

Resources Referred to in This Study (by author's last name)

"Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles" by John **Calvin** in Volume 22 of *Calvin's Commentaries* (1551)

"An Exposition, With Practical Observations, of the First Epistle General of John" by Matthew **Henry** in Volume 6 of *Matthew Henry's Commentary*

"John, Jude, and Revelation" by Alexander **Maclaren** in Volume 11 of *Maclaren's Expositions of Holy Scripture* (1959)

The Epistles of John by Donald **Burdick** (1970)

"The First Epistle of John" by Charles **Ryrie** in *The New Testament and Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (1971)

Be Real (commentary on 1 John) by Warren **Wiersbe** (1972)

"The First Epistle of John" by Benjamin **Chapman** in the *Liberty Commentary on the New Testament* (1978)

The Epistles of John by I. Howard **Marshall** in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (1978)

"1, 2, 3 John" by Glenn **Barker** in Volume 12 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (1981)

"1 John"; "2 John"; "3 John" by Zane **Hodges** in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (1983)

"James and I-III John" by Simon **Kistemaker** in *New Testament Commentary* (1986)

The Letters of John by John **Stott** in *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (1988)

The Epistles of John: An Expository Commentary by D. Edmond **Hiebert** (1991)

"Exposition of First John" class notes by Bruce **Compton**

"1, 2, 3 John" by Daniel **Akin** in *The New American Commentary* (2001)

“1-3 John” by John **MacArthur** in *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (2007)

“1-3 John” by Robert **Yarbrough** in *The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (2008)

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scriptural citations are from the NASB

Introduction to 1 John

(with corresponding discussion questions)

The book of 1 John is one of the eight New Testament books (Hebrews-Jude) that are called the “General Epistles.” They are entitled such because they are supposedly written to Christians in general, rather than to a specific church or individual (as in the case of the thirteen “Pauline Epistles”).¹

A unique feature of the epistle of 1 John is the fact that it contains neither the standard epistolary introduction (naming of writer, naming of recipients, greeting)² nor the standard epistolary conclusion (greetings, benediction)³.

Authorship

Nowhere in the epistle of 1 John does the writer identify himself by name⁴ (the same holds true for Hebrews, 2 John, and 3 John). From the contents of the epistle itself, we do know that the author was an eyewitness of the ministry of Christ (see 1:1-3). The authoritative tone of the epistle leads one to believe that it was written by an apostle. The apostle John fits both of these internal evidences.⁵ It is external evidence, however, that decisively tips the scales in favor of the apostle John as the author (rather than one of the other apostles). The uniform testimony of the early church was that John the apostle was the author of the epistles which bear his name.⁶

¹In reality, “general epistle” is somewhat of a misnomer, at least as far as 1 John is concerned, since most interpreters are of the opinion that John was writing to a group of churches under his oversight. For this reason, 1 John is considered by many to be a “circular letter,” i.e., one “meant to circulate throughout the geographic area where Johannine churches had been established” (Barker, p. 301).

²Hebrews also lacks the standard epistolary introduction.

³James also lacks the standard epistolary conclusion.

⁴Hiebert (p. 5) gives the probable reason for this phenomenon: “His relation to the readers was so well known that it was superfluous for the writer to declare his identity.”

⁵Assuming Johannine authorship of the gospel of John, another internal evidence for Johannine authorship of 1 John is the similarities between the gospel of John and 1 John. Hiebert (p. 7) calls the list of phrases common to both books “striking.” Robert Gromacki (p. 368 of his *New Testament Survey*) states: “Although [1 John] is anonymous, the similarities of vocabulary, thought phrases, and style of writing between it and the Gospel of John argue for the same author.” Marshall (p. 33) adds: “The Epistles of John stand closer to the Gospel [of John] in style and content than do any other writings to one another in the New Testament.”

⁶This was the opinion of 3rd century church fathers Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria,

John went from being a disciple of John the Baptist to a follower of Jesus (John 1:35-37), eventually becoming one of the twelve apostles (Matthew 10:2-4). His father was Zebedee (Mark 1:19-20), his mother Salome (compare Matthew 27:56 with Mark 15:40).⁷ John was a fisherman by trade (Mark 1:19-20). We know he had at least one sibling, his older (since he is always listed first) brother, James (Mark 1:19).⁸ Christ nicknamed James and John “the sons of thunder” (Mark 3:17), no doubt due to their tempestuous natures, as evidenced in Luke 9:54. Peter, James, and John (fishing partners—Luke 5:10) comprised the “inner circle” among the Twelve (Mark 5:37, 9:2, and 14:33).⁹ John was one of the “pillars” of the early church (Galatians 2:9). Besides 1 John, John also wrote the epistles of 2 John and 3 John, the Gospel of John, and Revelation. Most interpreters are of the opinion that in his later years John resided in Ephesus, overseeing the churches located in the Roman province of Asia (particularly the seven mentioned in Revelation 2 & 3), of which Ephesus was the capital.¹⁰ Kistemaker (p. 206) states in this regard: “The writer appears to have been a long-time resident in their area; he has taught and preached in their churches.” It is commonly believed that John was the last of the apostles to die, dying a natural death at the end of the 1st century A.D.

Recipients

As with the author, the recipients of the epistle are not specifically named. From the epistle itself, we do know that John was writing to believers (see 2:12-14, 21, 3:1-2, 13, 4:6, 5:13, 19, et. al.). As mentioned previously, it is the opinion of most interpreters (based on the testimony of church historians) that at the time the epistle of 1 John was written, John was residing in Ephesus and overseeing a group of churches in the Roman province of Asia, of which Ephesus was the capital. If so, the recipients of 1 John would have been the believers who were members of these churches, with whom John clearly had an endearing relationship (see 2:1, 7, 18, 28, 3:2, 7, 18, 21, 4:1, 4, 7,

Tertullian, and Origen.

⁷Based on a comparison of Matthew 27:56 with John 19:25, it may be that Salome and Mary, the mother of Jesus, were sisters (this may be the reason why Christ asked John to look after his mother in John 19:25-27). If so, Jesus and John would have been cousins.

⁸James was martyred by Herod Agrippa I in 44 A.D. (Acts 12:2).

⁹John and Peter are often closely associated (John 18:15-16, 20:2-8, Acts 3:1-4:23, and 8:14-24).

¹⁰In both 2 John 1 and 3 John 1, John calls himself “the elder.” Though “elder” is one of the Scriptural titles for the office of pastor, John was probably using the term in a different sense to indicate his apostolic authority and oversight (cf. Peter’s similar designation in 1 Peter 5:1). Notice that he calls himself “the” (not “an”) elder. Assuming John was the only living apostle at the time, this designation would be entirely appropriate.

11, and 21).

Place of Composition

The overwhelming majority of interpreters are of the opinion that John wrote the epistle of 1 John in Ephesus.

Date of Composition

The overwhelming majority of interpreters date the writing of 1 John in the later years of the 1st century A.D.¹¹ If so, 1 John was one of the last biblical books written. The five Johannine books were likely the last five biblical books to be written and were probably written in the order in which they appear in our New Testaments: Gospel of John, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, and Revelation.

Occasion

What occasioned or prompted John to write what he wrote in 1 John? In keeping with Paul's previous warning to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:29-30 (cf. Paul's words to Timothy, at that time Paul's apostolic representative in Ephesus, in 2 Timothy 3:1-7 and 4:3-4), false teachers had arisen from within (2:19) the congregations under John's oversight (2:18-26 and 4:1-6; cf. 3:7 and 2 John 7), necessitating a pointed response from John. These false teachers were "many" (2:18 and 4:1; cf. 2 John 7). Who exactly were they and what did they teach?

From statements made within the epistle itself, it is clear that these false teachers taught a perverted Christology (Christology being the doctrine of Christ), particularly in regards to the incarnation of Christ.¹² Notice especially 4:2-3 in this regard (cf. 2 John 7). Accordingly, John begins his epistle by immediately asserting the truth of Christ's incarnation (1:1-3¹³). Interpreters are divided as to the precise identification of these heretics. One possibility is that they were Gnostics. The Gnostics held to an absolute

¹¹Marshall (60s, 70s, 80s, or 90s A.D.); Hiebert (80-97 A.D.); Barker (85-90 A.D.); Robert Gromacki (85-95 A.D.); D.A. Carson, Douglas Moo, and Leon Morris (early 90s A.D.); Kistemaker (90-95 A.D.).

¹²"Incarnation" literally means "in flesh." It is the doctrine that teaches that the second person of the Godhead, God the Son, took on human flesh, thus becoming theanthropic (from *theos*, the Greek word for "God" and *anthropos*, the Greek word for "man")/the God-man. See John 1:14.

¹³In regards to 1 John 1:1, Millard Erickson (on pages 707-708 of his *Christian Theology*) states: "Touch was thought by the Greeks to be the most basic and most reliable of the senses, for it is a direct perception—no medium intervenes between the perceiver and the object perceived. Thus, when John speaks of having 'touched with our hands,' he is implying just how thoroughly physical was the manifestation of Jesus."

dichotomy between the material and the immaterial, viewing the first as evil and the second as good. Therefore, Christ could not have taken on human flesh, because the human body, being material, was evil. Since most historians are of the opinion that Gnosticism did not fully bloom until the 2nd century A.D., it is unlikely that these false teachers were Gnostics (furthermore, other aberrant teachings of the Gnostics receive no mention in 1 John). Another possibility is that these false teachers were Docetists. Docetism (from the Greek verb, *dokeo*, meaning “to appear or seem to be”) taught that Christ only appeared to be human. Yet another possibility is that these false teachers were Cerinthianists. Named after Cerinthus, a contemporary of John who, like John, resided in Ephesus, Cerinthianism taught that rather than the divine taking on the human, the human took on the divine. More specifically, Cerinthus taught that the human Jesus became divine at his baptism (the Christ spirit entered Jesus), then lost his divinity just prior to his crucifixion (the Christ spirit left Jesus). It may be that John’s words in 5:6 are penned with Cerinthianism in mind.¹⁴

Not only did these false teachers have a faulty theology, but also a deficient morality.¹⁵ Donald Burdick (quoted in Hiebert, p. 21) describes their false teaching as “perverted in its Christology and woefully deficient in its morality.” We can surmise this from John’s emphasis throughout the epistle on righteousness and love as a corrective. These false teachers claimed to be sinless (1:8 and 10), to have fellowship with Christ (1:6), to know Christ (2:4), to abide in Christ (2:6), to be in the Light (2:9), and to love God (4:20), yet their lives belied such a claim (1:6, 2:4, 9, and 4:20).

In the final analysis, a precise identification of the heretics is beyond our reach.

Purpose

Why did John write what he wrote in his first epistle? His purpose in writing appears to be two-fold: 1) to combat the false teaching/false teachers and, in so doing, to 2) give his readers a series of “tests”¹⁶ whereby they might identify the false teachers for who

¹⁴Adding credence to the position that the heresy John is combatting in 1 John is Cerinthianism is the historical anecdote related by Polycarp and recorded by Irenaeus: “There are also those who heard from him [Polycarp] that John, the disciple of the Lord, going to bathe at Ephesus, and perceiving Cerinthus within, rushed out of the bath-house without bathing, exclaiming, ‘Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within’” (Irenaeus, quoted by Kistemaker, p. 213).

¹⁵One, of course, must not separate the two. Wrong belief always leads to wrong behavior (belief determines behavior). Marshall (p. 21) states in this regard: “[John] has demonstrated the inner connection between right belief and ethical exhortation and shown how the latter depends on the former.”

¹⁶These “tests” can be combined into a 3-fold classification: 1) the doctrinal test—correct Christology; 2) the moral test—doing right (“God is light,” 1:5); and 3) the social test—loving others (“God is love,” 4:8 and 16).

they really were (unbelievers), as well as assure themselves of who they really were (believers). This John does by both an exposure of error and an affirmation of truth (see, for example, 1:6-7, 8-9, 2:4-5, 9-10, et. al.). “By their nature the revealed truths of the Christian gospel, which save and assure the true believer, also expose and condemn the errors of the heretic” (Hiebert, p. 20).

As far as an explicit statement of purpose is concerned, John appears to make three of them in the epistle (in 1:4, 2:1, and 5:13). Contextually, the first two apply only to what has immediately preceded. The third, 5:13, is the overall statement of purpose for the epistle. This being the case, it is interesting to note how the Gospel of John and the first epistle of John dovetail. Whereas the first has as its stated purpose the bringing of its readers to salvation (20:30-31), the second has as its stated purpose the assuring of its readers that they possess salvation (5:13). “[John’s] desire for the readers of the Gospel [of John] was that through faith they might receive life; for the readers of the letter [of 1 John] that they might know they already had it” (Stott, p. 26).

Outline/Structure

Hodges (p. 882) echoes the sentiment of almost every interpreter of 1 John when he states: “The First Epistle of John is notoriously difficult to outline.”¹⁷ Marshall (pp. 22-26) analyzes the outlines suggested by various commentators. Perhaps the best is that offered by Stott (p. 61):

- I. THE PREFACE (1:1-4)
- II. THE APOSTOLIC MESSAGE AND ITS MORAL IMPLICATIONS (1:5-2:2)
 - A. The denial that sin breaks our fellowship with God (1:6-7)
 - B. The denial that sin exists in our nature (1:8-9)
 - C. The denial that sin shows itself in our conduct (1:10-2:2)
- III. FIRST APPLICATION OF THE TESTS (2:3-27)
 - A. Obedience, or the moral test (2:3-6)
 - B. Love, or the social test (2:7-11)
 - C. A digression about the church (2:12-14)
 - D. A digression about the world (2:15-17)
 - E. Belief, or the doctrinal test (2:18-27)
- IV. SECOND APPLICATION OF THE TESTS (2:28-4:6)
 - A. An elaboration of the moral test: righteousness (2:28-3:10)
 - B. An elaboration of the social test: love (3:11-18)
 - C. A digression about assurance and the condemning heart (3:19-24)
 - D. An elaboration of the doctrinal test: belief (4:1-6)
- V. THIRD APPLICATION OF THE TESTS (4:7-5:5)

¹⁷“Any hurried attempt to set forth in logical outline the contents of this epistle will inevitably result in frustration” (Hiebert, p. 24). “Probably few commentators have satisfied themselves with their own analysis of this Epistle: still fewer have satisfied other people” (Alfred Plummer, quoted in Hiebert, p. 24).

- A. A further elaboration of the social test: love (4:7-12)
- B. A combination of the doctrinal and social tests (4:13-21)
- C. A combination of the three tests (5:1-5)
- VI. THE THREE WITNESSES AND OUR CONSEQUENT ASSURANCE (5:6-17)
 - A. The three witnesses (5:6-12)
 - B. Our consequent assurance (5:13-17)
- VII. THREE AFFIRMATIONS AND A CONCLUDING EXHORTATION (5:18-21)

A perusal of Stott's outline reveals how John keeps coming back to the three tests (doctrinal, moral, and social) throughout the epistle in, what some have described as, an ascending spiral.

Steve Thomas (in an article on 1 John in the July-August 2001 issue of *Sola!*) interestingly points out the similarity in structure between the Gospel of John and the first epistle of John (a further indicator that the apostle John wrote 1 John, assuming he wrote the Gospel bearing his name):

- Christological prologue (John 1:1-18; 1 John 1:1-4)
- Body (John 1:19-20:30; 1 John 1:5-5:12)
- Statement of Purpose (John 20:31; 1 John 5:13)
- Epilogue (John 21; 1 John 5:14-21)

Tone/Style

1 John is a fascinating blend of toughness and tenderness. It is at the same time both pastoral¹⁸ and polemical (from the Greek word for "war," *polemos*). It is tender/pastoral in that John is obviously fond of his readers (see once again 2:1, 7, 18, 28, 3:2, 7, 18, 21, 4:1, 4, 7, 11, and 21). Here we have John living up to his reputation as the "apostle of love." However, it is also tough/polemical, as John blasts away at the false teachers. John calls them liars (2:4, 22, and 4:20; cf. 1:6), antichrists (2:18 and 22; cf. 4:3), children of the devil (3:8 and 10), and false prophets (4:1). Here we have John living up to his reputation as a "son of thunder." "No other writer in the New Testament uses stronger words in denunciation of sin and error than John" (Hiebert, p. 25).

Outstanding Features of 1 John

1. Prominence of the word, "love." The word "love" and its derivatives are found 51 times in the epistle (see especially 4:7-21). No wonder John is designated "the apostle of love."

¹⁸Marshall (p. 14) calls 1 John "a written sermon or pastoral address." Stott (p. 17) calls it "a truly pastoral letter sent by a pastor to his flock."

2. Prominence of the word, “know.” The word, “know” and its derivatives are found 41 times in the epistle. Knowledge is the key to the Christian life. Knowledge is the key to assurance of salvation (see 2:3, 5, 3:14, 19, 24, 4:13, and 5:13). Knowledge in 1 John is both theoretical (know that) and relational (know). See, for example, 2:3.
3. The “Johannine Comma”¹⁹. One of the most well-known textual problems in all of Scripture is found in 1 John 5. Compare the reading of the NASB with that of the KJV at 1 John 5:7-8. Depending on your perspective, the KJV adds the words “in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth,” while the NASB omits them. The question is: Are they original (i.e., did John write them when he wrote 1 John, only to have them omitted by a scribe at a later point or did John not write them when he wrote 1 John, only to have them inserted by a scribe at a later point)? The overwhelming majority of textual scholars believe that they were later inserted by a scribe.²⁰ Especially fascinating is the fact that Erasmus did not include them in his first two editions of the Textus Receptus (the Greek New Testament upon which the KJV is based), because none of the Greek manuscripts he possessed contained them. Erasmus, however, promised to include them in future editions of the TR if such a manuscript could be produced. Low and behold, such a manuscript was “produced” (with the ink still drying, as some have said tongue-in-cheek), forcing Erasmus (who doubted the manuscript’s legitimacy, but was nevertheless bound by his promise) to include it in his 3rd edition of the TR. Since the New Testament of the KJV was translated from the most recent edition of the TR, the Johannine Comma is found in the KJV to this very day. Adding further credence to the position that the Johannine Comma is spurious is the fact that these words are not cited by the defenders of the trinity of God during any of the Trinitarian controversies in the early centuries of the church.

Other Resources Consulted for This Lesson

An Introduction to the New Testament by D. A. Carson, Douglas Moo, and Leon Morris

New Testament Survey by Robert Gromacki

The New Open Bible, Study Edition

The Zondervan NASB Study Bible

¹⁹The term, “comma” comes from the Greek word for “short clause,” *komma* (Hiebert, p. 27).

²⁰“The external evidence is overwhelming against the authenticity of these words” (Hiebert, p. 27).

Discussion Questions for Introduction to 1 John

1. A study of 1 John shows the apostle John to be a fascinating blend of toughness (living up to his nickname as a “son of thunder”) and tenderness (living up to his being known as the “apostle of love”). Towards whom is his toughness directed in the book of 1 John?

Answer: towards the false teachers

Why do you suppose John is so tough on them when writing to his readers about them?

Suggested answer: because false teaching is so harmful—see, for example, 2 Timothy 2:17

So, are toughness and tenderness mutually exclusive?

Answer: no

Can you have one with the other?

Answer: yes

Why?

Suggested answer: because if you truly love someone, you will warn him about what is harmful to him

According to 2 Timothy 2:24-26, when dealing directly with those in error, what should our position be, and what should our disposition be?

Suggested answer: tough in position, tender in disposition (as Ephesians 4:15 says, speaking the truth in love)

2. Why is it so important that, like the apostle John in the book of 1 John, we fight against the falsehood of denying the Incarnation?

Suggested answer: because if God the Son did not become incarnate (add humanity to His deity), we could not be saved, because it takes the life and death of a God-man to save mankind. His humanity made it possible for Him to live a human life in man’s place and die a human death in man’s place. His deity made His life a perfect one, providing the righteousness we need to be declared right in God’s sight/justified. His deity made His death one of infinite value, capable of paying our infinite sin debt.

3. Is assurance/the certainty that we are saved based on profession, practice, or both?

Answer: both—one must profess or believe correctly about Christ/correct Christology, as well as practice his profession or behave correctly/Christianly, which includes consistently correct conduct and concern for Christians.

What is the problem with basing assurance of salvation **solely** on a filled-out decision card, a date written in one's Bible, etc.? (not that it is necessarily wrong to fill out a decision card or write the date of one's salvation down)

*Suggested answer: because it is based solely on profession and not also on practice; note: remember, we are speaking here of **assurance** of salvation, not of salvation itself. Salvation itself is based on faith alone, with a genuine profession being the means of expressing such faith. The assurance of that salvation, however, comes about when we not only continue to believe, but also behave, as a Christian, for the root of genuine saving faith invariably results in the fruit of good works.*

1 John 1:1-2:2

(with corresponding discussion questions)

As with his Gospel (see John 1:1-18), John begins his first epistle with a “prologue,” a preface of sorts, in 1:1-4.²¹ John begins the body of the epistle (1:5-5:12) by declaring that “God is Light” (1:5) and that those who “have fellowship with Him” (1:6), believers, will “walk in the Light” (1:7). Those who walk in the Light still sin (1:8, 10), though they should not resign themselves to the fact (2:1a). When they do sin, however, they will confess (1:9) and Christ will cleanse (1:7, 9, and 2:1b-2).

PROLOGUE (1:1-4)

1:1

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—

Interpreting John’s prologue to his first epistle, as interpreting his prologue to his Gospel, is quite challenging. Much of what makes interpreting this prologue tricky is that it blends a what with a Who, the what being the truth about the Who, Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:23 and 2 Corinthians 4:5). John and the other apostles (the “we,” “us,” and “our” throughout the prologue) were proclaiming (verses 1-3 are one sentence in the Greek, with “proclaim” as the main verb) a message “concerning the Word of Life.” Based on a comparison of this prologue with the prologue to the Gospel of John (cf. Revelation 19:13), some see “the Word of Life” as reference to Christ Himself. More precisely, it refers to the message about Christ (cf. John 6:68, Acts 5:20, and Philippians 2:16), which is designated the Word “of Life” because Christ is “the life”²² (John 11:25, 14:6, and 1 John 1:2). The object of the apostolic message was “what was from the beginning,” most likely an allusion to Christ’s eternality, His existence prior to the establishment of time as we know it in Genesis 1:1 (cf. John 1:1-2 and 1 John 2:13-14). As mentioned in the introductory lesson, one of John’s purposes for writing was to combat a heresy that denied Christ’s incarnation. As the epistle opens, John immediately attacks this error²³ by affirming the truth of the full humanity of Christ, informing his readers that he was among those who heard²⁴ (cf. verse 3), saw (cf.

²¹These prologues have many striking similarities.

²²“Word of Life” in 1 John 1:1 is literally “Word of the Life.”

²³“With these introductory words, the apostle directed his first shafts at the heresy with which he was concerned” (Hodges, p. 883).

²⁴Commenting on the fact that the apostles had both seen and heard, Kistemaker (p. 237) and Henry (p. 1061) says that they were “eyewitnesses and earwitnesses.”

verses 2 and 3), and touched²⁵ Jesus.²⁶

1:2

and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us—

Verse 2 is somewhat parenthetical (thus, it is offset by a dash in the NASB; the KJV puts it in parentheses), as John further develops the thought with which he ended verse 1, that of Christ being “the life” (cf. John 1:4). John says that “the life was manifested,” an allusion to the Incarnation, which John personally witnessed (“have seen”) and to which he was now bearing witness (“testify”). See John 19:35, 21:24, and Acts 4:20). John calls Christ not only “the life,” but also “the eternal life” (cf. 5:20). Eternal life is more a *quality* of life than a *quantity* of life.²⁷ It is life that is divine in quality, a life unlike any other, infinite both in quality and in quantity. Because Christ is divine, He is the essence of eternal life (and, thus, can be called so). He can, therefore, give eternal life (John 10:28 and 1 John 5:11; cf. 2 Peter 1:4). Prior to His becoming incarnate, Christ was “with the Father” (cf. John 1:1-2).

1:3

what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.

John now gives the purpose for (“so that”) the apostolic proclamation concerning Christ: that others might come to know the Father and the Son in the same intimate way that the apostles did (cf. John 17:3) and might, thereby, be able to fellowship with them.

²⁵Touch being the most conclusive proof of material reality (Stott, p. 65). See footnote 13.

²⁶The verbs, “heard” and “seen” are in the Greek perfect tense, indicating a past action with ongoing effects. Hiebert (p. 38), in discussing the verb, “heard,” points to the potential significance: “Their relationship as His personal hearers has been terminated, but the perfect tense, ‘have heard,’ implies that the revelation received, the message He communicated, still rings in John’s ears” (cf. Burdick, p. 19). The verbs “looked at” and “touched” are in the aorist tense, indicating a one-time occurrence. Some are of the opinion that John specifically has in mind the appearance of Christ to the disciples in the Upper Room on the night of His resurrection (see Luke 24:39; cf. His appearance a week later in John 20:27). Burdick (p. 19) says that the verb translated “looked at” is one that “describes a careful and deliberate inspection of the object in view.” MacArthur (p. 16) likewise says that it describes “a long, searching gaze.”

²⁷“‘Eternal life’ underscores the divine character of the life described, not its length” (Barker, p. 307).

Vertical fellowship with God is the basis of horizontal fellowship with other believers. The word, “fellowship” carries with it the idea of sharing something in common. Christian fellowship is impossible apart from a commonly-held relationship with the Father and Son (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:9).²⁸ With the words, “His Son Jesus Christ,” emphasizing the full humanity (“Jesus”) and the full deity (“His Son”) of the one person, Jesus Christ, John may very well be giving the heretics a “side-glance” (Stott, p. 69).

1:4

These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.

In 3 John 4, John states that he has “no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.” The heretics that threatened the churches John oversaw were no doubt threatening the theological stability of the believers within them. To counter this threat, John wrote “these things” (a reference to what he has just said in 1:1-3) to reinforce his children in the truth in order that his²⁹ joy might be made complete (cf. Philippians 2:2), a joy that Hiebert (p. 50) describes as “the joy of the Christian teachers whose hearts rejoice when they observe that the message is effective in the lives of their hearers.”

²⁸The absence of the Holy Spirit’s name at the end of verse 3 is quite conspicuous. As to the reason for its absence, we can only speculate. Since the nature of the person of Jesus Christ was the target of the false teachers’ attacks, perhaps John mentions only the Father and the Son as a way of focusing his readers’ attention on the true nature of Jesus Christ (in other words, it was not that John did not believe that the believer’s fellowship is also with the Spirit [it is—2 Corinthians 13:14 and Philippians 4:1], but that mentioning the Spirit might cause his readers to miss his Christological emphasis).

²⁹Here in verse 4, John is likely using the so-called “editorial we.” Though he uses the plural (“we” and “our”), he is ultimately referring to himself, singular.

Discussion Questions for 1 John 1:1-4

1. In verse 1, John calls Jesus “the Word of Life.” In what sense is Jesus “the Word?”

Suggested answer: He is the ultimate revelation of God; see Hebrews 1:2a and 3a.

In what sense is Jesus the Word “of life”?

Suggested answer: He, being God, is the essence of real life, eternal life, life that is divine in its quality, John 1:4, John 14:6’s “the life,” 1 John 1:2, and 1 John 5:20.

In what sense is the Word of God “the word of life” (Philippians 2:16; cf. John 6:68 and Acts 5:20)?

Suggested answers: it is a revelation from God [“the word”], and is, therefore, life, John 6:63; it is also able to give eternal life when one believes what It, the Word of Life, says about Jesus Christ, the Word of life, John 3:36a and 1 John 5:11-12a.

2. In verses 1-3, we read of how John and the other apostles physically saw Christ. According to materialism, in order for something to be real or believable, one must actually see it (“seeing is believing”). According to John 20:29, 2 Corinthians 5:7, Hebrews 11:1b, and 1 Peter 1:8, do we have to physically see Christ in order to believe in Him?

Answer: no

3. Verse 3 mentions the subject of fellowship (*koinonia*, having things in common), both vertical fellowship (fellowship between the believer and God) and horizontal fellowship (fellowship between believers).

What do the following verses say about the existence of vertical fellowship, i.e., what do all believers have in common by virtue of their common connection to God?

1 John 1:3 and 1 Corinthians 1:9

Answer: a common connection to God the Father and to God the Son, Jesus Christ

2 Corinthians 13:14, Ephesians 4:3, and Philippians 2:1

Answer: a common connection to God the Holy Spirit

Ephesians 4:4-6

Answer: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one

God and Father

What do the following verses say about the expression of horizontal fellowship, i.e., in what ways is fellowship among believers communicated?

1 Corinthians 10:16

Answer: observing the Lord's Supper together

Acts 1:14, 4:24, and 12:12

Answer: praying together

Acts 2:46a and Hebrews 10:25a

Answer: worshipping together

Acts 2:46b

Answer: eating together

Acts 2:44b-45 and 2 Corinthians 8:4

Answer: being benevolent towards fellow believers

Philippians 1:5 and 4:14-15

Answer: partnering in getting out the gospel

BODY (1:5-5:12)

1:5

This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.

In verse 3, John said that what he and the other apostles had heard and seen concerning Christ they proclaimed. One of the things they heard from Christ (“from Him”) was the truth that “God is Light.”³⁰ John often refers to Jesus as “the Light” in his Gospel (see John 1:4-9, 3:19-21, 8:12, 9:5, 12:35-36, and 46). “Light” in Scripture is symbolic of God’s revelatory activity (cf. Psalm 119:105, 130, and Proverbs 6:23) and of His purity. The second is John’s focus here. Light means the absence of darkness (darkness ≈ impurity; cf. Isaiah 5:20 and John 3:19-21). Light and darkness cannot coexist (2 Corinthians 6:14).³¹ John emphatically³² states that there is no darkness in God, Who “dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Timothy 6:16). Negatively, God is untainted by impurity/absence of vice (“no darkness at all”). Positively, He is the epitome of purity/presence of virtue (“Light”).

1:6

If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth;

Throughout this epistle, John uses the formula, “If we say” Most interpreters believe that each time John uses this formula he is articulating one of the claims of the false teachers he is combatting. One such claim they made was to have fellowship with God. In order to have fellowship with another, both parties must have something in common (see comments on verse 3 above). It was clear to John that these false teachers and God had nothing in common, God being light (verse 5) and the false teachers walking in the realm of darkness (cf. John 8:12 and 1 John 2:11). The Greek verb translated “walk” is in the present tense, indicating a continuous, ongoing, habitual pattern, a lifestyle (“are walking” would be a more literal translation). Thus, their claim to be in fellowship with God was erroneous (“a lie”). Though they were *professors* (they professed to have fellowship with God), they were not *possessors* (they did not possess

³⁰The Gospels do not record this saying of Jesus. However, it must be remembered that the Gospels were never intended to be exhaustive (see, for example, John 20:30 and 21:25).

³¹“Light and darkness represent two antithetical realms that cannot be mixed. They do not overlap, and there is no neutral zone between them” (Hiebert, p. 58).

³²John uses an emphatic double negative, as the Greek literally reads: “darkness in Him not is none.” Our English versions bring out the emphasis by translating the second negative “at all” (so KJV, NASB, NIV, and ESV). Hiebert (p. 58) translates it “not one bit,” as does Burdick (p. 23) and Chapman (p. 719).

what they professed to possess). Actions, not words, are the ultimate determinative (see Matthew 7:21).³³ Mere professors “do not practice the truth” (cf. John 3:21); possessors do. Our practice must match our profession. Truth is practical and is to be practiced.

1:7

but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.

John gives the corrective to the error espoused by the false teachers in verse 6. The corrective to walking in the darkness is walking in the Light (cf. Isaiah 2:5), i.e., living a life characterized by purity (cf. Ephesians 5:8-14). God has called believers “out of darkness [cf. Colossians 1:13] into His marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9), making them “sons of light and sons of day ... not of night nor of darkness” (1 Thessalonians 5:5). Those whose lives are characterized (“walk”; literally “are walking”) by purity (“in the Light”) give evidence of the fact that they have fellowship with God (“as He Himself is in the Light”) and can, thereby (cf. comments on verse 3), have fellowship with other believers (“have fellowship with one another”).³⁴ Walking in the light ≠ sinlessness, as John will go on to explicitly state in the verses to follow. In the latter half of verse 7, John implies this truth when he states that the believer’s sin is cleansed by Christ (cf. verse 9). Specifically, it is “the blood of Jesus” (“blood of Jesus” is a metaphor that primarily and ultimately refers to the violent, bloody death of Christ on the Cross; compare Romans 5:9 with Romans 5:10) that washes away the stain of sin (cf. Isaiah 1:18, John 1:29, Ephesians 1:7, and Revelation 1:5). Significantly, it is the death of “Jesus His Son” that washes sin’s stain away, indicative of the fact that only the death of a God-man can do so. Christ’s humanity (“Jesus”) made His death possible (God cannot die—1 Timothy 1:17 and 6:16), while His deity (“His Son”) made His death powerful enough to wash sin’s stain away (only the death of an infinite being is infinitely valuable enough to pay the infinite debt incurred by a crime of infinite proportions, sin; sin is a crime of infinite proportions because it is committed against an infinite God). The blood of Jesus cleanses the believer from “all” sin (cf. Colossians 2:13 and 1 John 1:9’s “all unrighteousness”): past, present³⁵, and future.

³³“Whenever there is a clear conflict between an individual’s ‘talk’ and his ‘walk,’ it is always his walk and not his talk that reveals what he really is” (Hiebert, p. 61).

³⁴Hiebert (p. 62) points out the flip side: “He who consistently has trouble maintaining fellowship with others walking in the light should examine his own claim of fellowship with God.”

³⁵The Greek verb translated “cleanses” is in the present tense (literally “is cleansing”).

1:8

If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.

Another false claim made by the false teachers in John's day was the claim to be without a sin nature (the original literally reads: "if we say that sin we are not having"). Those who make such a claim are not fooling anyone but themselves,³⁶ showing themselves to be unbelievers, those in whose hearts the truth has not found a home ("the truth is not in us").

³⁶The Greek literally reads "ourselves we deceive," "ourselves" being placed first, for emphasis. In other words, we are only fooling ourselves when we make such an outlandish claim.

Discussion Questions for 1 John 1:5-8

1. According to verse 6, can one be a Christian and be characterized by consistently corrupt conduct?

Answer: no

Why or why not?

Answer: because a Christian is connected to God/has fellowship with God [v. 6a], and God is incorrupt/light [v. 5]; see also v. 7a

2. According to verse 7, what might we be able to imply about someone who is unable to get along with believers?

Suggested answer: that they may not be in the Light/may not have had their sins forgiven/may not be saved (i.e., have them check their salvation); or, if saved, that there is something awry in their vertical relationship with God/that they are in some way(s) not walking in the light (i.e., have them check their sanctification)

3. (based on verse 8) Why is it that someone who claims to have no sin is not saved?

Suggested answer: because salvation is salvation from sin, and one has to admit his sinfulness in order to be saved from it—see, for example, Luke 18:13-14

1:9

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

The corrective to the error espoused by the false teachers in verse 8 is acknowledgment of sin. Rather than denying that we are sinners (and, therefore, sin), we must say the same thing about our sin that God does (the Greek verb translated “confess” literally means “to say the same thing”). Inherent in true confession is not only an acknowledgment of sin, but also a determination to turn from it/forsake it (cf. Proverbs 28:13). Those who confess their sins, believers, are forgiven (cf. 2 Samuel 12:13, Psalm 32:5, Isaiah 6:5-7, and Luke 18:13-14) and cleansed by the blood of Christ (cf. verse 7 and comments on).³⁷ In forgiving the repentant sinner, God is “faithful” to His promise to forgive (cf. Hebrews 10:23b and 11:11) and “righteous,” because Christ, “the righteous” (2:1), paid the penalty for the believer’s sins on the Cross (cf. Romans 3:25b-26).

1:10

If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.

Another false claim made by the false teachers, similar to the previous one (in 1:8)³⁸, is the claim not to have sinned. John’s response to such a claim is quite forceful. The person who makes such a claim makes God a liar³⁹ (cf. 5:10) “reduces God to the level of the Devil (cf. John 8:44)” (Hiebert, p. 68), saying in essence that God is not telling the truth when He tells us in His Word that all men are sinners (1 Kings 8:46, 2 Chronicles 6:36, Psalm 14:3, 53:3, 143:2, Proverbs 20:9, Ecclesiastes 7:20, and Romans 3:10-12 and 23). Such an individual has rejected God’s Word, showing that God’s Word does not have a place in his heart (“His word is not in us”⁴⁰; cf. John 5:38, 8:37, and 1 John

³⁷Contextually, John’s point in 1:9 is that those who confess (literally “are confessing,” i.e., as a typical practice) their sins show themselves to be true believers, as opposed to the unbelieving false teachers, who deny being sinners (1:8) or having sinned (1:10). Only a converted person, due to the illuminating work of the Spirit, grasps the significance of his sin, so much so that he truly acknowledges it, confesses it, and repents of it whenever the Spirit convicts/convinces him of it (see John 16:8). The unbeliever, not having the Spirit (Romans 8:9b), never becomes convicted enough about his sin to truly confess it.

³⁸The difference between the claim of 1:8 and the claim of 1:10 is that the first is a claim not to have a sin nature/be a sinner, while the second is a claim not to have sinned. In the final analysis, there is not much difference between the two, as the one cannot be true without the other also being true.

³⁹The Greek literally reads: “a liar we are making him,” “liar” being first in the sentence, for emphasis.

⁴⁰“His word is not in us” in 1:10 parallels “the truth is not in us” in 1:8. God’s Word is

2:14). On the surface, this verse seems to contradict John's teaching elsewhere in the epistle (in 3:6, 8, 9, and 5:18). However, John's point in these verses is that a true believer's life will not be characterized by sin (the verbs are in the present tense), not that he will never sin.

2:1

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;

Lest his words at the end of chapter 1 on the reality of sin in the life of the believer be misconstrued to mean that sin is no big deal (after all, everybody's doing it), John is quick to inform his readers (his "little children"⁴¹) that "I am writing these things (what he has written in 1:5-10) to you so that you may not sin." John is skillfully navigating between the two extremes of being unable to sin and not being able not to sin. John was an optimistic realist. Though he was hopeful that his readers would not sin, he knew that they would. When⁴² they sinned, they need not despair, because they "have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." The word, "Advocate" is the Greek noun, *paraclete*. The Holy Spirit is called such in John 14:16, 26, 15:26, and 16:7. Jesus implicitly calls Himself such in John 14:16, calling the Holy Spirit "another" Helper, the implication being that He Himself is also one.⁴³ A *paraclete* is someone called alongside to help another (the noun is derived from the Greek verb, *parakaleo*, the Greek preposition, *para*, "beside, alongside" + the Greek verb, *kaleo*, "to call"). It has the idea of both strengthener/encourager/helper/comforter and advocate/legal counselor/intercessor. Jesus is our Advocate with the Father in the sense that He comes alongside us to argue our case before the Father's bar of justice (NIV: "speaks to the Father in our defense"). This does not imply that the Father is a reluctant Judge, needing to be cajoled into ruling in the believer's favor, for it is the Father Himself who sent the Son into the world for the believer's spiritual well-being (John 3:17). The precise nature of Jesus' advocacy on the believer's behalf is open to debate. Henry Sweete (quoted on page 247 of *Jesus Christ our Lord* by John Walvoord) is among those who view it as more passive than active: "The intercession of the Ascended Christ is not a prayer, but a life. The New Testament does not represent Him as . . . standing ever before the Father, and with outstretched arms . . . and with strong crying and tears

truth (John 17:17b).

⁴¹This Johannine term of endearment was one that John heard from the lips of Jesus (John 13:33). Paul also uses it in 1 Corinthians 4:14 and Galatians 4:19.

⁴²John actually says "if," perhaps his way of saying that the believer's attitude toward sin should not be one of resignation, but one of resistance.

⁴³Jesus' advocacy in our behalf is also spoken of in such passages as Romans 8:34, 1 Timothy 2:5, Hebrews 7:25, and 9:24.

pleading our cause in the presence of a reluctant God.” Calvin (p. 171) likewise states: “The intercession of Christ is a continued application of his death for our salvation.” So also Compton (p. 6): “...[T]he Father has accepted the Son’s sacrifice and has raised Him and exalted Him to His right hand. It is on this basis that the Lord intercedes on behalf of those who are saved.” His death is the grounds upon which He rests His case (Marshall, p. 117).

2:2

And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.

Christ’s advocacy is effectual because His death propitiates (appeases, pacifies, satisfies) the wrath of the Father towards man’s sin (cf. Hebrews 2:17).⁴⁴ The Greek noun translated “propitiation” “carries the idea of an offering made by a guilty person in order to placate or appease the person who has been offended” (Barker, p. 314). God’s wrath towards human sin (John 3:36, Romans 1:18, 2:5, 8, 3:5, 5:9, and Ephesians 5:6), however, cannot be appeased by any offering the sinner himself might make. If God’s wrath toward the sinner is going to be appeased, God Himself must intercede on the believer’s behalf, offering Himself as the offering. This is what God did in the person of Jesus Christ (cf. Romans 3:25 and 1 John 4:10). The last half of this verse is a significant one in the debate regarding the extent of Christ’s atonement (limited or unlimited). This verse is one of many in Scripture that clearly teach that Christ’s atonement is unlimited in extent (cf. John 1:29b, 3:16a, 6:51b, 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, 19, 1 Timothy 2:6a, 4:10b, Titus 2:11, Hebrews 2:9, and 2 Peter 2:1).⁴⁵

⁴⁴Likely due to aversion towards the thought of a wrathful God, some translations have watered down the Greek noun translated “propitiation” (by the NASB, ESV, and KJV) here in 2:2. For example, the NIV seems to do so by translating it “atoning sacrifice” (however, it does offer as an alternate translation: “one who turns aside God’s wrath”).

⁴⁵Ultimately, there is a sense in which Christ’s atonement is limited and a sense in which it is unlimited (see 1 Timothy 4:10). It is unlimited in its accomplishment (sufficient for all), but limited in its application (efficient only for the saved). “The atonement is unlimited, the whole human race might be saved through it; the application of the atonement is limited, only those who repent and believe are actually saved by it” (A. H. Strong, quoted in Dr. Rolland McCune, “Systematic Theology II” class notes, p. 150).

Discussion Questions for 1 John 1:9-2:2

1. Why is it righteous or just for God to forgive the believer's sins (1:9)?

Answer: because the infinitely-valuable death of Christ atoned for them/paid the infinite price for them, thereby justly satisfying God's infinite wrath against them; see Romans 3:25-26

2. What might be inferred from what John says at the end of 1:8 and at the end of 1:10?

Suggested answer: according to 1:8, a denial of sin means that the truth is not in us, while according to 1:10, a denial of sin means that God's Word is not in us; therefore, the implication is that God's Word is truth, John 17:17b

3. How might one reconcile what is said in 1:10 with what is later said in 3:6, 3:9, and 5:18a?

Suggested answer: while a believer sins [the point of 1:10], his life will not be characterized by sin [the point of 3:6, 9, and 5:18a]

4. Does 2:2 teach universalism, the belief of some that, in the end, all men will be saved?

Answer: no

Why or why not?

Suggested answer: all men are potentially savable because Christ's death is sufficient for all [in this sense, an unlimited atonement], but only those who believe in Christ are actually saved

1 John 2:3-17

In this section of the epistle, John continues to hammer away at the truth that someone who is truly saved will give evidence of the fact by the way he lives. This includes keeping God's commandments/Word (2:3-5a), walking as Jesus walked (2:5b-6), loving the brethren (2:7-11), and not loving the world (2:15-17).

2:3

By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments.

The word, "know" and its derivatives are prominent in the first epistle of John (see the section in the introductory lesson entitled "Outstanding Features of 1 John").⁴⁶ Here in verse 3, we have "know" being used in two different senses, "know that" and "know." We are cognitive of the fact that ("know that") we have a relationship with God ("know"; cf. John 17:3) if we keep His commandments.⁴⁷ As is the case throughout this epistle, the verb tenses in this verse are significant. The Greek verb translated "have come to know" is in the perfect tense, signifying a past, point-in-time event with ongoing effects ("have come to know and continue to know"). The believer comes to know/enters into a relationship with God at a point-in-time in the past (at the moment of conversion), and this relationship continues unabated for all eternity. The Greek verb translated "keep" is in the present tense ("are keeping"), signifying that keeping God's commandments characterizes the life of the true believer. The Greek verb translated "keep" connotes that the true believer makes a concerned, concentrated, careful effort to keep God's commandments. Keeping God's commandments involves not only not doing what God prohibits (the "thou shalt not"s), but also doing what God prescribes (the "thou shalt"s).

2:4

The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him;

Those who do not know God do not keep His commandments (cf. Hosea 4:1-2). The false teachers were claiming to have come to know God, but were not keeping His commandments, thus showing their claim to be a false one (cf. Titus 1:16). Once again, John minces no words in telling these false teachers what they really were, liars (cf. 1:6

⁴⁶One possible reason for the prominence of the word, "know" in 1 John is the possibility that John may have been combatting an incipient form of the heresy known as Gnosticism. Gnosticism (from the Greek word, *gnosis*, meaning knowledge) taught that one is saved by being the recipient of a special, esoteric knowledge.

⁴⁷Once again (cf. comments on 1:6), one's actions are the ultimate determinant of one's spiritual condition. Ultimately, we know that we are saved if we keep God's commandments, not if we walked an aisle, raised a hand, prayed a prayer, filled out a decision card, etc.

and 4:20). They were “living a lie.” Those whose practice does not match their profession are devoid of the truth (“the truth is not in him”; cf. 1:8). They profess salvation, but do not possess salvation.

2:5

but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him:

Keeping God’s Word (verse 5a) is synonymous with keeping His commandments (verses 3-4). The one who keeps God’s Word, the believer, “in him the love of God has truly been perfected” (cf. 4:12). Interpreters are divided as to whether “love of God” is referring to God’s love for the believer (“of God” as a “subjective genitive,” as in 3:17 and 4:12) or the believer’s love for God (“of God” as an “objective genitive”). The NIV’s translation, “God’s love is truly made complete in him,” reflects the first, while the NIV’s alternate translation, “love for God is truly made complete in him,” reflects the second. Among those in favor of the first are Hiebert, Yarbrough, and Kistemaker. Among those in favor of the second are Stott, Akin, MacArthur, Henry, Burdick, Compton, Maclaren, Chapman, and Ryrie. Based on such Johannine passages as John 14:15, 21a, 23a, 24a, and 1 John 5:3, the second is probably the better option (so also in 2:15). Those who keep God’s Word thereby show that their love for God has been “perfected,” i.e., matured or made complete. Compton (p. 7) says it has reached its intended goal. Burdick (p. 30) adds that the goal is obedience (to the degree that we do not obey God, to that degree our love for Him is lacking). Both the NASB and the NIV translators take the latter half of verse 5 with verse 6 (notice the colon that ends verse 5 in both translations), while the KJV takes it with verse 5 (notice the colon in the middle of verse 5 in the KJV). Most interpreters take it with verse 6.

2:6

the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.

Here is another “test” whereby one may know that he is a true believer. “In Him” in verse 5b is synonymous with “abides in Him” in verse 6. Contextually (based on the words that end verse 6), the “Him” is Christ (cf. 5:20). To be in Christ or to abide in Christ means to be spiritually connected to Him (cf. John 15’s vine-branch metaphor). Just as “in Him” [God] we live and move and exist” physically (Acts 17:28), so in Christ we exist spiritually. Christ is our spiritual lifeline. Though in position the believer is already connected to Christ (compare John 6:54 with John 6:56; cf. 1 John 3:6 and 4:15), he is commanded in practice to keep his connection to Christ (John 15:4 and 1 John 2:28). Inherent in the idea of “abiding” is the doctrine of perseverance, the teaching that a true believer will actively persevere in the faith/belief and in faithfulness/behavior. A telltale sign that one is abiding in Christ (i.e., is a believer) is walking (the Greek verb translated “walk” is in the present tense)/living like Jesus

walked/lived.⁴⁸ The believer can have Christ-like behavior only by abiding in Christ (John 15:4-5) through the Word (John 15:7). The Scriptures are replete with admonitions for the believer to imitate Christ: His love (John 13:34, 15:12, Ephesians 5:2, 25, and 1 John 3:16); His servant's spirit (John 13:14-15); His purity (1 John 3:3); His humility (Philippians 2:5-8); His righteousness (1 John 3:7); and His suffering (1 Peter 2:21). Inherent in the idea of "walking" is making progress. A believer should always be making progress towards the finish line (Philippians 3:12-14).⁴⁹

⁴⁸“We cannot claim to live in him unless we behave like him” (Stott, p. 97).

⁴⁹I am reminded of something a former pastor of mine once said: “Age does not indicate how far you’ve traveled on the road of life, just how long you’ve been on it.”

Discussion Questions for 1 John 2:3-6

1. What teaching is implied by John's use of a perfect tense verb for the second "know" in verse 3 (which the NASB translates: "we have come to know")? Note: a perfect tense verb signifies a past, point-in-time action with ongoing results (we could translate: "we have come to know and continue to know")

Answer: eternal security

2. Verse 6 tells us to walk/live as Christ did. According to the following verses, what aspects of Christ's life are we specifically to imitate?

John 13:34, 15:12, Ephesians 5:2, Ephesians 5:25, 1 John 3:16

Answer: His love

John 13:14-15

Answer: His servant's spirit

1 John 3:3

Answer: His purity

Philippians 2:5-8

Answer: His humility

1 John 3:7

Answer: His righteousness

1 Peter 2:21

Answer: His suffering

Romans 15:7

Answer: His receiving or accepting of others

Romans 15:2-3

Answer: His pleasing others

Hebrews 12:1-3

Answer: His endurance

Ephesians 4:32, Colossians 3:13

Answer: His forgiveness

2:7

Beloved, I am not writing a new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you have heard.

The true believer will keep God's commandments (verses 3-4). In verses 7-11, John zeroes in on one of God's commandments, the commandment to love one's fellow man (cf. 3:23b). Not ironically, John introduces his discussion on love by calling his readers "beloved." Those loved by God (Romans 1:7) should love others (Colossians 3:12f and 1 John 4:11). The commandment to love one's fellow man is both old (verse 7) and new (verse 8). It is old in that it was first given in the Law (Leviticus 19:18), was reemphasized by Christ while on earth (John 15:12 and 17), and was known to John's readers "from the beginning" (cf. 1 John 2:24, 3:11, and 2 John 5-6), meaning from the beginning of their Christian lives.⁵⁰

2:8

On the other hand, I am writing a new commandment to you, which is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true Light is already shining.

Though the command to love one's fellow man is old (verse 7), there is also a sense in which it is new (cf. John 13:34). According to MacArthur (p. 64), the word for new here is one that "defines something that is fresh in essence and quality." It is new in the sense that "Jesus Christ invested it in several ways with a richer and deeper meaning" (Stott, p. 98). See, for example, Matthew 5:43-44. It is new in that Jesus is now the standard (Compton, p. 8). Jesus exemplified what true love is by dying not just for His friends (John 15:13), but also for His enemies (Romans 5:10).⁵¹ Due to what Christ did, the concept of love took on new meaning/significance. This self-sacrificial love for others was certainly true in Jesus ("true in Him"); it is also true in His followers ("in you"). The display of such love by Jesus during His incarnation was evidence of the fact that a new age had dawned in human history. The "true Light"⁵² (cf. John 1:9) had come into the world (John 1:9 and 3:19), beginning the process of the gradual dispelling and displacing of the darkness in human history (cf. 2:17's "the world is passing away"), as the rising of the Sun gradually dispels and displaces the darkness of night. The display

⁵⁰So Stott, Marshall, Hodges, Wiersbe, Compton, Maclaren, Ryrie, Burdick, Calvin, Akin, and MacArthur.

⁵¹"The New Testament writers had to introduce what was virtually a new Greek word, *agape*, to express the love of God as they knew it" (J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 124).

⁵²If the heretics John was combatting were claiming to be the recipients of a special revelatory light, then John's description of the Light as "true" in 2:8 takes on added significance (in other words, the false teachers were believing in a false light instead of the true Light).

of such love by Jesus' followers is evidence of the fact that the light is gradually dispelling and displacing the darkness in the human heart (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17).

2:9

The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now.

When an individual gets saved, he goes from being “in the darkness” (cf. Acts 26:18, Ephesians 5:8, Colossians 1:13, and 1 Peter 2:9) to being “in the Light.” The false teachers were claiming to be “in the Light,” yet once again their conduct contradicted their claim (cf. 1:6 and 2:4). Specifically, their failure to truly love their fellow man (“hate” being not so much an active enmity toward another, but more of a passive failure to act in love toward another—see, for example, Proverbs 13:24; cf. pp. 104-105 of Yarbrough) showed that they were “in the darkness,” i.e., unsaved.

2:10

The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in Him.

The corrective to hating one's fellow man is loving him. A simple definition of love is choosing to do what is best for another.⁵³ Hiebert (p. 90) defines it as “a purposeful love that seeks to promote the highest good for the one loved, even at the expense of self.” A biblical description of love is found in 1 Corinthians 13. The person who loves his fellow man gives evidence of the fact that he is truly saved (“abides in the Light”⁵⁴); genuine saving faith expresses itself through love (see Galatians 5:6 in the NIV). The person who lives in the Light can see where he's going and, therefore, does not stumble (cf. John 11:9). To stumble is to sin (cf. Matthew 5:29-30//18:8-9, Matthew 13:41, Matthew 18:6//Luke 17:2, 1 Corinthians 8:13, James 2:10, 3:2, and Revelation 2:14). The true believer's life will not be characterized by the sin of hatred.

2:11

But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

In contrast to the believer, who abides in the Light (verse 10) and, therefore, walks in the Light (1:7), is the unbeliever, who is “in the darkness” (cf. verse 9) and, therefore, “walks in the darkness” (cf. 1:6). The failure of the unbeliever to love his fellow man reveals that he is still in the darkness (cf. verse 9). Such an individual is spiritually blind,

⁵³“‘This is true love to any one,’ said Tillotson, ‘to do the best for him we can’” (J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 126).

⁵⁴To “abide” in the Light implies feeling at home in It (Hiebert, p. 90) and remaining in It (perseverance).

unable to see the light (cf. John 12:35 and 2 Corinthians 4:4).

Discussion Questions for 1 John 2:7-11

1. The command to love others is first found in Scripture at the end of Leviticus 19:18. According to the verses leading up to this command (19:13-18a), what actions are not expressions of such love (verses 13-17a, 18a)?

Verse 13—*stealing (either taking or withholding what belongs to another)*

Verse 14—*cruelty towards those who are handicapped*

Verse 15—*judicial injustice by showing favoritism/partiality*

Verse 16a—*slander*

Verse 16b—*endangering the life of another*

Verse 17a—*hatred/homicide of the heart/mental murder*

Verse 18a—*revenge and bearing a grudge*

What action is an expression of such love (v. 17b)?

Answer: rightly rebuking those who are wrong

According to Romans 13:8-10, what actions are not expressions of love for others?

Answer: adultery, murder, stealing, lying, and coveting

2. The old commandment to love others is found at the end of Leviticus 19:18. The new commandment to love others is found in John 13:34. By examining the two, what is the difference between them and, thus, the aspect that makes it “new”?

Answer: to love like Jesus loved

According to the following passages, how did Jesus love?

Ephesians 5:2, 25, and 1 John 3:16—*sacrificially*

John 13:1—*unceasingly*

2:12

I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name's sake.

Verses 12-14 are somewhat of an aside, as John reassures his readers after exposing the false teachers. Hiebert (p. 92) calls them “one of the most debated passages in 1 John.” In them, John addresses his readers, discussing their forgiveness (verse 12), fellowship (“know Him”/“know the Father” in verse 13 and 14), and fighting (“overcome the evil one” in verses 13 and 14). Most of the debate regarding these verses has to do with the significance of “little children,” “children,” “fathers,” and “young men.” Do they signify chronological age, spiritual age, levels of spiritual development/maturity, or what? It is likely that “little children” in verse 12 and “children” in verse 13 refer to all of John’s readers (“children” and “little children” being John’s favorite designations for his readers as a whole throughout the epistle—see 2:1, 18, 28, 3:7, 18, 4:4, and 5:21), while “young men” and “fathers” subdivide his readers into the common, two-category subdivision of young and old found throughout the New Testament (see, for example, 1 Timothy 5:1-2, Titus 2:1-6, and 1 Peter 5:5). This is about as far as we can take the distinction, because the phenomena John associates with each describe phenomena descriptive of every believer, regardless of his or her stage in life. All believers are recipients of God’s forgiveness (verse 12), whether old or young. All believers know God (“children” in verse 13c; cf. verses 3 and 4), whether old (verses 13a and 14a) or young. All believers, whether old or young, have to flex their spiritual muscles like a young man to overcome Satanic attack (verses 13b and 14b). According to verse 12, all believers (“little children”) are recipients of God’s forgiveness (cf. 1:9). The tense of the verb John uses is significant. The Greek verb translated “have been forgiven” is in the perfect tense, signifying that the believer’s sins have been forgiven and continue to be forgiven (cf. the end of the comments on 1:7). The believer’s sins are forgiven “for His name’s sake” (literally “on account of/because of the name of Him”). In Scripture, “name” often stands for the person himself (cf. John 20:31, Acts 3:16, 4:12, Romans 10:13, 1 John 3:23, and 5:13); thus, we could read: “your sins have been forgiven you on account of/because of Him,” the “Him” being Christ. Our sins are forgiven because (and only because) of the person and work of Christ (see 1:7, as well as John 1:29, Acts 10:43, 13:38-39, Ephesians 1:7, and 4:32).⁵⁵

2:13

I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father.

John’s readers, being believers, were those who “know [i.e., have a relationship with]

⁵⁵“God forgives sin not because of any merit in the sinner, but because of the infinite merit of the Savior” (George Williams, quoted in Hiebert, p. 94). Our infinite problem of sin against an infinite Person, which results in an infinite penalty, needs an infinite payment.

Him who has been from the beginning,” perhaps a reference to God the Father (cf. “because you know the Father” in verse 13c) and to His eternality (cf. Genesis 1:1, where the God of eternity past created time as we know it), although most (such as Akin, Compton, Ryrie, Calvin, Burdick, and Henry) see this as a reference to Christ (cf. John 1:1 and 1 John 1:1). John’s readers, being believers, were also those who were spiritually strong, able to overcome⁵⁶ “the evil one” (Satan; cf. Matthew 6:13, John 17:15, Ephesians 6:16, 2 Thessalonians 3:3, 1 John 3:12, and 5:18-19).

2:14

I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

In verse 14a, John repeats verbatim the words of verse 13a. In verse 14b, he expands upon his words in verse 13b. Believers are spiritually strong and able to overcome Satan because the Word of God abides in them (by contrast, unbelievers are those in whom God’s Word does not abide—John 5:38 and 1 John 1:10). The “sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:17) is the key to defeating Satan (cf. Matthew 4//Luke 4, where Christ used the sword of Scripture to ward off Satanic attack).

⁵⁶The Greek verb translated “have overcome” is in the perfect tense, indicating a past, point-in-time overcoming (at the moment of conversion), with a continuing, ongoing overcoming (sanctification). The believer’s ultimate overcoming of Satan will come at the point of glorification.

Discussion Questions for 1 John 2:12-14

1. (based on 2:13) That the believer will overcome the evil one (Satan), rather than being overcome by him, is assured (see 2 Thessalonians 3:3 and 1 John 5:18b), but it is not automatic. According to the following verses, what means does God use to bring about this assured end?

Revelation 12:11—*the death of Christ*

1 John 2:14, Revelation 12:11 (cf. the temptation of Christ in Matthew 4//Luke 4)—*the Word of God*

Matthew 6:13, John 17:15—*prayer*

Ephesians 6:11f—*the armor of God, specifically truth (verse 14), righteousness (verse 14), the gospel (verse 15), faith (verse 16), salvation (verse 17), the Word of God (verse 17), and prayer (verse 18)*

2. According to 2:14, believers are able to overcome Satan by the Word of God abiding in them. What does it mean for the Word of God to be **abiding** in a believer?

Suggested answer: it regularly remains in the believer; it is at home in the believer's heart

What are some ways the Word of God can abide in us?

Possible answers: regular Bible reading; regular church attendance in order to receive as much of the teaching and preaching of the Word of God as possible; memorization of Scripture

2:15

Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

While a true believer will love his fellow man, he will not love the world. Love for the world is what Wiersbe (p. 491) and MacArthur (p. 79) call “the love God hates.” In Scripture, “world” can mean one of three things: 1) the created universe (John 17:24, Acts 17:24, and 1 John 4:9); 2) mankind (John 3:16 and 1 John 2:2); or 3) the organized system (Ephesians 2:2) under the sway of Satan (John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11, 2 Corinthians 4:4, and 1 John 5:19) opposed to God (John 15:18 and James 4:4) and His people (John 15:18-19, 17:14, and 1 John 3:13).⁵⁷ It is this third usage that John has in mind in 2:15-17. Love for the world (2 Timothy 4:10) and love for the Father are mutually exclusive, unable to reside in the same heart at the same time (cf. Matthew 6:24//Luke 16:13 and James 4:4). Wiersbe (p. 491) gives the analogy of health care workers who wash their hands because they love health and hate germs (cf. Psalm 97:10). A person who is characterized (the Greek verb translated “love” is in the present tense; thus, a more literal translation would be: “do not be loving the world”) by a love for the world is not a true believer, being one in whom love for the Father does not exist (the lover of the world is a spiritual adulteress, James 4:4). Worldliness starts as an attitude (see verse 16 and Romans 12:2), develops into an affection/affinity (“love” in verse 15), and ultimately leads to actions. A Christian should be careful not to be conformed to the world (Romans 12:2), nor be contaminated by it (James 1:27). A worldly person is one who lives for the “nasty now-and-now” instead of for the “sweet by-and-by,” acting as if this temporal, earthbound life is all there is, as if there isn’t a Hell to shun and a Heaven to gain (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:18 and Colossians 3:2).

2:16

For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.

In verse 15, John commanded his readers not to love the world, “nor the things in the world.” Here in verse 16, he specifies what “the things in the world” are. Notice that he is primarily concerned with worldly attitudes and affections as opposed to worldly actions; he wants to get to the heart of the matter. John identifies three worldly attitudes/affections that believers are to avoid.⁵⁸ First is the lust of the flesh. The “flesh”

⁵⁷One has defined the world as the mindset that views life without God at the center as normal.

⁵⁸Wayne Mack (“Interpreting Counselee Data,” in *Introduction to Biblical Counseling*, p. 246) describes the three as follows: “the lust of the flesh (inordinate, controlling desires for sensual pleasure, for ease and comfort, for physical gratification ...) ... the lust of the eyes (covetousness and greed, a controlling desire for profit or for material things ...) ... and the pride of life (inordinate ruling desires to be great in one’s self and for self, to be accepted and approved, to have power and be in control, to be recognized and respected, to be regarded as

is the sin nature that dominates a man prior to conversion and scuffles with him after conversion. The lust of the flesh not only encompasses “sins of the flesh” (pleasure/hedonism), but also “sins of the spirit” (cf. Galatians 5:19-21, where the “deeds of the flesh” that are listed include both sins of the flesh and sins of the spirit, such as jealousy and envy). Second is the lust of the eyes (possessions/materialism), feasting our eyes on what is forbidden. The “lustful looks” of Eve in Genesis 3:6, of Achan in Joshua 7:21, and of David in 2 Samuel 11:2 (cf. Matthew 5:28) come to mind. C. H. Dodd (quoted in Stott, p. 105) defines the lust of the eyes as the “tendency to be captivated by the outward show of things, without enquiring into their real values.” Akin (p. 110) likewise says: “... [A]ll of these temptations of the world focus on enjoyment in the present without an analysis or understanding of the future ramifications.” Third is the boastful pride of life (popularity or prestige/humanism). This has the idea of taking pride in one’s possessions (the Greek word translated “life” here is used in Mark 12:44//Luke 21:4 in reference to the little owned by the widow who cast her two mites into the temple treasury; cf. Luke 15:12 and 30). The ESV translates: “pride in possessions,” the NIV: “boasting of what he has and does.” Compton (p. 11) describes it as “the false pride that comes from having what the world esteems as valuable.” Many see all three of these worldly attitudes showing up in the account of the Fall (Genesis 3) and in the account of the temptation of Christ (Matthew 4//Luke 4).

2:17

The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.

The world is transient (cf. 2 Timothy 4:10's “this present world”). It is in the process of dying (“is passing away”; cf. 1 Corinthians 7:31b and 1 John 2:8).⁵⁹ Thus, how foolish for anyone to allow himself to become attached to it. By contrast, “the one who does the will of God (the believer) lives forever” (cf. comments regarding eternal life in comments on 1:2), like the wise man who built his house upon the rock (Matthew 7:24-25).

successful ...).”

⁵⁹“All the vanity of this evil world with its devices is passing away. It has already begun to putrify. It is a corpse not yet buried” (Barker, p. 322).

Discussion Questions for 1 John 2:15-17

1. Using the three categories found in verse 6, show how each of the three were at work in Satan’s temptation of Eve in Genesis 3:6 and in Satan’s temptation of Christ in Matthew 4:1f (suggested answers in italics)

	Genesis 3:6	Matthew 4:1f
Lust of the flesh	<i>Saw that the tree was good for food</i>	<i>Command that these stones be made bread (v. 4)</i>
Lust of the eyes	<i>Pleasant to the eyes</i>	<i>Worship me, and I will give you the kingdoms of the world (v. 9)</i>
Boastful pride of life	<i>Desired to make one wise</i>	<i>Cast yourself from the temple so the angels can catch you (v. 6)</i>

2. Using the same three categories, name some sins that would be examples of each.

Lust of the flesh

Some suggested answers: gluttony; drunkenness; sexual sins; laziness; the sins listed in Galatians 5:19-21, including such things as jealousy and envy

Lust of the eyes

Some suggested answers: lustful look, including pornography, 2 Samuel 11:2, Matthew 5:28; greed, Joshua 7:21

Boastful pride of life

Some suggested answers: seeking after status symbols—certain clothing, certain vehicles, certain electronic devices, etc.; boasting about/taking pride in what one has accomplished, Daniel 4:30 or accumulated, Luke 12:15-21

1 John 2:18-28

In this section of the epistle, John for the first time directly warns his readers about the false teachers in their midst (cf. 4:1-6). He calls them “antichrists” (2:18 and 22), “liar”s (2:22), and “deceive”rs (2:26). They were at one time members of the congregations under John’s oversight (2:19), had defected (2:19), yet were still trying to influence these congregations (2:26). They taught a corrupted Christology (2:22). John reminds his readers that they have been divinely given the ability to detect such doctrinal deviation (2:20-21 and 27a) and exhorts them to persevere in the face of such enemy attack (2:24 and 27b-28a).

2:18

Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have appeared; from this we know that it is the last hour.

John identifies the false teachers in the midst of his readers for what they really are, antichrists (cf. 2:22, 4:3, and 2 John 7). The “anti” in “antichrist” primarily denotes being against Christ⁶⁰ (cf. “opposes” in 2 Thessalonians 2:4), but also can denote being in the place of Christ (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:4). John’s readers were aware of the biblical teaching regarding a specific, end time individual (“you heard that antichrist is coming”; cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12) who would be the ultimate embodiment of the antichristlike spirit that was embodied in the false teachers of John’s day (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2, where Paul speaks of the antichrist as “the man of lawlessness” in verse 3 and as “the lawless one” in verse 8, but also says in verse 7 that “the mystery of lawlessness is already at work”). The presence of these “antichrists” was indicative of the fact that the day in which John was writing was “the last hour” (cf. 1 Timothy 4:1). This is John’s way of describing the period of time between the first and second advents (comings) of Christ, called elsewhere in Scripture the “ends of the ages” (1 Corinthians 10:11), the “consummation of the ages” (Hebrews 9:26), the “last days” (2 Timothy 3:1 and Hebrews 1:2), the “last time” (Jude 18), the “last times” (1 Peter 1:20), or the “later times” (1 Timothy 4:1). See also 1 Peter 4:7.⁶¹ The presence of such antichrists should

⁶⁰I am reminded of Jesus’ statement that whoever was not for Him was against Him (Matthew 12:30//Luke 11:23).

⁶¹The last hour/last days/last times/later times are descriptive of the last period in world history (emphasis on the adjective, “last,” not on the chronological designations, “hour,” “days,” etc.), inaugurated by Christ’s first advent (Marshall, p. 148). Because John wrote these words over 1,900 years ago, it is hard from a human perspective to see how the day in which he wrote could be called the “last hour.” However, we must remember that from the divine perspective, “one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day” (2 Peter 3:8). A helpful explanation is given by J. H. Newman (quoted in Marshall, p. 149) who says that the course of history was altered by the first advent of Christ. According to Newman, the course of history has “altered its direction, as regards His second coming, and runs, not towards the end, but along it,

have come as no surprise, for Christ Himself said that the last days would be characterized by such individuals (Matthew 24:5, 11, 24//Mark 13:22).

2:19

They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.

The false teachers John has been speaking of (the “they”) eventually showed their true colors (“so that it would be shown”) by defecting from the congregations (“went out from us”) to which they had once been superficially (“from us, but . . . not really of us”) attached.⁶² The false teachers showed by their defection that they really were not true believers. One of the marks (and means) of perseverance is ongoing local church involvement (“if they had been of us, they would have remained with us”), and those who forsake the local church (cf. Hebrews 10:25) bring the authenticity of their conversion into doubt.⁶³

2:20

But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you all know.

In contrast to the false teachers (“but you”), John’s readers, being believers, had been divinely (“from the Holy One⁶⁴,” “Holy One” most likely being a reference to Christ; compare verse 27 with verse 28; cf. Mark 1:24, Luke 4:34, John 6:69, and Acts 3:14) endowed with “an anointing.” The “anointing” that all (“you all⁶⁵ know”) believers receive

and on the brink of it; and is at all times near that great event, which, did it run towards it, it would at once run into. Christ, then, is ever at our doors.” Marshall helps clarify Newman’s words with a set of diagrams on pages 151 and 152 of his commentary. For a more in-depth discussion of the meaning “last hour” in 1 John 2:18, see Stott’s extended discussion on pages 112-114 of his commentary.

⁶²“Outwardly they had been members of the church but inwardly they never shared the inner spiritual life of the church” (Hiebert, p. 111). This verse is testimony to the fact that the visible church ≠ the invisible church (body of Christ). As Akin (p. 116) says: “... [H]aving one’s name on the church roll does not necessarily mean that one’s name is written in the Book of Life.”

⁶³Wiersbe (p. 88) states in this regard: “Any group, no matter how ‘religious,’ that for doctrinal reasons separates itself from a local church which holds to the Word of God, must immediately be suspect.”

⁶⁴“Holy One,” in contrast to the “evil one,” Satan (2:13-14, 3:12, and 5:18-19).

⁶⁵The possible significance of the “all” is the belief that the false teachers John was combatting taught that only a select few were the recipients of a special “anointing” that enabled

is the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 1:21-22), given to every believer at the moment of conversion, enabling believers to know (know in the sense of being convinced of through the Holy Spirit's work of illumination; cf. John 16:8-11, 1 Corinthians 2:12, and 1 Thessalonians 1:5) the truth⁶⁶ (including the truth about Christ, which the false teachers were denying, verses 22 and 23).

2:21

I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it, and because no lie is of the truth.

John does not have to convince his readers as to what the truth is, because the Holy Spirit has already done so (cf. verse 20 and comments on). John's readers, therefore, could detect the error espoused by the heretics. Because of their anointing, they knew that what they knew was the truth. John's readers already knew the truth; therefore, John will simply exhort his readers to adhere to what they already knew (in verses 24, 27b, and 28a).⁶⁷

2:22

Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son.

The "height of heresy" (Marshall, p. 159) is denying who Jesus really is (His person), which the false teachers in John's day did; thus, John calls such an one "the liar," i.e., the liar par excellence (Marshall, p. 157), "the liar who surpasses all other liars" (Burdick, p. 43). Jesus is the Christ (cf. Matthew 16:16, 20, John 11:27, 20:31, Acts 5:42, 9:22, 17:3, 18:5, and 28), meaning that He is God in the flesh (cf. Matthew 16:16, John 11:27, and 20:31; compare 1 John 5:1 with 5:5; notice also verse 22's "the Son"). The false teachers denied this Christological truth, showing themselves to be not only liars, but also antichrists (cf. 1 John 4:2-3 and 2 John 7), teachers of diabolical doctrine (cf. 1 Timothy 4:1's "doctrines of demons"). To deny the Son is to deny the Father also ("denies the Father and the Son"; cf. verse 23).

them to know the truth. John says that all believers have received an anointing (verse 20), and that the anointing believers receive is a genuine one (verse 27's "true"/"not a lie"), as opposed to the spurious one the false teachers claimed to have received.

⁶⁶The original does not supply a direct object for the Greek verb translated "know." Thus, the NASB translators do not either. The NIV translators do, however, based on verse 21 (the NIV supplies the words "the truth" after "know" in verse 20).

⁶⁷"The greatest Christian defence is simply to remember what we know" (William Barclay, quoted in Hiebert, p. 115).

2:23

Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also.

John explicitly states the truth implied at the end of verse 22, namely, that you cannot have the Father without also having the Son (cf. Luke 10:16c, John 5:23b, 8:42, 15:23, 1 John 1:3, and 2 John 9), for it is only through the Son that one can have a relationship with the Father (John 14:6). Calvin (p. 197) writes at this point: “It hence follows, that Turks, Jews, and such as are like them, have a mere idol and not the true God. For by whatever titles they may honour the God whom they worship, still, as they reject him without whom they cannot come to God, and in whom God has really manifested himself to us, what have they but some creature or fiction of their own?”

Discussion Questions for 1 John 2:18-23

1. According to verse 19, what is one of the “birthmarks of a believer”?

Suggested answer: being part of a local body of believers; see also Hebrews 10:23-25

2. According to verse 22, the false teachers in John’s day denied that Jesus is the Christ. According to the following passages, who declared that Jesus is the Christ?

Matthew 16:16 — *Peter*

Mark 14:61-62 — *Jesus*

John 11:27 — *Martha*

Acts 5:42 — *the apostles*

Acts 9:22, 17:3, 18:5 — *Saul/Paul*

Acts 18:28 — *Apollos*

3. Based on verses 22 and 23, are adherents of Judaism saved, though they claim to believe in God the Father?

Answer: no

Why not?

Answer: because they deny that Jesus is Christ/the Son of God, and to deny the Son is to deny the Father (see also John 20:31)

2:24

As for you, let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father.

Turning his focus away from the false teachers, who did not let the word of God abide in them (2:19), and back to his readers (“as for you”), John applies the truth of 2:14b. If his readers are going to overcome the Satanic attack launched by the false teachers, they are going to have to let the word of God abide in them, particularly “the teaching of Christ” (2 John 9), which John’s readers had known since the day they were saved (“from the beginning”; cf. 1 John 2:7, 3:11, and 2 John 5-6, as well as 2 Timothy 3:14). If John’s readers continued to let the truth about Christ abide/reside in them (“if what you heard from the beginning abides in you”), they would remain Christians (“you also will abide in the Son and in the Father”; cf. 2 John 9). Such perseverance in the faith is taught elsewhere in John 8:31, 1 Corinthians 15:2, Colossians 1:23, Hebrews 3:6, and 14.

2:25

This is the promise which He Himself made to us: eternal life.

God promises every believer eternal life (John 3:15-16, 36, 5:24, 6:40, and 47; cf. 2 Timothy 1:1 and Titus 1:2), but one must become and remain a believer/persevere in the faith⁶⁸ (verse 24) in order to receive and retain the gift of eternal life (for those proficient in Greek, notice the present tenses in the aforementioned references in John’s gospel). Eternal life is a quality of life (not just a quantity of life) that one enters into the moment he places his faith in Christ (“has eternal life,” John 3:36 and 5:24). Whenever Scripture views eternal life as a future possession (such as in Luke 18:30, Romans 2:7, James 1:12, and Revelation 2:10), it is viewing it in its full and final sense.

2:26

These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you.

What John had been saying in verses 18-25 (the “these things” of verse 26) was of utmost significance to his readers because, though the false teachers had departed from them (2:19), they were apparently still trying to exert influence over them.⁶⁹ Part of what makes such false teachers such a threat is their deceptiveness (cf. Matthew 24:4-5, 24, Colossians 2:4, 2 Timothy 3:13, and 2 John 7).

⁶⁸When theologians speak of the doctrine of perseverance, they typically speak of it in terms of perseverance in the faith (belief/doctrine) and in faithfulness, or good works (behavior/deeds).

⁶⁹“Antichristian groups rarely try to lead lost sinners to their false faith. Instead, they spend much of their time trying to convert professing Christians” (Wiersbe, p. 92).

2:27

As for you, the anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need for anyone to teach you; but as His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you abide in Him.

Once again (cf. verses 20 and 24), John draws a contrast between the false teachers and his readers (“as for you”). John once again (as in verse 20) reminds his readers that they have received an “anointing” from “Him” (the “Him” being Christ; compare verse 27 with verse 28), the anointing being the Holy Spirit and His work of illumination (see comments on verse 20), what Burdick (p. 47) describes as “the commending of the truth to the regenerated mind, the impartation of the ability to receive and appreciate truth, the activity of making revealed truth meaningful to the believer.” Consequently, they “have no need for anyone to teach” them. This statement can be misinterpreted to make commentaries, Bible institutes, Bible colleges, seminaries, Sunday Schools, etc. superfluous. However, John is not saying that teaching is unnecessary (After all, by writing these words to his readers, what is he doing but teaching them? Also, see Matthew 28:20, Romans 12:7, 1 Corinthians 12:28, Ephesians 4:11, and 1 Timothy 3:2.). Rather, what John seems to be saying is that his readers, because of the anointing they have received, do not need John or any other Bible teacher to convince them of the truth they already know concerning Christ (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:9). They simply need to continue in what and in Whom (“abide in Him”) they already know/have become convinced of (cf. 2 Timothy 1:12). If they do, the false teachers will have no effect upon them.

2:28

Now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming.

There is some divergence among interpreters as to whether this verse concludes the previous section (so Hiebert and Barker) or begins a new one (so Hodges, Stott, Akin, MacArthur, and Marshall). In favor of the first is the repetition of the command “abide in Him,” which seems to closely link the end of verse 27 with the start of verse 28. In favor of the second is the introduction of a new thought, the Second Coming, mentioned again in the midst of the next section (in 3:2). “Abiding in Christ” (perseverance) is important, not only because it keeps the believer from falling prey to heresy (2:27), but also because it enables the believer to face the Judgment Seat of Christ (Romans 14:10 and 2 Corinthians 5:10) with confidence (cf. 4:17 and 2 Timothy 4:8), not shame (Mark 8:38), a judgment that will take place immediately after Christ “appears⁷⁰” (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:5, Colossians 3:4, Hebrews 9:28, and 1 Peter 5:4) to rapture all church age believers (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).

⁷⁰Elsewhere in the epistle (in 1:2, 3:5, and 8), John uses this same Greek verb (translated “manifested” in 1:2) to describe Christ’s first coming. Akin (p. 130) says that “this word was something of a technical term and marked the arrival of a king, ruler, or official with open splendor, dignity, and respect.”

Discussion Questions for 1 John 2:24-28

1. According to verse 25, God promises eternal life. This promise is made in such verses as John 3:15-16, 36, 5:24, 6:40, and 47. According to these verses, particularly the present tense verbals that are used in them (reflected by the “-th” word endings in the KJV), upon what is this promise conditioned?

Answer: perseverance in the faith/belief; present tense verbals in these verses include: “believeth” in 3:15, 16, 36, 5:24, 6:40, and 47 [literally: “is believing”], “have” in 3:15 and 3:16 [literally: “is having”], “have” in 6:40 [literally: “be having”], and “hath” in 3:36, 5:24, and 6:47 [literally: “is having”]

2. In verse 27, John appears to say that believers, because they have the Holy Spirit’s anointing, know all things (all things that are spiritually-related) and, therefore, do not need to be taught (so, no need for commentaries, Sunday School, Bible colleges and seminaries, etc.). How do we know that this is NOT what John means when he says this?

Possible answers: if this is what John meant, he would be contradicting himself, for in saying these words to his Christian readers, he is in fact teaching them; furthermore, there are many passages in Scripture that speak of the need for believers to be taught, such as Matthew 28:20 [cf. Romans 12:7, 1 Corinthians 12:28, Ephesians 4:11, and 1 Timothy 3:2]; what John likely DOES mean in this verse is that because believers have the Holy Spirit’s illumination [the anointing], they do not need to be convinced of the certainty and significance of spiritual truth, because the Holy Spirit has already convinced them of it

1 John 2:29-3:12

In this section of the epistle, John gives his first extended development of the “moral test” of doing right.⁷¹ He does so by way of contrast between the believer, whose life is characterized by righteousness, and the unbeliever, whose life is characterized by unrighteousness. If one were to give this section a title, it might be: “like father, like son.” The believer is a child of God (3:10; cf. 3:1-2) and, therefore, resembles his Father (2:29, 3:7, and 9). The unbeliever is a child of the devil (3:10) and, therefore, resembles his father (3:8 and 12).

2:29

If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him.

God is righteous (3:7; cf. Deuteronomy 32:4, Psalm 11:7, 129:4, 145:17, Daniel 9:14, and Revelation 16:5), meaning that in His being and actions He perfectly conforms to the standard of right, Himself.⁷² Because the believer is “a chip off the old block,” he also is characterized by righteous character and conduct, although to a far lesser degree than God is. The person whose life is characterized by righteous conduct (“practices righteousness”) gives evidence of the fact that he is a true believer, one who is “born of Him [God].” The Greek verb translated “born” is in the perfect tense (literally “has been born”), indicative of the fact that there was a past point in time when the believer was born and that this birth has ongoing effects. John is speaking of the doctrine of regeneration (also known as being “born again”/“born from above” or the “new birth”), the impartation of spiritual life to the spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:5). John speaks of this elsewhere in this epistle (in 3:9, 4:7, 5:1, 4, and 18) and in his Gospel (John 1:13 and 3:3-8). The “of Him” in “born of Him” is most likely a “genitive of source,” indicative of the fact that God sovereignly, unilaterally regenerates (1 Peter 1:3), enabling the believer to respond to the gospel in repentance and faith.

⁷¹To this point in the epistle, John has touched on the moral test in 1:7 (walking in the Light); in 2:3 and 5 (keeping God’s commandments//keeping God’s Word); and in 2:6 (walking as Jesus walked).

⁷²Theologically, this must be the case, for if there was some sort of standard external to God to which God had to conform, it would be God. “It is sometimes said, ‘Justice requires God to do this,’ referring to some act we know He will perform. This is an error of thinking as well as of speaking, for it postulates a principle of justice outside of God which compels Him to act in a certain way. Of course there is no such principle. If there were it would be superior to God” (A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, p. 87). Thus, it is more accurate to say that things are right because God does them than it is to say that God does things because they are right.

3:1

See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him.

Because God has, as it were, given birth to the believer (2:29), the believer is His child (3:1; cf. John 1:12, Romans 8:14-16, Galatians 3:26, and 4:5-7). John marvels over the fact that he and his readers are God's children. The believer's sonship can be attributed to nothing else than God's attribute of love. John wants his readers to take notice of this fact ("See"). John describes the love of God as "how great a love." The Greek adjective translated "how great" is one that communicates absolute astonishment. It is used elsewhere in Scripture to describe something that is extraordinary (cf. Matthew 8:27 and Mark 13:1). God's love is, indeed, extraordinary!⁷³ It is "great" (Ephesians 2:4). Significantly, the Greek verb translated "bestowed" is in the perfect tense, indicative of the fact that God's love was bestowed upon the believer at a point in time in the past (at conversion) and continues to be so; nothing can separate the believer from the love of God (Romans 8:35 and 38-39)! John concludes verse one by alluding to the lack of agreement between believers and unbelievers (cf. 3:13).⁷⁴ Unbelievers do not know God (cf. John 1:10, 16:3, and 1 Corinthians 1:21); therefore, they do not know those who are God's children. The world "has no true understanding or appreciation of those who are born-again believers" (Hiebert, p. 135).

3:2

Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.

After directing the attention of his readers to the extraordinary love of God for them in verse one, it is not surprising to find John beginning verse two by addressing his readers as "beloved" (cf. Romans 1:7's "beloved of God"). A glorious future awaits those who are God's children, as the process of sanctification begun at the moment of conversion, during which time the believer is progressively being conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29, Galatians 4:19, and 2 Corinthians 3:18), will culminate in the believer becoming like Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:49).⁷⁵ This includes having a

⁷³"The expression *how great* translates [a Greek word] which meant originally 'of what country.' It is as if the Father's love is so unearthly, so foreign to this world, that John wonders from what country it may come" (Stott, p. 122). Wiersbe (p. 103) translates: "Behold, what peculiar, out-of-this-world kind of love the Father has bestowed on us."

⁷⁴Barker (p. 330), commenting on this section of the verse, states: "Approval by the world is to be feared, not desired."

⁷⁵"Our future face-to-face encounter with the glorified Christ will complete our transformation into His likeness" (Hiebert, p. 138).

glorified body like Christ (Philippians 3:20-21) and a sinless character like Christ.

3:3

And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies Himself, just as He is pure.

Though the believer is destined to become perfectly sanctified (verse 2), he is not passive in the process of progressive sanctification (verse 3). Like Paul in Philippians 3:12-14, he relentlessly pursues perfection (cf. 2 Corinthians 7:1).⁷⁶ The believer's glorification is described as a "hope," i.e., a confident expectation. The believer can confidently expect to be glorified because his hope is "on Him [Christ]," not in himself.⁷⁷ The process of conformity to Christ means being pure like Christ (cf. 1 Peter 1:15-16). Wiersbe (p. 104) calls verse one what we are [children of God], verse two what we will be [like Him], and verse three what we should be [pure].

⁷⁶The former advertising slogan of Lexus, "the relentless pursuit of perfection," describes this concept well.

⁷⁷ "There is nothing within the believer that creates hope and security for the future. The foundation for hope, now and forever, is Christ alone" (Akin, p. 138).

Discussion Questions for 1 John 2:29-3:3

1. According to 2:29, God is righteous. Righteousness is conformity to a standard. To what standard does God conform in order to be righteous?

Answer: Himself

Why can there be no standard of righteousness external to God to which He must conform?

Possible answers: because if there was, it would be God; because God is the ultimate reality; cf. Hebrews 6:13

Is it more accurate to say that God does things because they are right or to say that things are right because God does them?

Answer: things are right because God does them

2. What doctrine might be implied by John's use of a perfect tense verb (translated "is born" by the NASB) in 2:29 when speaking of the new birth of the believer? Note: a perfect tense verb in Greek describes a past, point-in-time action with ongoing results/effects

Suggested answer: eternal security—believers have been born of God at the point of conversion and continue to be new creatures in Christ

3. In 3:1, God's love for the believer is called "great," meaning extraordinary, foreign, peculiar. What about God's love for the believer makes it so different?

Suggested answers: it is a love that sacrificed one's life, John 15:13, 1 John 3:16; it is a love that was for the unlovable, Romans 5:6-8; it is an everlasting love, Romans 8:35, 38-39

4. According to 3:2, when Christ returns the believer's glorification will be complete, as the believer will then be perfectly like Him. Does this mean we will at that point become divine?

Answer: no; at that point believers who have already died and gone to Heaven and have had their human natures glorified will also have their earthly bodies glorified, while believers still alive will have both their natures and bodies glorified, but neither will become divine, as they will remain finite in being, while only God is infinite in being; so, we will be like Christ in behavior and in body (Philippians 3:21), but not in being.

3:4

Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness.

It may very well be that the false teachers John was combatting watered down the significance and seriousness of sin. John certainly did not. He identifies sin for what it is⁷⁸, “lawlessness” (cf. Romans 4:7 and Hebrews 10:17, where sin and lawlessness are equated; cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:3 and 8, where the antichrist is called “the man of lawlessness” and the “lawless one”). Sin is “an active rebellion against God’s known will” (Stott, p. 126). It is “a willful disregard for God. It is a rebellious revolt against God’s will” (Akin, p. 141). It is a deliberate deviation from, a disregard for, and a defiance of divine dictates/demands. Sin is “serious stuff.”

3:5

You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin.

Not only is the second coming/advent of Christ an incentive to righteousness (2:28 and 3:3), but so also is the first one (“appeared” in verses 5 and 8). Christ came the first time “to take away sins” (cf. John 1:29 and Colossians 2:14). This He did “by the sacrifice of Himself” (Hebrews 9:26; cf. Romans 6:6-7, Ephesians 5:25-26, Titus 2:11-12, 14, and 1 Peter 2:24). Christ took our sin upon Himself (2 Corinthians 5:21; cf. Isaiah 53:6 and 11-12) in order to take it away; therefore, it is incongruous for the believer to live in sin (verse 6). And only He could take away sin because only He is without sin (2 Corinthians 5:21, Hebrews 4:15, 1 Peter 1:19, and 2:22).

3:6

No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him.

Another reason why it is incongruous for the believer to live in sin is because He lives in one in Whom sin does not live (verse 5b; cf. 2 Corinthians 5:21, Hebrews 4:15, 1 Peter 1:19, and 2:22). This verse has been given a myriad of interpretations (Stott gives seven different ones on pages 134-140 of his commentary). Earlier in the epistle, John implicitly (in 2:1) and explicitly (in 1:8 and 10) teaches that believers sin, yet in this section of the epistle he indicates that believers do not (in 3:6, 8, and 9a; cf. 5:18), nor cannot (in 3:9b), sin. How do we reconcile? In the earlier verses, John is speaking of individual acts of sin (which believers do). In this section, he is speaking of living in sin (which true believers do not, nor cannot). To live in sin is to live a life characterized by sin (the Greek verb translated “sins” in this verse is in the present tense; cf. the NIV’s and ESV’s “keeps on sinning” and the NIV’s “continues to sin”). The person who lives in sin gives evidence of the fact that he is an unbeliever, one who has not seen (cf. 3 John 11) or known (cf. 2:3-4, 13-14, and 3:1) Christ. To “see” Christ means to see Him spiritually with the eyes of faith, which is tantamount to believing in Him (John 5:37-38,

⁷⁸Other definitions of sin in Scripture are given in Romans 14:23 (“whatever is not from faith is sin”), James 4:17 (not doing right/sins of omission), and 1 John 5:17 (unrighteousness).

6:40, and 12:44-45). To know Christ is to have a relationship with Him, to know Him as one's Savior (Matthew 7:23, John 8:19, and 17:3).

3:7

Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous;

Earlier in the epistle (in 2:26), John alerted his readers to the fact that the false teachers in their midst were deceptive. Here, he exhorts them not to fall prey to their deception. Based on what John says here, it may be that the false teachers were teaching that one can live unrighteously, yet still be considered righteous. According to John, such a dichotomy is impossible. What a person does ("practices righteousness") is indicative of what he is ("righteous"). Conduct reveals character. As Christ said in Matthew 7:16 and 20, "You will know them by their fruits." Once again (cf. 2:29), John emphasizes the fact that the believer resembles his Father, bearing the resemblance of righteousness ("is righteous, just as He is righteous").

3:8

the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil.

The believer bears the resemblance of his Father (2:29, 3:7, and 9). In like manner, the unbeliever bears the resemblance of his father. The person whose life is characterized by sin gives evidence of the fact that his father is the devil (cf. John 8:44 and Acts 13:10). Sin has characterized the devil "from the beginning," i.e., from the moment the devil became the devil at his fall (recorded in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28) and, therefore, characterizes all those who are his children. In words reminiscent of 3:5a, John states that the purpose of Christ's first advent/coming was "to destroy the works of the devil" ≈ "to take away sins" (3:5a). The Greek verb translated "destroy" means not to annihilate, but to render inoperative or to rob of power (Wiersbe, p. 109). Christ's work has loosened (the verb can also mean "to loose" or "to set free") Satan's grip on the believer, delivering the believer from the power of sin and setting him free to live righteously (cf. Romans 6, Titus 2:14, and Hebrews 2:14-15).⁷⁹

⁷⁹Stott (p. 140), commenting on this section of the verse, states: "Christ appeared to undo the devil's work; to sin is therefore to undo the Saviour's work."

Discussion Questions for 1 John 3:4-8

1. Verse 5 says that Christ came the first time to take away sin. In what sense did He do so at His first coming?

Suggested answers: He took away the penalty of sin by paying for it by His death on the Cross, John 1:29, Colossians 2:14, and Hebrews 9:26; He also took away the power of sin by His death, see Romans 6:6-7, Ephesians 5:25-26, Titus 2:14, and 1 Peter 2:24

In what sense will Christ take away sin at His second coming?

Suggested answer: He will take away the presence of sin, 1 John 3:2

2. How do we know, based on what John has already said in this letter, that he is not talking about sinless perfection in 3:6?

Answer: he has already established the fact that believers sin in 1:8 and 10

What does John mean by what he says in 3:6?

Answer: not that believers never commit sin, but that their conduct is not characterized by sin

3:9

No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because He is born of God.

John once again (cf. 2:29) emphasizes the truth that regeneration results in righteousness. Whereas 2:29 stated this truth in positive terms (doing right), this verse states it in negative terms (not doing wrong). Once again, the verbs associated with sin are in the present tense, indicative of the fact that the true believer will not and cannot live in sin (NIV: “will continue to sin” and “cannot go on sinning”). The reason why the true believer will not and cannot live in sin is because the believer has been “born of God” (see 2:29 and comments on, as well as 5:18) and because God’s “seed abides in” the believer. To what is the seed a reference? One possibility is the Word of God (see Luke 8:11, James 1:18, 21, and 1 Peter 1:23). More likely, it is the divine life (eternal life; cf. comments on 1:2 and 3:15b) implanted within the believer at the moment of conversion (cf. 2 Peter 1:4) through the Holy Spirit’s indwelling (John 3:5-6). An unbeliever is alive to sin and dead to righteousness, while a believer is alive to righteousness and dead to sin (cf. Romans 6).

3:10

By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.

The moral test of doing right makes it “obvious” to all whose child one is (Is it obvious to others that you are a child of God?). A person’s deeds demonstrate whether he is of divine or diabolical (Stott, p. 132) descent. At the end of verse 10, John begins to transition from the moral test of doing right (the primary focus of the present section) to the social test of loving one’s fellow man (the primary focus of the next section). A birthmark of the believer is love for fellow believers (cf. John 13:35).

3:11

For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another;

In 3:11-18, John gives his first extended development of the social test of loving one’s fellow man.⁸⁰ He starts by reminding his readers that “from the beginning” of their Christian experience (cf. 1 John 2:7, 24, and 2 John 5), they had been taught the truth that they were to love one another (cf. John 13:34, 15:12, 17, Romans 12:10, 13:8-9, Galatians 5:14, Hebrews 13:1, 1 Peter 1:22, 4:8, 1 John 3:23, 4:7, 11, 21, and 2 John 5).

⁸⁰To this point in the epistle John has touched on the social test only in 2:7-11.

3:12

not as Cain, who was of the evil one and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous.

John now gives a prime example of what loving one's fellow man is not, using the example of Cain, who showed that he was of diabolical descent ("of the evil one") by murdering ("slew"⁸¹) his brother, Abel (cf. Genesis 4:1f and John 8:44a).⁸² The ultimate, underlying reason why Cain slew Abel is because Cain "was of the evil one." The immediate reason was because Abel's righteousness revealed Cain's unrighteousness, kindling hatred in his heart toward Abel (Genesis 4:5b-6),⁸³ ultimately leading to Abel's murder.⁸⁴

⁸¹The Greek verb translated "slew" is a graphic one, indicative of a violent murder (cf. Genesis 4:10-11), a butchering or slaughtering. It literally means to cut the throat. "It is as if Cain ... violently slit his brother's throat, thus defiantly making him his 'replacement sacrifice'" (MacArthur, p. 133). The same verb is used to describe the death of Christ in Revelation 5:6, 9, 12, and 13:8..

⁸²Not only did Cain resemble his father by murdering, but also by lying (compare Genesis 4:9 with John 8:44b).

⁸³What Stott (p. 144) calls "the violent antipathy which righteousness always provokes in the unrighteous."

⁸⁴"All hatred is embryonic murder" (Marshall, p. 190). See Matthew 5:21-22.

Discussion Questions for 1 John 3:9-12

1. What doctrine might be implied by John's use of a perfect tense verb (translated "is born" by the NASB) in 3:9 when speaking of the new birth of the believer (note: a perfect tense verb in Greek describes a past, point-in-time action with ongoing results/effects), as well as by the fact that, according to this same verse, God's "seed" **abides** in the one who has been born of God?

Suggested answer: eternal security—believers have been born of God at the point of conversion and continue to be new creatures in Christ; and God's seed, the divine life implanted in believers at the moment of conversion, remains in them

2. According to 3:11, believers are to love one another. According to the following verses, how are they to do so?

John 13:34 and 15:12—*as Christ loves us (selflessly, sacrificially, unceasingly)*

Romans 12:10—*with kind affection*

1 Peter 1:22—*sincerely; purely; fervently*

1 Peter 4:8—*fervently*

3. Why did Cain kill Abel (v. 12)?

Possible answers: because he was "of the evil one"/an unbeliever, and like father [John 8:44's "he was a murderer from the beginning"], like son; because Abel's righteousness convicted Cain of/exposed his unrighteousness; because Cain did not rightly respond to God's admonition to change his attitude and to God's warning that his sinful attitude would lead to sinful action, Genesis 4:6-7

1 John 3:13-24

In this section of the epistle, John concludes his first extended treatment of the social test of loving others, begun in 3:11 (3:13-18). Passing this test will build confidence that one is truly saved (3:19-20), which will in turn enhance one's prayer life (3:21-22). John concludes this section by touching on the interplay between the three tests: belief in Christ (3:23a), love for others (3:23b), and doing right (3:24a) and the internal witness of the Spirit (3:24b).

3:13

Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you.

Having just used the example of Cain, an unbeliever, who expressed his hatred of Abel, a believer, by murdering him (verse 12), John tells his believing readers not to be surprised (cf. 1 Peter 4:12) when⁸⁵ (cf. Matthew 5:11 and James 1:2) the unbelieving world hates them. As in 2:15-17, John is using "world" in the sense of the system under Satan's sway opposed to God and His people (see comments on 2:15). The world is one of the three enemies of the believer.⁸⁶ This vile world is not a friend to grace.⁸⁷ Christ Himself indicated so in Luke 21:17, John 15:18-25 (especially verse 19), and 17:14.

3:14

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death.

Love for others is indicative of the fact that one is a true believer (cf. John 13:35 and 1 John 2:10). Conversely, the presence of love's counterpart, hatred, is indicative of the fact that one is an unbeliever (see verse 15, as well as Titus 3:3, 1 John 2:9, and 11). In this verse, John describes salvation as a reversal of realm, passing⁸⁸ from the realm of death to the realm of life. See also John 5:24. To be in the realm of death is to be in a state of being spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1 and 5) and separated from God (death = separation); to be in the realm of life

⁸⁵"If the world hates you" reflects a Greek grammatical construction in which the "if" clause describes an actuality, not a potentiality. Thus, it could be translated: "since ..."

⁸⁶The other two being the flesh (Romans 7:23, James 4:1, and 1 Peter 2:11) and the devil (1 Peter 5:8).

⁸⁷See stanza 3 of "Am I a Soldier of the Cross?" by Isaac Watts.

⁸⁸The Greek verb translated "have passed" was used to describe the action of migrating from one country to another (Hiebert, p. 156). It is in the perfect tense, indicative of the fact that once the "migration" has taken place, there is no return.

is to be in a state of being spiritually alive and in communion with God. The person whose life is characterized (the Greek verb translated “love” is in the present tense: “He who is not loving”) by the absence of love for others shows himself to be an unbeliever (“abides in death”).

3:15

Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

John expands on his last statement in verse 14. Absence of love (verse 14b) is the biblical equivalent of hatred (verse 15) (see comments on 2:9).⁸⁹ Not only that, hatred is in essence murder (cf. Matthew 5:21-22).⁹⁰ Hatred is homicide in the heart, mental murder, “moral murder” (Hodges, p. 896). Hatred in the heart of Cain (Genesis 4:5b-6) left unchecked (Genesis 4:7) led to the murder of Abel (Genesis 4:8).⁹¹ Those who have such disregard for life, murderers, show themselves to be devoid of eternal life (“no murderer has eternal life abiding in him”; cf. Revelation 21:8 and 22:15). One who has a heart that is homicidal is not headed to heaven.

3:16⁹²

We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.

If Cain was the epitome of one who was hateful (verse 12)—he took life, Jesus is the epitome of one who was loving (verse 16a)—He gave His life. Christ demonstrated what true love is by laying down His life (cf. John 10:11, 15, 17, and 18) for the benefit of the believer (“for us”; cf. Romans 5:8's “for us,” 1 Corinthians 15:3's “for our sins,” and Galatians 2:20's “for me”).⁹³ See John

⁸⁹“Murderous hatred always fills the emptiness left in the heart by the absence of love” (Hiebert, p. 158).

⁹⁰“Hatred is the wish that the other person was not there; it is the refusal to recognize his rights as a person, the longing that he might be dead” (Marshall, p. 191). This is not to imply that hatred and murder are equivalent in every respect. As Wiersbe (p. 124) states: “This does not mean, of course, that hatred in the heart does the same amount of damage, or involves the same degree of guilt, as actual murder. Your neighbor would rather you hate him than kill him!”

⁹¹“Murder is in the heart before it is in the hand” (Herschel Hobbs, quoted in Hiebert, p. 158). See also Marshall’s quote in footnote 84.

⁹²Burdick (p. 59) categorizes verses 14 and 15 as the love test and verses 16-18 as the test of love.

⁹³“A person’s life is his most precious possession. Consequently, to rob him of it

15:13, Romans 5:8, Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 5:2, and 25. According to the latter half of this verse, the self-sacrificial love of Christ is to be emulated by the believer in his dealings with fellow believers (cf. John 15:12-13 and 1 John 4:9-11, as well as comments on 2:6). Just as Christ gave his life for the believer, so the believer ought to be ready and willing to give his life for a fellow believer.

3:17

But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?

The likelihood of a believer having to make the ultimate sacrifice of giving his life for a fellow believer is little. Consequently, it is easy to say that we would.⁹⁴ John, however, points out a very practical way in which a believer can clearly express his love for a brother in Christ—meeting his physical needs (we may not need to give our lives, but we may need to give of our livelihoods). Meeting the physical needs of a fellow believer (see Acts 2:45, 4:35, 11:29, Romans 12:13, and 2 Corinthians 8-9; cf. Deuteronomy 15:7-8) is something virtually any and every believer is financially capable of doing (“has the world's goods”).⁹⁵ The Greek noun translated “goods” (*bios*) is used in Mark 12:44//Luke 21:4 to describe the assets of the widow who cast her two mites into the temple treasury, which was “all she had to live on” (literally: “all the *bios* of her”). Failure to meet such a need is not due to a lack of cash, but to a lack of care. Someone who fails to do so seriously calls his conversion into question (“how does the love of God⁹⁶ abide in Him?”).⁹⁷ Like the priest (Luke 10:31) and the Levite (Luke 10:32) in the parable of the Good Samaritan, he sees⁹⁸ the need (“sees his brother in

is the greatest sin we can commit against him, while to give one's own life on his behalf is the greatest possible expression of love for him” (Stott, p. 146).

⁹⁴As Marshall (p. 194) states: “Readiness to lay down one's life is a high ideal, to which we may enthusiastically consent: it is a fairly remote possibility”

⁹⁵“If you have the means of livelihood in the world—and everybody who can afford to buy this book comes into this category” (Marshall, p. 194).

⁹⁶“Of God” in verse 17 is most likely either a “subjective genitive” (God's love for the believer; so Stott, Barker, Burdick, Yarbrough, and Kistemaker) or an “objective genitive” (the believer's love for God; so Henry; cf. Matthew 22:35-40 and 1 John 4:20-21). Based on the immediately preceding context of verse 16, which speaks of God's love for the believer, the first option is preferable.

⁹⁷“As life does not dwell in the murderer (15), so love does not dwell in the miser (17)” (Stott, p. 147).

⁹⁸Commenting on the Greek verb translated “see,” Akin (p. 160) writes: “The verb . . . is more than just a casual, passing glance. Instead, the term denotes a continual, contemplative observation.”

need”), yet refuses to meet it (“closes⁹⁹ his heart¹⁰⁰ against him”). According to Ephesians 4:28, one of the reasons why God gives us a job is so that we “will have something to share with one who has need” (cf. Acts 20:34). According to Galatians 6:10, the physical needs of a fellow believer take precedence over those of an unbeliever.

3:18

Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.

John summarizes the truths of verses 16 and 17. Jesus proved His love for us by His actions (verse 16a; cf. John 3:16 and Romans 5:8). In like manner, we are to prove our love for the brethren by our actions (verses 16b-17). Mere words are inadequate (“with word or with tongue”). True (“in . . . truth”) love is seen by one’s actions (“in deed”) (cf. James 2:15-16). “Talk is cheap”; actions are costly.¹⁰¹ Donald Burdick (cited in Hiebert, p. 330) says: “In the epistles of John, love is never mere sentiment or verbalization. Instead it is action.”

⁹⁹The Greek verb translated “closes” literally means to close or lock a door or gate (Hiebert, p. 162). A. T. Robertson (cited in Akin, p. 160) says it means to slam the door.

¹⁰⁰The Greek noun translated “heart” is an interesting one. It is literally “intestines” (Acts 1:18), the part of the body the Jews viewed as the seat of the emotions (hence, “heart” in the NASB).

¹⁰¹The Good Samaritan demonstrated his love by his actions, sacrificing his schedule (Luke 10:33), possessions (Luke 10:34), and money (Luke 10:35).

Discussion Questions for 1 John 3:13-18

1. (based on 3:13) How did John, the human author of 1 John, personally experience the hatred of the world?

Possible answers: he was arrested in Acts 4; he was imprisoned and beaten in Acts 5; he was exiled to the island of Patmos, Revelation 1:9; also: his brother, James was martyred, Acts 12:2

2. (based on 3:13) Why does the world hate believers?

Possible answers: because believers are of Christ, whom the world hates, Luke 21:17; because believers are not of the world, John 15:19 and 17:14; because the conduct of believers convicts unbelievers of their corruption, John 15:22 and 24 and 1 John 3:12

Based upon the answers to the previous question, if we do not find the world being hostile to us, what conclusion(s) might possibly be drawn?

Possible answers: that we are not of Christ; that we are of the world; that we are not living in a way that convicts unbelievers of their corruption

3. What doctrine might be implied by John's use of a perfect tense verb (translated "have passed" by the NASB) in 3:14 when speaking of the changed realm of the believer (note: a perfect tense verb in Greek describes a past, point-in-time action with ongoing results/effects)?

Suggested answer: eternal security—believers have passed into the realm of life and continue to be in that realm; cf. John 5:24

3:19

We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him

Verses 19 and 20 have yielded a myriad of interpretations.¹⁰² Passing the social test of loving others (the “this”) gives believers confidence that they are truly saved (“of the truth”; cf. John 18:37). “Heart” in verses 19-21 is most likely being used in reference to the conscience (cf. Acts 2:37, where the NASB suggests “wounded in conscience” as an alternate translation for “pierced to the heart”).

3:20

in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things.

God’s opinion (that we can be assured of our salvation due to the presence of love for the brethren) is all that ultimately matters (cf. “before Him” in verse 19). Thus, “in whatever” the believer’s conscience (the “prosecuting attorney”) tries to convict him (“the defendant”) of the charge that he is unsaved, God (the “judge” and “jury”) renders the decisive verdict. God is infinitely more qualified than us to make such a judgment (“God is greater than our heart”), due to His omniscience (“knows all things”; cf. John 21:17). In His omniscience He knows that the believer is saved, and He wants the believer to know so by passing the social test. Here is an instance where God’s omniscience is a cause for comfort, not just a cause for concern.

3:21

Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God;

According to verses 21 and 22, the assurance of salvation that passing the social test of loving others brings does wonders for one’s prayer life. To the degree that the Holy Spirit through the Word (more specifically, through the tests of salvation in the Word) convinces us that we are truly a child of God (“if our heart does not condemn us”), to that degree we will approach our heavenly Father in prayer with confidence (“we have confidence before God”; cf. Matthew 7:7-11 and 1 John 5:13-15, as well as Ephesians 3:12, Hebrews 4:16, 10:19, and 22). The Greek word translated “confidence” was used in the Greek literature of the day to describe freedom of speech. According to MacArthur (p. 145), “It describes the privilege of coming before someone of importance, power, and authority and feeling free to express whatever is on one’s mind.”

¹⁰²On pages 273-275 of his commentary on the Johannine Epistles, Donald Burdick list 10 possible interpretations of these verses (Hiebert, p. 167). Curtis Vaughan (cited in Akin, p. 162) says that “verses 19 and 20 are generally conceded to be the most difficult verses in the epistle [of 1 John].”

3:22

and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight.

Sin is a hindrance to answered prayer (cf. Psalm 66:18, Proverbs 15:29a, Isaiah 59:2, and 1 Peter 3:7), doing right a help (cf. Proverbs 15:29b, and James 5:16b).¹⁰³ The believer's action of obedience is evidence of his attitude of seeking to please God (cf. John 8:29, 2 Corinthians 5:9, Ephesians 5:10, Colossians 1:10, 3:20, 1 Thessalonians 2:4, 4:1, 2 Timothy 2:4b, Hebrews 11:5, and 13:21).

3:23

This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us.

There is an interplay between the tests of assurance and the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, which John alludes to in verses 23 and 24. Here in verse 23, he mentions the doctrinal test of belief in Christ and the social test of loving others. John ties the two together¹⁰⁴ under the umbrella of a singular "commandment," one implication being that belief determines behavior/faith determines faithfulness/creed leads to deed (cf. Galatians 5:6 in the NIV: "faith expressing itself through love"). Belief in Christ is an obligation, not an option (cf. John 3:7, Acts 5:32, 6:7, 17:30, Romans 1:5, 2:8, 16:26, 2 Thessalonians 1:8, and 1 Peter 4:17), as is loving others (John 13:34, 15:12, 17, and 2 John 5¹⁰⁵). The object of belief is "the name of His Son Jesus Christ" (cf. 1:3, 5:13, and 20), "name" standing for the person and all that He is (Hiebert, p. 172; cf. comments on 2:12).

¹⁰³Obedience is a condition of answered prayer, but not the cause of it (Stott, p. 152; Compton, p. 25). Besides doing right, another key condition for answered prayer laid down by John in this epistle is praying according to God's will (5:14-15). Robert Law (quoted in Stott, p. 153) ties these two conditions together: "'To obey his commands' is the condition of being heard, simply because such obedience is the evidence that 'our will is in inward harmony with God's.'" Burdick (p. 64) adds: "Such a person is concerned with God's will, and his petitions will be in accord with that will."

¹⁰⁴ Richard Lenski (cited in Burdick, p. 64) says: "You cannot believe without loving nor love without believing."

¹⁰⁵Because loving others is an unconditional command, we are to do so regardless of their merit or demerit. We are to love as Christ loved (John 13:34, 15:12, Ephesians 5:2, and 25), which means loving someone in spite of his or her demerit (Romans 5:8).

3:24

The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.

John begins this verse by mentioning the third of the three tests of assurance, the moral test of doing right (cf. the end of verse 22). The person who “keeps His commandments” (for the significance of this, see comments on 2:3) gives evidence of the fact that he abides in God and that God abides in Him (cf. John 14:23). This mutual indwelling of the believer and God (cf. John 6:56 and 1 John 4:13, 15, and 16) is descriptive of the relationship of salvation, a relationship in which God and the believer enjoy fellowship/communion with one another (cf. 1:3 and comments on). In the last half of this verse, John indicates that a believer knows that he is truly saved (“We know by this that He abides in us”) “by the Spirit whom He has given¹⁰⁶ us.” The Holy Spirit gives subjective confirmation that a believer is truly saved (cf. Romans 8:16). He does not do so, however, in a vacuum; he does so based on the objective presence of belief in Christ, loving others, and doing right in the life of an individual. When (and only when) these realities are present, the Holy Spirit does His work of assuring one that he is truly saved.

¹⁰⁶The Greek verb translated “has given” is in the aorist tense, which describes a punctiliar (point-in-time) action in the past (“gave” would be a more literal rendering of the verb), indicative of the fact that each believer is given the Holy Spirit at the moment of conversion.

Discussion Questions for 1 John 3:19-24

1. (based on 3:22) How is it that one who keeps God's commandments/does what is pleasing in His sight has his prayers answered?

Possible answer: because someone who keeps God's commandments/does what is pleasing in His sight is one who desires to do the will of God and will, therefore, be likely to pray according to the will of God, which is the key to answered prayer, 1 John 5:14-15

2. In 3:23, John ties together believing in Christ and loving Christians. What is the connection between the two?

Possible answer: one cannot believe in Christ without loving Christians, and vice versa; there is an unbreakable belief-behavior bond for the true believer

3. According to 3:23 (as well as Acts 17:30b and 2 Thessalonians 1:8), is belief in Christ optional or obligatory?

Answer: obligatory

1 John 4:1-16a

John begins this section of the epistle by directly warning his readers for the second time (cf. 2:18-28) about the false teachers in their midst and, in so doing, gives his second extended treatment (the first being in the midst of 2:18-28) of the doctrinal test of correct Christology (4:1-6). He concludes this section of the epistle by giving his second (the first being in 3:11-18) extended treatment of the social test of loving others (4:7-16a), a treatment that continues through the end of chapter four.

4:1

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

As in our day, John's day was plagued by the proliferation ("many"; cf. 2:18 and 2 John 7) of false prophets, or false teachers (2 Peter 2:1)¹⁰⁷. These "missionaries" had "gone out into the world"¹⁰⁸ (cf. 2 John 7) to spread their message. John exhorts his readers not to gullibly/indiscriminately/uncritically believe every spirit, but to exercise discernment by "test"ing the message of any so-called prophet to see if it measured up to the standard of God's Word (as the Bereans did in Acts 17:11). Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:20-22 commands his readers to do the same ("examine" in 1 Thessalonians 5:21 translates the same Greek verb translated "test" in 1 John 4:1).

4:2

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God;

In verses 2 and 3, John gives his readers a specific doctrinal measuring stick whereby they may discern whether or not a so-called prophet's message measures up, the Incarnation (see John 1:14, Philippians 2:7-8, Colossians 2:9, and Hebrews 2:14). The true prophet is the one who "confesses that Jesus Christ has come¹⁰⁹ in the flesh¹¹⁰." To confess (to say the same thing about something that God does) a doctrine (cf. 2:23 and 4:15) is to believe it (i.e.,

¹⁰⁷A prophet was one who not only foretold (future events), but more often "forthtold" (a message).

¹⁰⁸Kistemaker (p. 324) says that they had "made the world their lecture hall."

¹⁰⁹The Greek verb translated "has come" is in the perfect tense, indicative of the fact that Christ took on human flesh at a point in time in the past, at the Incarnation (John 1:14), becoming the God-man, Jesus Christ, and that He continues to be the God-man (1 Timothy 2:5).

¹¹⁰Stott (p. 157) translates: "Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh."

wholeheartedly commit oneself to it), not just to verbalize it (cf. Mark 1:24, 3:11, 5:7, Acts 19:15, and James 2:19).

4:3

and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.

Whereas the true prophet readily confesses belief in the incarnation of Christ (verse 2), the false prophet does not (verse 3; cf. 2 John 7). Behind every prophetic utterance is a “spirit,” either the “Spirit of God” (verse 2)/“spirit of truth” (verse 6) or the “spirit of the antichrist” (verse 3)/“spirit of error” (verse 6). Behind the declaration is a doctrine (see 1 Timothy 4:1). The false prophets of John’s day taught a corrupt Christology, denying the Incarnation¹¹¹, showing themselves to be driven by the second of the two (cf. 2:22 and 2 John 7). The appearance of individuals who embodied such a spirit should have come as no surprise to John’s readers, for they were living in the last days (as are we), a time characterized by deviant doctrine (1 Timothy 4:1) and an antichristlike spirit (cf. 2:18 and comments on); “the spirit of the antichrist . . . is already in the world”/“the mystery of lawlessness is already at work” (2 Thessalonians 2:7). A false prophet will ultimately display his true colors through doctrinal deviance (cf. Deuteronomy 13:1-5). Correct Christology is the dividing line between the false prophet and the true (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:3).¹¹²

4:4

You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.

Unlike the false teachers, who were “not from God” (verse 3), John’s readers were from God (“You¹¹³ are from God”; cf. 5:19’s “we are of God”) and were, therefore, able to overcome the false teachers (the “them”) (cf. 5:4a). They were able to do so because the Spirit who was in them, the Holy Spirit (cf. John 14:17, 1 Corinthians 6:19, and 1 John 2:27), is greater than the spirit who was in the false teachers, Satan. The Holy Spirit within John’s readers used His Sword to

¹¹¹“From this verse we are not to suppose that this is the only test of orthodoxy, but it is a major one and it was the most necessary one for the errors of John’s day” (Ryrie, p. 1023).

¹¹²Marshall (p. 207) rightly states in this regard: “If a person claims to believe in Jesus, it is proper to ask, ‘Is your Jesus the real Jesus?’ For it is all too easy for us to make a picture of Jesus which is congenial to our taste but leaves out vital aspects of the New Testament presentation of him.”

¹¹³In the original, the “you” is emphatic. The original literally reads: “you from God you are,” the “you” being repeated for emphasis.

help them ward off/overcome Satanic attack in the form of the false teaching of the false teachers (cf. 2:14 and comments on) (cf. 5:4b). Perhaps this is what precipitated the departure of the false teachers from the Johannine churches (2:19)?

4:5

They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them.

False teachers can be identified not only by what they teach (this verse and verse 3), but also by who listens to their teaching (verse 5), what Burdick (p. 70) calls the “hearing test.” In verses 5 and 6, John applies the principle that “like listens to like” (Donald Burdick, quoted in Hiebert, p. 192). Teachers of falsehood attract unbelievers¹¹⁴ (verse 5); teachers of Truth attract believers (verse 6). Because false teachers are “from the world,” i.e., unbelievers, they speak accordingly (“as from the world”) (cf. Matthew 12:34-35 and John 3:31) and, therefore, attract accordingly (“the world listens to them”). Beware of the teacher and/or preacher who has the world’s ear.¹¹⁵

4:6

We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

Unlike the false teachers, who “are from the world” (verse 5), John and the other apostles (the “we”¹¹⁶) “are from God.” Consequently, those “not from God,” unbelievers, do not listen to them. However, those who know God, believers, do (cf. John 8:47, 10:4-5, 27, and 18:37). Whenever the Word of God is accurately communicated by a believing teacher and/or preacher, its message resonates in the heart of every believer who hears it.¹¹⁷ Thus, John’s readers could detect a false prophet not only objectively by the content of what they taught, but also subjectively by the lack of concord between the teacher and the hearer. Through

¹¹⁴“The world of mankind in rebellion against God is attracted by the false prophets and their cults because fundamentally they have the same desires and inclinations” (David Jackman, quoted in Hiebert, p. 190).

¹¹⁵“Because the world goes to hear what it wants to hear anyway, it is no compliment to a preacher to say, ‘He speaks our language.’ It is condemnation when the world says, ‘He is one of us’ or ‘He is my kind of preacher’” (Herschel Hobbs, quoted in Hiebert, p. 190).

¹¹⁶In the original, the “we” is emphatic. The original literally reads: “we from God we are,” the “we” being repeated for emphasis (cf. footnote 113).

¹¹⁷“The Holy Spirit in the heart of the speaker witnesses to the heart of the hearer and vitalizes the sense of their mutual fellowship” (Hiebert, p. 192).

these means (the “this”), John’s readers would be able to distinguish “the spirit of truth” (cf. John 14:17, 15:26, and 16:13, where the Holy Spirit is called the “Spirit of truth”) from “the spirit of error.”

Discussion Questions for 1 John 4:1-6

1. This section of the letter speaks of false teachers, particularly those who taught a corrupt Christology. Name any groups in our day that promote the following false Christological teachings:

Jesus is not God

Possible answers:

Jehovah's Witnesses—teach that Jesus was a god and was created

Christian Science—teaches that Jesus was a man who presented Christ, with Christ being an idea

Islam—teaches that Jesus was a prophet

Hinduism—teaches that Jesus was an “avatar,” an incarnation of the Hindu god, Vishnu

Judaism—teaches that Jesus was not the Messiah, but that the Messiah is still to come the first time

Jesus was not virgin conceived or born

Possible answers:

Mormonism—teaches that Mary was impregnated by God the Father, whom they believe has a body

Christian Science—teaches that Mary conceived the idea of God in her mind and gave the name Jesus to this idea

Jesus did not physically rise from the dead

Possible answers:

Jehovah's Witnesses—teach that Jesus' spirit was raised, but not His body

Christian Science—teaches that Jesus did not die in the first place and that resurrection is an idea, not a physical reality

Islam—teaches that Jesus did not die in the first place, but was replaced on the Cross by someone else, either Judas Iscariot, Simon of Cyrene, or Satan, and that before His death, Jesus was taken up by Allah

Judaism—since it rejects the New Testament

2. According to 4:4, the believer is able to overcome the corrupt Christology of false teachers because of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. According to 2:14, what does the Spirit specifically use to bring this about?

Answer: the Word of God

According to 5:4-5, what does the Spirit specifically use?

Answer: faith, particularly belief in the deity of Christ/correct Christology

3. According to 4:6, unbelievers do not listen to what those who are from God speak. What might such things be?

Possible answers: doctrinal preaching; preaching on sin and its consequence, Hell; preaching on repentance; preaching on submission to the lordship of Christ; preaching on holiness

4:7

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

John switches gears, moving from a focus on the doctrinal test of correct Christology to a focus on the social test of loving others (this is John's third focus on the social test, following 2:7-11 and 3:11-18). John begins by once again (cf. 3:11 and 3:23) calling on his readers to love one another (cf. John 13:34, 15:12, 17, 1 John 4:11, and 2 John 5). Not ironically, John prefaces this exhortation by reminding his readers that they are loved¹¹⁸ ("beloved"), not just by John, but also by God Himself (cf. Romans 1:7's "beloved of God"). Those who are loved by God should love others (cf. verse 11). The reason why believers ought to love one another is because ("for") "love is from God"; love is a "God thing." Love originates with God; He "invented" it; He "owns the patent" on it. Since believers are God's children ("born¹¹⁹ of God"; cf. comments on 2:29), they reflect the nature of their Father. If one partakes of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4 and 1 John 3:9's "seed"), and inherent in that divine nature is love (cf. verse 8), then it naturally follows that one who is truly a child of God will be characterized by love. According to this verse, loving¹²⁰ others (the social test) is proof positive that one has been born again; according to 5:1, correct Christology (the doctrinal test) is the proof; according to 2:29, 3:9, and 5:18, doing right (the moral test) is the proof.

¹¹⁸“John skillfully reminds them that those being commanded to love others are themselves the recipients of love” (Hiebert, p. 196).

¹¹⁹The Greek verb translated “born” is in the passive voice, indicative of the fact that God is the One who “gives birth to” the believer (see also John 1:13); God is acting, while the believer is passive, being acted upon; God is sovereign in salvation (cf. comments on 2:29). Also, this verb is in the perfect tense (as in 2:29 and 3:9), indicative of an ongoing condition, implying eternal security.

¹²⁰It must be remembered that John is speaking of a love characterized by its quantity (the Greek verb translated “loves” is in the present tense and is, thus, speaking of a lifelong love; in order to be considered a true believer, one’s life must be continually characterized by this kind of love) and quality (in order to be considered a true believer, one’s life must be characterized by a unique kind of love, *agape* love, a selfless, one-way love). In commenting on 4:16b, a parallel to 4:7b, C. H. Dodd (quoted in Marshall, p. 222) states: “The famous aphorism of 16b, in its English dress, readily lends itself to falsely sentimental interpretations, if it is detached from its total context. It does not mean that anyone who feels for another person any sort of liking, affection or passion, which we loosely include under the term ‘love,’ is *ipso facto* in union with God. The true nature of divine charity is sufficiently defined by reference to the Gospels, and it is this love, or charity, that is meant.”

4:8

The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

John states the converse of the truth of verse 7b. The person whose life is characterized by *agape* love (cf. footnote 120) gives evidence of the fact that he is a true believer (verse 7b), while the person whose life is not so characterized gives evidence of the fact that he is not (verse 8a). The reason given for the truth of verse 8a (verse 8b's "for God is love") is similar to the one given for the truth of verse 7b (verse 7a's "for love is from God"). "God is love" (cf. 4:16b) means that love is one of His attributes, a characteristic inherent to His being. "God is love" in 4:8b and 4:16b must be coordinated with "God is Light" in 1:5 in order to preserve the biblical truth that God's love is a holy love ("Light" in 1:5 being symbolic of purity). "God is love" cannot be reversed to read "love is God."¹²¹

4:9

By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him.

Love is seen in one's actions (cf. 3:18). Accordingly, just as God the Son manifested His love by His actions (3:16), so did God the Father (verses 9 and 10). God manifested His love among us (cf. Luke 1:1, 7:16, John 1:14, Acts 1:17, 2:29, and 1 Corinthians 11:19, where the Greek phrase translated "in us" here is translated "among us"), i.e., in the realm of human history, by sending¹²² His Son to be our Savior¹²³ (cf. verse 14) in order that we might live through Him (cf. John 3:16-17).¹²⁴ John, as he does also in John 1:14, 18, 3:16, and 18, calls Jesus God's "only begotten Son," meaning that Jesus is God's special, unique, "one-of-a-kind" Son¹²⁵ (so NIV's "one and only Son"). The Greek adjective

¹²¹In the original, the Greek word for "God" has a definite article preceding it ("the"), while the Greek word for "love" does not. Only if both words were preceded by a definite article would reversing of the order ("love is God") be grammatically legitimate. Furthermore, notice that the immediately preceding verse (verse 7) says "love is from God," not "love is God."

¹²²The Greek verb translated "has sent" is in the perfect tense, indicative of "the abiding impact of that crucial sending" (Hiebert, p. 201).

¹²³ Calvin (p. 240) writes: "...[W]hen a real and full certainty of divine love towards us is sought for, we must look nowhere else but to Christ."

¹²⁴Satan has sent his false prophets into the world for ill (verse 1); God has sent His Son into the world for good (verse 9).

¹²⁵Jesus is not God's only "son." Angels, Adam, and believers are also called sons of God in Scripture. Jesus, however, is God's special Son (the only one being divine, like Himself). Similarly, Isaac was not Abraham's only son (Ishmael was also his

translated “only begotten” (cf. Hebrews 11:17) is *monogenes*¹²⁶ (*monos*, “only” + *genos*, “kind”). Those spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1 and 5) can only become spiritually alive (Ephesians 2:5) and spiritually live (John 15’s vine-branch metaphor) “through Him” (cf. John 14:6 and Acts 4:12).

4:10

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

What makes God’s love so magnificent is that He loved those who were unlovely—the “ungodly” (Romans 5:6), “sinners” (Romans 5:8), His “enemies” (Romans 5:10), those who did not love Him (“not that we loved God”; cf. John 5:42).¹²⁷ “He loves not because we love Him, but because He is God” (Maclaren, p. 332). God demonstrated His love for us by sending His Son (cf. verse 9) “to be the propitiation (cf. 2:2 and comments on, as well as Romans 3:25 and Hebrews 2:17) for our sins.” The death of Christ on the Cross shows that God is both light (His holiness demanded it) and love (His love provided it).

4:11

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

God’s love for the believer (exemplified in verses 9 and 10) is to be reproduced in kind and degree (“so”; cf. John 3:16’s “so”) in the believer’s love for others (cf. 3:16). Once again (as in verse 7), John prefaces his call for brotherly love (“we also ought to love one another”) with the subtle reminder that his readers are loved (“beloved”), only this time he makes it explicit that it is God’s love for them that he primarily has in mind (“if¹²⁸ God so loved us”). John’s use of the Greek verb translated “ought” is significant. It “denotes not the ‘must’ of external compulsion but the inner constraint of conscious obligation” (Hiebert, p. 204).

son, born to Hagar), but was his special son (being the son of promise, born to Sarah). See Genesis 22:2 and 12, as well as Hebrews 11:17-18. I am indebted to page 230 of Homer Kent’s commentary on Hebrews for the bulk of the information contained in this footnote.

¹²⁶Some have incorrectly identified the derivative of *genes* in *monogenes* as the Greek verb, *gennao*, “to bear, beget, give birth to”; thus, the translation “only begotten.” Unfortunately, this inaccurate translation potentially gives fuel to those, such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who teach that Christ was a created being.

¹²⁷“God loved what is the antithesis of himself; this is its marvel and greatness” (John Murray, quoted in *The Grandeur of God* by C. Samuel Storms, p. 144).

¹²⁸This “if” clause reflects a Greek grammatical construction in which the clause is communicating *actuality*, not *potentiality* (therefore, we could translate: “since God so loved us”).

“[John] could not understand how a person could experience divine love and remain unmoved by the obligation to love other people in the same way as God had loved him” (Marshall, p. 216).

Discussion Questions for 1 John 4:7-11

1. What significance, if any, might there be to the fact that John begins verses 7 and 11 with the word, “beloved”?

Suggested answer: he is reminding his readers that those who are loved by God [cf. Romans 1:7] ought to love others

2. What doctrine might be implied by John’s use of a perfect tense verb (translated “is born” by the NASB) in 4:7 (the same phenomenon is also found in 2:29 and 3:9) when speaking of the new birth of the believer (note: a perfect tense verb in Greek describes a past, point-in-time action with ongoing results/effects)?

Suggested answer: eternal security—believers have been born of God at the point of conversion and continue to be new creatures in Christ

What might be implied by John’s use of the passive voice for this same verb (note: the passive voice signifies that the subject of the verb is not doing the acting, but is being acted upon)?

Suggested answer: that the new birth/regeneration is solely the work of God; just as we do not give birth to ourselves physically, so also spiritually—see John 1:13

3. According to Hebrews 11:17, Isaac was Abraham’s “only begotten son.” Was Isaac the only son Abraham had at the time?

Answer: no—he also had Ishmael

In what sense, then, was Isaac his only begotten son?

Answer: he was Abraham’s special son, the son of promise—see Hebrews 11:18

Therefore, what does it mean when John says in 4:9 that Jesus was the Father’s only begotten Son?

Answer—that He was the Father’s special Son, the only one who was divine, like Him; note: Jesus is not the only son God has, as angels, Adam, and believers are also called sons of God in Scripture

4:12

No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.

The opening words of this verse (“No one has seen God at any time”; cf. John 1:18, 6:46, and 1 John 4:20) have puzzled interpreters. It may be that the false teachers of John’s day were claiming to have had visions of God and that, by these words, John is debunking such a myth. Because God is spirit in substance/composition (John 4:24), He is invisible (Colossians 1:15 and 1 Timothy 1:17) and, therefore, incapable of being seen (1 Timothy 6:16). However, God can be “seen” in and through the believer whenever the believer loves others with a God-like love.¹²⁹ Love for other believers (“if we love one another”) is proof positive that one is saved (“God abides in us”). It also is indicative of the fact that “His love is perfected in us.” Whereas in 2:5 (see comments on) “love of God” is most likely referring to the believer’s love for God (taking “love of God” to be an “objective genitive”), here “His love” (literally “love of Him”) is most likely referring to God’s love for the believer (taking “love of Him” to be a “subjective genitive”). Whenever the believer loves a fellow believer, God’s love in him is perfected (cf. 4:17), i.e., matured or made complete, or reached its intended goal.¹³⁰

4:13

By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.

In words reminiscent of 3:24b, John mentions the subjective ground of assurance, the presence of the Holy Spirit within the believer. We know (are convinced) that we are saved (“we abide in Him and He in us”; see comments on 3:24) because we sense the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. The Holy Spirit bears witness to the fact that we are saved (cf. Romans 8:16). It bears repeating (cf. comments on 3:24) that this subjective internal witness of the Spirit is based on and in direct proportion to the presence of the objective tests (doctrinal, moral, and social) in the life of the believer. The Holy Spirit convinces us that we are saved to the degree that we are believing in Christ, doing right, and loving others. The tense of the Greek verb translated “has given” is significant; it is in the perfect tense, indicative of the fact that the Spirit, first given to the believer at the moment of conversion, continuously indwells the believer

¹²⁹“The unseen God, who was once revealed in His Son [John 1:18, 12:45, and 14:9], is now revealed in His people if and when they love one another” (Stott, pp. 166-167). “Since no one has seen God ever, the only way he who is love can be seen is by his children’s loving one another and thus showing the family likeness” (Ryrie, p. 1024). This is what Yarbrough (p. 245) calls incarnating God’s character.

¹³⁰“When we love others, God’s love for us has reached its full effect in creating the same kind of love as his in us” (Marshall, p. 217).

(cf. Hebrews 13:5).

4:14

We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world.

The historicity of the Incarnation was verified by the witness of the apostles (“we have seen and testify”; cf. John 15:27, Acts 5:32, and 1 John 1:1-3). This is the historical *what*. The theological *so what* is found in the latter half of the verse. Why did God send His Son? He sent His Son to save sinners from sin (“to be the Savior of the world”; cf. John 3:17 and 4:42); cf. verses 9 and 10, as well as Galatians 4:4-5. “Of the world” is indicative of the fact that the extent of Christ’s atonement was unlimited, i.e., that His death was sufficient for the sins of all men, though efficient only for the saved (cf. comments on 2:2). Significantly, the Greek verb translated “has sent” is in the perfect tense, indicative of the fact that God’s sending of the Son has had an ongoing, “ripple” effect (see footnote 122). As an aside, notice how all three members of the Godhead (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) are mentioned in verses 13 and 14.

4:15

Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.

In the midst of his focus on the social test of loving others, John touches on the doctrinal test of correct Christology. One who is truly saved (“God abides in him, and he abides in God”; see comments on 3:24) is one who “confesses that Jesus is the Son of God,” i.e., that Jesus is God (cf. John 5:18, 10:36, and 19:7)¹³¹ Belief in the deity of Christ is essential to salvation (John 8:24 and Romans 10:9; cf. 2:22-23 and 2 John 9). “This confession of the deity of Jesus Christ implies surrender and obedience also, not mere lip service” (A. T. Robertson, cited in Ryrie, p. 1025).

4:16a

We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us.

Following Hiebert (and Kistemaker and the NIV), we make a break in the midst of this verse. John’s point here in the first half of verse 16 is simply that a true believer is one who has been convinced (“have come to know and have believed”) and continues to be convinced (the Greek verbs translated “have come to know” and “have believed” are in the perfect tense) that God loves him (through the subjective work of the Holy Spirit¹³² and the objective truth of

¹³¹In Scripture, the phrase, “son of x” expresses the character or essence of someone or something (cf. Mark 3:17 and Acts 4:36).

¹³²See Romans 5:5b. The songwriter has said it this way: “Loved with everlasting love, Led by grace that love to know; Spirit, breathing from above, Thou hast

Scripture working in tandem).

taught me it is so!” (from the song, “I Am His, and He is Mine,” words by George Robinson).

Discussion Questions for 1 John 4:12-16a

1. What implications might be drawn from the fact that the Son was sent to be the Savior of the world (verse 14)?

Possible answers: the extent of the atonement is unlimited, meaning that anyone can be saved—John 3:16; there is no one with whom we should hesitate to share the gospel/we should share it indiscriminately; we should seek to spread the gospel throughout the world; everyone needs to be saved; God wants to see people saved (Ezekiel 18:23, 1 Timothy 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9)

2. According to verses such as Mark 3:17 and Acts 4:36, in the Jewish way of thinking, when a person is called the “son of” something, what is being said about that person?

Answer: that the person is characterized by what he is the “son of”

So, when Jesus is called “the Son of God” (such as in verse 15), what is being said about Him?

Answer: that He is God/divine in nature; see John 5:18

1 John 4:16b-5:9

In this section of the epistle, John finishes his second extended treatment of the social test of loving others, begun in 4:7 (4:16b-21), and begins a section (5:1-12) in which he once again (as in 3:23-24) conjoins the 3 objective tests of correct Christology, doing right, and loving others with the internal witness of the Holy Spirit (5:1-9).

4:16b

God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

John begins the last half of verse 16 by reiterating the truth that “God is love” (cf. 4:8). Because God is love, it naturally follows that those who live in Him will live in love.¹³³ Thus, one whose life is characterized by love for others (“abides in love”) gives evidence of the fact that he is saved (“abides in God, and God abides in Him”; see comments on 3:24).

4:17

By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world.

The believer whose life is characterized by love for others (the “this”) (verse 16b) gives evidence of the fact that God’s love in and through him has been “perfected” (cf. 4:12 and comments on), that is, matured, completed, fulfilled; it “has reached its goal ... has accomplished its intended aim” (Compton, p. 33). As a result (“so that”), he can face judgment day with confidence (cf. 2:28 and comments on), the reason being (“because”) he is what God is (“as He is, so also are we”), loving, thus showing that he is truly a child of God (cf. 4:7) and does not, therefore, have to live in slavish fear of God’s judgment (cf. Romans 8:15).

4:18

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.

Fear and love cannot coexist; love (the love of verse 17) excludes (“there is no fear in love”) and ejects (“perfect love casts out fear”) fear. The fear John is speaking of is not the reverential awe for God that every person is to have (1 Samuel 12:24 and Ecclesiastes 12:13), but the fear of retributive justice¹³⁴ (“fear

¹³³J. Dwight Pentecost (quoted in Hiebert, p. 214) states in this regard: “To dwell in God is to have one’s spiritual roots so deeply implanted in Him that His life flows through the total person and manifests itself in our life.”

¹³⁴Theologians speak both of God’s “retributive justice” (His punishing of disobedience) and of His “remunerative justice” (His rewarding of obedience).

involves punishment”; cf. Romans 13:3). The presence of such fear is indicative to some degree of imperfection in the believer’s assurance of God’s love for him (“the one who fears is not perfected in love”), which is ultimately traceable to a failure to love others (4:12). To the degree that the believer loves others, to that degree his assurance of God’s love for him increases (his love for others convinces him that he is a child of God; see comments on 4:17), and to that degree his fear of being judged by God decreases; conversely, to the degree that the believer does not love others, to that degree his assurance of God’s love for him decreases (his lack of love for others calls his paternity into question), and to that degree his fear of being judged by God increases.

4:19

We love, because He first loved us.

Verse 19 serves as somewhat of a bridge between the following verses (verses 20-21) and the preceding ones (verses 16-18). The reason why “we love” (verses 20-21) is “because He first loved us” (verses 16-18). Both God’s love for man and man’s love for God and others are initiated by God (cf. verse 10’s “not that we loved God, but that He loved us”); it could not be otherwise, for all men naturally hate God (see Romans 1:30’s “haters of God” and Romans 5:10’s “enemies”) and others (see Titus 3:3’s “hateful, hating one another”).¹³⁵ God must supernaturally (through the new birth) implant within the heart of a man the capacity to truly love (see footnote 119) God and others.

4:20

If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.

Apparently, the false teachers in the midst of John’s readers were claiming to love God, but were once again (cf. 1:6, 2:4, and 9) contradicting their claim (loving God) by their conduct (hating others), making them liars (cf. 2:4 and 22). It is not profession that proves salvation, but practice. They were living a lie, claiming to love One they could not see, all the while hating those they could see. “It is obviously easier to love and serve a visible human being than an invisible God, and if we fail in the easier task, it is absurd to claim success in the harder” (Stott, p. 173). Furthermore, since God commands us to love others (3:23, 4:21, et. al.), failure to love others is disobeying God, and those who disobey God do not love Him (John 14:15 and 1 John 5:3); thus, failure to love others = failure to

¹³⁵Before objecting to the charge that unbelievers hate God and others, please remember that, biblically, hatred is more than visible, active enmity; it is also the failure to actively love (a passive hatred). Furthermore, in the face of forces to the contrary (for example, when firmly confronted with the gospel and its demand of repentance), the unbeliever’s deep-rooted enmity toward God and others often becomes quite visibly active.

love God.

4:21

And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.

John restates the truth of verse 20 in positive terms. Love for God and love for others are inseparable; you cannot have one without the other (cf. 5:1b-2). In Matthew 22:37-39//Mark 12:29-31, Jesus tied the two greatest commandments in the Law, the command to love God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and the command to love others (Leviticus 19:18), together. This verse is John's way of saying in essence: "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate" (Matthew 19:6b).

Discussion Questions for 1 John 4:16b-21

1. In 4:16, John speaks of the believer abiding (the Greek verb can also be translated, “remaining”) in God, and vice versa. By using this particular verb, and in the present tense (literally: “is abiding,” reflected by the “-eth” ending in the KJV’s “dwelleth”), what might John be implying regarding the believer’s relationship with God?

Suggested answer: it is an ongoing, never-ending relationship, a relationship that God preserves [we are eternally secure] and a relationship in which the believer perseveres

2. In 4:16, John says that God is love. Yet, in the very next verse, 4:17, he speaks of judgment. How do you reconcile the two?

Possible answers: Both are true [as Charles Spurgeon once said regarding another issue, “I don’t reconcile friends”]. God is love [1 John 4:8 and 16], but He is also light [1 John 1:5], so His love is a holy love, a love that must respond to wrong [A. H. Strong once said that His holiness is the track on which the engine of His love must run]; it is loving to rightly respond to wrong/it is not loving to refuse to do so [see Proverbs 3:12, 13:24, Hebrews 12:6, and Revelation 3:19a]; God in love provided the way for ultimate judgment to be averted [see John 3:16-18]; it is loving of God to warn us of judgment

3. In 4:18, John says that fear and love cannot coexist. Does this mean that a person who loves God no longer needs to fear God?

Suggested answer: No. In this verse John is not talking about no longer fearing [in the sense of revering] the person of God; rather, he is talking about no longer fearing [in the sense of dreading] the punishment of God

4. In 4:19, John says that believers love because God first loved them. How might God loving believers cause believers to love?

Possible answers: because God in love saves, and it is by being saved that one is able to truly love; in gratitude for God’s love for him, the believer responds with love for God; the believer follows God’s example, loving others the way God loves him

5:1

Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him.

In 5:1-5, John ties the three tests (doctrinal, social, and moral) together. He begins (in verse 1a) and ends (in verse 5b) with the doctrinal test of correct Christology. One who is truly saved (“born of God”; see comments on 2:29) is one who believes¹³⁶ what the Bible teaches about the person of Christ.¹³⁷ According to this verse, in order to be saved, one must believe “that Jesus is the Christ,” i.e., that Jesus is God in the flesh (cf. 2:22 and comments on). The doctrinal test (verse 1a) cannot be separated from the social test (verse 1b); John ties the two together by the Greek verb translated “born,” which appears in both halves of the verse. In the last half of this verse, John reiterates the truth of 4:20-21 that love for God and love for others (specifically, other believers) are inseparable, giving a further reason why this is so, the reason being that God and other believers are members of the same family. It would be incongruous to love a father, but not to love his children (the KJV’s more literal translation makes the point more explicitly: “every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him”). It is only natural to love the one who begat you, as well as any others begotten by the same; for this reason, the believer not only loves his spiritual Father, but also his spiritual siblings, his brothers and sisters in Christ. The divine life implanted in the heart of each believer (through regeneration) has, as it were, a magnetic force that attracts the believer to those who share the same kind or quality of life, God¹³⁸ and other believers.

¹³⁶Hiebert (p. 223) rightly reminds his readers that belief/faith is “more than intellectual apprehension of the truth involved; it is not mere assent to a creed; it involves an active personal commitment to the truth believed.” The Greek verb translated “believes” is in the present tense (more literally, “is believing”), indicative of the fact that one who is truly saved will invariably persevere in faith (doctrine/belief), as well as in faithfulness (deeds/behavior).

¹³⁷Stott (p. 175) sees in this verse implicit support for the soteriological (soteriology being the doctrine of salvation) concept that regeneration precedes faith: “The combination of present tense [”believes”; more literally, “is believing”] and perfect [”is born”; more literally, “has been born”] is important. It shows clearly that believing is the consequence, not the cause, of the new birth.”

¹³⁸Though God and believers share the same kind or quality of life, eternal life, they do not share it to the same degree or quantity.

5:2

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments.

Just as the doctrinal test cannot be separated from the social test (verse 1), so the social test cannot be separated from the moral test (verses 2 and 3); all three are intertwined¹³⁹, being rooted in the same reality, regeneration (see last comment on 4:7). Love for God and love for God's children are so intertwined that John can speak of love for the first (God) as *prima facie* evidence of love for the second (God's children). Just as one cannot love God without also loving His children (4:20-21 and 5:1b), so one cannot love God's children without also loving God (5:2).

5:3

For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.

John begins this verse by making explicit what was implied at the end of verse two, namely, that love for God (taking "love of God" as an "objective genitive," meaning our love for God) and obedience to God are inseparable (cf. John 14:15, 21a, 23a, 24, 31, 15:10, 1 John 2:4-5, and 2 John 6). If a person does not obey God, he does not truly love God. Love is acting for the benefit of another, and the person who obeys God is acting for God's benefit, submitting his will to God's (cf. Christ's "not as I will, but as You will" in Matthew 26:39, et. al.), showing God, not man, to be supreme. Such submission, however, is not oppressive, for "His commandments are not burdensome" (cf. Matthew 11:28-30). It is not a "bitter burden" (Yarbrough, p. 275). Thus, the believer's attitude is not so much one of *having to* obey God/duty as it is *getting to* obey Him/delight¹⁴⁰ (cf. Psalm 112:1 and 119:35).

5:4

For¹⁴¹ whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.

John returns to the doctrinal test of correct Christology in verses 4 and 5. One of the enemies of the believer is the world (cf. 3:13 and comments on), the

¹³⁹ "[The three tests] are so closely woven together into a single, coherent fabric that it is difficult to unpick and disentangle the threads" (Stott, p. 174).

¹⁴⁰ It is more of a "may I?" than a "must I?" (Hershel Hobbs, cited in Hiebert, p. 227).

¹⁴¹ Akin (p. 192) ties verses 3 and 4 together when he writes: "Everyone who has been born of God is able to keep God's commands because he has been given power by God to overcome the negative influences that would prevent such obedience."

organized system under the sway of Satan opposed to God and His people (cf. comments on 2:15). Because believers are regenerate (“born of God”), they are able to overcome this enemy. The weapon by which they are able to overcome the world is their faith (verse 4; cf. 2:14, where the specific weapon for overcoming another enemy, Satan, is the weapon of the Word), specifically their faith in Christ (verse 5). John is likely alluding to his readers’ successful resistance of the false teaching of the false teachers (cf. 4:4 and comments on).¹⁴² Faith overcame falsehood; correct Christology conquered corrupt Christology.

5:5

Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

The specific object of the faith of John’s readers was the ultimate key to their success in overcoming the false teaching of the false teachers in their midst. They were able to overcome because their faith was placed in the right object, One who had Himself overcome the world (John 16:33, Revelation 3:21, and 5:5; cf. the very end of footnote 142). To believe “that Jesus is the Son of God” is to believe He is God (see comments on 4:15). This is the key to spiritual victory. As Marshall (p. 231) states: “Only the person who recognizes that Jesus is the Son of God can believe that Jesus supplies divine power to overcome the world.”

¹⁴²Stott (p. 177) may very well be correct in seeing in the tense of the Greek verb translated “has overcome” (an aorist tense, indicative of a past, point-in-time event) an allusion to a culminating act of resistance on the part of John’s readers leading to the departure of the false teachers (2:19). Burdick (p. 84) sees in it an allusion to the moment of the believer’s conversion. Another option is to see in it an allusion to Christ’s victory on the Cross.

Discussion Questions for 1 John 5:1-5

1. What significance might there be to the present tense verb for believe (reflected by the –eth ending in the KJV; literally: “is believing”) that John uses in 5:1?

Suggested answer: one who is truly saved/born of God will persevere in the faith, specifically the belief that Jesus is the Christ/God in the flesh

2. How is it that loving God is an automatic indicator that one will also love God’s children (5:2)?

Suggested answers: Because, as 5:1 says, it is only natural to love the children of a father that you love. Also, because to love God is to keep His commands [5:2b & 5:3a], and one of His commands is to love other believers [3:23b]; therefore, those who truly love God will love other believers

3. Why is keeping God’s commands not a burdensome thing for the believer (5:3)?

*Possible answers: because we **love** the One giving us the commands (5:3a); because we know that the One giving us the commands loves us/His commands are for our benefit; because He gives us the ability to keep them*

4. What significance might there be to the present tense verbs for overcome (reflected by the –eth endings in the KJV; literally: “is overcoming”) that John uses in both 5:4 and 5:5?

Possible answers: one of the birthmarks of the believer is consistently overcoming the corruption of the culture; the Christian’s fight against the corruption of the culture is an ongoing, continuous one—we must keep fighting

5:6

This is the One who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ; not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood. It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.

The opening words of this verse are somewhat mysterious. Alfred Plummer (cited in Akin, p. 195) calls this verse “the most perplexing passage in the Epistle [of 1 John] and one of the most perplexing in the N.T.” What does John mean when he says that Jesus came “by water and blood”? Based on John 19:34, Augustine saw in water and blood a reference to the death of Christ. Some see a reference to the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Nearly all modern interpreters, however, see in “water” a reference to the baptism of Christ (Matthew 3:13-17//Mark 1:9-11//Luke 3:21-22) and in “blood” a reference to the death of Christ (“blood” in Romans 5:9 = “death” in Romans 5:10). These events marked the commencement and the culmination of Christ’s ministry. Many interpreters are of the persuasion that this is John’s way of combatting the Cerinthian-like teaching of the false teachers. Cerinthus¹⁴³ taught that the Christ spirit entered Jesus at His baptism and departed from Him just prior to His crucifixion, thus denying the Incarnation, the fact that Jesus was God in the flesh. According to John, however, Jesus was at all times the Christ (2:22 and 5:1), including at His baptism and at His death. While Cerinthianism did not reject the first *per se*¹⁴⁴, it did reject the second; thus, John reiterates: “not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood.” If the death of Jesus was not the death of a God-man, then His death would not have had the infinite value needed to make it powerful enough to wash away sin (cf. 1:7 and comments on). In the second half of this verse, John once again (as in 2:20 and 27) makes mention of the illumination of the Spirit, that ministry whereby the Holy Spirit convinces the believer that the teachings of God’s Word are, indeed, the truth. In context, John is specifically speaking of the Spirit’s confirmation of the truth concerning Christ (cf. John 15:26), including the truth of His resurrection (Acts 5:32). Because “the Spirit is the truth” (≈ “the Spirit of truth” in John 14:17, 15:26, and 16:13), His testimony is true.

5:7-8

For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.

These verses in more recent versions (such as the NASB) are significantly shorter than in the KJV due to (in the opinion of almost every textual scholar) an improper addition of the words “in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy

¹⁴³For more on Cerinthus and Cerinthianism, see under “occasion” in the introductory lesson.

¹⁴⁴“Cerinthus would probably have agreed that the Christ ‘came by water,’ inasmuch as he held that it was at His baptism in water that the Christ came upon Jesus” (Burdick, p. 86).

Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth”¹⁴⁵ (the so-called “Johannine Comma”; for more on this, see under “outstanding features of 1 John” in the introductory lesson) into the Greek text (Erasmus’ 3rd edition of the Textus Receptus) behind the KJV. Under the Old Testament Law, in order for someone’s testimony to be admissible/valid, it had to be confirmed by two or three witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15; cf. Deuteronomy 17:6, Matthew 18:16, John 8:17, 2 Corinthians 13:1, 1 Timothy 5:19, and Hebrews 10:28). The true identity of Jesus is confirmed by the consistent (“the three are in agreement”) testimony of three witnesses: the Spirit, the water, and the blood. The historical, objective events of Jesus’ baptism (notice the words of God the Father at Jesus’ baptism in Matthew 3:17//Mark 1:11//Luke 3:22) and death (notice the words of the centurion at Jesus’ death in Matthew 27:54//Mark 15:39) testify to His true identity, as does the Holy Spirit within the heart of the believer.¹⁴⁶

5:9

If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater; for the testimony of God is this, that He has testified concerning His Son.

God the Father gave testimony concerning the true identity of Jesus both at His baptism (Matthew 3:17//Mark 1:11//Luke 3:22) and at His transfiguration (Matthew 17:5//Mark 9:7//Luke 9:35). Because this testimony is from one who is divine (NIV: “We accept man’s testimony, but God’s testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God”), it is greater than the testimony of men. If (the “if” could be translated “since”) the testimony of men is so readily received, so should the testimony of God (an argument from the lesser to the greater). The Greek verb translated “has testified” is in the perfect tense, indicative of the fact that God continues to testify concerning His Son through the Word of God and the Holy Spirit’s ministry of illumination.

¹⁴⁵Henry (pp. 1090-1092) argues for their inclusion, while Akin (pp. 198-200) and MacArthur (pp. 195-196) argue for their exclusion.

¹⁴⁶The words from Charles Wesley’s “Arise, My Soul, Arise” come to mind: “The Spirit answers to the blood and tells me I am born of God.”

Discussion Questions for 1 John 5:6-9

1. At the start of 5:6, John especially emphasizes that Jesus, the Son of God (as he is called at the end of 5:5) came by “blood,” or death, likely his way of combating Cerinthianism, which taught the falsehood that when Jesus died He was no longer divine. Why is it so vital that Jesus was divine when He died?

Answer: Because the only sufficient payment for the infinite debt of our sin against an infinite God was a death of infinite value, and the only death that is of such value is the death of a God-man

2. Most students of the Greek text of the New Testament are of the opinion that the Greek text behind the KJV (and the NKJV) in 1 John 5:7-8 at some point wrongly added the words that include a listing of the three Persons of the Trinity (“the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost” in verse 7). If these words are not part of the text of these verses, does this mean that the doctrine of the Trinity is in question?

Answer: no

Where in Scripture do we find support for the doctrine of the Trinity?

Possible answers: all 3 Persons of the Trinity are present at the baptism of Christ in Matthew 3:16-17//Mark 1:10-11//Luke 3:21-22; all 3 are mentioned in the Great Commission passage of Matthew 28:19; Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Trinity speaks of the other 2 in John 14:16-17, 26, and 15:26; all 3 are mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:4-6; all 3 are mentioned in 2 Corinthians 13:14; all 3 are mentioned in Ephesians 4:4-6; all 3 are mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2:13; all 3 are mentioned in 1 Peter 1:2; and all 3 are mentioned in Jude 20-21

Thus, does the absence of these words in 1 John 5:7-8 in versions other than the KJV mean that such versions are denying the Trinity?

Answer: no; this is a disagreement about the genuine reading of a particular text, not the denial of a biblical truth

3. In this section of the Epistle, John mentions 3 separate witnesses to the deity of Jesus: the Holy Spirit, the “water”/the baptism of Christ, and the “blood”/the death of Christ. According to the following passages, who or what else testifies that Jesus is God?

Matthew 3:17//Mark 1:11//Luke 3:22; Matthew 17:5//Mark 9:7//Luke 9:35; John 5:37; and John 8:18b – *God the Father*

Matthew 14:33 – *the disciples*

Matthew 26:63-64//Mark 14:61-62//Luke 22:70; John 4:25-26; John 5:17; John 8:14; John 8:18a; John 8:58; John 9:35-37; John 10:30; and John 14:9 – *Jesus Himself*

Matthew 27:54//Mark 15:39—*a Roman soldier*

Mark 1:24, 3:11, and 5:7—*demons*

John 1:34—*the apostle John*

John 1:41 – *Andrew*

John 1:49 – *Nathanael*

John 4:29 – *the woman of Samaria*

John 4:42 – *the Samaritans*

John 5:33 – *John the Baptist*

John 5:36, John 10:25, John 10:38, John 14:11, and John 20:30-31 – *the works Jesus did on earth*

John 5:39 and John 5:46 – *the Old Testament*

John 11:27 – *Martha*

John 20:28—*Thomas*

4. In 5:9, John says that the testimony of God is greater than that of men. Why is this so?

Suggested answers: because God is infinite/unlimited, while man is finite/limited—therefore, God’s testimony is always and absolutely complete, without any inherent limitations, such as limited knowledge of facts, etc.; because man is fallen, while God is not—therefore, God’s testimony is always and absolutely correct, inherently truthful and trustworthy

1 John 5:10-21

In this section of the epistle, John completes the body of the epistle (1:5-5:12) by finishing the section of 5:1-12, a section in which he conjoins the 3 objective tests of correct Christology, doing right, and loving others with the internal witness of the Holy Spirit (5:10-12); gives the statement of purpose for the epistle (5:13); and concludes the epistle with an epilogue (5:14-21).

5:10

The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son.

John begins this verse by teaching that a true believer (“one who believes in the Son of God”) receives confirmation that his faith is genuine through the internal witness of the Spirit (“has the testimony in himself”). The internal witness of the Spirit is that ministry whereby the Holy Spirit bears witness/testifies to the believer that he is truly a child of God (see Romans 8:16, Galatians 4:6, and 1 John 3:24b), a subjective witness based on the presence of the objective evidences of conversion in the believer’s life (see comments on 3:24). One of the things concerning which the Holy Spirit convinces the believer is that Christ really is who the Scriptures say He is and that the believer’s faith in Him is genuine.¹⁴⁷ Throughout His Word, God has testified concerning the true identity of His Son (cf. verse 9b and comments on). To reject this testimony in unbelief is to malign God’s very character (“the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar”; cf. 1:10); unbelief is a serious matter.¹⁴⁸ You cannot separate belief in what a person says from belief in the person himself (see John 3:33). Saving faith involves committing oneself both to a Person (“believes in the Son of God”) and to certain propositions about that Person (“believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son”; cf. 5:5’s “believes that Jesus is the Son of God”). Stott (p. 184) comments that the “testimony” concerning Christ’s person which John speaks of in this verse is both the cause [verse 10b] and the consequence [verse 10a] of belief.

¹⁴⁷“Following his regeneration there develops in the believer the growing inner conviction that the things that the Spirit has borne witness to are true and that they are true in his own life” (Hiebert, p. 244). “The inward witness of God’s Spirit shows the Christian that he was right to believe in Jesus” (Stephen Smalley, cited in Akin, p. 201).

¹⁴⁸“Unbelief is not a misfortune to be pitied, it is a sin to be deplored” (Stott, p. 185). “Rejecting God’s witness concerning His Son ... is an affront to God’s holy nature. Those guilty of it must ... [be] confronted and called to repentance. This is no trivial issue; the integrity of God is at stake” (MacArthur, p. 198).

5:11

And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son.

In order to properly interpret this verse, one must decide which “testimony” John is speaking of, the objective testimony that God has given concerning His Son (verses 9b and 10b) or the subjective testimony of the Spirit within the heart of the believer that this objective testimony is true and has truly been believed (verse 10a). Along with Stott, this writer takes it to be the second. The Holy Spirit witnesses/testifies to the believer that he is a believer/regenerate/a recipient of the gift of eternal life¹⁴⁹ (“that God has given us eternal life”; cf. John 10:28, 17:2, Romans 6:23b, and Ephesians 2:8; salvation is received, not achieved), which is in Christ (“this life is in His Son”; cf. John 1:4 and 1 John 1:2 and comments on).

5:12

He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.

Since eternal life is in Christ (verse 11b), in order to be a recipient of God’s gift of eternal life, one must “have” Christ (verse 12). The totality of humanity can be subdivided into two groups, those who have Christ and those who do not. Those who do not have Christ abide in death (see 3:14 and comments on). Those who have Christ have “the life,” the life that is life indeed (1 Timothy 6:19). To “have” Christ is to believe in Him/to have Him as one’s Savior (compare 5:12a with John 3:36a). Since Christ is “the life” (John 11:25, 14:6, 1 John 1:2, and 5:20), to have Him is to have the life.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE (5:13)

5:13

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

As he does in his Gospel (in John 20:31), John states his purpose for writing 1 John explicitly and at the end of the book. While a minority of interpreters believe otherwise (taking the “these things” to be a reference merely to what immediately precedes), the majority of interpreters take the “these things” to be a reference to the contents of the book as a whole. John’s purpose for writing (cf. under

¹⁴⁹Eternal life is not just quantitative, but also qualitative. It “is the highest kind of spiritual and moral life, irrespective of time, which God enables the believer to share in relationship with Jesus” (Stephen Smalley, quoted in Hiebert, p. 246). It is “life that is endless (as to time) and life that is God-breathed (as to quality)” (Edward McDowell, quoted in Hiebert, pp. 252-253). For more on the nature of eternal life, see comments on 1:2.

“purpose” in the introductory lesson) was to give his readers the means whereby they might be convinced (“know”) that they were truly believers (“you who believe in the name¹⁵⁰ of the Son of God”)/recipients of eternal life (“that you have eternal life”), the means being the three objective tests (or what some have called the “birthmarks of the believer”). The Greek verb translated “have” is in the present tense (more literally, “are having”), indicative of the fact that the believer has eternal life the moment he gets saved (cf. John 3:36, 5:24, and comments on 1 John 2:25). The believer will receive the full and final phase of eternal life in the future (see Luke 18:30 and Romans 2:7).

¹⁵⁰To believe in the “name” of the Son of God (cf. John 1:12, 2:23, 3:18, and 1 John 3:23) = believing in the Son Himself (see comments on 2:12 and 3:23; compare 5:10 with 5:13).

Discussion Questions for 1 John 5:10-13

1. According to verse 12, the only way to have eternal life is by having/believing in God the Son. What other places in Scripture speak of the exclusivity of Christianity, i.e., that the only way to be saved is through the Son?

Possible answers: Isaiah 43:11, Hosea 13:4, John 14:6, Acts 4:12, and 1 Timothy 2:5

2. In verse 13, John gives his purpose for writing his epistle: to give believers assurance of their salvation. According to the following verses in 1 John, what are the three main “birthmarks of the believer” that are found in this book?

2:22-23, 4:2-3, 6, 15, 5:1a, and 13 – proper belief, specifically correct Christology

1:5-7, 2:3-6, 29, 3:6-10a, 24a, and 5:18 – proper behavior, specifically consistently correct conduct

2:9-11, 3:10b, 14-15, 17, 19, 4:7-8, 12, and 16b – proper behavior, specifically consistent concern for Christians

EPILOGUE (5:14-21)

As with his Gospel (chapter 21 of John), John concludes his first epistle with an epilogue, a postscript of sorts in which he briefly touches on many of the same topics dealt with in the body of the epistle, as well as introducing a few new ones.

5:14-15

This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.

As earlier in the epistle (see 3:21-22 and comments on), John makes a direct connection between assurance of salvation (verse 13) and effectiveness in prayer (verses 14 and 15). The more one is convinced that he is truly a child of God, the more apt he will be to approach his heavenly Father in prayer (see the start of the Model Prayer in Matthew 6:9f) with a bold, open, uninhibited freedom of speech, or confidence¹⁵¹, confidence being one of the keys to answered prayer (cf. Matthew 7:7-11, James 1:5-8, and comments on 3:21). Another key to answered prayer is praying according to God's will. The only way to know God's will is through His Word. Thus, all other things being equal, the more you know the Bible, the more effective you will be in prayer.¹⁵² Prayer is not about getting our will done in heaven; it is about getting God's will done on earth (see Matthew 6:10, as well as Christ's words in Gethsemane in Matthew 26:39//Mark 14:36//Luke 22:42).¹⁵³ The believer can be confident that any prayer that is prayed in accordance with God's will (\approx praying "in Jesus' name," i.e., in accordance with His character and will, John 14:13-14, 15:16, and 16:23-24; cf.

¹⁵¹Accordingly, John speaks of having confidence "before Him," which connotes face-to-face intimacy, being near Him, facing Him (Hiebert, pp. 254-255).

¹⁵²W. Bingham Hunter, in his book on prayer entitled, *The God Who Hears* (p. 104), states in this regard: "Effectiveness in prayer will always be coupled with regular reading, memorizing of and meditating on Scripture. I see almost no potential to become a so-called prayer warrior where systematic Bible reading and study are absent. The Bible is the only divinely inspired guidebook to the will and thought of God. And learning to pray effectively boils down largely to learning to think like God and understand His will. Read the Book."

¹⁵³"Prayer is not a device for imposing our will upon God, but rather the bending of our will to His in the desire that His good will may be done" (Hiebert, p. 256). "Prayer is not a convenient device for imposing our will upon God, or for bending his will to ours, but the prescribed way of subordinating our will to his" (Stott, p. 188). C. H. Dodd (cited in Akin, p. 206) adds: "For prayer rightly considered is not a device for employing the resources of omnipotence to fulfill our own desires, but a means by which our desires may be directed according to the will of God, and made into channels for the forces of His will." Yarbrough (p. 300) simply says that it's about God's will, not our whims.

John 15:7's "and My words abide in you"¹⁵⁴) will be answered.

5:16

If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this.

In verses 16 and 17, John continues his focus on prayer begun in verse 14. Verse 16 is fraught with interpretive challenges. Marshall Neal (*Biblical Viewpoint*, Volume 5, Number 1, p. 42) calls it "perhaps the most difficult verse to interpret in the whole Epistle [of 1 John]." In the first half of the verse, John calls for intercessory prayer for a believer (a "brother") who commits "a sin not leading to death"¹⁵⁵. "The one who sees sin is to make request or petition, not point fingers, turn a blind eye, initiate gossip, or bask in a feeling of superiority" (Yarbrough, p. 307). In the last half of the verse, John discourages (I say "discourages" because he does not explicitly preclude it, though such preclusion does seem to be implied) such prayer for someone (whether a believer, an unbeliever, or either, John does not specify) who commits "a sin leading to death." Is "death" to be understood as a reference to physical death or spiritual death? Closely related to this question is the question of who can commit such a sin: a believer, an unbeliever, or either? Some (such as Wiersbe, Ryrie, and Hodges) view the death as physical and the sinner as a believer who dies prematurely due to sin (cf. Deuteronomy 34:5, 2 Samuel 6:7, Acts 5:1-11, 1 Corinthians 5:5, and 11:30). Other interpreters (among whom are Hiebert, Stott, Akins, Yarbrough, and Kistemaker) view the death as spiritual and the sinner as an unbeliever. This second option seems preferable. Another question the interpreter must answer is: What is the "sin leading to death"? Is it a particular sin, such as apostasy (so Calvin), blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:31-32//Mark 3:28-30//Luke 12:10; so Calvin and Henry), murder, or suicide? Or is it more a category of sin? This writer is more inclined to see it as a category of sin.¹⁵⁶ In this writer's opinion, the sin leading to death is not a particular sin, but a sin that is of such a character that to persist in it is to resign

¹⁵⁴Commenting on this verse, Edwin Blum ("John" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 2:326) states: "Christ's words condition and control such a believer's mind so that his prayers conform to the Father's will. Since his prayer is in accord with God's will, the results are certain."

¹⁵⁵Of course, there is a general sense in which all sin leads to death (Romans 5:12, 6:23a, and James 1:15). John's words in this verse, therefore, must be interpreted in a more specialized sense, germane to the specific context in which they are found.

¹⁵⁶"The sin unto death' is not some one *specific* sin. Rather, it is a *kind* of sin—it is the sort of sin that leads to death" (Wiersbe, p. 185).

one's soul to eternal damnation.¹⁵⁷ In writing these words, John may specifically have had the false teachers in mind, who by their persistent rejection of Christ were sealing their eternal fate.¹⁵⁸ A true believer, though he sins (1:8, 10, and 2:1), will not commit this kind of sin. Thus, every sin the believer commits can be characterized as one that does not lead to spiritual death. When a believer sins, a fellow believer's intercession for him in prayer is one of the means God uses to keep/preserve his soul in a state of life (see, for example, Christ's intercession for Peter in Luke 22:32).

5:17

All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death.

Lest his readers wrongly surmise that since the sin of the believer does not lead to spiritual death (verses 16a and 17b), it is, therefore, “no biggie,” John is quick to add that “all unrighteousness is sin.” Sin is the failure to be, think, feel, or act like God in the moral realm. This definition makes God the standard against which the rightness or wrongness of an action is to be measured. Failure to measure up to the standard of righteousness, God Himself, is what makes an action sinful (cf. 2:29 and comments on).¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷Such a sin is described by Stott (p. 191) as “a deliberate, open-eyed rejection of known truth.” Chapman (p. 728) describes it as: “Total rejection and rebellion against God, and rebellion to God’s laws.”

¹⁵⁸“[John] has in view the persistent attitude of those who . . . reject the apostolic message of redemption in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God. In thus persistently rejecting the divine provision for forgiveness, they commit themselves to a spiritual disposition and course of conduct which can only be described as ‘sin unto death.’ Characterized by full and deliberate unbelief in the incarnate Redeemer, they are fatally guilty of sinning against the remedy” (Hiebert, p. 263).

¹⁵⁹“Everything in the universe is good to the degree it conforms to the nature of God and evil as it fails to do so” (A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, p. 87).

Discussion Questions for 1 John 5:14-17

1. According to 5:14-15, praying according to God's will is a condition for answered prayer. According to the following passages, what are other conditions for answered prayer?

James 4:2 – *actually praying*

Psalm 34:15, 66:18, Proverbs 15:29, Isaiah 1:15, 59:2, Micah 3:4, and 1 John 3:22 – *being a Christian and living Christianly*

Luke 11:5-10 (note: the verbs in verses 9 and 10 are in the continuous tense, i.e., keep on doing so) – *persistence in praying*

James 5:17 – *praying fervently*

Matthew 21:22, Hebrews 11:6, and James 1:5-7 – *faith (the belief that God can answer any prayer that is according to His will)*

2. According to the following passages, what is God's will and, therefore, something we should be praying for?

Ezekiel 18:23, 32, 33:11, 1 Timothy 2:4, and 2 Peter 3:9 – *the salvation of sinners*
1 Thessalonians 4:3 – *the sanctification of the saved*

According to the following passages, what does God's Word, the expression of God's will, say we should be praying for?

Matthew 5:44 – *our enemies*

Matthew 9:38 – *laborers for the harvest*

1 Timothy 2:1-2 – *political leaders*

Ephesians 6:18 and James 5:16 – *other believers*

Matthew 6:9 – *God's glory*

Matthew 6:10a – *the coming of God's kingdom*

Matthew 6:10b – *the accomplishment of God's will on earth*

Matthew 6:11 – *food*

Matthew 6:12 – *forgiveness*

Matthew 6:13a – *freedom from sin*

5:18

We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him.

John begins this verse by reiterating the truth of 3:9 (see 3:6 and comments on 3:9). One who is truly saved/regenerated (“born of God”) cannot live in sin (the Greek verb translated “sins” is in the present tense; cf. NIV’s “anyone born of God cannot continue to sin”). Sin is an anomaly for the believer¹⁶⁰ (cf. the “if”s in 2:1 and 5:16); “the new birth results in new behavior” (Stott, p. 194). This is a truth that John and his readers (“We”) had been convinced of (“know”) by the Holy Spirit’s work of illumination. To this truth John adds the truth that the believer is spiritually kept by Christ.¹⁶¹ The believer’s soul is eternally secure because of the keeping power of Christ (cf. John 10:28¹⁶², 17:12, and Jude 1; cf. 1 Peter 1:5 and Jude 24). To these truths John adds yet a third truth. Satan (“the evil one”) cannot spiritually harm (so NIV; NASB: “touch”¹⁶³) the believer (see Matthew 6:13 in the NIV, John 17:15, and 2 Thessalonians 3:3).

5:19

We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.

Another reality that John and his readers (“We”) had been convinced of (“know”) through the Holy Spirit’s illumination was that they were “of God” (cf. John 8:47, 1 John 3:10, and 4:6). The Greek noun translated “God” is in the “genitive” case, likely either a “genitive of source” (we derive our spiritual existence from God; so Burdick) or a “genitive of possession” (we belong to God; so Compton and MacArthur). In contrast to the believer, who is of God (verse 19a) and, therefore, cannot be harmed by Satan (verse 18c), is the unbeliever, who is of Satan (3:12) and, therefore, under his sway (“the whole world lies in the power of the evil one”; cf. John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11, Acts 26:18, Colossians 1:13, and 2 Timothy

¹⁶⁰“Sin and the child of God are incompatible. They may occasionally meet; they cannot live together in harmony” (Stott, p. 194).

¹⁶¹John describes Christ as “He who was born of God,” a reference to the doctrine known as the “eternal generation of the Son.” Dr. Rolland McCune (p. 131 of his “Systematic Theology I” class notes) describes this doctrine as “that eternal act whereby the Father ‘communicates’ or makes common the divine essence to the Son; the eternal ‘sonning’ of the Son.” See John 5:26.

¹⁶²“Our security is not our grip on Christ but His grip on us” (David Smith, quoted in Hiebert, p. 266).

¹⁶³That “touch” = harm in Hebraic thought is clearly seen by Psalm 105:15 (cf. Job 1:11 & 2:5).

2:26).¹⁶⁴

5:20

And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.

Yet another reality that John and his readers (“we”) had become convinced of (“know”) through the Holy Spirit’s illumination was the fact that “the Son of God ha[d] come” in the person of Jesus Christ. They had grasped the theological significance (the so what) of the historical event of the Incarnation (the what).¹⁶⁵ Since the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father (John 14:26; cf. “Spirit of God” in Romans 8:9a) and the Son¹⁶⁶ (John 15:26 and 16:7; cf. “Spirit of Christ” in Romans 8:9b), the illuminating work of the Spirit can be rightly attributed to the Son. Thus, John speaks of the Son as having given John and his readers (“us”) the “understanding” (contrast unbelievers, whose understanding is darkened, Ephesians 4:18) to know God (on the significance of knowing God, see comments on 2:3 and 3:6). John describes God as “Him who is true,” meaning that God is real, genuine, authentic (cf. Jeremiah 10:10, John 17:3, and 1 Thessalonians 1:9), the exact opposite of idols, which are a “lie” (Isaiah 44:20)/“falsehood” (Jeremiah 16:19). Hiebert (p. 270; so also Calvin, p. 274) is probably correct in eliminating the comma (there were no punctuation marks in the original text) after “true” and before “in,” thus resulting in one continuous phrase: “we are in Him who is true in His Son Jesus Christ.” Believers are in God (“in Him who is true”) by virtue of being in Christ (“in His Son Jesus Christ”). See especially John 14:6, 17:21, and 1 Thessalonians 1:1 in this regard. There is some debate as to Whom John is referring in the last statement of the verse (“This is the true God and eternal life”). Some (such as Stott, Burdick, and Maclaren) take the antecedent of “this” as being God the Father. Most (such as Hiebert, Kistemaker, MacArthur, Akin, and Yarbrough, as well as past theologians such as Luther, Calvin, and Henry), however, take it as being God the Son (cf. 1:2, where “eternal life” is clearly a reference to Christ, as well as John 11:25 and 14:6). If so, this is one of the most explicit statements in all of

¹⁶⁴“On the child of God the evil one does not so much as lay his hand; the world lies in his arms” (David Smith, quoted in Stott, p. 196).

¹⁶⁵Commenting on the word, “understanding,” Hiebert (p. 269) states that it “denotes the ability to pass beyond the external and superficial to discern and understand true reality. Involved is the mental ability to discern the true significance of the coming and person of the incarnate Son of God.”

¹⁶⁶This is the doctrine known as the “eternal procession of the Spirit.” Dr. Rolland McCune (p. 132 of his “Systematic Theology I” class notes) describes this doctrine as “that eternal act whereby the Father and the Son make the divine essence common to the Spirit; the eternal ‘spirating’ of the Spirit.”

Scripture concerning the deity of Christ (the fact that Christ is God). Jesus is the “true God” (cf. Jesus as the “true Light” in John 1:9, as the “true bread” in John 6:32, as the “true vine” in John 15:1, and as “the truth” itself in John 14:6). “It is precisely because Jesus is the true God that the person who is in him is also in the Father” (Marshall, p. 254).

5:21

Little children, guard yourselves from idols.

John concludes his first epistle on a striking note, what Yarbrough (p. 305) calls “perhaps the most unusual epistolary ending found in the NT.” This is the first and only mention of idolatry in the epistle.¹⁶⁷ In light of the context of the epistle as a whole, the idolatry John is warning his readers about is likely the false Christ of the false teachers (cf. Zechariah 13:2). In contrast to the true Christ (verse 20), the false teachers of John’s day proclaimed a false Christ, one that was not real/did not exist (except in the minds of the false teachers). The Greek verb translated “guard” means just that. It is used elsewhere in Scripture of shepherds guarding their sheep (in Luke 2:8) and of soldiers guarding a prisoner (in Acts 12:4). The believer is to, as it were, set a sentry at the entrance to his heart, lest idolatrous thinking invade through the ear and eye gates.¹⁶⁸ While God is the One who ultimately guards the believer (see verse 18; cf. Jude 24), according to this verse, the believer is responsible to guard himself (the same Greek verb is used in both verses). In regards to the second, see also Luke 12:15 and Jude 21.

¹⁶⁷This mention of idolatry was fitting for the readers of John, many of whom were likely from Ephesus (see under “Recipients” in the introductory lesson to this study), the home of the temple of the Greek goddess, Artemis (see Acts 19:23f; see also Acts 19:19).

¹⁶⁸What is idolatry? Maclaren (p. 45) answers: “What I prize most, what I trust most utterly, what I should be most forlorn if I lost; what is the working aim of my life, and the hunger of my heart—that is my idol.”

Discussion Questions for 1 John 5:18-21

1. In verse 18, John says that Jesus (“He who was born of God”) keeps the believer (meaning that He guards the believer’s soul, preventing the believer from apostatizing), while verse 21 indicates that the believer is to keep himself. How do you reconcile the two?

Suggested answer: while God is the One who ultimately keeps the believer/preservation [John 10:28-29, 17:12, 1 Peter 1:5, Jude 1, and 24], He does so through the believer’s necessary, active, and responsible, God-enabled [Philippians 2:13 and Hebrews 13:21] participation/perseverance [1 Peter 1:5’s “through faith” and Jude 21])

2. According to verse 18, we are told that Satan cannot harm the believer. Yet, in Job 1:11-19 and 2:5-7, Satan harmed Job. How do you reconcile?

Suggested answer: Satan cannot harm the believer in that he cannot cause the believer to apostatize; furthermore, when Satan harms the believer otherwise, he can only do so with God’s permission, indicating that such harm is ultimately for the believer’s good

3. Assuming that John’s words at the end of 5:20 (“This is the true God”) are referring to Jesus, John is affirming the doctrine of the deity of Christ, the fact that Jesus is God. What are some other passages in Scripture that explicitly affirm/directly declare the deity of Christ

Possible answers: John 1:1, Romans 9:5, Colossians 2:9, Titus 2:13, Hebrews 1:3, 8, and 2 Peter 1:1; note: there are numerous other Scriptures that implicitly affirm this doctrine

4. In 5:21, John commands his readers not to be idolatrous. What are some idols from which believers in our day are to keep themselves?

Possible answers: sinful sexual acts, Romans 1:24-25; money, Matthew 6:24 and Ephesians 5:5//Colossians 3:5; a job; a hobby—hunting, fishing, organized sports, etc.; food/living to eat instead of eating to live, 1 Corinthians 6:13a and Philippians 3:19; an addictive substance—alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, etc.; human relationships, Matthew 10:37; false teaching, as in 1 John

“Birthmarks of the Believer” in 1 John

Belief

Correct Christology – 2:22-23, 4:2-3, 6, 15, 5:1a, and 13

Behavior

Consistently Correct Conduct – 1:5-7, 2:3-6, 29, 3:6-10a, 24a, and 5:18

Consistent Concern for Christians – 2:9-11, 3:10b, 14-15, 17, 19, 4:7-8, 12, and 16b

Confession of Corruption – 1:8-10

Not Conforming to the Corruption of the Culture – 2:15-17

Continuation in Christianity – 2:19, 24, and 28

Overcoming the Corruption of the Culture – 5:4

Other

Not Cared for by the Culture – 3:13

The Confirmation of the Holy Spirit – 3:24b and 4:13