

The background of the cover is a photograph of ancient ruins, likely the Temple of Apollo in Side, Turkey. On the left, two tall, fluted columns stand prominently. In the center and right, there are large, weathered stone blocks and a pile of rubble. The ruins are situated on a sandy beach overlooking the deep blue sea under a clear sky. A few small figures of people can be seen in the distance near the water's edge.

The Epistles of John

A SHORTER COMMENTARY

ZANE C. HODGES

The Epistles of John: A Shorter Commentary is taken
from *The Grace New Testament Commentary*

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Design: Shawn Lazar

Hodges, Zane C. 1932-2008

ISBN 978-1-943399-32-1

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Printed in the United States of America

THE EPISTLES OF JOHN: A SHORTER COMMENTARY

INTRODUCTION

ANCIENT TRADITION ASSIGNS THESE epistles to John the son of Zebedee, one of the twelve apostles. Although efforts have been made to evade the implication that an eyewitness wrote 1:1-4, these efforts are faulty. The statement of 4:6 (“We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error”) would be pompous, to say the least, if it was not penned by an apostle.

In 2 and 3 John the writer introduces himself as “the Elder.” This title is perhaps simply the author’s self-effacing way of saying “the elderly one” or “the old man.” On the other hand, possibly “the older ones” (or, “elders”) had already become a designation for the apostles. If so, the term in 2 and 3 John could be a claim to apostolic authority.

The efforts made by critical scholars to find nonapostolic authors for the Fourth Gospel and these epistles are not surprising, because of scholars’ usual bias against apostolic eyewitness accounts. But the attempt to differentiate the authorship of the Gospel from that of the Epistles and even sometimes that of 1 John from 2 and 3 John, is a stunning display of tunnel vision. It is difficult to find four books anywhere in Greek literature that exhibit a style more likely to stem from one mind than does the style of the Gospel and the Epistles. Even the English reader can detect this.

The near unanimity of ancient opinion that the apostle John wrote these three epistles must carry its full weight. Johannine authorship is well supported and incapable of refutation.

There are no clear internal indications of the date when the Johannine Epistles were written. The content of the Epistles often seem to presuppose knowledge of what was written in the Gospel of John.

The date of the Gospel is most likely prior to AD 70 since the destruction of the temple is not mentioned in that Gospel. The statement in John 5:2 that “there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool” argues that Jerusalem was still standing when the Gospel was written. According to Eusebius and Irenaeus, John wrote his Gospel from Ephesus. Many believe he began to minister there in the late 40s or early 50s. The most likely date for the composition of the Gospel of John at Ephesus (as per Irenaeus) would be between AD 48 and 52. No one knows how much time elapsed between the composition of the Fourth Gospel and the writing of the Epistles, which seem often to presuppose the teaching found in the Gospel. But it could well have been quite a few years.

The Book of Revelation was the last book John wrote. While many hold to a late date for Revelation, there is good reason to believe that it also was written before the destruction of the temple in AD 70 (See Introduction to Revelation).

Therefore the Epistles can be broadly dated between 48 and 70, but in light of the infusion of false teaching in the church, and John’s reference to what they had “heard from the beginning” (cf. 1 John 2:7, 24; 3:11; 2 John 6), a date of 64–65 seems preferable.

When John wrote 1 John, he may have been back in Jerusalem with a number of other apostles (cf. comments on 2:19). John already is well acquainted with at least one of the churches addressed (see comments on 2 John). His paternal concern for them, marked by his repeated term of address, “little children,” also suggests that he felt a pastoral responsibility for these believers.

In 1 John the apostle writes out of a concern that certain false teachers may be given a hearing in the church or churches he is addressing. Since they deny that Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh (1 John 2:22; 4:3), their doctrine strikes at the heart of Christian experience. The readers, who themselves are Christians (2:12-14, 21; 5:13), are not in danger of losing eternal life—which cannot be lost—but are in danger of having their fellowship with God seriously undermined.

The aim of 1 John is *fellowship* (1:3), but John also wrote to sustain and promote this fellowship with God in the face of theological errors. These errors seem to center around the denial that Jesus is the Christ who had come in flesh. The statements in 1 John 5:6-8 suggest the possibility of an error that said the man Jesus and the divine Christ were two distinct beings, and that the Christ descended on Jesus at His baptism, but left Him prior to His death. Thus the divine Christ might be said to have come “by water” but not by “blood” (see discussion on 5:6).

If this were the case, it would imply that some aspects, at least, of physical experience were considered by the false teachers to be inappropriate or meaningless for a divine being. This may have involved the concept that any real physical contact with such a being was also impossible and that people could have contact only with the human Jesus. If this claim was made, it is denied in 1:2 where the apostles are said to have had physical contact with “that *eternal life* which was with the Father and was manifested to us” (italics added).

The false teachers could also have affirmed that the *spiritual* person did not actually commit sin when he was involved in immorality, since he was fundamentally above or separate from all physical experience. John’s apparent concern that the commandments of the Lord should be taken seriously would thus be relevant to any such teaching as this (2:3, 4, 7; 3:23; 4:21; 5:2-3).

Particularly relevant is the final command of the epistle: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (5:21). As the letters to the seven churches in Revelation reveal, the problem of Christian compromise with pagan idolatrous practice was very much alive in these churches (Rev 2:14, 20). The cultural situation made such compromise particularly seductive. Artisans, for example, might belong to a particular guild that had a specific pagan god as its patron. Guild meetings could be held in the idol’s temple and such feasts often featured the opportunity for immorality with temple prostitutes. A Christian who refused to attend such meetings might well fear expulsion from his guild and the loss of his means of livelihood.

First John also contains hints that the apostle is combating a view of God that allowed for *both light and darkness* as part of the divine nature. For example, when John writes, “God is light and in Him is no darkness at all” (1:5), the Greek statement about “no darkness” is emphatic, as the English words “at all” rightly suggest. Again, in 2:29

where John writes, “If you know that He is righteous,” he uses a Greek conditional form that does not take such knowledge for granted.

The false teachers may have taught that ultimately both good and evil, light and darkness originated with God Himself. Indeed, this idea seems to lie behind the discussion of the sinlessness of the regenerate person’s nature, which is found in 3:6-9.

John also stresses the idea of “original truth,” and repeatedly uses the phrase “from the beginning” in connection with what Christians were taught or believed (see 1:1; 2:7; 2:24; 3:11). The false teachers did not deny Christianity in its totality, they reinterpreted Christian history and doctrine. For this reason these false teachers may be thought of as “the Revisionists,” those who brought a *new version* of Christianity.

They are not referred to as Gnostics because there is no trace of the later Gnostic mythologies in 1 John (with the possible exception of the reference to Cain in 3:12). It is conceivable that the false teachers could be called proto-Gnostics, but the term “Revisionists” seems more appropriate. Nevertheless, they probably reflected some of the concepts that were formative in later Gnostic thought.

The false teachers evidently were connected with the apostolic circle at one time. This is by far the most natural reading of 2:19 where a “they-us-you” sequence begins (see comments on 2:20). Naturally false teachers, who wished their doctrines to be heard in the churches among the Gentiles, would claim connections with the mother church in Jerusalem. Indeed, the legalists, who came to Antioch from Judea (Acts 15:1), apparently made such claims, which the apostles and elders at Jerusalem felt compelled to deny (v 24). From 1 John 2:19 one can infer similar claims by the revisionists, which John denies.

Like 1 John, 2 John is chiefly concerned with the revisionists, or antichrists. At first glance, 2 John might seem like a personal letter, but it is generally taken as written to a particular Christian church personified by “the elect lady.”

Third John is a personal letter. There is no hint of doctrinal problems in this epistle, and Diotrephes seems nothing more than the first known church tyrant in Christian history. But this epistle is all

the more important for its uniqueness in addressing a problem that has replicated itself in Christian history numerous times.

OUTLINE OF 1 JOHN

- I. Prologue: The Call to Fellowship (1:1-4)
- II. Preamble: Living in Fellowship with God (1:5–2:11)
- III. Purpose: Resist the Antichrists (2:12-27)
- IV. Body: The Life That Leads to Boldness Before Christ's Judgment Seat (2:28–4:19)
- V. Conclusion: Learning How to Live Obediently (4:20–5:17)
- VI. Epilogue: Christian Certainties (5:18-21)

OUTLINE OF 2 JOHN

- I. Salutation (vv 1-3)
- II. Protecting the Truth by Rejecting Error (vv 4-11)
- III. Farewell (vv 12-13)

OUTLINE OF 3 JOHN

- I. Salutation (v 1)
- II. Upholding the Truth by Supporting Its Representatives (vv 2-12)
- III. Farewell (vv 13-14)

1 JOHN

COMMENTARY

- I. Prologue: The Call to Fellowship (1:1-4)

First John begins with a firsthand eyewitness account of what the author and his apostolic companions witnessed in Jesus Christ. John calls on what they have seen and heard as a way to refute a group of professed teachers who may be called Revisionists. Their message does not accord with the truths originally given to the apostles. If the readers were to adopt any of the doctrines these false teachers teach, it would destroy their fellowship with the apostolic circle and with God (v 3).

1:1. The impersonal form **that which was from the beginning** is deliberate. The *person* of Christ is not his theme here, but rather the “eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us” (v 2). Although Jesus *is* “the true God and eternal life” (5:20), the apostle wishes to stress the realities of eternal life itself. This is a life his readers share (see comments on 5:13).

John and his apostolic companions (note the word **we**) **have heard...we have seen...we have looked upon, and our hands have handled** this life.

Of the four verbs in v 1 (“heard...seen...looked upon...handled”), the first two, which are repeated in v 3, are in the Greek perfect tense, while the last two, not repeated in v 3, are in the aorist tense. The perfect tense verbs imply the ongoing shared experience of the apostles, while the two aorist verbs do not.

Their message was **concerning the Word of life**, or “concerning the *message about* life.” But since Jesus Christ is that life (5:20), one can also say it means “concerning the message about *Life*.” John is writing about what he and the other apostles witnessed in Jesus Christ, who *is* life (5:11-12).

1:2. The apostles **have seen** this **manifested** life, **bear witness** to it, **and declare** it to the readers. The revelation of this life was made only to the apostles themselves (**to us**), so they were equipped to share their knowledge of this *manifested* life.

1:3. What the apostles had **seen and heard** cannot be fully shared in this life. Believers must wait until they are in the presence of the Lord to “gaze at” or “handle” Him.

John now states the purpose of the epistle, namely, is fellowship (*koinōnia* shared experiences, undertakings, possessions, etc).

But this is no ordinary kind of fellowship. It is fellowship with the apostolic witnesses. In addition, John invites the readers to share in the apostles’ own fellowship...with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. If one has fellowship with John’s circle, that one also has fellowship with God and Jesus Christ.

1:4. John and the other apostles are delighted when those they have led to Christ, or nurtured in the faith, are true to the faith. If the present letter succeeds in encouraging the readers to “let that abide in [them] which [they] heard from the beginning” (2:24), the joy of the readers will be full.

True joy is gained through knowing Christ and God the Father through the apostles. Churches today need to respect for the importance of divine truth, along with a rejection of doctrinal error.

II. Preamble: Living in Fellowship with God (1:5–2:11)

Since the Revisionists are a threat to the readers' ongoing fellowship with God, it is important to state the fundamental principles for such fellowship.

A. Staying on the Path: Walking in God's Light (1:5–2:2)

1:5. The simple yet profound message that **God is light** is crucial to all fellowship between God and His creatures. Being free from every moral defect, His light is unsullied by any degree of moral impurity, **and in Him is no darkness at all.**

This latter statement is so emphatic in Greek (“darkness is not in Him—none”) that the Revisionists may have claimed that there *was* darkness in the Deity. In the religious atmosphere of the first century, pagan concepts about the gods may have influenced some to produce anti-biblical revelation of God. The heretics may have thought of Him as having a nature that included both *light* and *darkness*. If the Revisionists did have such a view of God, they could argue that moral distinctions were invalid. It was vital that the readers of this epistle have no misunderstanding on this point. God is *completely* holy.

1:6. The word **we** includes both the apostles *and* their Christian audience. The believer who walks in sin has lost touch with a completely holy God. If he nevertheless claims **fellowship** with such a God, he is lying. Sinning believers are out of *fellowship* with Him.

The phrase **practice the truth** (lit., “to do the truth”) means “to act consistently with the truth.” To claim *fellowship* with God while walking *in darkness* is to behave contrary to the truth about God's holiness.

1:7. Instead of walking in darkness, believers should **walk in the light**, that is, to live in God's presence, exposed to what He has revealed about Himself, and to “walk in darkness” (v 6) is to hide from God and to refuse to acknowledge what is known about Him. The believer who wants fellowship with the Lord must maintain an openness to Him and a willingness to be honest in His presence about everything that God shows him.

The result of walking *in the light* is that believers **have fellowship with one another**. That is, they have fellowship with God and He

has fellowship with them. Though Christians remain sinful people, while *we walk in the light* **the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin** so that they can maintain fellowship.

True, all Christians have *already* been cleansed (cf. 1 Cor 6:11) and have full forgiveness in Christ (cf. Eph 1:7). So too there is an ongoing cleansing based on Christ's **blood** that enables imperfect children to have a genuine experience of sharing with a perfectly holy heavenly Father.

1:8. At no point in time can someone rightly claim to **have no sin**. Anyone who makes such a claim is self-deceived.

The words **the truth is not in us** do not mean that the person in question is not saved. The apostle continues to use first-person pronouns, **we** and **us**, just as he has done from v 5 onward. If *the truth* has its proper effect on believers, they will not fall into this trap. If they do fall into it, *the truth is not in us* as an active and controlling force that shapes their thoughts and attitudes.

1:9. As long as believers walk in that light, they are in a position to *be shown* their failures. When that happens, they should **confess** them. The word *repentance* is not used here or anywhere in the epistle. In John's usage, Christian repentance is appropriate when a pattern of sin is persisted in and needs to be changed (see Rev 2:5, 16, 21, 22; 3:3, 19). In 1 John 1:9, John is talking about those who *discover* sin while in fellowship with God, not those who have wandered away. The audience of 1 John is spiritually stable and has nothing to repent of (see 2:12-14, 21). Their task is to "abide" in Christ and His truth (see 2:24, 28).

Confession of sin enables believers to remain in fellowship. First John 1:9 is not meant for the unsaved. Nowhere in the Johannine literature is confession of sin given as a condition for obtaining eternal life. Faith is the only condition for salvation (cf. John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; 1 John 5:1, 12, 13).

If believers deny what the light shows them, they cease to be honest and open with God and fellowship will end. But **if we confess** (*homologeō*, "agree, admit, acknowledge") **our sins** that the light reveals, they can depend on God, who is **faithful and just to forgive us our sins**. Then fellowship continues. The word *just* (*dikaios*) means "righteous." Because of the shed blood of Christ (v 7), there is no compromise of God's righteousness when He forgives.

The NKJV places the second *our* in italics since there is nothing in the Greek that strictly corresponds to it. One could translate "to

forgive us *the* sins,” with the implication being “the sins *we confess*.” But what about the sins of which believers are *unaware*? These are covered by the words **and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness**. Therefore, whenever a believer makes confession—honestly acknowledging what he knows to be wrong—whatever other sin there may be in his life is totally cleansed away. Nothing is left uncleansed.

1:10. When sin is revealed, believers either confess it or claim **that we have not sinned**. If they choose the latter, they **make Him a liar** by denying the testimony of **His word** and in effect, charging God with untruthfulness.

It is inappropriate here to take the words *we have not sinned* as a categorical denial that we have *ever* or *at any time* sinned. Even while one is in fellowship with God, he is not free from the need for cleansing (v 7). Should he deny that truth, he is self-deceived (v 8). If he confesses whatever sins the light shows him, he is forgiven (v 9). But if he denies what the light shows, he is making God a liar, which proves he does not have fellowship with God (v 6), who is Light (v 5).

2:1. The apostle now enters a disclaimer. His words could be wrongly perceived as discouraging the believer’s resistance to sin. But this is not his intent. Tenderly he addresses his readers as **my little children**. (That his readers are genuine Christians he never doubts anywhere in his letter; cf. 2:12-14). He does not want his spiritual *children* to misconstrue his intention in writing **these things** to them. *These things* (i.e., 1:5-10) are not written either to excuse or to encourage sin. Instead they are written so **that you may not sin**.

Though sin is to be vigorously shunned, it can and does occur in the lives of believers. So John adds, **And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ**. As our *Advocate*, Jesus does not plead with God to keep us “saved.” The many promises made in John’s Gospel that guarantee the security of the believer stand against such an idea. Since Jesus’ promises are true and the believer eternally secure, there is no need for the Son to plead with the Father not to cast sinning believers away.

As their *Advocate*, Jesus intercedes for believers in prayer to the Father that their “faith should not fail (cf. Luke 22:31-33). Though “the gifts and the calling of God *are* irrevocable” (Rom 11:29), the faith that appropriates those gifts is nevertheless subject to failure (cf. 2 Tim 2:18). Christ intercedes for believers so that this will not happen.

2:2. Jesus is also **the propitiation for our sins**. He can intercede for believers before God because He has personally made satisfaction to God *for our sins*. No matter what one's sin may be, Christ has made satisfaction for it. Indeed, as a *propitiation* for sin, this *propitiation* covers the sins of all humanity, **(the whole world)**.

The argument that if Christ paid for all human sin all would be saved is a misconception. The removal of sin as a barrier to God's saving grace does not automatically bring regeneration and eternal life. The sinner remains dead and "alienated from the life of God" (Eph 4:18). At the final judgment of the lost (Rev 20:11-15), sin *as sin* is not considered. Instead, men are "judged according to their works" (Rev 20:12) to demonstrate to each that their "works" give them no claim on God's salvation.

B. Reaching the Goal: Knowing the God of Light (2:3-11)

2:3. Any claim that one has achieved a personal knowledge of God can be at once tested by whether he keeps **His commandments**. The word **Him** might refer either to God or to Christ, or it may be intentionally vague, since for John they are One.

This verse is often taken as a way of knowing whether a person is genuinely *saved*. The explanation often given is that although salvation is by faith, one cannot know whether his faith is real unless he keeps *His commandments*. But that view conflicts with Johannine theology in many ways.

First, a person is saved by believing in Christ for eternal life (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:35; etc.). Second, the idea that a Christian can believe in Christ, without knowing whether he or she has *really* believed, is nonsense. When Jesus asks Martha if she believes, neither of them adopt a "wait and see" mentality (John 11:25-26). Martha's reply, which was accepted by Jesus, was a strong affirmation of her belief (v 27). Since belief is a conviction that something is true, when we believe, we know we have believed.

First John 2:3 is not talking about the *saving* knowledge of Christ, but a *fellowship* knowledge. While it is true that all believers do know God and Christ at a fundamental level, all believers may *not* know them at the level of communion and fellowship (cf. the interaction between Philip and Jesus in John 14:7-9). First John 2:3 refers not to the *saving* knowledge of God, but of the *experiential* knowledge of God.

Just as a claim to fellowship with Him is false if a believer “walks in darkness,” so too a disobedient lifestyle falsifies any claim to intimate knowledge of **Him**.

2:4. But someone might claim such knowledge without the obedience that goes with it. In that case the person making the claim **is a liar, and the truth is not in him** as a dynamic, controlling force (see comments on 1:8). Without obedience to God’s commandments, no person can truthfully claim an intimate personal knowledge of the Father and the Son.

Here, as in v 3, the words “**I know Him**” could be translated *I have come to know Him*. On the lips of the Revisionists this claim would probably imply the attainment of a knowledge of God that the readers lacked and that the Revisionists offered to supply.

2:5. In contrast to the false claim discussed in v 4, the apostle now observes that the person who **keeps** (guards) **His word** has a special experience of **the love of God**. Love for Christ and obedience to *His word* are in no way a test of saving faith, despite the repeated claim by many that they are. Instead, they are tests of genuine, heartfelt discipleship to Jesus.

The love of God is perfected in obedient Christians. The Greek word translated *is perfected* (*teteleiotai*) suggests “bring to completion,” “bring to its goal,” or “bring to full measure.” God’s love for the believer is wonderful at the point of salvation (see 3:1), but its goal is not reached until the believer returns that love by obedience, with the result that he knows the deeply personal love of the Father and Son as they “make [their] home with him” (John 14:23).

The expression **in Him** (*en autō*) is not equivalent to Paul’s concept of being “in Christ” (*en Christō*). In light of Christ’s teaching in John 13–17 (esp. 15:1–8), the words *in Him* refer to the “abiding” Teacher/disciple relationship.

2:6. The claim that someone **abides in** Christ can be verified only by a Christlike lifestyle. The Greek word *menō* (“to remain,” “to dwell,” “to live,”)—its first occurrence in 1 John—describes the life of discipleship (cf. John 15:4–7). The words of 1 John 2:5 about being “in Him” are equivalent to the idea of “abiding” in Him. The next few verses explain how to do this.

2:7. The **old commandment** is the one the believers **had from the beginning** of their Christian experience. The *old commandment* is the one spoken years before by Jesus in John 13:34: “A new

commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.”

This memorable “new” *commandment* was now *old* for John’s readers because they had received it *from the beginning*, that is, in the very earliest period of their Christian lives. This is the only reasonable sense for the phrase *from the beginning*. There is an implicit connection between 1:1 and 2:7, since John is concerned in this letter with the original truth of Christianity in contrast to the spurious “new truth” evidently taught by the Revisionists. Perhaps the Revisionists of John’s day reinterpreted the meaning of the commandment to love one another. This John would not allow. **The old commandment** still had the same content as before.

2:8. From another point of view (**Again**), the commandment John spoke about in v 7 as being “old” can be called **a new commandment**. This is because it belongs to the new age that was dawning.

Is passing away (*paragō*) occurs in 1 John only here and in v 17 (see also 1 Cor 7:31). Since the world is morally at odds with God the Father (1 John 2:15-17), darkness describes its moral condition. Thus the apostle is stating that the “old” moral situation of the world is temporary. The “new” reality that will replace it, **the true light, is already shining**. It was revealed fully in Christ’s love for the world (John 3:16), and is being revealed in Christians’ love for one another. A day will come when this love will shine forth in unhindered brilliance (2 Pet 3:13).

2:9. The claim that this verse can refer only to “professing” believers is without evidence. If John was thinking of an unsaved (but professing) Christian hating a true Christian, he would not have written: **He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother**, for the word *his* would be misleading. The correct way to say that would be, “He who hates *a* brother” (i.e., someone who hates a Christian).

In this context the subject matter is the Lord’s command to “love one another” (cf. John 13:34). John has in mind the love of Christians toward other Christians (cf. esp. 4:20–5:1). The term *brother* must therefore be understood in the Christian sense.

The apostle acknowledges the sad reality that some believers have feelings of hostility and animosity toward other believers. Such a Christian’s moral condition is deplorable. The claim by such a person to be walking in the light in fellowship with God is disproved by his hatred of his fellow Christian. **He is in darkness until now.**

2:10. By contrast, the Christian **who loves his brother** is not only **in the light**, but also **abides** there. By loving God and others as Christ loved, he is walking “as He walked” (v 6).

The one who lives this way is also a person in whom **there is no cause for stumbling**; i.e., (*skandalon*, “a trap or a snare” whatever ensnares a person in sin). In the person *who loves his brother* there is no such trap.

This does not mean that this person is sinless (see 1:8), but rather that in walking as Christ walked, he does not create an inner spiritual condition by which he can be ensnared in sin.

2:11. A Christian who hates another believer has lost touch with “the true light” (v 8), which displays God’s loving nature. And he has also embraced “the darkness” which “is passing away” (v 8). He becomes a tool in the hands of Satan, resulting in tragic division and church splits. As John says, he **walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going**.

III. Purpose: Resist the Antichrists (2:12-27)

A. By Recognizing Their Spiritual Assets (2:12-14)

Verses 12-14 clearly reveal that John does not regard his readers as “false professors.” Viewing this epistle as presenting “tests” by which to determine the genuineness of a person’s salvation misreads the epistle.

2:12. The fact that the readers have experienced the forgiveness of **sins** marks them as the **little children** of their heavenly Father (cf. v 13). This forgiveness has been granted **for His name’s sake** (lit., “on account of His name”). That is, their forgiveness is predicated on the efficacy of Christ’s name.

As will be seen in vv 25-26, the Revisionists seem to have questioned the readers’ entire salvation experience but John has just taught that they have experienced true forgiveness (cf. 1:5–2:2).

2:13. By addressing his readers as **fathers**, John is reminding them of what he has just written about regarding knowing God (vv 3-11). In view of the statements found in vv 3-4, the assertion that the readers **have known** God implies that they have reached the stage where they *keep* the Lord’s commandments.

The words **Him who is from the beginning** could refer to either God or Christ. Here the words *from the beginning* are most naturally taken as a reference to the eternity of the One whom the readers

know. The term *fathers* carries with it an overtone of seasoned experience with the eternal God.

But the readers are also **young men** [who] **have overcome the wicked one** (Satan). The designation *young men* follows *fathers* because the readers' invaluable experience as *little children* (the forgiveness of sins) and as *fathers* (the knowledge of God) renders them vigorous *young men* prepared to do battle with Satan.

In fact these **young men** have already **overcome** Satan. The Greek verb (perfect tense, *nenikēkate*) suggests a past victory, the fruits of which still remain. Probably John is thinking here of the readers' faith in Jesus.

As **little children** (*paidion*, instead of *teknion* [v 12]) the readers have gone well beyond the minimal experience of the forgiveness of sins. All believers in Christ have experienced forgiveness as part of their salvation experience. Even in their earliest days as *little children* in God's family, they experience "family forgiveness" as they confess their sins to God (see 1:9). Just as a baby cannot be said to do much more than recognize his parents, so it is in the spiritual realm. Coming to know **the Father** requires time in the faith and spiritual growth.

The concept of "coming to know" God is in the Greek perfect tense, thereby conveying a situation that results from what has been accomplished in the past. In every case where John employs this tense, an appropriate translation would be *to come to know*. In this second reference to *little children*, advancement beyond mere infancy is implied.

2:14. To the readers viewed as **fathers** John chooses to say no more than he has already said. For what could mark an advance on the knowledge of **Him who is from the beginning**? Their knowledge of God is fully sufficient. No doubt the Revisionists thought otherwise.

As **young men** in whom **the word of God abides**, John's audience is prepared for battle, since the resource of answered prayer is open to them (see 3:22; 5:14-15).

B. By Recognizing Their Spiritual Adversaries (2:15-27)

1. Resisting the World (2:15-17)

2:15. The world—a moral and spiritual system designed to draw humanity away from the living God—is profoundly seductive (see

v 16), and no Christian, however advanced, is fully immune to its allurements.

If a Christian does **love the world or the things in it**, he does *not* love God. John is not saying that God does not love those who love the world, but that God's love is not working **in** and through those who love the world. It is impossible to love both the world and God at the same time.

2:16. All that is in the world can be summarized under three categories the apostle names here. Taken together they summarize the totality of the allurements of this godless system.

The first is **the lust of the flesh**, that is, every illicit physical activity that appeals to people's sinful hearts. These are those things the flesh craves, such as illicit sexual pleasure or addictive drugs.

The second element of the world is **the lust of the eyes**, that is, whatever is visually appealing but not proper to desire or obtain. The object before *the eyes* might be a person or thing, but the desire to have it is what is called elsewhere as *covetousness*.

The pride of life means "the vain display of earthly life." The Greek word rendered "pride" is *alazoneia* (arrogance, pretentiousness, or boasting about self, possessions, or accomplishments).

The Revisionists probably maintained that one could freely participate in the activities of **the world**. They may have argued that since God is its Maker, one was simply using what the Creator had made. But although the physical world is "of God" who created it, *the world* as a moral system **is not**. *All that is in the world* bears the taint of wickedness (cf. 1:5).

2:17. The world is also transient: **The world is passing away**. When *the world* no longer exists as an entity morally and spiritually opposed to God, none of its illicit experiences will exist either. **The lust of it**, that is, the world's sinful gratification, is every bit as transient as the system it reflects.

By contrast, **he who does the will of God abides forever**. There is an eternal permanence to the character and activity of such a person. Since the "abiding" life has already been referred to (v 6) and is a prominent theme in the epistle (see comments on v 28), likely this is a reference to that *kind* of life. The one *who does the will of God* is inseparable from the Christ likeness which such a person has

achieved. Likeness to Christ can give boldness at the Judgment Seat of Christ (4:17; cf. 1 Cor 3:11-15; 2 Cor 5:10).

2. Resisting the Antichrists (2:18-27)

2:18. Not only is “the world passing away,” but what is more, the apostle and his readers are living in **the last hour**. Though *hour* can refer to a portion of a day (e.g., John 1:39; 4:6; 11:9), it also is used in reference to an undetermined length of time (e.g., John 2:4; 4:21, 23; 5:25, 28; 16:25; etc.). Here *the last hour* is when human history will climax with the rise (and overthrow) of Satan’s final great deception.

Many interpreters take the term **Antichrist** as a reference to the “man of sin” who will claim godhood in the Jewish temple (2 Thess 2:3-4) and who will rule the world (Rev 13:5-8). But the **many antichrists** of this verse are essentially the same as the “many false prophets” of 1 John 4:1. The teachers of error are precursors of the supreme human deceiver, the *Antichrist*.

2:19. The “many antichrists” had once been part of the same fellowship to which the apostles themselves belonged. The word **us**, used four times in this verse, obviously contrasts with the “you” of the following verse, which is emphatic in Greek. Here for the first time is seen the “we”-“you”-“us” contrast (cf. 4:4-6).

The antichrists had *not* left the church or churches to whom John writes, for if they had they would no longer have been a problem. On the contrary, the apostle is concerned about the exposure his readers have to these men. They departed from the church, which indicated that they did not really “belong” to it in the first place.

2:20. The term **anointing** refers to the Holy Spirit, probably not the Word or the Gospel. In the NT the Word of God is never directly connected with the idea of anointing, whereas the Holy Spirit is.

The recipients of this epistle were spiritually advanced Christians (see vv 13-14), possibly the spiritual leadership (or elders) in the churches to which John is sending his letter. If so, when the letter was read aloud in the public meetings, it would reinforce the spiritual authority of the leaders. With this understanding, since the leaders **know all things**, there is nothing the Christians in these churches need to learn from the Revisionists. The leaders themselves are competent to teach the whole body of Christian truth.

2:21. He has **not written to** them because they are ignorant of the truth. On the contrary, he writes precisely because they **know the truth**. It is clear that John is not writing to *test* whether the readers

are genuinely saved or not. In view of vv 12-14 such a view reflects a blindness to the statements of the epistle itself.

In addition to knowing *the truth*, John's readers also know **that no lie is of the truth**. John would have been most impatient with Christians who praise a false idea as "insightful" or "worthy of dialogue," no matter how far it is from **the truth**.

2:22. The lie John particularly has in mind is the denial **that Jesus is the Christ**. For John, of course, the belief **that Jesus is the Christ** is *saving* belief (see comments on 5:1; cf. John 20:30-31). The person **who denies** this truth **is a liar** who subverts the very basis on which anyone is saved.

Believing that *Jesus is the Christ* means to believe that He is the One who guarantees eternal life to every believer.

The lie John has in mind involved the denial that John's readers had eternal life (see v 25). If **Jesus** is not **the Christ**, then the readers' assurance that they possessed this life by faith in Him was a mirage. If their assurance collapsed, so would their fellowship with God. To deny that faith in Christ is the only means of eternal life is to deny the **Father** also.

2:23. Jesus was so perfectly reflective of His Father that both His words and works were those of the Father (cf. John 14:10-11). To deny **the Son** was automatically to deny **the Father** (cf. v 22).

In light of 2 John 9 (see comments there), the claim that the denier of **the Son does not have the Father either**, means that neither **the Son** nor **the Father** has anything to do with the activities of the false teachers.

2:24. The readers can triumph over the wicked one's agents, the antichrists, by abiding in God's Word, which they heard **from the beginning**. As a result, they **will abide in the Son and in the Father**. As noted earlier (see vv 5-6, 14), the "abiding life" is the life lived by a disciple who keeps the Lord's commandments and is marked by love for the brethren.

2:25. The antichrists deny "that Jesus is the Christ" (v 22). But only by *believing* that Jesus is the Christ can a person obtain eternal life (5:1; John 20:30-31). God promises **eternal life** to any person who believes that Jesus is the Christ. The pronoun **He** could refer to God or to Christ Himself.

2:26. The Revisionists brought with them a doctrine of salvation different from the one the readers had **heard from the beginning** (v 24). They denied that Jesus is the Christ (v 22), and apparently they

also denied that eternal life is available through Him alone (in light of v 25). They may have even claimed some special relationship to “the Father,” which John denied (vv 22-23).

2:27. This verse is the climax of the epistle’s purpose section. His readers are highly competent in the truth and need only to hold fast to what they already know in order to enjoy the full benefits of the “abiding life.”

The **anointing which [they] have received from Him** suggests that the readers are the “anointed ones” by means of the Spirit who came to them from Jesus, the “Anointed One” (cf. v 20). The readers’ *anointing* teaches them to reject the Revisionists’ lie about the “Anointed One.”

As a result of this anointing they **do not need that anyone teach** them, a mark of their maturity (see Heb 5:12). This maturity has already been implied elsewhere in this section (cf. 1 John 2:13b-14, 20).

The two parallel statements—**as [it] teaches you concerning all things** and **just as it has taught you**—shows that the ongoing teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit is always consistent with what the Spirit has *already* taught. That is, whatever the Spirit has previously taught will not be negated or denied by anything He continues to teach. Whatever “revisions” the antichrists taught could be rejected as not from the Holy Spirit if it contradicted what the Spirit had already taught.

IV. Body: The Life That Leads to Boldness Before Christ’s Judgment Seat (2:28–4:19)

A. The Theme Verse: Abide to be Bold (2:28)

2:28. This verse is a theme statement for the material that follows in 2:29–4:19. As the readers allow the truth to “abide” in them, they will be able to “abide” in the Son and in the Father (vv 24-27).

John speaks of the coming of Jesus Christ and the need to be ready to stand **before Him** with **confidence, and not be ashamed**. Even though the readers obviously are saved (cf. comments on vv 12-14), it is still possible for them to feel shame in the presence of Christ, and particularly at His Judgment Seat. Even though salvation is a free gift that can never be lost, each believer must give an account of his or her Christian life in the presence of Christ (cf. Rom 14:10-12; 1 Cor 3:11-15)—both “good and bad” (2 Cor 5:10).

Instead of shame, the writer suggests that his readers can have **confidence before Him at His coming**. The entire body of the epistle explains how this *confidence* can be obtained.

B. By Learning to See God's Children (2:29–3:10a)

2:29. Possibly the Revisionists maintained that God's nature includes both light *and* darkness (cf. 1:5). On this understanding God by His very nature had experience with both good and evil. An obvious deduction from this is that His children could do the same. In contrast, since God is **righteous**, [then] **everyone who practices** (lit., does) **righteousness is born of Him**. This is the first reference in the epistle to the new birth. The born-again person can be recognized as such if he manifests Christian *righteousness*. The "commandments" of Christ (cf. the pl. in 3:22) can be summarized under a single commandment: "And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment" (3:23). True *righteousness* is impossible apart from faith in Christ and love for fellow Christians.

John is not talking about how one can decide if a person is regenerate. John is clearly concerned with the deduction one can make if a person knows that God is righteous. If *that* is known, it follows that one who reproduces His *righteous* nature is actually *manifesting* that nature and can rightly be *perceived* as *born of Him*.

3:1. The mention of new birth (2:29) draws from John an exclamation of wonder. The Greek word translated **what manner of** (*potapos*) sometimes conveys intensification ("how great," or "how wonderful"). How truly magnificent is the **love of the Father** that makes believers His **children!**

The visibility of God's *love* in the church is a crucial theme in 2:29–4:19. Obviously there must be something *visible* to see. As verse 29 has demonstrated, the performance of Christian righteousness makes the child of God *visible*. As a child of God is seen acting in Christian righteousness, he makes God's *love* for him visible as well.

This perception of the child of God is not available to **the world**, which is as ignorant of believers as it was of **Him**, the Lord Jesus. Thus the "beholding" urged here by the apostle is a uniquely Christian experience.

3:2. The word **Beloved** picks up the thought of the previous verse that Christians are the objects of the love of the Father, who regards them as His **children**. This is true **now** (emphatic). But even though

this basic fact is true *now*, **it has not yet been revealed what** believers **shall be** like when they are transformed into the Savior's likeness.

The word twice rendered **revealed** is the same word rendered "appears" in 2:28 (*phanerōthē*). When Christ "appears," what believers shall be will "appear" too. Since **we shall be like Him** then, believers do not want to "be ashamed before Him" now (cf. 4:17-19).

The reason they will *be like Him* at His coming is that they **shall see Him as He is**. Seeing Jesus in His glory will be automatically transforming for each child of God. This agrees with Paul's teaching that even now their spiritual transformation takes place as they behold His glory in the Scriptures (2 Cor 3:18). Christians have a marvelous expectation for the future—the glorious transforming sight of their Savior—and this should energize them toward Christlikeness now. It should inspire them to "abide in Him" (2:28).

3:3. The wonderful truth that they will one day be completely like their Lord Jesus both physically and spiritually is a **hope** that **purifies** believers.

The born-again person does not sin *at all* because he has in him the sinless seed of God's nature and he *cannot* sin (see v 9). At the inward level of his redeemed nature, the believer is every bit as *pure* as his Savior. That purity will be totally realized at the coming of the Lord (v 2), but is theirs now at the core of their being.

Thus the phrase **everyone who has this hope in Him** is equivalent to John's expression "whoever believes in Him [in His name, etc.]" When an individual believes in Christ, God imputes righteousness to him. Here too a person **purifies himself**, not because of any intrinsic power in his faith, but because the exercise of this faith is the basis on which God cleanses him inwardly.

3:4. **Sin** is the antithesis of the purity that belongs to Christ and to everyone who has the hope of being like Him. **Lawlessness** (*anomia*) might be better translated "wickedness" or "iniquity." Committing of sin in no way expresses or manifests the purity of which John spoke in v 3.

3:5. For those who have inwardly purified themselves through the new birth (cf. v 3), sin is not only unsuitable because it is evil (v 4), but also because it contrasts to the person and work of Christ. Though every Christian sins (1:8), sin has no place in the life of a Christian (cf. Rom 6:1-4). It should not be tolerated, much less endorsed in any way (cf. 1 John 2:1).

The purpose of Jesus first advent was **to take away our sins**. Because of His sacrificial death, ultimately the world's sin will be removed from human experience. No one in God's eternal kingdom (after the final rebellion in the millennium; Rev 20:7-10) will ever sin again. The statements of v 2 have already referred to this climax.

The repudiation of sin, therefore, should be based not only on its iniquitous character, but also on the realization that the goal of the Savior, is to completely remove it from the believers' lives. His own personal purity, (v 3), offers incentive to reject sin in all its forms. For He is entirely without it: **in Him there is no sin**. Christ's sacrificial work, plus His own personal and absolute holiness, make sin utterly unsuitable for the believer.

3:6. Since there is no sin in Christ, the believer who **abides in Him does not sin** (cf. 2:28). Many efforts have been made, both here and in v 9, to soften this assertion. One popular way has been to understand the present tense (*does not sin*) as "does not *continue to sin*." Another popular view is that John is speaking of an ideal which is not fully realized in present experience.

Against both of these views is the statement of v 5 that "in Him is no sin." Since this is so, the one who *abides in* the Sinless One cannot be said to be only "a little bit" sinful! If there can be "no sin" in Christ at all, one cannot take even a little bit of sin into an experience that is specifically said to be *in Him*. The failure to recognize the logical connection between vv 5 and 6 is the reason v 6 has been misunderstood. As a result, this misunderstanding carries over into v 9.

First John 1:8 makes it clear that no Christian can ever claim to be experientially completely free from sin in this life. But at the same time the experience of "abiding in Him" is a sinless experience. One area of obedience is not "contaminated" by the presence of sin in other areas. If a person obeys the command to love his brother, that obedience is not tainted in God's sight by some different sort of failure in the life, such as a lack of watchfulness in prayer (cf. Eph 6:18).

When a believer is walking in fellowship with God, He is able to look past all his failures and sin and see the actual obedience that is there. In 1:7 John explained that even while walking in the light, there is cleansing going on by virtue of the blood of Christ. As a believer walks in the light and does what God commands, God sees him as one who is totally cleansed and is without any charge of unrighteousness.

Thus, when a believer *abides in Him*, the positive *obedience* is what God takes account of and recognizes. The sin that still remains is not *in any sense* sourced in the abiding life, and that sin is cleansed in accord with 1:7. The experience of “abiding” is therefore equivalent to obedience.

Since sin has no part of the abiding experience, it follows that **whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him.**

It is wrong to resort to the present tense of the verb *sins*, as though it means “continues to sin,” (see v 9). The flow of thought points to an antithesis between sin and Christ, between sin and abiding. Every attempt to accommodate “a little bit of sin” or “an occasional sin” in John’s statements completely nullifies the contrast the apostle is drawing. Since even believers sin (1:8), the statement is intended to stigmatize all sin as the product not only of not abiding but also of blindness toward God.

Every sin in some way is deceiving (Heb 3:13), and flows out of a darkening of the heart toward God. Not to recognize that John’s statement is true of *all* sin is to miss his point completely. If the Revisionists rationalized sin, they were wrong. People sin when in some way they are blind to and ignorant of the true God.

3:7. Simplicity of mind and spirit is often the best hedge for the Christian against heresies that purport to have more “profound” knowledge to share. Clearly in the preceding material (esp. vv 4-6) John has had the Revisionists in mind. The readers are not to allow these antichrists to **deceive** them. Some believers probably thought they could commit sin and still claim to be in touch with God.

In order not to be deceived, the readers must keep in mind the simple fact that **he who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous.** John’s point is that *righteousness* (rather than sin) is what indicates that a person has a perfect, inward righteous standing with God (see 2:29).

Only *righteousness* arises from the inner nature of one who is already *righteous* as God *is righteous*, for “in Him there is no darkness at all (1:5).” When a believer sins, it is not a manifestation of divine righteousness.

3:8. If believers are righteous, and sin is not a manifestation of that righteousness, then the sin all believers commit (1:8) is **of the devil**, that is, sourced in him. Interpreters who take a statement like this as the equivalent of saying that a professing Christian is unsaved miss

the point. Since even John acknowledges that Christians sin (see 1:7-10), if **he who sins** is unsaved, *everyone* is unsaved!

John states that **the devil has sinned from the beginning**, that is, he is the source of all sin, and his sinful career dates from *the beginning*. (*The beginning* does not refer here to eternity past, since the devil is a created being and not eternal. The reference is to the original state of creation as it was when Satan introduced sin into it (Isa 14:12-15; Ezek 28:11-15.) To be *of the devil* means “to be doing the devil’s work” (cf. Jesus’ words to Peter in Matt 16:23).

Also participation in sin is participation in the very thing that Jesus came to destroy, because **the Son of God was manifested in order that He might destroy the works of the devil** (cf. v 5, He “was manifested to take away our sins”).

3:9. The person who **has been born of God** has God’s **seed** within **him** and so is not capable of sin (**he cannot sin**) by virtue of his birth from **God**.

Naturally many have wondered how this claim can be squared with reality since Christians *do* sin, as even John acknowledges (1:8). But the answer lies near at hand. In 1:8 John warns, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.” But in 3:9 he says, *whoever has been born of God does not sin*. As total persons, believers do sin and can never claim to be free of it, but their “inward self” that is regenerated does not sin.

In describing his struggle with sin Paul notes that two diverse impulses are at work. So he can say, “For I delight in the law of God according to *the inward man*. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members” (Rom 7:22-23; italics added). Previous to this he had concluded, “Now if I do what I will not to do, it is *no longer I that do it*, but sin that dwells in me” (v 20; italics added). His conclusion is simple; “So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin” (v 24). At the core of his being (in his *inward man*) he does not and cannot sin. The inward man (the “regenerate self”) is absolutely impervious to sin, fully enslaved to God’s will. If sin occurs, it is not the inward man who performs it.

Sin *does* exist in the Christian, but it is foreign and extraneous to his regenerated inner self, where Christ dwells in perfect holiness. Since Christ *is* eternal life (1 John 5:20), the one who possesses that life *cannot sin because he is born of God*. The divine *seed* (*sperma*) of

that life *remains* (*menō*, “abides,” “stays”) in *him* who is born again, making sin an impossibility at the level of his regenerate inward self.

This understanding of 3:9 builds naturally on 2:29–3:8. Absolute contrasts are a familiar part of Johannine discourse. Most prominent among these are the light/darkness and the death/life antitheses. But to these must be added the sin/righteousness polarity that has appeared prominently in this unit.

For a number of decades the opinion was popular that the key to understanding 3:9 is in the present tense of the verb *to sin*. In this view the verse should read, “Whoever has been born of God does not *continue to sin*; for His seed remains in him; and he cannot *continue to sin*, because he has been born of God.” (The NIV has a similar rendering.) In this view prolonged continuation in sin does not occur if one is born again.

But this raises more questions than it answers. Do not all Christians *continue to sin* until the day of their death? Furthermore do not all Christians sin *daily*? How can anyone claim *not* to be continuing to sin? Does the born again person come to some point at which he ceases to sin? This proposed translation solves nothing.

The regenerate person can express himself only through righteousness (cf. 2:29) and can never express himself through sin, because *he cannot sin*.

3:10a. The NKJV takes this statement as a reference to what follows it (note the colon in its translation). But it is preferable to take the last half of the verse as the beginning of a new unit.

The words **In this** refer backward rather than forward in this context. The use of the words **are manifest** in verse 10a link the statement with what has preceded in 2:29–3:9. **The children of God... are manifest** by their doing righteousness. This is not to be viewed as a test of salvation. John’s one and only test of salvation is faith (cf. 5:1 and 5:9-13). Instead, this is simply a statement about *how* God’s children do manifest themselves.

Those who see 1 John as a handbook for deciding who is saved and who is not misuse the book grievously. John is advancing the theme stated in 2:28 that boldness in the presence of the Lord is offered to those who abide in Him. By abiding in Him, believers can and do manifest themselves as children of God. But those who do not abide do not so manifest themselves. The reality of their regenerate inward man remains hidden.

The same principle applies to **the children of the devil**. There is no good reason to take this phrase as a reference to unsaved people generally (see v 8). The term *children of the devil* is descriptive in nature. In light of 2 John 9 (see comments there), the Christian who has deviated from sound doctrine about the person and work of Jesus Christ and who vigorously opposes the truth could be so described. This is no more strange than the fact that Jesus addressed His own disciple Peter as “Satan” (Matt 16:23). The “child of the devil” is anyone who does the devil’s work by opposing the truth.

C. By Learning to See Christian Love (3:10b-23)

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

3:10b. Here John affirms that what is true of **whoever does not** [do] **righteousness** is true also of **whoever does not love his brother**. In both cases the person is **not of God** in the sense that God is not behind what he is doing.

As was the case with the phrase *of the devil* in v 8, it is wrong to take the phrase **not of God** (*ek tou theou*) as though it meant “not born of God.” The NIV rendering, “Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God,” paraphrases the text and misinterprets it at the same time. There is nothing in this text about not being a child of God. How could there be? One *must be* a child of God before one could hate *his brother*. An unsaved person has no Christian *brother* to hate (cf. 2:9).

John also moves from a broader to a narrower theme. The words *whoever does not practice* [lit. “do”] *righteousness can refer to anyone* who lacks righteous conduct, whether saved or unsaved. But the words *he who does not love his brother* introduce a specific kind of righteousness that only a Christian can manifest or fail to manifest.

3:11. The failure to love one’s brother is nothing less than an infraction of the Savior’s command to **love one another** (John 13:34). The original command was expressed by Jesus *only after* Judas had left the Upper Room (John 13:30). Such a command would have had no bearing on Judas, who was not a child of God.

Thus the new subject matter in this unit of the epistle (3:10a-23) has to do with a command that was given only to believers and can be fulfilled or not fulfilled only by a born-again person. This **message** about love had been given to them **from the beginning** of their Christian experience (cf. 2:7).

3:12. The classic example of brother-to-brother hatred is the case of **Cain** and Abel (Gen 4:1-15). *Cain was of the wicked one*, in that what he did was derived from satanic influence rather than from anything related to God (cf. 1 John 3:8, 10b). As Jesus had said, Satan “was a murderer from the beginning” (John 8:44). Whether Cain was ever regenerate is a question that cannot be answered from the Biblical information. But John uses the physical relationship between Cain and Abel as an illustration of the spiritual relationship between Christian brethren. And just as it is possible for one brother to murder his biological brother, it is possible for one Christian to murder another. So grievous a crime as **murder** is not regarded in the NT as impossible for a Christian to commit (cf. 1 Pet 4:15). If a Christian were to be guilty of murder, the influence of *the wicked one* is behind it.

The apostle’s next words are telling. **Why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother’s righteous.** Thus a spiritual envy led to the first murder in human history. Whenever Christians feel guilt because their behavior is contrary to God’s will, they will find it easy to experience hatred toward those whom they know God approves.

3:13. Many see v 13 as an explanation of vv 11-12, and are inclined to see Cain as an example of what to expect from the world, but something not possible for a Christian brother. But the wider context reveals that John’s intent is to contrast brotherly love with worldly hate, while showing that sometimes even brothers behave like the world.

While brother-to-brother hatred is wholly inconsistent with Jesus’ command “to love one another” and is therefore not to be the expected experience, the same cannot be said of **the world**. The world’s hatred, as Jesus taught, *is* to be expected (John 15:18-19). While the readers might well **marvel** at hatred from a brother, the world’s hatred is to be anticipated.

3:14. The emphatic **we** no doubt refers to the apostles themselves. In contrast to “the world,” the apostles love their fellow Christians.

Indeed, John declares, **we [apostles] know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren.** This is more than an assertion that they *love* their fellow Christians. It is also a claim to a certain quality of experience. The apostles are able to recognize their experience of *love* as an experience of *life* rather than *death*.

The words *passed from death to life* do not mean the apostles were sure of their eternal salvation *because* they loved *the brethren*. There is no reason why this should be true for them or any other Christian. Assurance of salvation is based on the testimony of God (see 5:9-13). Instead, in a perfectly normal use of the word *know* John declares that he and his fellow apostles *experience* their passage *from death to life* through loving their Christian brothers.

The implication is that the passage *from death to life*, which occurs at the point of salvation (John 5:24), can be experientially known and appreciated through Christian *love*.

By contrast **he who does not love his brother abides in death**. There is no way a Christian who fails to *love his brother* can have the immediate, experiential knowledge of *life* John has just spoken about. On the contrary such a person *abides* (“dwells”) *in death*. If love is an experience of “life,” John is saying, hatred of one’s Christian brother is an experience of *death* (cf. Rom 7:9-10).

There is thus no reasonable objection to the concept of a Christian “abiding” *in death* in the sense that he has lost touch with the experience of God’s life. In sharp contrast with 2:9-11; 3:10, 12, there is no Greek word for *his* in the phrase *his brother*. The statement of v 14 can then apply not only to Christians who might hate a particular Christian *brother*, but also to anyone else who might hate such a *brother*. It makes no difference who is doing the hating. Hatred by a Christian is an experience in the realm of *death*.

3:15. Hatred of one’s **brother** is also an experience of murder. The person who **hates his** Christian *brother* is really no different from Cain (cf. v 12), even though he may not commit the overt act of physically killing *his brother*. The spirit of hatred is that a brother wants “to be rid” of his brother and would not really care if he died.

John does not say (as the NIV paraphrases), “No murderer *has* eternal life in him.” The NKJV (and NAS) better translate the Greek as **No murderer has eternal life abiding in him**. The key is the concept of “abiding.” Moreover, John’s concept of *abiding* is always that it is a reciprocal relationship, even as Jesus said; “Abide in Me, and I in you” (John 15:4; see 1 John 2:27). Since Christ Himself *is* eternal life

(cf. 5:20), to say that someone does not have *eternal life abiding in him* is equivalent to saying that he does not have Christ *abiding in him*.

2. What Love Is (3:16-18)

3:16. Christian love can be recognized by its conformity to the supreme model found in Christ's death **for us**. Although Christ died for the entire world (2:2), when a believer considers his own obligation to love he should focus on the fact that it was for him that Christ died. As the personal beneficiaries of His great sacrifice, believers should be prepared to make a similar sacrifice **for the brethren**.

The words **we know** are in the perfect tense, suggesting a situation arising from a past event or action. Once a Christian has understood the love of Christ for him, he has come to a definitive knowledge of what Christian *love* is about.

3:17. Sometimes it is easier to profess a willingness to die for one's brother than it is to aid him in his time of **need**. John therefore wishes to test the reality of a Christian's love for his brother by offering an example more likely to occur than an opportunity to die for a brother.

In v 16 the Greek word for "life" is *psychē*. In v 17 John employs another Greek word for "life" (*bios*, life in its earthly and/or material aspects), hence the translation **goods**. One could almost render; **but whoever has this world's life!** The thought is that sharing with other Christians the material things that *sustain* life is, at heart, a way of laying down one's life for them.

If, instead of doing this, however, a Christian **shuts up his heart** from his needy brother, this speaks about his relationship to God.

The Christian who acts so uncompassionately is not having a vital experience of God's *love*. John's rhetorical question, **how does the love of God abide in him?** simply means that God's *love* does not *abide in him*. The uncompassionate Christian is not walking as his Master walked (cf. 2:6) and thus is not living the abiding life.

3:18. The readers must not think that they have expressed love if that expression is merely verbal (**in word**), involving only the **tongue**. True love requires action (**in deed**) and conformity to the **truth**. By

the words *in truth* John means that their love for other Christians should conform to the manifestation of love in Christ (cf. v 16).

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

3:19. The issue here is not assurance of salvation, but whether one participates in the truth with respect to Christian love. The believer in Christ can easily ask himself, “Can I love as *He* loved? Am I really doing *that*?”

The words **of the truth** are an echo of the exhortation of v 18 that believers are to love “in deed and *in truth*.” The introductory words **And by this** refer back to v 18, and are essentially equivalent to “And by doing this” (i.e., by loving in deed and in truth). When believers act in love with deeds that reflect *the truth* about love as revealed in Christ, they can *know* that they are *of the truth*.

If the Christian doubts that he is able to express Christian love to his brethren, essentially he is doubting whether he can relate to, or participate in, *the truth* revealed in Christ about that kind of love. He may feel guilty for past failures or he may have a strong sense of inadequacy, but by acting in love as v 18 directs, he can actually know that by such actions he *is participating in* the truth—that is, he is *of the truth*. Another way of saying this is that by so loving one can know that his actions *have their source in* the truth.

The words that follow, **and shall assure our hearts before Him**, are best taken with the words of the next verse.

3:20. The NKJV wrongly treats this verse as a separate sentence for it omits a repetition of the initial Greek word *hoti* (**For**). But *hoti* is repeated in the Greek in front of the clause beginning (in the English) with **God is greater** and is left untranslated in NKJV. The translation should be linked with the last clause of v 19 and would be as follows, “and we shall assure [or, persuade *peisomai*] our hearts before Him that [*hoti*] if our heart condemns us, that [*hoti*] God is greater than our heart, and knows all things.” By acting with deeds of love (“by this,” v 19), believers can know they are “of the truth.” But also by so acting, they can quiet their condemning hearts.

When believers love “in deed and in truth,” they should *assure* [*persuade*] their hearts that *God is greater than* their hearts in that He knows perfectly well the love they have expressed by their actions.

When believers approach God’s throne of grace in prayer, they should count on God knowing (even if **our heart** does not!) what they have *actually done* in love.

3:21. As believers come before God, perhaps their hearts do **not condemn** them for failure to express Christian love. This could be because their hearts readily accept the fact that God takes cognizance of their love manifested “in deed and in truth” (cf. 18), or because they have “persuaded” it to do so (v 19). In any case the result is **confidence toward God**.

The word for *confidence* (*parrēsia*) is the same one used in 2:28 (having “*confidence* before Him at His coming”). Obviously, if believers do not have confidence before God when they kneel *in prayer* (cf. v 22), even less likely will they have such confidence *at His coming*.

3:22. As indicated by the emphatic words “before Him” in v 19, John has been thinking in this immediate context of “confidence” *in prayer*. (He will return to this subject again in 5:14-17.) The result of “confidence” toward God in prayer is, of course, answered prayer. Thus, **whatever we ask we receive from Him**. The reason for this kind of answered prayer is twofold: **because (1) we keep His commandments, and (2) [we] do those things that are pleasing in His sight**.

Also the Christian who is actively seeking to please God will not *ask* for things that are not *pleasing in His sight*. When prayer arises therefore from the heart of one in whose life the will of God is foremost, then *whatever* he asks of God will be received *from Him* because he is asking “according to His will” (5:14).

3:23. John concludes this subunit (vv 19-23), as well as the larger subsection (3:10b-23), with a summary of what it means to “keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight” (v 22). That this is indeed a summary is seen by the transparent shift from the plural “commandments” (v 22) to the singular **commandment**. Answered prayer (cf. v 22) finds its basis fundamentally in adherence to this *commandment*.

This *commandment* has two aspects. The first of these is that **we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ**. John links faith and love together as a single commandment for Christians. Faith in *the name of His Son Jesus Christ* imparts life to all believers and views other believers as their brothers or sisters. This relationship gives them the proper object for their love when we are told to **love one another**. Believing *the name of God’s Son* is a prerequisite, and an essential component, of love for *one another*.

The closing words of the verse, **as He gave us commandment**, refer to Jesus from whom the commandment to love one another directly

came (John 13:34). The verse should read, *that we should believe on the name of His [God's] Son Jesus Christ and love one another as He [His Son] gave us commandment*. God's will therefore can be summarized as faith in *His Son's name* and obedience to *His Son's commandment*.

D. By Learning to See the God of Love (3:24–4:16)

1. God's Indwelling Affirmed (3:24)

3:24. The person **who keeps His commandments abides in Him** and, in addition, **He abides in him** (the obedient believer). The obedient believer has God making "His home" within him (cf. John 14:23). Such an experience with God is the ultimate form of *fellowship* with God, which John declared from the beginning was the goal of his epistle (cf. 1:3).

Although the **Spirit** has been referred to under the designation of "the anointing," He is now mentioned specifically. If God indeed **abides in us**, this can be known **by the Spirit...He has given us**.

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

4:1. Satan has many **spirits** who serve him here, as is shown by the fact that **many false prophets have gone out into the world**.

In vv 1-2 John seems to be trading on the fairly fluid meaning of the term **spirit**. The word itself can refer to a human spirit, to supernatural spirits like demons, or to an attitude or disposition. John is not trying to be specific; he is warning against *every* malevolent *spirit* of Satan, *every* human *spirit* who becomes his agent, as well as *every* manifestation of "the spirit of error" (cf. v 6) that characterizes satanic doctrine.

False prophets are to be tested "by their fruits" (cf. Matt 7:16-20). Contrary to popular interpretation, this does *not* mean that they were to be tested by their *works*. On the contrary, as 12:33-37 proves, their fruits are their *words!* They *look like* sheep when in reality they are "ravenous wolves" (7:15). Their *behavior* does not set them apart from the sheep, but their *message* does!

4:2. The test that can be applied to **every spirit** is its willingness or unwillingness (cf. v 3) to confess **Jesus Christ** incarnate. The words **by this you know** refer backward and mean, "This is how (i.e., by testing the spirits) you know the Spirit of God." A period, rather than a colon, should follow the statement, with the words *Every spirit* beginning a fresh sentence.

On this understanding vv 2b-3 give the test that is to be used to recognize God's Spirit. Verses 1-2a insist that only those willing to *test* the spirits will be able to recognize *God's* Spirit. If they "believe every spirit" they will really not know which of them is truly God's.

The conjoining of **the Spirit of God** with the words **every spirit that confesses** no doubt is intended to link the Holy *Spirit* with every *human spirit* that makes this confession.

A more likely translation of the statement **that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh** is this: "Every spirit that confesses Jesus *as Christ* having come in the flesh." John's principal theological concern is that *Jesus* should be recognized as the *Christ* (cf. 2:22). The Revisionists may have held to the doctrine that *Jesus* was a mere man and that the divine *Christ* was an incorporeal, spiritual being who descended on Him at His baptism, but departed from Him before He died.

4:3. In contrast to "Every spirit that confesses" Christ is **every spirit that does not confess...Jesus [as] Christ come in the flesh**. Such a spirit exemplifies **the spirit of the Antichrist**.

John does *not* say *every spirit that denies*, but rather *every spirit that does not confess*. Heretical teaching can mask the full extent of its deviation from the truth by simply failing to affirm some pivotal biblical truth.

4:4. John's readers have spiritual strength and are capable of successfully resisting the antichrists (cf. 2:12-14, 20-21). The reason the readers have overcome is their possession of the Holy Spirit, who was in them as He is in all Christians (cf. 3:24; Rom 8:9). It is precisely **because He** (God's Spirit)...**is greater than he** (Satan) **who is in the world**, that victory over the world's deceptions is possible.

4:5. The antichrists, or Revisionists, are viewed in sharp contrast with the readership. Whereas the readers are "of God," the Revisionists are **of the world** and stand in opposition to Him (see comments on 2:15-16). **They speak as of the world** in the sense that their message is worldly in content and perspective. Not surprisingly, **the world hears them**. Heterodoxy has a far greater appeal to worldly people than orthodoxy.

4:6. In vv 4-6 there are three contrasting pronouns, "You-They-We." "You" refers to the readers, "They" refers to the Revisionists, and *We* refers to the apostles. In the fullest sense the apostles were **of God** because their doctrine came directly from Him.

They could thus confidently affirm that **He who knows God hears** ("listens to") **us**. As noted in 2:3 (cf. also 2:13-14), in this epistle the

concept of “knowing” God suggests progress beyond mere spiritual infancy (cf. comments on v 7). A mark of the mature Christian is that he is responsive to apostolic teaching.

It follows that **he who is not of God does not hear** (“listen to”) **us**. John may be thinking of anyone out of touch with **God** as the kind of person who rejects apostolic authority and teaching. Such a person could be a believer or an unbeliever.

The words **By this we know** can refer to the apostles, who are the subject of the earlier statements of this verse. The apostles were able to make appropriate discriminations between **the spirit of truth and the spirit of error** on the basis of each spirit’s submission or lack of it to apostolic truth. John condemns the Revisionists as “false prophets” who are “of the world” (vv 1-3, 5).

3. God’s Indwelling Recognized (4:7-16)

4:7. The apostle now leaves behind his discussion about the many false spirits which “have gone out into the world” to allure Christians into worldly ideas. These ought to be rejected so that the readers can focus on **love for one another**.

If the readers obeyed the command to *love one another*, they would be carrying on an activity that was distinctively sourced in their heavenly Father. The reason for this is that **love itself is of God**.

It follows then that two things may be safely said of **everyone who loves**: (1) such a person **is born of God and** (2) he also **knows God**. John treats these concepts as two different things, for he says in v 8 that “he who does not love does not know God.” It would have been easy to say, “He who does not love *is not born of God and* does not know God” in direct antithesis to the statement of v 7. But this is precisely what *cannot be said*. Already John has talked about a person who “hates *his* brother,” which is a feat quite impossible for a non-Christian since a Christian is not *his* brother (cf. 2:11; 3:10b; 3:15; 4:20). Those who teach that a Christian *cannot* hate another Christian are teaching a myth.

4:8. But since a born-again Christian *can* fail to love, if he **does not love** it would show that he has not really come to **know** his heavenly Father (cf. 2:3). The **God** who has begotten him **is love**.

Here is the second of 1 John’s two great affirmations about God. The first, in 1:5, affirms that “God is light.” Now John declares that *God is love*. The former points to His perfect holiness; His freedom from all sin or deception. This second statement affirms that His

basic nature is characterized by *love*. This does not mean God has no other attributes, such as wisdom and justice. But it does indicate that *love* is fundamental to what *God* is and to what He does.

4:9. The supreme expression of **the love of God toward us** is the love of His **only begotten Son**.

God's purpose in sending *His only begotten Son* was **that we might live through Him**. Unstated here, though plainly indicated in v 10, is the fact that God's **Son** had to *die* that we might *live*. Thus the manifestation of God's love involved two opposite experiences: *death* for God's Son, *life* for believers. That God would allow this for His beloved **Son** so **that we might** have eternal life speaks volumes about the greatness of that **love**.

4:10. God's **love** was not a response to ours: **not that we loved God, but that He loved us**. God's love sought to meet our *spiritual* need: **and [God] sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins**. Although John wants believers to be concerned for their brother's *physical* needs (3:17), we should also be concerned for their *spiritual* needs. Since no one in all humanity is beyond the reach of the Savior's sacrificial death, no brother or sister should be beyond the believers' sacrificial love.

4:11. The use of the word **so** makes the total phrase, **God so loved us**, redolent of the words of John 3:16, "For God so (*houtō[s]*) loved the world." Since the Lord spoke these words in John's hearing so many years before, they no doubt had become richly valued by John and by those he taught. He thus chooses an echo of John 3:16 on which to ground his insistence that **we also ought to love one another**.

4:12. What John now says might seem surprising. The invisible **God**, whom **No one has seen at any time**, actually abides in those who love one another.

When Christian love, modeled on God's love, is truly exercised by Christians, God is "at home" in those who exercise it: **If we love one another, God abides in us**. The invisible *God*, whom *no one has seen*, is *actively living* in such a body of believers.

Also God's **love has been perfected in** (or "among") them. This idea was first mentioned in 2:5. The Greek words for **has been perfected** (*teteleiōmenē estin*) are in a form (perfect tense) that suggests His love resulting in Christian love. God's *love* achieves its goal and reaches its full measure *in believers* when that *love* is reproduced in them and reflected through them by loving *one another*.

4:13. In place of “keeping His commandments” (3:24) here “loving one another” is the key to this mutual “abiding” relationship. But as seen from 3:22-23, these are but two sides of the same coin for the apostle: the obedient Christian *is loving* and the loving Christian *is obeying*.

Whereas John wrote in 3:24 that believers know the abiding of God “by the Spirit whom He has given,” them, 4:13 states that this is known **because He has given us of** [lit., “out of”] **His Spirit**. That is, believers *participate in the same* Spirit that God has. This means that they participate in a “spirit of love” which is nothing less than His Spirit, since “God is love.”

4:14. No verse in 1 John is more critical to understanding the epistle than this one. The initial statement, **And we have seen...that the Father has sent the Son**, suggests an apostolic experience similar to 1:2.

The *we* is not the “apostolic we” as in 2:19; 3:14; and 4:6. In all these places there is a contrasting “you” nearby (cf. 1:2-4; 2:20; 3:13; 4:4) which does not occur here. In 4:7-14 the subject *we* includes the readers along with the apostles (vv 7, 9, 10-13).

The Greek word *kai* (*And*) can be taken in its well-recognized sense of “And so.” The verse can be paraphrased, “*And so*, when we love like this, *we* (both the readers and the apostles) *have seen* the reality. By loving one another, the readers can *have fellowship* with the apostles in what the apostles had *seen*,” (precisely as the prologue had promised; 1:3a). And this was nothing less than *fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ* (1:3b).

In 3:24–4:13 John teaches that love demonstrates the presence of the indwelling God whose love believers share. Since this manifested Christian love is nothing less than the manifestation of *eternal life* within the loving Christian fellowship, those who so manifest this *life* are *living witnesses* to the reality that **the Son** really is the **Savior of the world** (cf. John 13:35).

The visible manifestation of *eternal life* through Christian love is an effective way to *testify* about the Saviorhood of Christ. Such a “seeing” is a “seeing” of faith expressed in the confession of *Jesus* as the world’s *Savior*.

4:15. “Fellowship” was with the apostles in what they had “seen” (v 14). But the readers were also to have “fellowship” in what the apostles had “heard” (cf. 1:3). What the readers can *hear* in the midst of

the loving Christian community is nothing less than a confession **that Jesus is the Son of God.**

The words of John the Baptist that he had *seen and testified* (John 1:32-34) reflect the wording of the previous verse (*we have seen and testify*, v 14) whereas the Baptist's words *that this is the Son of God* reflect the present verse. Thus the "testimony" mentioned in v 14 is not to be limited to the visible manifestation of eternal life in the form of Christian love, although this is a part of it. But John is thinking of a congregational context where there would also regularly be the confession of *Jesus* as God's *Son*.

John had in mind the visible manifestation of Christian love, accompanied by this confession of **Jesus** and reproduced in what the apostles themselves had *seen* in Jesus and what they had *heard* about Him from His forerunner, John the Baptist. The apostle John's goal of leading his readers into this kind of fellowship with the apostolic circle (1:1-3) has now been reached.

Furthermore the goal of obtaining an abiding relationship with God is also reached since **God abides in** anyone who *confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, and he in God*. This confession is by the Spirit of God by whom the indwelling of God is known and recognized (cf. v 13).

When Jesus is confessed as *the Son of God*, He is being confessed as "*Christ come in flesh*" (cf. 4:2) and as the Guarantor of eternal life and future resurrection to every believer.

It is possible for a Christian community to recognize the reality that God "abides" within them if (1) they love one another and (2) they confess *that Jesus is the Son of God*. Thereby that community is keeping "His commandment" (3:23).

4:16. Verse 16 is parallel in grammar and theme to v 14. The author apparently intends that both verses show the results of the community experience of love he has been discussing. But between the two verses John has pointed out the role of confessing Jesus (v 15) as an additional sign that God indwells the members of a loving Christian community. Therefore when believers in a church enjoy such an experience as this, they face the reality of **the love God has** toward

them. The statement *abides in God and God [abides] in him* forms an *inclusio* with the statement “abides in Him, and He in him” in 3:24.

E. Having Boldness at the Judgment Seat (4:17-19)

4:17. God’s love is **perfected** only in a Christian who conveys it to others. Another aspect of this perfecting is **boldness in the day of judgment**. This goes back to 2:28 and the concept of “confidence before Him at His coming.” The word rendered “confidence” there and *boldness* here represent the same Greek word (*parrēsia*). This is not a judgment for the saved to determine their destiny in heaven or hell, since that is already settled (cf. John 5:24; Rom 8:31-34). But Christians will give an accounting of their Christian lives at the Judgment Seat of Christ (Rom 14:10-12; 2 Cor 5:10-11).

The idea of having *boldness in the day of judgment* is stunning. Reasonable Christians, even though fully assured of their salvation, will realize “the terror of the Lord” (2 Cor 5:11). The possibility of triumphing over that “terror” is challenging indeed. Yet this is possible if believers “abide in love” (1 John 4:16).

The reason one who “abides in love” can expect *boldness* at the Judgment Seat of Christ is **because as He is, so are we in this world**. Since “God is love” (4:8, 16), the one who loves is like *He is*, even though the loving Christian is still *in this world*.

4:18. The experience of **fear** and **perfect love** are incompatible. If a Christian has **been made perfect in love**, he need not fear the Judgment Seat.

By *perfect love* the writer does not mean sinlessness (cf. 1:8). The word translated “perfect” (*teleios*) is of the same root as the verb rendered *has been made perfect* (*teteleiōtai*), a verb also used in 2:5; 4:12, 17. Here, as in those places, the concept is of a matured *love* that has reached its goal or objective (see comments on 2:5). John’s point is that when God’s *love* to believers has reached its goal in them, by making them channels for that *love* to one another, this experience **casts out fear**.

However, the disobedient Christian will experience God’s discipline, since the presence of **fear involves torment** (*kolasis*, “punishment”). John likely has in mind the truth that “whom the Lord loves *He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives*” (Heb 12:6). In fact this NT truth is found on the lips of the Lord Jesus in Rev 3:19, “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten.”

If a Christian experiences *fear* as he anticipates being evaluated at the Judgment Seat, then this *fear* can be regarded as a *punishment* intended to awaken him to his need to correct his behavior. Unpleasant as it is, like all divine discipline (Heb 12:11), it is nevertheless a signal of God's love and of His desire to see believers *made perfect in love*. If the Christian responds to this kind of discipline, the discipline is effective and "yields the peaceable fruits of righteousness" (Heb 12:11), which for John are inseparable from *love*.

4:19. With regard to the Christian's exercise of love, John has up to now spoken of that love as directed toward other Christians, (one another). Here, however, he speaks for the first time in the epistle of loving *God*. (It should be noted that the standard critical editions of the Greek NT omit *Him* and so do the translations based on them [e.g., JB, NASB, NIV, etc.]. The omission is unfortunate, since the reference to loving God is pivotal here; see v 20.)

One's **love** for God is sourced in His love for believers (vv 9-10). So if believers love one another and also *love* God, there can be only one reason. It is **because He first loved us!**

V. Conclusion: Learning How to Live Obediently (4:20–5:17)

A. What Loving Our Brothers Means (4:20–5:3a)

4:20. To a Christian it might seem easier to **love God whom he has not seen** than to **love his brother whom he has seen**. While God seems perfectly deserving of the Christian's love, one's brother often does not. But for John, love is *not* an emotional word. For John "to love" is to behave in a way that meets the need of one's fellow Christian (see 3:16-18). By their *actions*, not their *feelings*, John assesses the reality of the believers' love for one another: they are to love "in deed" and therefore "in truth" (3:18).

Since *action*, not *emotion*, is the critical issue in Christian love, it is obvious that there is actually no basic difference between expressing love for God and love for a Christian brother, since the test of one's love for *Him* is obedience to His commandments (see 4:19). If a Christian does not obey God's commandments, he does not love Him, no matter what he says or feels. Thus the person who says, "**I love God,**" but does *not* obey God's command to *love his brother*, is **a liar**.

4:21. John now states the connection between love for *God* and love for one's *brother*. These two things are part of the same

commandment. The commandment is so stated that the presence of one kind of love necessitates the presence of the other.

5:1. The chapter break is unfortunate since John is continuing the discussion begun in chapter 4. John's definition of a Christian brother is simple and direct. **Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.** Here John recalls the thematic statement of his Gospel (John 20:31). There is no other way John ever defines a Christian.

Whether a Christian brother is living worthily of his Christian faith is irrelevant. The reason for loving another Christian has nothing to do with his performance. The real reason is now stated by the apostle: **everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him.** Believers love others because they love the Father of those children! If they do *not love* the child, it is a lie to say they love the Father (4:20).

5:2. The apostle now makes explicit what was implicit in 4:20–5:1. If one wants to **know** whether he really loves **the children of God**, this can be verified if he **love[s] God and keep[s] His commandments.**

Keeping *His commandments* is the way to demonstrate that a believer loves his brother, since love for the brethren is one of those *commandments*.

This new perspective subtly introduces a new thought. John does not speak here of a single commandment (as he did in 3:23 and 4:21), but rather of keeping God's *commandments* (plural). It is not merely one's obedience to the specific command to love our brother that shows love. Rather it is one's obedience to all that God commands that verifies *that we love the children of God*.

5:3a. Not surprisingly John now insists that **the love of God** is a matter of keeping **His commandments.** The NKJV translation *the love of God* does not mean God's *love* for believers (subjective genitive). Instead the phrase refers to *our love* for God (objective genitive; cf. v 2), which consists of keeping *His commandments*.

B. What Actually Empowers Our Love (5:3b-15)

5:3b-4. In the NKJV the closing words of v 3 are made into a complete sentence. But this does not correctly represent the Greek since v 4 starts with the Greek subordinating conjunction *hoti* ("because," **For**). It would be better to read vv 3-4a this way: **And His commandments are not burdensome, [because] whatever is born of God overcomes the world.**

The reason God's commands *are not burdensome* is that *whatever is born of God overcomes the world*. John says *whatever*, not "whoever." This suggests that there is something inherently world-conquering in the very experience of being *born of God*. Believers are now immediately told that this is **the victory that has overcome the world—our faith** (v 4b).

John is stating that *our faith* in Christ (cf. v 5) *has* already *overcome the world*. Since the antichrists deny "that Jesus is the Christ" (2:22), it is a great victory to believe this truth and so to be born again. This initial victory does not *guarantee* subsequent victory in Christian living. Rather, the victory achieved by the new birth makes obedience to God's commands an achievable goal.

5:5. The Greek constructions here translated **he who overcomes** (*ho nikōn*) and **he who believes** (*ho pisteuōn*) are present participles preceded by the Greek article. This construction in Greek is essentially timeless and characterizes an individual (or individuals) by some act or acts he has (or they have) performed. Such statements have their closest analogy to many English nouns (often ending in -er) that express completed and/or ongoing action. For example, "He is a murderer." In this case the person may be described this way based on one instance of murder or on the basis of many such acts.

John is thus saying that "the overcomer of the world" is one and the same as "the believer in Jesus Christ, God's Son." As is made clear by the past tense of v 4 ("*has overcome*") this is *already true!* But since John is discussing the fact that keeping God's commandments is not "burdensome" (v 3b), the implication is that such victory can continue and that the key to it is *faith!* Just as the Christian life *begins* at the moment of saving faith in Christ, so also that life is *lived* by faith in Him.

This implication will be developed a little further on by John (1 John 4:12-13), but for now he pauses to clarify a point related to this faith, which was evidently challenged by the Revisionists.

5:6. Cerinthus, of Asia Minor, taught that Jesus was a mere man and that the divine Christ descended on Him at His baptism and left Him at the cross. Thus only the human Jesus, not the divine Christ, died and rose. Ancient Christian literature portrays Cerinthus as an arch-enemy of John. This reference to **water** is a reference to the *baptism* of Jesus, while the reference to **blood** is a reference to His *death*.

The baptism of Jesus was the formal inauguration of Him as the messianic Savior, that is, the **Christ**.

The words **it is the Spirit who bears witness** accurately describe the role of the Holy Spirit at the baptism of Jesus. (The Father also bore witness by speaking from heaven; Matt 3:17.) Possibly the Revisionists distorted the baptism by making *the Spirit* represent the “divine Christ” who descended on the human Jesus at that time, only to leave Him when He died on the cross. John’s words then correct a misrepresentation of the Holy Spirit’s role in relationship to the messiahship of Jesus. *The Spirit* is a witness, but He remains a distinct person not to be identified as the *Christ*.

Moreover, the Spirit’s testimony is reliable **because the Spirit is truth**. *The Spirit* can be said to be *truth* in much the same sense as “God is love” (cf. 4:8). The very nature and character of *the Spirit* is to be truthful and therefore His testimony can be relied on.

In the light of this verse it is possible to surmise what the theology of the Revisionists may have been. They claimed that Jesus was *not* the Christ (2:22), and possibly they regarded the “Christ” as a spiritual being (the Spirit?) who descended on the man Jesus at His baptism but left Him to die alone. Thus the work of the Cross was not a sacrifice offered up by God’s Son, but the death of a mere man. Therefore Jesus’ death had no saving value.

Those who believed that Jesus is the Christ would then be believing a falsehood. Hence they were not born of God, as the apostles taught that they were (cf. 5:1).

This was a grave challenge to Christianity. If the Revisionists’ view that Jesus is not the Son of God (cf. v 5), there was then no victory over the world through faith (cf. vv 4-5). Nor was there any hope of ongoing victory over the world.

5:7-8. The words of this verse are well known because they were first introduced into an early printed edition of the Greek NT by Erasmus. They then became part of the KJV. But they are not found in the vast majority of the surviving Greek manuscripts of 1 John.

Thus they may read as follows: ^{6b}*And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth—*⁷*because there are three that bear witness: ⁸the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one.*

John has affirmed that the Spirit *is* reliable—He is truth—and this is *because* His testimony follows the Biblical law of verification which required two or three witnesses (cf. Deut 17:6; 19:15; Matt 18:16; John 8:17-18).

The baptism and the death of Jesus were so firmly attested that they could be said to **bear witness** along with **the Spirit** and to be fully

in accord with Him: **these three agree as one**. Behind John's words stands the fact that at *the baptism* God declared, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17). John the Baptist personally "bore witness" to this event (cf. John 1:32-34). In addition the crucifixion was foreseen by the Scriptures (cf. 13:18; 19:24, 28, 36, 37) and was attested by apostolic witnesses (19:35; 21:24, note the words "we know"). Thus **the water** and **the blood** are fully attested in their own right, both by divine testimony and by witnesses.

5:9. This verse looks to the testimony specified in vv 7-8 and forward to the witness of God stated in vv 11-12. They make the point that inasmuch as they do receive human testimony as valid, how much more should they be able to do this with **the witness of God** which is obviously **greater** and thus much more deserving of reception.

The words, **If we receive the witness of men**, is probably referring to the requirement of two or three witnesses in order for the statement to be considered valid (vv 7-8).

John claims that God **has testified of His Son**. The words that follow in verses 11-12 show that this testimony derives from words spoken by Jesus in the hearing of the apostles.

5:10. This verse should probably be in parentheses. They constitute a brief side comment before the "witness of God" is actually stated in v 11. John draws the contrast between believing and not believing **the testimony** about God's Son.

The phrase **believes in** (*pisteueō eis*) reflects an expression common in the Fourth Gospel (cf. John 1:12; 2:11, 23; 3:15-16, 18, 36). "Believing in" Jesus is identical in force with the idea of "believing *that* (*hoti*) Jesus is the Christ" (John 11:27; 20:31; cf. 8:24; 13:19). Either Greek construction expresses the means of receiving eternal life (cf. 20:30-31 with John 3:15-16, 18, etc. and cf. 1 John 5:1).

The person who exercises this faith **has the witness in himself**, that is, God's testimony about His Son, is internalized when a person *believes in the Son of God*.

By contrast, the person **who does not believe God** (i.e., disbelieves *the testimony that God has given of His Son*) makes God out to be a **liar**. Such people are saying, in effect, that God's *testimony* is false.

There is nothing here about "head belief" or "heart belief," or about an inner faith over against mere intellectual assent. The Bible does not complicate faith like that. Once one has understood the message, the issue is, does the person believe it or not?

5:11-12. The words **and this is the testimony** should be taken as covering both verses which, taken together, state God's testimony about **His Son**. God's *testimony* consists of two closely related affirmations. The first is about what God has bestowed (v 11), and the second is about the exclusive character of this bestowal (v 12).

According to the divine *testimony* **God has given us eternal life**. Therefore **He who has the Son has life**, and **he who does not have the Son does not have life**.

The Revisionists seem to have questioned the readers' belief that they possessed *eternal life* (cf. 2:25). And since the Revisionists also denied that Jesus is the Christ (cf. 2:22), they would have affirmed that there was no *eternal life* available in Jesus. Thus in the eyes of the Revisionists John's readers did not really possess such life. John counters by asserting that he and his readers *do* have eternal life because God has given it to them *in His Son* and that this life is to be found *in Him* and nowhere else. If someone does not have the Son, that person does not have this life.

The reason John has been speaking about the "testimony that God has given of His Son" (vv 6-12) is to assure the readers that they do indeed *have eternal life* and to encourage continuing faith in His name.

5:13. The words **These things** refer not to the entire epistle but to vv 6-12. This near reference is consistent with John's style elsewhere in the letter. The words "these things we write to you" (1:4) refer to what has just been mentioned in the vv 1-3. In 2:1, the statement "these things I write to you, so that you may not sin," (1:4) refers to the discussion on sin in 1:5-10. The words of 2:26, "these things I have written to you concerning those who try to deceive you," refer to the preceding discussion about the antichrists in 2:18-25.

Every believer *knows* at the point of saving faith that he has **eternal life**, because the promises he believes guarantee it (cf. John 11:25-26). But the believer is not immune to doubts after he is saved (cf. John the Baptist; Luke 7:18-19). The antidote to such doubts is always God's promises. These promises can be referred to repeatedly as a fresh source of assurance. No book of the Bible contains more of these straight-forward guarantees than John's Gospel itself (John 3:16, 18, 36; 5:24; 6:35-40, 47; etc.). First John 5:11-12 reminds the readers of God's testimony they have already believed.

Since the believers he writes to have believed *in the name of the Son of God* (whose identity is attested by "the Spirit, the water, and

the blood,” v 8), then they should rest securely on the testimony that God has given about and through His Son. This testimony assures believers that they do *have eternal life*.

All true assurance of salvation and *eternal life* must rest on the “testimony of God,” for only that testimony has full reliability. Ironically once one’s Christian experience is made the grounds for assurance, John’s statement in v 13 about *knowing* becomes a complete impossibility!

The apostle here seeks to *reaffirm* the assurance of his readers which was to question the *antichrists*.

5:14. The Lord Jesus had taught His disciples the effectiveness of His name in receiving answers to prayer (John 16:23b-24). John’s shift to the subject of prayer after his reference to ongoing faith “in the name of the Son of God” (v 13), is natural, since the Son’s *name* is also the key to answered prayer.

To do something in someone’s name means to act on his authority (cf. John 5:43; 10:25). It has nothing to do with simply tacking onto our prayers a phrase like “in Jesus’ name”. Praying in Jesus’ name means to **ask...according to His** (God’s or Christ’s) **will**. If this is done, believers can have **confidence that...He hears** them. The word for *confidence* (*parrēsia*) is also used in 3:21, which also deals with prayer. Elsewhere in the epistle it is used only twice (2:28 and 4:17), both in relation to the Judgment Seat of Christ.

When a Christian prays, how can he know what God’s *will* is? There is one unmistakable way: His *will* is expressed in His “commandments” (cf. v 3).

5:15. Suppose, then, that a believer asks God for His help to love his Christian brothers and sisters. Can he expect God to grant such a request? John’s answer is in the affirmative.

Since God’s command “to love one another” (3:11, 23; 4:7, 11-12) is an expression of “His will” for Christians, if they ask for help in doing this, they can **know** that they are being heard (cf. v 14). And if, in any such matter which is “according to His will” (i.e., **whatever we ask** in His will), we are *heard*, we can also **know that we have the petitions** (requests) **that we have asked of Him**. If therefore the

request is for assistance to *do* God's will by loving fellow Christians, one can *know* that this assistance will be granted.

C. What Faith and Love Can Do for Our Brother (5:16-17)

5:16-17. As everywhere in John's epistle, the words **his brother** refer to a real Christian. If then, such a **brother** is seen **sinning a sin which does not lead to death**, Christian love should move one to pray for him.

This verse might have been better translated "which does not lead *directly* (or *immediately*) to death."

God sometimes inflicted *death* immediately in response to certain sins of Christians. The two obvious examples are Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), and the Christians at Corinth who ate the Lord's Supper with unconfessed sin in their lives (1 Cor 11:27-32).

John states that **there is sin leading directly to death** and that he is not saying (**I do not say**) **that** a Christian **should pray about that**. There is no command to *pray* for such *sin*, although also there is no command *not* to either. In other words, if a Christian suspects that a *sin leading directly to death* is being committed, he is free to pray for the sinning believer, but without any certainty about the outcome of his prayer. Although there is no guarantee, it is always possible that God may "relent" from His judgment.

What may a Christian expect when he prays for cases where the sin is one *which does not lead* directly to death? **He** (God) **will give life for those who commit sin not leading immediately to death**. Since the death in question for the sinning brother is not eternal (John 11:26), there is no reason to take *life* here as eternal either. Since, however, all sin leads *ultimately* to physical death, to turn from sin leads to a *lengthening of one's physical life*.

VI. Epilogue: Christian Certainties (5:18-21)

John brings his epistle to a close with a series of statements introduced by the words "We know." Together these statements plus the closing exhortation constitute a kind of epilogue. The fact that verbs whose subjects are "we" predominate in both prologue and epilogue is a further sign of stylistic balance. John is far from being the rambling writer some have imagined him to be; he is a literary artist of high caliber.

5:18. John now wishes to remind his readers that **whoever is born of God does not sin**, that is, the regenerate person *as such* is incapable of any *sin*. This leads to the further observation that **he who has**

been born of God keeps himself with the result that **the wicked one does not touch him**. The inner man, born of God, has the inborn capacity to resist the pollution of evil and thus lies outside of Satan's reach.

In saying that the regenerate inward person (cf. Rom 7:22) *keeps himself*, John is not saying that one's inner self can somehow prevent all sin in the Christian life (cf. 1:5-10). What John means is that God's "seed remains in" the regenerate inner self (cf. 3:9) as the controlling element of his born-again nature and is impervious to even the slightest contamination from *the wicked one*. Believers' failures are due to the sinful "programming" of their earthly bodies, as Paul himself taught in Rom 7:7-25.

But try as he might, Satan cannot really *touch* the believer. But if a believer lets him, Satan will use his failures to lead him to further failures. So after every sin, a believer ought to rise from his confession to God, *knowing* that he is the same inwardly holy person he was before he failed!

5:19. If a Christian knows the truth stated in v 18, he can also **know** whose side he is on. Knowing God normally suggests a dynamic experiential relationship with Him (cf. 3:19; 4:4).

The world **lies under the sway of the wicked one** translate *en tō ponerō keitai*, ("lies in the wicked one"). This phrase suggests that *the world* passively rests within Satan's operative sphere. By contrast, the phrase *ek Theou* (*of God*) means being "from" *God*.

The Christian should be aware of his own sinless inward man (v 18), and he should also be aware of his utter separateness from *the whole world* that lives under Satan's sway. Believers, whom the enemy cannot "touch" (v 18), are not a part of **the world**, which lies passively in the wicked one. Thus believers must not "love the world or the things in the world" (2:15-17) and they must resist the ideas that the world promotes (cf. 2:18-19).

This letter is written to Christians who are advanced in their spiritual state (cf. 2:12-14; 4:6), probably the church leaders. The statements of these closing verses can apply in varying degrees to other believers, depending on the extent to which their own spiritual experience matches that of the readers addressed.

5:20. The third thing **we know** is that by virtue of the coming of God's **Son** believers have been granted spiritual comprehension (**an understanding**) that makes it possible for them to know the true God.

The word *understanding* (*dianoian*) means *intelligence*. The idea is that **the Son of God** has granted spiritual *intelligence*, or intellect, necessary to *know* God.

This knowledge is attained through fellowship and is verified by obedience to God's commands (cf. comments on 2:3-4, 12-14). The ability to acquire such knowledge, that is, the necessary *intelligence* for it, is made possible by the fact that **the Son of God has come**.

Christian love (obedience) is never absent where God is truly known (cf. comments on 4:7-8). There could be no true *understanding* of love or of God had not *the Son of God come* and died to reveal God's love. Through His death *the Son has given us an understanding* (an *intelligence*) by means of which *we may know* God. The obedient Christian possesses the necessary spiritual capacity to know God.

The statement **we are in Him who is true** recalls the same expression in 2:5 ("by this we know that we are in Him"), which John linked to *abiding* in Him (2:6). "Abiding" is John's description of the experience of "living as a disciple" (cf. John 15:8).

But to be *in Him*, that is, to abide *in Him*, is not only to abide in *Him who is true* (as John has just described God), but it is also to be **in His Son Jesus Christ**. There is no **and** between the phrases *in Him* and *in His Son*. To abide in God and to abide in Christ are the same thing.

The declaration that **this is the true God** is one of the most straightforward announcements of the deity of *Jesus Christ* found in the NT and He is also **eternal life**, which leads back to the Prologue in 1:1-4, where the subject matter of John's letter is "that *eternal life* which was with the Father and was manifested to us" (1:2; cf. "I am...the life" John 14:6). This shows that the final statement is primarily a reference to *His Son Jesus Christ*.

Moreover, the reference to *eternal life* ties prologue and epilogue together in this climactic affirmation. John has now fulfilled his intention to "declare" to his readers this "eternal life" (1:2). He has shown them that through "abiding" **in Him who is true** (which is also to abide *in His Son Jesus Christ*), they can experience *eternal life*. That *life*, expressed in love toward their Christian brothers and sisters, springs out of the sinless inner self (v 18). It marks their life and experience as being of God rather than of the world (v 19), and expresses the spiritual *understanding* that the Son of God came to give them (v 20a).

5:21. The heresy John combats undermines the Saviorhood of Jesus Christ and espouses compromise with the world. They are agents of Satan, promoting various forms of idolatry (whether literal or metaphorical) that blind men to “the true God and eternal life.”

The apostle’s final words should therefore reverberate down the corridors of human history: **Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.**

2 JOHN

COMMENTARY

I. Salutation (vv 1-3)

Vv 1-2. John uses the title **the Elder** to mean “the elderly one.” **The elect lady and her children** probably refer to the church and its members.

John’s **love in truth** means that he loves them because they love the truth. Moreover, his love for them is shared by **all those who have known the truth**. They have believed *the truth* that “Jesus is the Christ” and so are “born of God” (cf. 1 John 5:1).

John’s statement that the **truth** (God’s revelation in His Son)... **abides in us** describes their corporate state.

But God’s *truth* also **will be with us forever**. Christianity has endured through the centuries and continues to **be with us** today, and will be true eternally.

V 3. The benefits of **grace, mercy, and peace** will come both **from God the Father and also from Jesus**. The full title, **the Lord Jesus Christ**, followed by **the Son of the Father**, is unique in the Johannine writings and serves to affirm His lordship, messiahship, and deity (cf. vv 7, 9, 10).

Moreover, these benefits will come, John states, **in truth and love**. As with Paul in Eph 4:15, *truth* is given priority. Those who think

that *truth* can be downplayed in the interests of mutual *love*, do not share the NT point of view (cf. 1 John 3:23; 4:21).

II. Protecting the Truth by Rejecting Error (vv 4-11)

A. Practice the Truth as Originally Given (vv 4-6)

V 4. John's goal was to turn believers into disciples, who are **walking in truth**, that is, in the **commandment** of Jesus Christ, the command to love other Christians (cf. vv 5-6; Matt 22:37-39).

V 5. John pleads with the whole church (**lady**) to adhere to the **commandment to love one another**, a command they **had from the beginning**.

V 6. As in 1 John 5:2-3, **love** for one's brother can be defined as obedience to God's commands. Thus when believers **walk according to His commandments**, they love one another.

The single **commandment** (cf. 1 John 3:22-23) is to love God. For if we love God, we will automatically love the brethren (1 John 2:4-11; 3:11-15; 4:7-11, 20).

B. Protect Your Work by Rejecting Error (vv 7-11)

V 7. The false prophets or **deceivers** are linked to the **Antichrist**, no doubt the same ones in 1 John. They denied that **Jesus** is the **Christ**, a denial that marked them out as antichrists (cf. 1 John 2:22).

V 8. The words **Look to yourselves** (*Blepete heautois*) might be rendered, "Watch out for yourselves." The intrusion of false teaching into the church can severely damage the work God has been doing among them, which will result in the **reward** for that work being diminished.

In the words **that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive** the repetition of *we* contrasts with *Look to yourselves*. John had labored for the Lord in the very church and area where the recipients of this epistle were located. What was at risk, because of the threat of false doctrine, was not simply *their* work for God, but *the apostle's* as well.

If false doctrine is allowed to intrude a church, it has the potential to stop that church's progress or even to destroy the church.

John's concern, expressed in terms of losing a **full reward**, shows that this, not the loss of salvation, was the consequence of failure to maintain the truth.

V 9. If the church John was addressing was *not* vigilant as he has just warned them to be, or if one (or more) of its members gave in

to the new theology, John states that such a person **transgresses** (*parabainō*, “to go aside”) **and does not abide** (*menō*, “to stay”) **in the doctrine of Christ**. He *turns aside* from the truth instead of *remaining* in it.

The person who does not abide in the true doctrine about Jesus Christ does not have God with him in his new perspective and/or lifestyle. He is out of touch with God, while he who abides in the doctrine of Christ is vitally in touch with God.

V 10. If the readers are to “abide” in the truth about Jesus Christ, they must be extremely wary of any traveling teacher who **comes to** [them] **and does not bring** (i.e., “teach”) **this doctrine**. They must offer him no hospitality or encouragement at all.

In Greek the pronouns **you** and **your** are plural, showing that the congregation is addressed. No one in the congregation was to give the false teachers assistance of any kind. The words **do not receive him into your house** at the least meant to refuse such things as food or lodging. The wisdom of not allowing such people “to get in the door” has often been proved by those who have invited the representatives of cults to come in and talk. Letting them in is often easier than getting them out! John tells the members of the church not even to **greet** such people. The reason for this is stated in the following verse.

V 11. This admonition may sound harsh. Why would a simple “hello” mean participating in the false teacher’s **evil deeds**? The Greek word for **greet** (*chairein*) means “rejoice.” One might compare it to “good luck” or “have a good day.” A believer should not say “Have a good day” to a person he knows is an enemy of the truth. To say this to a bearer of a false message was to participate, however slightly, *in his evil deeds*. In a tolerant age, believers must learn a true measure of *holy intolerance!*

III. Farewell (vv 12-13)

V 12. The last two verses of 2 John are a personal “farewell” from the author, who clearly knew the recipients. He has **many things** he could **write** to them, but has decided to save these for a future visit. This indirectly speaks volumes about the importance of the matters addressed in this letter, since he has chosen *not to wait* for a visit before communicating them. They were important enough to be put into writing immediately.

V 13. If 2 John were a personal letter to a particular woman, the question might be raised why only the children of her sister send their greetings. (The word for **greet** here is a standard one and different from the word in vv 10-11.) Of course, there are possible answers to this question: the sister was away; the sister was not a Christian; etc. But this does not seem truly natural, especially since neither the **elect sister** nor “the elect lady” (v 1) are given personal names. This contrasts with 3 John where three personal names appear in the brief space of the epistle, whereas in 2 John neither the “ladies” nor any of their “children” receive names.

On the other hand if the “elect lady and her children” of v 1 are the church and its members, then **the children of your elect sister** simply refers to the members of the church where John is when he writes this letter. The bearer of the epistle would know the identity of that church so that the readers would recognize that John is sending the greetings of a sister church.

3 JOHN

COMMENTARY

I. Salutation (v 1)

V 1. As in 2 John the apostle writes under the title of **The Elder**. The recipient is a man named **Gaius** for whom John expresses Christian **love**. The apostle loves him **in truth**, that is, both “truly” and in accord with Christian **truth** (cf. 2 John 1).

Several men bearing the name *Gaius* appear in the NT, but nothing indicates that the *Gaius* of 3 John should be identified with any of the others.

II. Upholding the Truth by Supporting Its Representatives (vv 2-12)

The letter appeals to Gaius to do what Diotrephes was unwilling to do, that is, to support the truth by supporting its representative Demetrius.

A. Commendation of Gaius's Walk in the Truth (vv 2-4)

V 2. The word **prosper** (*euodousthai*) is equivalent to the English expression “get along well” and does not necessarily refer to material prosperity. The apostle wants things to go well for Gaius and for

him to **be in good health**. Since he regards Gaius's **soul** as "getting along well" (**prosper**), he expresses the hope that Gaius's temporal well-being might match his spiritual well-being.

V 3. John now states that he has received information from certain Christian **brethren** that Gaius conducts himself consistently with **the truth**, that is, the substance of the Christian revelation made through God's Son.

V 4. John is delighted with the reports of Gaius's adherence to the truth. To **walk in truth** means that Gaius lived in conformity to the truth.

B. Encouragement of Gaius's Support for Those who Proclaim the Truth (vv 5-10)

Vv 5-6. **The brethren** referred to are Christian missionaries (itinerant evangelists). Gaius is being encouraged to continue to assist them as he evidently has done in the past.

The phrase **for the brethren and for strangers** does not mean Christians and non-Christians, since the statement **who have borne witness...before the church** seems to refer to both categories. Sometimes, however, the term *brother* or *brethren* seems to refer to specific people known to the Christians who are addressed (cf. 1 Cor 16:12; 2 Cor 9:3, 5; 12:18). *The brethren* may indicate traveling evangelists whom both John and Gaius knew, while *strangers* refers to evangelists from other places who were unknown to Gaius.

Gaius was an openhanded man when it came to assisting those who traveled in the service of the Gospel. This was an act of fidelity to the Lord and His truth. The words **you do faithfully** might be rendered, "you do a faithful thing." John's point is that **whatever** Gaius might **do** (*ergasei*, "do, accomplish") **for** these servants of Christ is an act of faithfulness to God.

V 7. These men have gone on their mission without seeking any assistance from unsaved **Gentiles**. As indicated by the words **taking nothing**, these NT preachers apparently refused to accept such help.

The words **for His name's sake** could be rendered "for the sake of the Name." (There is no word for *His* in the Greek and a reference to the Lord's name is perhaps preferable; i.e., *the Name* par excellence.) The implication of this is that to seek material assistance from the unsaved would have been unworthy of *the Name*.

V 8. The word **receive** (*apolambanein*) means "welcoming" (e.g., welcoming a guest into one's home [cf. Luke 15:27]). When Christians

offered hospitality to such servants of the Lord, they became **fellow workers** (*synergoi*, “coworkers”) **for** (or, with) **the truth** proclaimed by them. In other words, they became *partners with* the preached word!

V 9. Gaius might have wondered why this request was put to him instead of to **the church** to which he belonged. John’s remark here implies that his procedure was a bit unusual and so he wishes to explain it to Gaius.

John states that he *has* written **to the church**. The possibility exists that 2 John *is* the letter referred to here, but it is only that—a possibility.

The problem in Gaius’s church was the presence of a dominant leader named **Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them**. This indictment does not mean that Diotrephes held some doctrinal error. Nor does it mean he was not a Christian. Instead, Diotrephes is guilty of usurping a position in the church that belongs to Jesus alone.

The word **us** probably means those who formed a part of John’s immediate circle of apostles (cf. comments on 1 John 2:19). For this reason John does not expect Demetrius (v 12) to be received by Diotrephes either. That is why John is writing Gaius, rather than the church, to request hospitality.

V 10. John assures Gaius that **if** he does **come** to Gaius’s church, he will **call to mind** the deeds that Diotrephes does. John seems confident that he can put this man in his place if he goes to that church in person.

By the term **his deeds**, the apostle no doubt has in mind Diotrephes’s refusal to recognize any emissaries that had come to him from the apostles. Such rejections had been accompanied by **prating against us** (the apostles) **with malicious words**. The verb for *prating* (*phlyareō*) occurs only here in the NT (though related to *phlyareō* occurring in 1 Tim 5:13 in the sense of “gossips” or “tattlers”). It signifies foolish or senseless talk.

Whereas Diotrephes ought to have been deeply ashamed of these *words* with which he demeaned the apostles, he actually added to **that** (lit., “to these things,” i.e., to the words he spoke) the additional

sins of both rejecting the traveling preachers **himself** and then also preventing others (**those who wish to**) from doing so.

*C. Exhortation to Continue This Support in Regard to Demetrius
(vv 11-12)*

V 11. Gaius is **not to imitate what is evil**. If he did, then it could be said of him that he had **not seen God!** Conversely, if he did the right thing, it could be said that he was **of God**.

To be *of God* signifies that the action of the person in question has its source in God (cf. 1 John 3:10b). Sin, on the other hand, is always an act performed in spiritual ignorance and darkness. The sinner acts sinfully because he has lost sight of God (cf. 1 John 3:6).

The Greek articular present participle is used in the phrases **He who does good** (*ho agathopoiōn*) and **he who does evil** (*ho kako-poiōn*), but these expressions imply no more than that the action is performed. Such participles can express actions that occur only once (e.g., John 6:33, *ho katabainōn*, “He who comes down”) or actions that are no longer occurring (e.g., John 9:8, *ho kathēmenos kai prosaitōn*, “he who sat and begged”). The statements remain true whether good or evil is done once or many times.

Gaius therefore is being told that if he *does good* by receiving Demetrius (v 12), in so doing he will be *of God*. That is, he will be behaving in such a way that *God* Himself is the source of what he is doing. Alternatively if he *imitates* Diotrophes and *does evil*, he will be acting out of spiritual blindness and will have had no perception of God.

V 12. Demetrius had a **good testimony from all** who knew him. But beyond that, **Demetrius** received “testimony” **from the truth itself**. (i.e., *Demetrius* proclaimed *the truth*). By doing so he demonstrated his “orthodoxy” and this made him worthy to receive support in his travels from other Christians (cf. 2 John 10). Thus *the truth* testified *to him* as he proclaimed it.

A third “witness” was also available to *Demetrius*. John’s words **And we also bear witness** obviously refers to the apostles, whose “witness” Diotrophes was unwilling to accept. John is confident that Gaius, unlike Diotrophes, will accept this testimony, adding, **and you know that our testimony is true**.

III. Farewell (vv 13-14)

Vv 13-14. The apostle has a lot to say to Gaius, but he prefers to do this in person. Earlier he had used the words “if I come” (v 10), and

now he expresses the hope that he will be able to do so **shortly**. No doubt Demetrius was coming to Gaius's area ahead of John, and so this letter of recommendation was needed to procure Gaius's hospitality for Demetrius.

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