

A Study of the First Epistle of John

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For the Berean Class**

The Word of Life: 1:1-4

This epistle is commonly thought of as a letter even though it lacks the formal characteristic of other New Testament letters. Instead, it can be read as a sermon that addresses particular dangers and heresies that were circulating and threatening the life of this early church. Christians, in modern times, express differences in their understanding of the Christian Gospel that may not necessarily threaten church life so long as these differences are “at the edges” of thought. (ie non essentials) However, the writer of the epistle will say that certain truths must be held in common in order for real fellowship to take root because a shared acceptance of the truth is foundational for an experience of Christian fellowship. **Maintaining these truths is the fundamental purpose of John’s writing.**

Although these heretical ideas are not listed in the text, the modern reader can easily infer them from a careful reading of the entire epistle. Paying attention to the “setting in life” hidden behind the text will enrich the message and application of the epistle in innumerable ways by enabling the reader to grasp the writer’s intended meaning.

From the very beginning the writer associates himself with those who speak from first hand experience and by so doing he reminds us of Luke’s writing where he states unequivocally that what his Gospel comes directly from the reports of eyewitnesses. (Luke 1:1-4)

John begins his letter with a reference to how he and others have come to see the “Truth” of the Gospel so he makes several references to the sense of touch and sight. When he says that he has seen with eyes and touched with his hands he means that the nature of Jesus as being from the beginning is made known by his close proximity to Him; it is not the result of philosophical speculation. On

the contrary, his message results from the self disclosure of God through the incarnate Son that has taken place in space and time. God, in other words, has broken into human history for all to see. This is how He is known, John insists.

The “Word of life” is the Christ who brings “eternal life” which was with the Father from the beginning, the purpose of which is to bring fellowship with the Father and with one another. The two are inseparable!

This opening paragraph gives the reader a glimmer into a false idea that threatened this church; that God can be known by means other than the incarnation.

In the first century, the Gnostic heresy had not been fully developed but the beginnings of it can be seen here. Gnosticism’s fundamental concept was that the divine and the physical are mutually contradictory (ie the divine and the earthly cannot exist together) and that is why John echoes the opening words of his Gospel where he proclaims that God and Jesus are one. The Word has been with God all along so fellowship with the Father is fellowship with the Son and fellowship with the Son is fellowship with the Father. John is making the case for a Christology that the church has proclaimed cross culturally over many centuries because the entire Christian proclamation collapses without it. If the early church had abandoned this belief the Christian message would have been relegated to a place it deserved; the dust bin of failed and discarded religions.

The opening paragraph reveals the writer’s concern that they can be led astray by the false ideas popularized by “those who walk in darkness”. (1:6)

Walking in the Light: 1:5-10

John began his letter by countering an intellectual sin demonstrated by a false theology that rejected the incarnation. Now he moves on to deal with the

outward problem of behaviour characterized by a denial of personal sin that makes the cross and resurrection unnecessary.

The writer adds weight to his words by declaring that his message goes back to the source – Jesus himself. The revelation he has seen and heard is that God is light; a point that is emphasized by the phrase “in Him there is no darkness at all”.

The reader is well aware that this image is used frequently in scripture to describe God. Furthermore, in John’s Gospel, Jesus speaks of Himself as “the light of the world” (John 8:12) and he taught that those who follow him are to reflect that same light. (Matthew 5:14-16) **So what meaning does this image convey?**

In the Hebrew scriptures God’s presence is announced by fire and light and these images speak of God’s revelatory nature. John makes use of these images to establish the fact that the criticism he is about to make is grounded on what God has already revealed rather than his own intellectual ruminations. An important corollary is that light, by contrast, reveals the darkness of human life and by so doing men and women are judged; the light cast a shadow and the shadow is our sinful nature.

The image of light also speaks of God’s perfection in which darkness is incompatible with His nature. (ie light) Light and darkness cannot exist together at the same time and place therefore those who live in darkness are not in fellowship with God even if they claim that they are. Their subjective claims are rendered false by the objective revelation of the “light”.

In verse 6 the writer elaborates further on the false teaching he is countering. The false teachers claim that they are in fellowship with God, but their behaviour belies their claim. What they say is contradicted by the sinfulness of their lives;

they are not living by the truth. John does not fully elaborate on the full nature of their darkness except to say that one piece of visible evidence is their alienation from the God's people. The fact that they have disassociated from this community is all the evidence needed to convict them of sin.

Verse 7 prepares the reader for what is said in the verse that follows. When a person walks in the light of God it is inevitable that the sin remaining will be brought into the light of day. In this verse, John is not speaking of the sinful state (ie not individual sins) that renders a person alienated from God without the means to overturn their situation and save themselves. He is pointing out to his readers that the cross of Christ not only overturns their radical separation from God, it also uncovers the sin that remains as it provides a remedy for it. (sanctification) The purpose of Christ's death is two fold; to reconcile us to God and bring us into conformity with the Son by providing the means for victory over sin. This being the case, it is ridiculous to claim to be "without sin". (1:8)

It is self evident to John that the men and women, who have separated themselves, are sinners. The claim of sinlessness is a gross lie that demands a clear response lest it lead the people astray. All must admit their sin by confessing to the One who has promised to forgive and "purify us from all unrighteousness". (1:9)

Failure to recognize one's true nature makes God a liar and it renders Christ's sacrificial death pointless. (10)

Faith and Works: (2:1-14)

Chapter 2:1-2:

In verse 8 John said that the Christian believer cannot claim to be sinless but now he is careful to avoid the faulty conclusion that the inevitability of sinful acts

provides an excuse for sin. This problem is the same one that Paul addressed in Romans 6. Throughout the letter, Paul taught that the sinner is saved by faith alone and not by the works of the law. Drawing a faulty conclusion, his objectors reasoned that he (Paul) was encouraging sin by making sin the occasion where God's grace is revealed for all to see. Simply put, our sin provides God with an opportunity to reveal His grace and loving kindness so by continuing to sin, the sinner "does God a favour".

The chapter (2) begins with the affectionate term "My children" and it is clear that his attention is now focused on this community rather than those who would lead them away from the true gospel. His purpose in writing is to teach them to aspire to sin free lives. However, he is a realist because in 2:1a John anticipates the inevitability that acts of sin will still be a reality in their lives. This fact, though regrettable, should not send them into despair because the atoning death of Christ on the cross is the effective remedy for present and future sins as well as those in the past. He tells them that Jesus remains an "advocate" for them in the sense that He constantly pleads their case before God. The modern reader must recognize that even for the apostle's language has its limitations. The picture created seems to suggest a loving/forgiving Jesus begging on their behalf before an angry God. This is certainly not what he is saying to them. His teaching is that the God, who provided for their reconciliation by means of the cross, stands ever ready to forgive them when they confess their sins to Him because the righteousness of Christ provides for their atonement both now and in the future so long as they confess their sins. In other words, the work done on the cross is forever efficacious.

The paragraph ends with a remarkable statement that may have shocked the Jewish members; the purpose of Christ's death is not just for Jews. God has in mind the redemption of the entire world.

Chapter 2:3-6

In this paragraph John is addressing the congregation but he has in mind the claims of those who would lead them astray by their false teaching. His subject is what it means to know God. He rejects the notion that “knowledge” of God is essentially a mystical experience or religious attainment that demands no clear ethical expression in daily living. (see Hosea 4:1f)

John is **not** teaching a works righteousness that is required to establish and maintain the believer’s relationship with God. He is simply insisting that faith must have its fruits. Furthermore, it is evident that John does not have a Christian perfectionism in mind since in chapter 1:8-10 he has already pointed out the need for the confession.

In verse 3, the writer says that the evidence for knowing God is obedient living. In other words, one cannot claim to “know” God without conformity to His commandments. ‘Commands’ is stated in the plural but based on what has already been said, John must have in mind the commandment to “love one another”. (1:7)

Verse 4 is a restatement in the negative. A claim to know God without loving the people of God is a lie.

Verse 5 is stated in the positive. The consequence of obedience is that God’s love is made complete in the one who obeys. The word “complete” means that obedience will bring about a work in the believer that fulfills God’s purpose in the people He has called - fellowship based on love. The “love” of which he speaks is not conditional nor is it merely a response to that which is lovable. Thirdly, it does not seek personal satisfaction or pleasure for its own sake although it will

ultimately result in both. “Agape” (not found in secular Greek) is love of which he speaks. This love, unlike all earthly loves, seeks the benefit of the one who is loved.

Verse 5b and 6 are summary statements. We know we are “in Him” when we follow the pattern of Christ.

Chapter 2:7-8

John says that he is not writing about a new command. He may have in mind the fact that his opponents have accused him of instituting a new rule but as Jews they would have known that it has always been God’s intention that they should love their neighbour. In Leviticus 19 Moses was asked to speak to his people concerning their obligation to be a holy people even as God is holy. Essentially, Moses reviews Sinai and in verse 18b he says, “...love your neighbour as yourself”. Therefore, John is reminding them that the obligation to love their neighbour has always been part of Israel’s covenantal relationship with God.

How then can this commandment be **old** and **new** at the same time? The reader may be unable to interpret these words in the absolute certainty that he/she has grasped the intended meaning of John’s words. It is quite clear, however, that John is talking about a principle that is continuous with the past which has found a new expression in the life and proclamation of the early church.

John may mean that the principal of love has been actualized in the life of Christ so that it is no longer simply a precept or command; it has been expressed concretely in the life of Jesus. In this sense it is new. Secondly, he may be telling these early believers that they are meant to live within a community whose shared faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour is intended to produce a love for neighbour that has never been fully realized until now.

Chapter 2:9-11

The link with the previous passage is obvious but the notion that one either loves or hates without anything in between presents some difficulty. The modern reader may find John to be overly black and white because most would say that we neither love nor hate the local butcher with whom we have no relationship at all. It is helpful to realize, however, that he is not primarily talking about feelings. Neither is he writing about the world at large.

The reader must be aware that in this paragraph John is talking about relationships within the Christian community itself. Love is to be the operating principal that defines the nature of this community and it is for this purpose that God has called it into existence in the first place. Members, not committed to loving other members, are in such denial of God's will and purpose that they can be properly described as 'hating' their brother. By expressing his conviction in black and white, John has made their obligation to one another resolutely clear.

Verse 10 and 11 defines the consequential difference between those who love and those who hate. While love leads to victory over sin in every facet of life, the blindness of hate makes "stumbling" inevitable. In other words, a loving relationship with those who claim Jesus as Lord and Saviour is a basic requirement for spiritual growth that aspires to conform to the nature of Christ. A loving community is essential for the development of Christian character.

Chapter 2:12-14

He addresses three groups of people but the contemporary reader cannot be sure whether he is speaking metaphorically or whether he is speaking to people at different stages of Christian life. If his writing is understood metaphorically then he is speaking to members who are at different stages of Christian life. The

young then are new converts, fathers represent the more experienced and mature believers, while those in between are called young men. In any case, he intends to assure all of them of their status as Christian believers. He offers them the assurance that on the basis of the one who is from the beginning, forgiveness has been offered and accepted and that this new relationship to God brings with it the power to overcome evil. Lastly, he maintains that the possibility to resist evil is not simply their new status as forgiven sinners; the God who has forgiven them has taken residence in them thereby providing each with the power to live lives in conformity with the one who's life is without sin. (14)

Do Not Love the World: (Chapter 2:15-18)

After offering them the assurance of their standing before God as forgiven sinners, John warns them that the 'world' still has the power to overwhelm them if they are careless and undisciplined. However, he is not calling them to an esthetic life that withdraws from normal human society as a means of separating from the material world and the temptations to be found there. Nor is he promoting the notion that spiritual life is realized only as normal physical pleasure is avoided. Physical pleasure is not by definition, sinful. John could not possibly be a promoter of estheticism since he was convinced that God had disclosed himself as a sinless but fully human person who had participated fully in earthly life.

The key to having a sound exegesis of this passage is to understand what John means by the 'world'. The opening prolog to his Gospel provides the reader with an important clue. He wrote; "... the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him". (1:10a-11) Here, John is not using the 'world' simply to mean the created order; he is referring to that aspect of the 'world' that is organized against God for the purpose of establishing its own autonomy. Therefore, the temptation to love the world is the temptation to define one's own life without recognition of God as creator and Lord.

In verse 16 and 17, John elaborates further on what it means to resist the 'world'. His words remind the reader of Matthew 5:29-30 where Jesus said that the removal of an eye or hand is preferable to losing one's entire body. Of course, he is speaking metaphorically. It is through the senses that one experiences the world and from that experience, temptations arise that may lead to acts of thought, word, and deed that contradict God's intention for authentic human life. Jesus, in this passage, was teaching his followers that following him involves the discipline of choice because wrong choices have disastrous consequences.

John says that, though they are forgiven sinners, the world still provides a powerful temptation that can enter into their experience by means of their senses. He speaks of 'lust' that leads to 'boasting'; he is speaking of an overwhelming desire to acquire something from the world and then declare that God is not the provider. Such a declaration is nothing more than the attempt to establish a Godless self sufficiency. (2:17)

The passage ends with his most convincing argument; the best of what the world has to offer will eventually pass away to be replaced by that which is perfect and indestructible.

Warning Against Antichrists: Chapter 2:18-27

Chapter 2:18-19

In the previous passage John wrote that the world will pass away so in the next paragraph he continues the thought with the expression, "the last hour". On the basis of the text, the modern reader cannot discern the precise time period that he has in mind. He may, in fact, believe that the end of human history is imminent but he may also be referring to the entire period after the resurrection

as the last days before the end of human history and the final inauguration of God's kingdom in its totality.

He calls them "Dear children" to indicate that he has them specifically in mind as he offers a warning about the antichrist(s) to come. His first reference is to "the antichrist" but he says also that many "antichrists" have already come. Perhaps he is telling them that those who have denied 'the truth' are precursors to a time when an attack on the Gospel will be embodied in one powerful figure. This powerful assault on the truth of the Gospel will be a sign of the last hour. In any case, the effect of these words is intended to emphasize the importance of persevering in the faith during a time when it is constantly and rigorously challenged from within and without the church.

Verse 19 makes it clear that those who have left their fellowship never did share in their faith in Jesus as Saviour, Lord, and incarnate son. Furthermore, their departure means that they are examples of what he has called "the antichrists". These words appear harsh to the modern reader but they leave no doubt as to John's attitude towards those who advocate a departure from the fundamental truth of the Gospel. They also force the modern church member to take seriously the threats brought by those who espouse a belief system that rejects Jesus as the incarnate son of God. The church's tolerance of ideas should not extend to those who deny the authority provided by the apostle's witness concerning the nature and work of Christ.

Chapter 2:20-23

After warning them of those who would draw them away from the truth, John carefully points out that they have been given the capacity to discern the truth and recognize the lie. This spiritual capacity results from the fact that they have been anointed. This anointing means that, by the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, they have been able to recognize the truth of the apostles' witness and they are

now in possession of an objective 'norm' that enables them to know what is true. In verse 21, John affirms them again by saying that they require nothing new to protect themselves from the antichrists that will come for the purpose of denying the truth concerning Christ's nature and mission. Again, John defines the nature of the heresy that threatens (22) and he states categorically that there is no saving knowledge of God apart from the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Chapter 2:24-25

In this paragraph, John strengthens the power of his argument by emphasizing the fact that what he is saying is not new. The basis of everything he writes is informed by the original Gospel they have already received. He wants this Gospel to remain in them in the sense that it must be allowed to penetrate into the deepest level of their being. What they believe must be more than an intellectual affirmation concerning the truth of the apostolic message; it demands the orientation of their inner lives as the real source of their thoughts, words and deeds. In other words, John is not asking them to conform to abstract principles as a substitute for being changed from within. His words may remind the reader of the time when Moses tells his people that their physical circumcision must be nothing less than a sign of something deeper and more profound – the circumcision of their hearts.

An important challenge to the modern western church is contained in John's words. Christians cannot protect themselves from false ideas if Biblical literacy is left to the 'professionals'. Taking John's message seriously means that every believer has an obligation to learn as much as possible about the apostolic witness contained in scripture.

Just as Moses promised the children of Israel a full life as a consequence for their obedience to their covenant with God, so John reassures them that they will experience all that God desires for them if they resist the lies and temptations

that threaten their community. His concern is precisely Moses' concern when he warned Israel of the dangers of idolatry in Deuteronomy 13.

Chapter 2:26-27

The seriousness of the threat faced by this church is again emphasized. John's opponents have one purpose in mind; to lead them away from the Gospel that they originally received. He admits that 'conversion' does not produce a 'firewall' that eliminates the possibility of falling away from the fundamentals of the Gospel. These dangers can be resisted by first recognizing lies for what they really are and by the constant renewal that the Spirit provides. John has already told them to see that the message they have received remains in them so now he assures them it **does** remain in them. For this reason they can remain confident that they are in possession of everything needed to remain faithful. The fact that John encourages them to diligently persevere in the truth of the Gospel doesn't mean that their life as Christian believers involves living with a debilitating fear that the dangers and threats that inevitably come, are bound to overwhelm them sooner or later.

John, by saying that they need no one to teach them introduces an interesting paradox because he is, in fact, teaching them. Why then does he say it? Perhaps there is a gentle criticism here; the teaching he is offering should not really be necessary. A second possibility is that he is reminding them that they can know the truth of his warning by the application of the message they have already received. In this sense, John is admitting that even what he says requires conformity to the original Gospel that brought them to faith in the first place.

Lastly, John points out to them that their ability to discern the truth comes from the inner assurance that comes from God. Their anointing (the inner witness of

the Spirit) provides the ballast that keeps them upright when the storms of doubt and false ideas threaten to capsizes their faith. There will never be a time when they are unable to tell the difference between the counterfeit and the real!

Children of God: Chapter 2:28-29

John turns his attention to the future as he speaks of Christ's return. The passage does not allow us to say for whether or not John believes Christ's return is imminent or not but the text seems to suggest that He expects Christ's return to occur in his life time. However, the timing of Christ's return is not the point. He is giving emphasis to the basis of their preparedness when the newly inaugurated kingdom is completed. He wants them to be confident and unashamed but what is the ground of their readiness for Christ's return?

The text requires a careful exegesis in order to avoid the notion that the believer is destined to live in the constant fear that their standing before God is always in doubt as they wait for His second coming. While John insists that their lives must bear the marks of faith, namely their love for one another, he is not teaching that their love for one another is the basis of their confidence.

A proper reading of the passage requires the reader to bear in mind the nature of the heresy that threatens the veracity of their faith. John's opponents are denying the incarnation and by so doing they make Christ's death ineffectual. They are, in fact, denying that the cross alone saves them because the one who is crucified is "the word become flesh". Their unwillingness to believe in the incarnation amounts to a denial that God and God alone takes responsibility for the sin of mankind by means of the death of His incarnate son on the cross.

John is asking the community to hold on to their initial belief in the incarnation as the ground of their confidence and the guarantee that they will be able to remain unashamed as they await their Lord's return. Their preparedness comes from

their reliance on the saving work of the atonement provided by the Son who is “from the beginning”. A departure from this theological truth will render them hopeless and unable to live confidently and shamelessly as they stand on tip toe anticipating Christ’s return.

John completes his thought by pointing out that there is only one way of expressing their confidence in the work Christ has done on the cross; they must aspire to do what is right as a sign that they are already reconciled to God. (29)

Chapter 3:1-3

In the previous paragraph, John assured the community that they had a basis on which to be confident of their standing before God. The work that God has done on the cross is the singular ground of this confidence. Furthermore, by baring their guilt by His substitutionary death, the incarnate Son has provided a means by which they are freed from the shame of sin.

The source of their confident and shameless standing is the love of God that has been ‘lavished’ on them. The love of which he speaks has been given because God is love. Where as human love is always conditional and proportional to the lovability of the object of love, God loves because He is love. He “lavishes” His love upon them in the sense that He holds nothing back, a fact demonstrated by the gift of His **only** Son. Later in the letter, John insists that the love they have received must be extended to other members of the community. (3:14)

John never claims that they have achieved perfection even though they are “children of God” and full citizens of His kingdom.

There is, he says, empirical evidence for their status before God and it is the world’s reaction to them. What John says here sends the reader to the opening passage in his Gospel where he wrote; “... the world did not recognize him. He

came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him". (1:10b-11)
John's logic is clear; the world rejects them because it rejected the incarnate son. This rejection is proof that they are now living in the light that is distained by those who prefer the darkness of their unbelief.

In verse 2 John looks again to the future. He wants them to understand that although they have reason to be confident that Christ's saving death has placed them securely in God's kingdom, they must not see themselves as perfected citizens of that kingdom now. Their true destiny remains hidden until Christ returns. Only then will they realize all the benefits of Christ's life and death; they will know Christ in all his fullness and they will be like Him.

Verse 3 establishes that their future perfection must lead to a desire for righteousness **now**. He cannot mean that they can be in conformity to Christ by the action of their own unaided will as if they can save themselves. "This hope of ultimate conformity to the moral likeness of Christ is a powerful motive to diligent moral cleansing here and now, and is one channel by which the implanted divine nature achieves progressive conformity of the indwelt life with its own law of being". (R.W. Orr; The International Bible Commentary; page 1579)

Chapter 3:4-6

This paragraph presents considerable difficulty because it seems to insist that believers can live lives that are free from sin. Several commentators have tried to rid the text of its perfectionism but none of these interpretations are completely satisfactory in that they assume a subtlety of thought that would be unavailable to John's readers. Furthermore, the notion that John believes in the possibility of sinless perfection is unlikely since he has admitted to the possibility of sin in the life of the believer in 1:8,10; 2:1; and 5:16.

What he says here could be a response to his opponents who have trivialized the seriousness of sin and threatened the life of the church by claiming to be without sin. Their false self understanding is damaging because it discourages the necessity for confession and it weakens the churches aspiration to conform to Christ as the example of perfection.

Sin, he says, is lawlessness and as such it is no less than a rebellion against the will and purpose of God made known in Christ. For this reason, it must be seen for what it is; resistance to the saving work that God desires to do in the here and now. A proper understanding of the true nature of sin leads the believer into a life of constant repentance and it provides God the opportunity to continue His saving work in the lives of those willing to acknowledge their sin and turn from their sinful ways.

At the same time, he wants to say that the one who acknowledges their sin is not left feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of sin because Christ's work provides a means of forgiveness for past sins as well as progressive victory over the sins of the present. (5) Finally, Christ is able to do this work because He is sinless.

Verse 6 presents the most difficulty for the reasons discussed above. Two interpretations in particular, seem to follow the natural meaning of the text. The NIV translation takes the position (by using the aorist tense) that John is referring to sin as the basic orientation and pattern of a person's life. He means that a person who has been reconciled to God does not live in perpetual rebellion towards God while claiming to know Him at the same time. It remains true, however, that no one can claim to be completely free from the sinful thoughts, words, and deeds that require repentance.

Another reading is possible by considering what John says in 5:16-17 where he distinguishes between two categories of sin; one that leads to death and one that does not. In this context it is likely that the sin leading to death is the denial of

Jesus as the incarnate son of God. This sin results in death because it renders the believer without a means to be saved apart from works. If this is the intended meaning of the apostle's words, the community must continue to confess Christ as the sole means of their reconciliation to God because He is from the beginning.

Chapter 3: 7-10

In this paragraph, John repeats much of what he has already said but his main purpose is to help them distinguish between true believers and those who wish to lead them away from the truth of the Gospel. In the face of this danger, they must be able to discern who the true believers are by observing actions rather than simply listening to self aggrandizing words. Two phrases occur in juxtaposition: “.... **does what is righteous, just as he is righteous**”. (7b) The first phrase refers to actions and the second to a state of being before God. John must mean that visible behaviour, if not consistent with the status of righteousness achieved by Jesus' life and death, is no righteousness at all. It is this observable contradiction that provides them with the evidence needed to resist the influence of those who wish to lead them astray.

The passage does beg an important and difficult question. Can anyone claim a total consistency between their behaviour and their status in Christ? The answer is obviously no. Not for a minute does John advance the notion that sinless perfection is possible in this life because he insists on the need for repentance at other points in his letter. Therefore, it is reasonable for the reader to assume that he is referring to those who have such a wanton disregard for righteous behaviour that their lives are devoid of the aspiration to have their actions match their words. This aspiration they ought to have is clearly described by the writer of Proverbs when he said, “The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day”. (Proverbs 4:18) Jesus also

taught of this same aspiration in the Sermon on the Mount. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled”. (Matthew 5:6)

The 8th verse makes it clear that there is no middle position between God and the devil. His opponents are clearly in league with the one who is the source of all rebellion towards God. By their lack of aspiration for righteous living, they have formed a partnership with the very one Christ has come to destroy and for this reason, they are the enemy of God.

John does not elaborate on the specific nature of the unrighteous behaviour but other portions of the text give some indication: they are in denial of the incarnation, they have diminished the seriousness of sin, they see no need for repentance and they have failed to love the community.

Verse 9 has to be read in the context of the entire letter in order to avoid an absolutist reading of the text. The NIV translation takes the position that John is talking about sin as the essential pattern in a person’s life. (It uses the aorist tense.) Sin, he says cannot be the warp and woof of the believers life because God has implanted a “seed” within him/her. This seed is the believer’s source of power over the ravages of sin. Even though John believes that Jesus is the only sinless human being he does believe that God provides all that is necessary for living a sinless life. Repentance is an essential aspect of the Christian life even though God has provided us with every divine resource necessary to resist sin in all its forms. Perfection is not demanded but neither is imperfection inevitable. We sin in spite of the sufficient resources provided by God through the effectual presence of His son.

Verse 19 gathers up the main idea of the paragraph. They can be and must be a discerning people by observing the acts of others, especially as it relates to their relationship to the believing community.

Love One Another: Chapter 3: 11-24

Chapter 3: 11-15

In the previous paragraph John reminded his readers that a “child of God” is one who loves his brother. The love of which he speaks is defined by the word ‘agape’. Agape love leads the believer to care primarily about the welfare of others within the believing community as an expression of gratitude for the saving act of God provided by the death of the incarnate son on the cross. The benefit of Christ’s atoning death must be accepted as a divine act of grace that is given to those who repent and admit their unworthiness. John insists that reconciliation to God is on the basis of faith and not works but he makes it plain that saving faith has its fruit; “We should love one another”. (11) His point is that those who acknowledge the enormous weight that has been lifted from them by God’s redeeming love on the cross must accept the responsibility to love their brothers as God has loved them. This kind of love is not a response to the lovability of others. Rather, it comes from a deep sense of gratitude that enables the believer to love unconditionally. Failure to do this is a sign that the truth of the message they have heard “from the beginning” has not been truly understood or accepted.

In verse 12, John refers to the familiar story of Cain and Abel in order to point out where failure to love ultimately leads. For John, there is no middle ground. Their proximity to the standard of love determines whether they are aligned with Cain or not. Unwillingness to seek the welfare of others before one’s own comes from the same source as the act of murder.

This verse also serves to prepare John’s readers for the world’s reaction to them. Anyone who believes in Jesus becomes a member of a counter culture that the world cannot tolerate. Just as Cain could not tolerate Abel so the world will not

tolerate them. However, the world's reaction provides them with the evidence that they have "passed from death to life". (14)

The paragraph ends with a warning! Those who do not love their brother must face the possibility of a horrendous consequence - ultimate loss.

Chapter 3: 16-20

In the previous passage, John urged his readers to love one another with a reference to the very antithesis of love, the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. Now he follows this horrendously negative and dark picture with one that is profoundly positive. He says that the image they are to have in their minds is that of Jesus on the cross because only then can the true character of Godly love be grasped. The central event of the Gospel is the freely given sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Therefore, they are not left to ponder or speculate on the true nature of love as if it can be defined philosophically by the application of their intellect. What is required is an observable demonstration that can be the source of their understanding.

Christ's sacrifice has a radical implication; they must be willing to lay down their lives for the sake of those whom they love. The need for this kind of giving may never occur but that does not mean that other less demanding occasions will not arise that require personal sacrifice. One example is given. Generosity must be extended to those in material need. This implies that believers are to be constantly aware of the needs of other believers, otherwise how will they know that generosity is required to maintain the well being of another? Words may bring comfort but they do not necessarily change circumstances. For this reason, loving words are ineffective without the support of concrete action that is directed towards other people at their point of need.

The last two verses of this passage present some difficulty. This writer does not find in John a preoccupation with self examination nevertheless his readers are led to examine whether or not they “belong to the truth”. Either they will be reassured or they will be condemned by their conscience and become acutely aware of their shortcomings. If this is the case, John says that “... God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything”. (3:20) How this statement applies to the two possible situations John has described is not obvious but it is logical to expect that he is saying something to encourage them and bring relief from constant despair over their failure to love their brother as they should. He must mean that God’s judgment of them contains more understanding than their own self judgment and that God’s judgment has the purpose of redemption rather than condemnation. For this reason, they can know that the very moment they are found wanting is the occasion where they can receive the renewal necessary to bring them into conformity to the love demonstrated by Christ.

Chapter 3: 21-24

The main theme of this paragraph is confidence. Like any effective teacher, John completes this unit of thought by emphasizing what he has already said to the community. He tells them that they have been given an inner assurance that their lives, though imperfect, have found favour in God’s sight. For this reason, they can be confident that their obedience to God is the means by which He will continue to do the work of bringing them into conformity with His son. Verse 23 makes specific what they will be given as a result of their asking; confident trust in Christ as Lord and Saviour and a love for one another. It is clear that John sees theological belief and Christian action as equal partners in the life of the Christian. Each requires the other.

Again he tells them (3:24) that obedience is a true sign of their relationship with God confirmed by the inner witness of the Spirit.

Test the Spirits: Chapter 4:1-6

This section of the letter reminds the reader of the passage in Deuteronomy (13:1-5) that deals with false prophets. The sign of a true prophet is that his predictions come true. However, even if a particular prophet fulfills this condition he must be rejected if he tells the people to be unfaithful to the covenant by following false Gods. Moses expects this kind of temptation to occur but he states that it is an occasion when God finds out the depth of Israel's love for Him. Furthermore, Moses instructs the nation to put to death the one who is encouraging rebellion against God. In this section of the letter, John offers a warning that analogous situations will arise continually in this community. James develops the same thought in his epistle where he says that trials, though difficult, develop a perseverance that leads to maturity. "Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking in anything". (1:4)

Chapter 4:1-3

John begins this portion of his letter with the theme of discernment by instructing them to actively separate the truth from the lie. This is a warning the modern church needs to hear because the culture we live in promotes the notion that belief in absolute truth inevitably leads to intolerance. Modernity links tolerance to the idea that all ideas are equally valid even when they are in contradiction. In other words, conflicting beliefs are merely differences of opinion that reflect subjective experience. This understanding of reality promotes tolerance (it is believed) because it allows conflicting views to live side by side without the need to decide which one is true. John does not agree. Simply put, there are prophets and false prophets and the church is required to know the difference.

The indicator of the true prophet, says John, is their belief in the incarnate son of God. A person who promotes a false christological confession has the spirit of

the antichrist. The implication of this passage is not that church life is diminished by bad theology; it is destroyed when the true nature of Christ is no longer confidently affirmed. Christian proclamation of the Gospel requires the church to insist that “God is in Christ reconciling the world”. A theology that falls short of this claim causes the entire Gospel to collapse because it makes the atonement impossible. Only God can take responsibility for the sin of mankind on the cross because Christ is the ‘incarnate’ son. The cross, therefore, is the occasion where God does His greatest work at the point of His greatest weakness.

Chapter 4:4-6

Now John assures them that when they come face to face with a denial of the truth of Christ’s true nature, they are not defenseless. Rather, they are in possession of an inner confidence born of God. The inner light they have received is greater than any threat to their faith because it comes from the One who is greater than the world. Nevertheless, the Gospel they have received can and must be defended in every way possible but in the final analysis it is ultimately defended by the inner witness of the Spirit of God. The modern church also must defend the Gospel but this task is less important than simply proclaiming it uncompromisingly to a world that is fundamentally opposed to it. The energy to witness to the world comes from the inner conviction that the Gospel is true.

John admits that the world will be more willing to accept the words of the false prophet because they speak in words that do not contradict the ‘worlds’ point of view. The church, on the other hand, will find the ‘world’ less willing to believe its message. However, Christian witness will bear fruit even if it is rejected by those who are captured by the world’s viewpoint.

Lastly, John says something striking. (4:6b) The world’s unwillingness to believe them is **the** indicator of the truth of their message and the depth of their faith.

The world's negative reaction to them is the sign that they possess of "the Spirit of truth". (4:6b)

Chapter 4:7-21: God's Love and Ours

Chapter 4:7-12

This passage requires the reader to change directions abruptly from the topic of discernment to emphasize the importance of the message about the relationship of love to knowledge of God. Much of the material has been discussed before in the letter but there are some new nuances to be found.

John begins with the plea that these people are to love one another and he says that God is the source of their love. Verse 7b raises some difficulty for the modern reader if it is read out of context with the text as a whole. It is crucial to remember that John is not talking about the world as a whole as if to say that a person, who loves others, by definition, knows God. His words are directed towards the Christian community alone. John is not saying that a willingness to love others is, by itself, an indicator of fellowship with God. He has already written in 3:23 that theological affirmation of Jesus as the incarnate son of God together with the exercise of love, are the two essential conditions necessary for knowledge of God.

It must have been perfectly obvious to John, as it is to us, that people often display the capacity to love sacrificially even if they have not made a Christian confession concerning the nature and work of Christ. The fact that all people are 'fallen' (ie original sin) does not mean that they are devoid of the capacity to love. It does mean, however, that there is no aspect of their humanity that is not affected by sin. So serious is this (and ours) sinful condition that only the substitutionary death of Christ is sufficient to save them from the judgment of

God. Acts of love, however, may be used by God for redemptive purposes even though these acts fall short of providing a means of personal salvation.

Verse 8 is straight forward; if a person does not love they do not know God even if they have made the appropriate theological affirmations.

John has no need to develop a philosophical definition of love because the true nature of love has been revealed by Christ. First, it is for the sake of love that God has sent His Son into the world. Therefore, a person who refuses to acknowledge their obligation to love is in opposition to God's fundamental purpose found in Christ. (9) Secondly, the love required by a believer is not a spontaneous response to that which is loveable nor is it a response to the experience of being loved. Rather, like God's love, it is offered freely for the benefit of the one who is being loved. (10) Lastly, he tells them that God's love compels them to aspire to love in like manner. (11) (See the parable of the Unforgiving Servant; Matthew 18:21-35)

The last verse (12) in the paragraph suggests that John might have been writing in response to some who have claimed to have had a vision of God. His answer is simply put; no one has seen God. However, God can be made 'visible' in them as they love their fellow believers. Their acts of Godly love can be the empirical evidence the world requires to come to faith in the invisible God.

Chapter 4:13-15

John has already taught them that they must be constantly on guard against the threat of false teaching. They must be willing and able to tell the difference between what is true and what is false so in this paragraph he reminds them of the importance of having confidence in the truth of the Gospel. He states that the foundation of their confidence is two fold; the inner life of the Spirit and their outward confession of Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

He defines their relationship by writing that they live in God and that He also lives in them because God has given them His Spirit. John does not develop this thought further but he must have in mind an inner conviction that assures them that they belong to God. However, he is careful to point out that their inner assurance must be accompanied by the outward theological confession that Jesus has been sent by God to be the Saviour of the world. A further step is necessary; they must acknowledge Christ as Saviour as well. This acknowledgement is much more than the mere recognition that He existed. John means to say that reliance on the work that Christ accomplished on the cross produces confidence.

Chapter 4:16-18

The NIV translation places verse 16a at the end of the previous paragraph. If this is the correct placement, the verse functions as a summary of the previous paragraph. (4:13-15) However, there is a logical basis for reading it as an introductory statement that establishes the theme in the next paragraph.

He begins with a straight forward statement in verse 17 by announcing that “God is love”. Therefore, all other descriptions of God should be understood as aspects of this one overwhelming characteristic – love. Everything that God does flows from the fact that He loves what He has created and that there are no limits to which He will go to restore it according to His original purpose.

Secondly, God does not love because of the lovability of the object; He loves because He **is** love. What John is saying in these verses is entirely consistent with the understanding of all the Gospel writers. God’s divine initiative, whereby He acts unilaterally to save all of creation, is the theme of Jesus’ teaching in the parables found in Luke 15. These parables are introduced by the question, “What is the kingdom, of heaven like” which, for the Hebrew, is another way of asking about the true nature of God.

John goes on to say that because God is love, believers are compelled to live constantly within the sphere of love and that love must be the main feature of the 'church' both corporately and individually. (4:16) He does not elaborate on whether he is talking about God's love for them, their love for God, or their love for other believers but it is reasonable to assume that he has all three in mind. There is no doubt, however, that John regards God's love as primary because it makes possible all other love.

In verse 17, John says that God's love has one purpose and one purpose only; to bring them to a state of completion but he does not elaborate save for the fact that they are rendered confident concerning their final destination. John is so confident that the love of God will one day bring them into total conformity with the Son, that he can speak of it as a present reality. (See 3:2-3) That is why he is able to say that they are already like him in this world. Furthermore, the final verdict of God's judgment has already been rendered by means of the cross so they are already declared innocent even though the evidence against them (and us) is overwhelming in favour of a guilty verdict.

John has already given them a reason to be confident in their ultimate destiny so now he takes the point even further that the perfect love of God takes away any reason they have to fear. He is speaking of the fear of punishment and ultimate loss. His point is clear; God's love has been "lavished" upon them by means of the atoning death of Christ. Since "God in Christ" has already born their punishment they have no reason to fear. However, if any continue to live in fear it is a sign that they are not living within the sphere of perfect love. (4:18)

Chapter 4:19-21

John began his discussion of the importance of love at the beginning of chapter 3 so he concludes by reminding them that the love begins with God. What God

requires of them He first provides. They are able to love their fellow believer because God has first loved them. It is John's conviction that God only asks what he first gives; therefore a failure to obey this command is a sign that the gift of love has not been accepted. Conversely, John is teaching them of the need to recall the length, breadth, and depth of God's love as a prerequisite for loving others. For John, love for God and love for fellow believers are two sides of the same coin.

John further develops his message by offering a contrast between the visible and the invisible. Because God is invisible, there is no observable evidence of love unless it is given in a visible way. This means that a confession of love for God is nothing more than an unconfirmed abstraction unless it is supported by acts of love directed towards other people.

Chapter 5:1-12: Faith in the Son Of God

Chapter 5:1-5

Upon first reading it would appear that John is beginning a new theme concerning belief that Jesus is the Messiah as sign of being born of God but with the next expression he continues with the subject of love. "... everyone who loves the father loves his children as well." (5:1b) Plainly, these words repeat what he has said before; love for God and one's fellow believers are two sides of the same coin to the extent that each love requires the confirmation of the other. Again he repeats himself by saying that the love of which he has spoken is a vital sign that one has been born of God. It is critical to understand that John never says that faith is the result of good works (love) but he would certainly agree with James that "faith without works (love) is dead." In short, his teaching is that their love for other members of the community is the required response to the love which has been lavished on them. (Chapter 3:1)

The reader may recall that the apostle Paul spoke of the law as an overwhelming burden for Israel that he did not want to impose on Gentile believers. In verse 3 and 4, John states clearly that what he has been talking about does not rise to the level of an unbearable burden and impossible standard. Instead, he assures them that they have been provided with the resources necessary to obey the command of love. It is important for the modern reader of this epistle to keep in mind the fact that John does not teach a sinless perfectionism because he admits that there are occasions when believers fail to love as they ought even though love remains the basic orientation and pattern of their lives.

The paragraph ends with the affirmation that they are to have victory over the world by faith in Jesus as the Son of God. The victory of Jesus on the cross was that he said yes to God by giving his life in perfect obedience to the Father even though it meant bearing the full weight of our sin that resulted in his profound alienation from God. (Matthew 27:46) Christ's faith provides the pattern for theirs so he reminds them that only by faith in Christ can they resist the 'worlds' temptation to declare independency from God and set themselves up as the definers of their own existence. Instead, John wants their hearts and minds to be informed exclusively by their vertical relationship with God for this is the pattern that Jesus established by his life and death on the cross.

Chapter 5:6-12

This passage may be difficult and rather obscure for the modern reader but its meaning would have been clear to John's readers otherwise he would have found another means of expression. He says that Jesus came by 'water' and 'blood'. These two words refer to Jesus' baptism and death. John's primary concern in this paragraph is to emphasize the Christology that he has already established earlier in the letter. (1:1-4; 2:1-2; 2:22-23; 4:14; 5:1) Obviously, this doctrine was being seriously threatened by those who had left the fellowship but were still a danger to those who had remained. With his reference to 'blood' and

'water', John is insisting that the community remain faithful to what they first heard and believed about Jesus' nature and work. The question remains however; what would these two words mean to these first century readers? It is reasonable to assume that this community knew the Gospel tradition concerning Jesus' baptism even if had been delivered to them by word of mouth. The reader can benefit by reviewing what the three synoptic Gospels (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22) establish in their narratives concerning Jesus' baptism. All three writers report that a dove descended on Jesus signifying the dissension of the Spirit of God upon Jesus. Secondly, God declares that Jesus is His beloved son in whom He is well pleased. (Psalm 2:7) All three narratives establish the view that Jesus is the son of God whose work is to take away the sin of the world. (John 1:29)

John also said that Jesus came by blood, an unambiguous reference to his atoning death. Once again, John has insists that they hold fast to the apostolic claim concerning Jesus' nature and work in face of the serious challenges brought on by those who had left the community because they were unwilling to affirm Jesus as the incarnate son of God whose death on the cross is the sole basis for their reconciliation to God.

In verse 6 John goes on to say that the events of Jesus' baptism and death as well as the testimony of the Spirit provide the evidence that he is the Son of God. He says that these three together support the church's claim concerning the work and nature of Jesus as the incarnate son of God. The text does not provide us with what we need to say definitively all that John means but at the very least, he is saying that the meaning of Christ's baptism and death are confirmed by God Himself. (6b) In other words, John's Christological announcement is rooted in the testimony of God, not in his own wishful thinking or that of the apostles.

While the testimony of the church is important, it pales in significance to the testimony of God (9) which brings the inner conviction that Jesus is truly the

incarnate son of God. (10) Furthermore, refusal to believe is a declaration that God is a liar.

Finally, John says that men and women, by their response to the church's testimony, place themselves into one of two categories. Faith brings to their lives an 'eternal' quality but it is denied to those who remain in unbelief.

Chapter 5:13-21: Closing Remarks

Chapter 5:13-15

Like any good writer or preacher, John concludes by restating the most essential truths he has placed before them. The general theme of his conclusion is confidence in their status as believers, confidence in prayer, and confidence that they are in possession of that which enables them to resist the work of the evil one.

He realizes that those in denial of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God may have created some doubt in their minds causing them to wonder whether or not they are truly in possession of eternal life. Concerned with the fragility of their faith, he assures them again that they have eternal life because they believe that Jesus is the Son of God and the Messiah. (13) Considering the letter as a whole, the substance of this belief is that Jesus reveals the true nature and plan of God and that his death is the only means by which they can be forgiven of their sins and receive the power to move progressively towards the perfection that is guaranteed when he reappears. (3:2) Throughout the letter, his argument has been that spiritual growth does not occur passively; they must participate in their spiritual growth by obeying the commands, by loving their fellow believers in recognition that God has 'lavished' His love on them, (3:1) and by living in the hope that God will continue to bring them into conformity with His Son (3:2) even though they are not yet "finished works".

John now turns to the subject of confidence in prayer. Their present status as members of God's Kingdom means that they are able to pray with confidence expecting that God will grant them their requests as long as they ask according to His will. (5:14-15) This is an important qualification! They are to pray "according to his will" meaning that their prayers are not to consist of selfish requests because prayer is not for the purpose of self gratification. Instead, they are to pray with confidence for those things that lead to the spiritual perfection that he has defined in the letter. Prayer is important because it is a means of making themselves available to God and because their petitions offer the consent that God requires to do his saving work in them.

Chapter 5:16-17

The general discussion of prayer in the previous paragraph leads naturally to a brief discussion of prayer for two distinct categories of people he calls "brothers". He distinguishes between them with a reference to two categories of sin but he gives no clear explanation of what he means.

The key to unlocking his intended meaning is found by considering what he has already said in the letter. The sin that leads to death must be the denial that Jesus is God incarnate. Therefore, John is making an important distinction by drawing a line of demarcation between those who stubbornly refuse to accept the church's claims for Christ and those whose rebellion to God falls short of an outright rejection of Jesus as incarnate God. The sin of the former leads to death because it rejects the only possible means of reconciliation to God. Both groups are comprised of unrepentant sinners but the sins of the latter do not make reconciliation to God impossible.

Both groups are members of the community, at least up until the point of the letter. One group continues to live an immature Christian life while the other is

on the verge of leaving because they are repeating the apostasy of those who have already left. John encourages prayer for the former but he believes that the latter are beyond redemption so long as they remain determined to deny that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God.

John brings the paragraph to a conclusion by saying that “all wrong doing is sin”. (5:17) He wants to avoid the faulty conclusion that some sins can be trivialized because they do not lead to death. Sin, however expressed, is a serious matter that requires repentance and a sincere desire to follow the commands of God. The believer must never adopt the cavalier attitude that there are sins that can be ignored because they fall short of outright denial of Christ as incarnate God.

Chapter 5:18-21

Finally and dramatically, John ends his presentation with three statements that begin with the phrase “we know”. What he says runs counter to the norms of modern culture where absolute truth is, by definition, unknowable. Modernity would respond to John’s claims by saying that they are naïve and intellectually unsophisticated. Furthermore, definitive statements like the ones John makes are seen as potentially intolerant because they imply that counter claims are false. Contemporary thinking regards theological affirmations as nothing more than speculative assertions that are true only for those who make them. John, however, is not interested in speculation nor is he hesitant to finish his letter by restating what he knows to be objective truth because of the self disclosure of God in Jesus, the incarnate son of God. (5:20)

The first thing he knows is that those “born of God” have no need to continue in sin. He means that God has begun a work in their lives that enables them to obey Him as they move towards an ever more perfect conformity to Christ. As God does this work in them, they can live in the confidence that they have been given what they need to resist capture by the “evil one”. (5:18)

John also knows the reality of the world in which they live. They are children of God living in a world that, for now, belongs to the devil. For this reason, they are never to be complacent because they will be continually bombarded by forces vigorously opposed to God that are intent on enslaving them. As members of a counter culture, they require faithful reliance on the Gospel. (5:19)

Thirdly, John tells them that their knowing is the consequence of God's entrance into history and that this revelation is the sure ground of all that he knows. They are able to know that what he has written is true because it is confirmed in their hearts by the presence of Christ who gives them understanding. Furthermore, Christ's presence gives confirmation that what John has written is true. (5:20b)

Verse 21 reads like an unnecessary add on but it does provide an effective conclusion because it is so abrupt and unexpected. Because there is no greater abomination than idolatry to a Jew, this statement leaves them with the notion that departure from the truth is possible, profoundly tragic and idolatrous when it occurs.

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