone out from the congregation. Now he directs a second warning, this time against the spirit of antichrist, inspiring false prophets among the opponents. The difference between the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error is incarnationally discerned. The Lord Jesus in the flesh from God is the necessary acknowledgment of anyone who is in the truth.

There was a potpourri of false teaching among pagan and Jewish mystics in Asia Minor of the day. The believers needed to be wary. The central issue related to the person of the Lord Jesus. There could be no wavering on a proper assessment of the Lord's person.

4:1-3—It is interesting to compare 2:18-23 with 4:1-3 in terms of the respective emphases of the passages. In 2:18-23, John teaches that our "possession" of the Father is dependent on our confession of the Son. In this passage, he says that our confession of the Son is dependent on our inspiration by the Spirit.

4:2-3—The false teachers may well have believed that Christ was the Savior of the world, while denying the connection between the divine Christ and Jesus of Nazareth. They denied that "the Christ" ever had come "in the flesh." They may have taught that the Christ, a divine *aeon*, descended upon the man Jesus at his baptism and withdrew from him before his death. This denial of Christ in the flesh makes it likely that the false teachers were precursors of Gnosticism, Docetism, and a form of adoptionism. To deny the reality of the Incarnation has definite consequences:

- It is to deny that Jesus can be the High Priest who makes intercession for us before God. The true High Priest must be like us in all things, knowing our infirmities and our temptations (see Heb. 2:17-18; 4:14-15).
- It is to deny that Jesus can, in any real sense, be Savior. To save people, he must share their humanity.
- It is to deny the salvation of the body. Localizing evil in matter reduces humanity to a disembodied spirit.
- It is to deny that there can ever be any real union between God and people. If spirit is good and the body altogether evil, God and people can never meet.
- It is to deny that Jesus can ever be our example. If God was not in any real sense a human being, living under the same conditions as other human beings, he can only tell, not show

people how to live.

4:4-6—These verses are structured around three emphatic personal pronouns—you, referring to John’s believing readers, they, referring to the false teachers, and we, referring to himself as an authentic apostle. Recognizing the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error to overcome those teaching error is the heartbeat of this segment. Here, as in 2:18-27, protection against error and victory over it is ascribed to an objective standard of doctrine and to the indwelling Spirit who illumines our minds to grasp and apply it. This is a contrast between the receives of teaching that helps identify truth. The world recognizes its own people and listens to a message that originates in its own circles. God’s people respond differently. One of the ways you can tell whether a message is from God is whether God’s people receive it while the world rejects it.

In 4:1-3, the test of doctrine was whether it acknowledged the divine-human person of the Lord Jesus. Here, the test is whether it is accepted by Christians and rejected by those outside the faith. There is a certain affinity between God’s Word and the Lord’s people. There is a correspondence between message and hearers. The Spirit who is in the individual believer (4:4) enable that believer to discern the Spirit’s voice through a teacher or a preacher (4:2).

C. Composite Tests of Fellowship: Love as Focal (4:7-5:5)

1. First composite test: Love for the brethren as sourced in and reflective of God’s love (4:7-21)—The word “love” or a form of it appears twenty-seven times in these verses. Let’s follow John’s argument. In 4:7-10, John speaks of God’s love in sending the Lord Jesus into the world to be the atoning sacrifice for our sin. Since God could love us so, we ought to love one another (11). Indeed, people do not really see who God is until they see love revealed in the lives of Christians (4:12). If we acknowledge that Jesus is the Christ, God lives in us and we abide in God’s love (16). When God’s love abides and is evident in our lives, we have confidence and have no fear of judgement (4:17-18). That brings us back to loving our fellow believers as the necessary evidence of believing and loving God (19-21).

John’s opponents defined love in terms of worldly lusts. Here, the apostle exhorts believers to brotherly love by pointing to the Lord Jesus’ sacrifice on our behalf. It is because God is love (4:8, 16), has loved us in Christ (4:9-10), and continues to love in and through us (4:11-12), that we can and must love each other. John’s argument for reciprocal love is based on God’s own nature, his gift of his Son, and his present and continuous activity of love.

4:7-12—This text speaks of God’s love as the source of and model for brotherly love. We are to love each other because—

- God is love (4:8-9);
- God has loved us (4:10-11); and
- If we love one another, God dwells in us and his love is perfected in us (4:12).

To say this another way, God’s love originates in himself (4:8), is demonstrated in his Son (4:9-10), and is perfected in his people (4:11-12).

4:9-10—God’s love shows itself in sacrificial activity, that Jesus was sent as the propitiation (*hilasmos*) for our sins. God’s love flows in a self-emptying, other-oriented response. Jesus was God’s only begotten or One and only (*monogenes*) Son (see also Jn. 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18). This term speaks to the uniqueness of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is “the Son” in an absolute sense; we are “sons” only in a derivative sense.

God sent his Son to die for us. The further implication of this test is that the atonement is the

preeminent manifestation of God's love (see Rom. 5:8). The heart-wrenching realities of the Cross of Christ convey the depths of God's redemptive love. The greatness of God is seen in this as well. We are the beneficiaries of this sacrifice, undeserving as we are.

The opponents claimed to love God but understood love in terms of Greek philosophy rather than in biblical terms. Love in the Hellenistic world became a cosmic principle, the mystic craving for union with the eternal. Love thus perceived was of alleged love of human beings for an impersonal and transcendent supreme being. It was the desire of limited, conditional, temporal beings for the completion of the infinite, absolute, and eternal. Two things flow from this observation—

- Love for God became an exercise in self-gratification. It expressed prideful and so-called spiritual vanity, rather than a spirit of self-sacrificing service.
- One could never attribute love to this type of God and assert that God loves us. The opponents' God was the absolute and eternally other which remained passionless and unmoved. The opponents loved an idolatrous idea, not the august and awesome God whose being defines what it is to love.

4:11-12—God's love is completed and perfected in his people. We are not to think of love only as constituting God's eternal being and as historically manifested in the Lord Jesus but also seen in the love among believers. Reciprocal Christian love not only means that God's love is resident in us but that it is perfected in us. This is such a staggering idea that many commentators have been reluctant to accept it on its face. They have suggested that his love (*he agape autou*) is not a subjective genitive (God's love) but an objective genitive (our love for God) or a definite genitive (Godlike love). However, the entire paragraph concerns God's love and its conclusion is that God's love is *perfected* and completed in his people. This daring idea is akin to John 14:12: "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these because I am going to the Father.

4:13-16—These verses relate to the truth and our reliance on God's love. The sequence of thought is as follows: we know that we abide in God and he in us because he has given us his Spirit (4:13), and we know he has given us his Spirit because we have come to confess that Jesus is the Son of God (4:15) and to dwell in his love (4:16). It is by the Spirit that we come to confess the truth about the Lord Jesus (his deity, see 4:1-3; 1 Cor. 12:3), and by the same Spirit that we are enabled to love (4:11-12; see 3:23-24).

4:17-21—In 4:12, John declared that if we love one another, God dwells in us, and his love is perfected in us. In 4:13-16, he expanded on God's indwelling of us. In 4:17-21, he reverts to the perfection or completion of love.

Confidence (*parresian*) is a word used frequently in this epistle. John speaks of the confidence which we shall have at Christ's coming if we abide in him now (2:28), and of our present confidence before God in prayer (3:21-22), which is an assurance not only of access but of being heard and answered (5:14-15). In this text, John tells us that our confidence is a sign that our love is made complete or perfect. As and because Christ is, so are we in this world.

4:20-21—These verses are an echo of the Lord Jesus' great commandment in Mark 12:30-31. Love for God not only expresses itself in a confident attitude towards him, devoid of fear, but in loving concern for our fellow believers (see 3:14). Every claim of loving God is a delusion if it is not accompanied by unselfish and practical love for other believers (see 3:17-18).

2. Second composite test: Belief, obedience, and love (5:1-5)—For John, the components of the threefold test are inseparable. Those who believe the truth are under obligation to love their fellow

believers and that love is expressed by obeying the commandments. The argument forms a circle, ending where it began. Believers are God's children born from above. God's children are loved by all who love God. Those who love God also keep his commandments. They keep his commandments because they overcome the world, and they overcome the world because they are believers born from above. The real link between the three tests is the new birth. Faith, love, and obedience are the natural growth which follows being born from above.

5:1—Everyone who believes (*pas ho pisteuon*) is a present participle and born of God (*ek tou theou gegennetai*) is a verbal phrase in the perfect tense. This combination reveals that believing is the consequence, not the cause of the new birth. Our present continuing activity of believing is the result, and therefore the evidence, of our past experience of the new birth by which we became and remain God's children. This new birth, bringing us into believing recognition of the eternal Son, also brings us into a loving relationship with the Father and with his children

5:3-5—Our obedience, expressive of our love for God, is not to a set of irksome and burdensome regulations. The persnickety regulations of the scribes and Pharisees were difficult to bear (see Mt. 23:4; Lk. 11:46). Jesus' yoke is easy, and his burden is light (Mt. 11:29-30). This is not to say that obedience to God's commandments is an easy matter. It is never an easy thing to love people whom we do not like or people who hurt our feelings, or those we love, or who physically harm us. It is never an easy thing to solve the problems inherent in living together. When that involves living up to a Christian standard of life, task can be very imposing. John is focusing on our resources for living. Three points need to be made:

- It is never God's way to lay a commandment on us without giving us the strength to carry it out. With the vision comes the power; with the need comes the provision.
- Our response to God is a response of love. For such a love, no genuine duty is too difficult; no task too great. That which we would never do for a stranger, we must willingly do for the lover of our souls.
- A true believer is an overcomer. There is something in him or her that overcomes the world. This is not a bunch of hyperbole about how incredible certain victorious people are, but straight talk about the victorious provision that is our faith.

This section concludes as it began. If we love God, then we must love the children of God because we are born of God and we believe in the Lord Jesus. In addition, we must keep the commandments of God and overcome the world because we are born of God and we believe in the Lord Jesus.

IV. Threefold Witness That Results in Assurance (5:6-15)—Throughout this letter, John's intent has been to assure believers of their fellowship with God. In this passage, that intent becomes explicit. 1 John 5:6-8 describes the nature of the testimony of the three witnesses to the Lord Jesus Christ. 1 John 5:9-12 describes the results of this testimony, while 5:13-15 unfolds the believer's subsequent confidence and assurance.

A. Threefold Witness: Water, Blood, and Spirit (5:6-8)—

5:6—The purpose of John's discussion of the threefold witness is to affirm that it is the historical Jesus who is the Christ, the Son of God. The false teachers denied the true humanity of the Lord Jesus. The verse speaks of water and blood. There have been three principal interpretations of this:

- They are a reference to baptism and the Lord's Supper (Calvin and Luther).
- Some link this text with John 19:34-35, where the soldier thrust the spear into Jesus' side and drew forth blood and water (Augustine).
- Others have interpreted the water to refer to baptism, at which he was declared to be the Son

and commissioned and empowered for his ministry, and the blood to refer to his death in which his work was finished (Tertullian and Stott).

How does the Spirit bear witness? John is referring to the inward witness of the Holy Spirit, who opens our eyes to see the truth that is in the Lord Jesus. The Spirit has been given to us as an indwelling reality (3:24; 4:13) and as an illumining anointing (2:20, 27; 4:1-6). So, this text, as in 4:13-14, refers to two kinds of corroborative testimony, objective and subjective, historical and experimental, water and blood on one hand and Spirit on the other.

B. Greater Testimony of God (5:9-12)—

5:9—The false witnesses at Jesus' trial, seeking to discredit him, did not agree (see Mk. 14:56, 59). The true witnesses, the Spirit, the water, and the blood, seeking to accredit him, are in perfect agreement. The three witnesses are important because Old Testament law required any charge to be supported by the testimony of two or three witnesses (see Deut. 19:15; Jn. 8:17-18). A triple human witness was sufficient to establish any fact. How much more is a triple divine witness?

5:10-12—A In 5:6-9, John described the nature of the testimony of the threefold divine witness to the Son through the Spirit, the water, and the blood. In this text, he proceeds to unfold the results of this testimony. The purpose of such testimony to the Lord Jesus Christ is to evoke faith in him.

What God has given is eternal life (*zoen aionion*), or life unto the ages. Eternal life is the life God alone possesses. Believers are promised God's life here and now. Three important truths are taught here about eternal life:

- It is not a prize we have earned, but an undeserved gift.
- It is found in the Lord Jesus Christ, so that, to give us life, God gives us his Son.
- This gift of life in Christ is a present possession.

C. Resultant Assurance of the Believer (5:13-15)—

5:13—John wrote his Gospel for unbelievers, that they might read the testimony of God to his Son, believe in the Son, and receive eternal life through faith. 1 John was written for believers. John's desire is that having believed, his readers would know that they had received and have eternal life. His purpose for writing is to establish their assurance.

5:14-15—A second assurance enjoyed by believing Christians is answered prayer. Confidence (*parresia*) means boldness or freedom to speak. This is a boldness of approach to God that is to characterize his children. This confidence is not effrontery; it is born from the knowledge of our complete dependence for our standing before God upon the person and atoning of the Lord Jesus.

V. Concluding Affirmations and Exhortations (5:16-21)—John concludes his epistle with a threefold affirmation concerning God's work in the Lord Jesus. He exhorts them to obedience, warns them of the world system that is antithetical to brotherly love, and reaffirms that they are in the truth. Not by coincidence do these affirmations reflect the threefold test of fellowship.

5:16—What is the sin unto death? Some have taken it to mean a sin in a believer that leads to premature death (see Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor. 5:5; 11:30). However, this seems unlikely given the contrast of the sin unto death with eternal life, not physical life. Other suggestions include:

- Specific, grievous sin—The Mosaic Law listed certain sins as capital offenses punishable by death (see Lev. 20:1-27; Num. 18:22). The Old Testament also distinguishes between sins of ignorance and willful sin committed in a high-handed fashion (see Ps. 19:13), In the Qumran

community, the former sin required penance, the latter expulsion from the community. Some think this kind of willful, high-handed sin is what John has in mind here.

Tertullian took this classification of sin a step further and listed certain gross sins (e.g. murder, adultery, blasphemy, and idolatry) as beyond pardon, while minor offenses could be forgiven. This later developed into the Roman Catholic differentiation between mortal and venial sins and the specification of the seven deadly sins (e.g. pride, covetousness, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, and sloth). These seven deadly sins enumerated the primary instincts in people which are most likely to give rise to specific acts of sin.

- **Apostasy**—The sin unto death is seen by some as a total apostasy where a person denies the Lord Jesus and renounces the faith. People holding this view see John as having the false teachers in mind when penning this verse, those who had repudiated the truth and left the community (see 2:19). But is John really suggesting that someone who has received eternal life might lose it by sinning unto death? He just finished assuring his readers that they have eternal life, a life wrought by God's grace both in provision and in their reception of that provision. Is he now saying they must keep themselves or forfeit that life?
- **Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit**—This sin is the deliberate, open-eyed rejection of known truth. In Matthew 21:31-32, Jesus said that those who ascribe the work of the Holy Spirit to the agency of the devil were guilty of blasphemy against the Spirit, a sin that would not be forgiven in this age or the next. Such a sin is an eternal sin that leads the offender into a state of incorrigible moral and spiritual obtuseness because the offender has willfully sinned against his or her own conscience.

5:18-20—John concludes by stating three things each true believer knows:

- Anyone born of God does not continue to sin habitually;
- True believers are children of God;
- The Lord Jesus has come and given us certain, definite knowledge of God.

5:21—The exhortation to keep ourselves from idols seems like an odd way to end this letter. Most likely this is John's final characterization of the teaching of his opponents. False teaching is an apostasy from the truth and to follow in its train is to become an idol worshiper. The opponents' false view of the Son, and therefore of the Father, constituted a monstrous idolatry.

In our lives today, John's final warning is apropos. Idolatry is anything we allow to take the place of God in our lives, anything that preempts or substitutes for the worship of God. Just as believers were to keep themselves from idolatrous pollutions in their day, so we must in ours.

C.S. Lewis reflects on the real possibility of idolatry in modern life in the *Four Loves*. The possibility extends not only to false teaching but to outsized loves. He writes:

Every human love, at its height, has the tendency to claim for itself divine authority. Its voice tends to sound as if it were the will of God Himself. It tells us not to count the cost, it demands of us total commitment, it attempts to over-ride all other claims and insinuates that any action which is sincerely done "for love's sake" is thereby lawful and even meritorious. That erotic love and love of one's country may thus attempt to "become gods" is generally recognized. But family affection may do the same. So, in a different way, may friendship. ... We may give our human loves the unconditional allegiance which we owe only to God. Then they become gods: then they become demons. Then they will destroy us and also destroy themselves. For natural loves that are allowed to become gods do not remain loves. They are still called so but can become in fact complicated forms of hatred. C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*. New York: HarperOne, 2017, pp. 747, 748.

2 John—Discerning Love and Extending Hospitality

Introduction—2 and 3 John may have been written as cover letters for 1 John, intended as private notes of counsel and greeting. The main body of John’s teaching is contained in the first letter.

2 John addresses “the chosen lady”, variously identified as either a particular person or the entire church. The letter is dominated by themes of Christian love and truth. It warns against showing hospitality to false teachers. Early believers customarily took itinerant teachers into their homes and supplied provisions for their journey. John exhorts them to be discerning and not to have their generosity abused by false teachers and unintentionally contribute to heresy. Love must be in accordance with truth, must walk in obedience to God’s commandments, and be discerning rather than foolish.

Author and recipients—See separate introduction to John’s Letters. Bible scholars disagree as to whether “the chose lady” personifies a local congregation with “her children” representing individual members of the church, or whether these refer to personal acquaintances of the apostle who belonged to the same nuclear family. It is probable that the church is being addressed given the context of the letter and the fact that, in the Greek, the pronouns referring to the “chosen lady” in verses 5 and 13 are plural rather than singular. In either case, the readers were well known to John and probably lived in the province of Asia Minor, not far from Ephesus.

Purpose—The purpose of this letter is to warn against showing hospitality to false teachers. Believers customarily took missionaries into their homes and supplied provisions for their continuing journey. False teachers relied on and abused this practice. 2 John was written to urge discernment in support of traveling teachers. Otherwise, they would unintentionally contribute to the propagation of false teaching rather than truth.

Distinctives and guiding concepts—Discernment in fellowship is the key contribution of this letter to the New Testament witness. John emphasizes love of the brethren, but this was not a naive, unthinking, “open to anything and anyone” kind of love. To float through life with undiscerning love is both dangerous and foolish. The believers were to have nothing to do with false teachers and certainly were not to assist them in their wayward ministries.

Summary Outline: 2 John—Discerning Love and Enemies

Salutation (1-3)

Exhortation to Christian love (4-6)

Warning against supporting error: Hospitality to false teachers (7-11)

Final greeting (12-13)

2 John—Discerning Love and Extending Hospitality

Salutation (1-3)—John refers to himself as “the elder”. In his later years, he appears to have held a role comparable to that of Simon Peter (refer to 1 Peter 5:1). The term “chosen lady” (*eclecta kyria*) is ambiguous. The phrase can be translated as “the lady Electra,” “the elect Kyria,” or “the elect lady,” depending on whether it refers to a proper name, an individual, or symbolically to the whole church. It is likely that the entire church is being addressed given the nature of the problem of extending hospitality to false teachers and the use of the plural pronoun throughout the body of the letter.

Exhortation to Christian love (4-6)—John is concerned that the church walk in the truth, love one another, and obey God’s commandments. These are the same concerns writ large in 1 John. He rejoices that some were walking in the truth. The truth is that the Lord Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah and the full revelation of the Father (3). The truth deals with the wholeness, the completeness of human life in the Lord Jesus, from thought and imagination to every detail of practical living. It is what happens when human beings, redeemed by the Lord Jesus and renewed by the Spirit think, speak, and act in a way that corresponds to God’s plan to renew of the whole creation. The great, redeeming love of God is the motor that drives the cosmos. Such love should be demonstrated by those who follow him.

John expressed concern that the well-being of the church was at risk due to the activities of false teachers. He exhorts the believers to love one another not because love precedes truth and faith but that it offers the clearest test of the truthfulness of one’s confession of faith and the sincerity of one’s obedience to God’s commands. The argument is circular by intention. The test of love is obedience to God’s commands. The test of obedience is love, for God and others.

Warning against supporting error: Hospitality to false teachers (7-11)—John is concerned that the believers resist all inroads by the false teachers. These false teachers were the same as warned against in 1 John. They seemed to be kin with the early Gnostics and/or adoptionists who denied that God came in the flesh but taught that the Son of God temporarily came upon the man Jesus between his baptism and crucifixion. John is concerned that the believers would not follow this error and lose their reward for their faithfulness and perseverance.

He goes on to instruct them not to show hospitality to the false teachers. Extending hospitality was essential in the early church given the hostility of the pagan culture at large and the undesirability of the inns at the time. Most of them doubled as brothels. The early second century instructional manual, the Didache, also raised concern that hospitality shown to traveling teachers and missionaries be discerning. Not all traveling teachers were true teachers.

The instruction is troubling to our modern ears, particularly coming from the apostle of love. However, the issue emanated from unbelief that involved its aggressive promotion of the perversion of truth that went to the heart of the faith. When false teaching touches the person and work of the Lord Jesus it takes aim at the heart of Christianity. It is not loving to let such error fester and run its deadly course.

8—The believers needed to be wary of the spiritual consequences that compromise with these false ideas would bring. The danger was not the loss of salvation, but loss of reward.

9-11—The believers are warned against extending hospitality to false teachers. John tells them that if the truth is not in the teacher’s baggage, he should receive no welcome from those loyal to the truth. Hospitality and greeting might be misconstrued as acceptance of false doctrine. The believers were to make plain by their aloofness that they in no way condoned the teaching or activities of darkness.

John’s stern language takes us aback. He is not the least bit tolerant of those desiring hospitality while

denying central Christian truth—that Jesus the Messiah came in the flesh. Such people should not be welcomed in the house church or in the homes of the communicants. Hospitality could be regularly used as a sign that such people and their teaching were acceptable and approved. In addition, in just going along to be nice, believers could go amiss because of association or friendship. Christian charity does not extend to being so nice as to fail to contend for truth. True, there is difficulty in drawing the lines appropriately and too often those lines are drawn too narrowly. But just because there is difficulty does not mean that we are wise to ignore John's warnings here.

Final greetings (12-13)—John desires to speak face to face about additional matters and thus concludes the letter. “Chosen sister” designates another Christian woman (other than the Chosen lady addressed in verse 1), or, more likely, is a figurative reference to the community of the elder.

3 John—Discerning Love and Turf Battles

Introduction—2 and 3 John may have been written as cover letters for 1 John, intended as private notes of counsel and greeting. The main body of John’s teaching is contained in the first letter.

3 John is a variant on the theme of 2 John. In the early church, a good deal of the ministry was carried on by itinerant preachers who made periodic rounds, staying a little while with each group and holding meetings in private homes. Such a practice could be abused by religious racketeers. In 2 John, the apostle warns against entertaining itinerants who were false teachers. In 3 John, the apostle warns against rejecting true itinerants, whatever the articulated reasons, because of the control needs of a dominant member of the house church. John urges Gaius to show hospitality to Demetrius (12) who may have been an itinerant preacher (5-8) and probably the bearer of this letter. The appeal was needed because Diotrephes controlled the church, refused to welcome traveling preachers, and excommunicated those who did (9-10). Diotrephes took control of the church, asserted himself as the main authority, and excluded or spread rumors about rivals. He was abusing John’s authoritative counsel in 2 John to sandbag his control of a particular church. Gaius was a person of sufficient stature to oppose such a power play and John urges him to do so.

Author and recipients—See separate introduction to John’s Letters.

Distinctives and guiding concepts—Turf battles have been with the church from time in Memoria. They are about control over various aspects of church life, or the entire church life, and are particularly difficult to address. Christians are loathe to admit their control needs and often frame their power plays in the rubric of eternal verities or ministry concerns. When power plays succeed, at whatever level, ministry is damaged. No “competition” is allowed or, if disallowance is politically impossible, the “competition” is maligned by malicious gossip or marginalized in various ways. This letter reveals the stark ugliness of this practice. Ministry dries up in this setting. Indeed, the entire context of ministry shifts from the glory of God to partisan jockeying. If the sovereign God is to have his way with the church, the small-minded, controlled-ordered, petty barons of ecclesiastical turf must be reined in.

Summary Outline: 3 John—Discerning Love and Turf Battles

Commendation of Gaius: Truth and hospitality (1-8)

Rebuke of Diotrephes for his quest for preeminence (9-11)

Recommendation of Demetrius and final greetings (12-14)

3 John—Discerning Love and Turf Battles

Commendation of Gaius: Truth and hospitality (1-8)—John commends Gaius for adhering and progressing in the truth (2-4). Gaius was one of John’s converts or one of the believers strongly influenced by the apostle’s teaching and guidance. John’s particular concern was extending hospitality to traveling preachers. Gaius was doing that, in stark contrast to Diotrephes, and John encouraged Gaius to continue to do so (5-8).

1—John merely describes himself as the elder. He is so well known among the churches in Asia Minor that no further explanation was necessary. See separate introduction to Letters of John.

5-8—Hospitality was particularly important in the early church given the general hostility and/or suspicion of the pagan society and the state of the public inns of the age which often doubled as brothels.

Rebuke of Diotrephes for his quest for preeminence (9-11)—Diotrephes disrupted the expected love and cooperation among believers. He treated other believers as competitors and intruders, rather than co-workers. He abused his position of leadership by treating the church as his own personal turf, turning away traveling ministers and evangelists, and excommunicating from the house church those who extended hospitality to them. His mode of operation was threefold:

- He maliciously gossiped about co-workers. He put them down rather than build them up.
- He excluded them, refusing to receive them.
- He enforced his will on others. Supporting the itinerants meant for some believers the threat of excommunication from the church.

John may have written to Diotrephes about extending hospitality and was thwarted by him. Why the opposition is not clear, but what is clear is the Diotrephes was out of line. He desired to be the primo guy and could stomach no rivalry. Indeed, he might have feared it, given the reference to his “malicious” gossip. In short, Diotrephes was more interested in his own position than in the work of God. He may have rationalized this in his own mind by equating the work of God with his own participation and direction.

Recommendation of Demetrius and final greetings (12-14)—Demetrius was probably the bearer of this letter and a traveling missionary. He was well regarded by John, by his faith community, and by the truth itself, meaning that he was authentic in faith and action. His life matched his confession. The truth of the gospel had made its way into the bloodstream of his thinking, believing, acting, and his entire personality. The personal remarks at the end of this letter confirm that there was a warm relationship between Gaius and John and beyond them between their respective believing communities.

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