

FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD STUDIES IN 1 JOHN

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Preface

When studying any book from the Bible, it is always necessary to find out who wrote that part of Scripture, when, to whom and why. It may not always be possible to find answers to all these questions in every case, but with John's first epistle (or letter) we know the following.

Who John was – it is accepted that the author of this letter was 'John', the cousin of Jesus and the son of Zebedee. John was an apostle, which means he was an eye-witness of Jesus and could therefore speak with authority about who Jesus was and what he did. The same 'John' wrote the fourth gospel, two further letters and the book of Revelation.

When John wrote the epistle – probably at the end of the first century AD.

To whom John was writing – by this time John had left the church in Jerusalem and was now serving the church in the city of Ephesus from where he wrote this letter. He was

writing to his congregation, and it is quite likely that the letter was also circulated to other churches in the area of what is now modern day Western Turkey.

Why John wrote this letter – John's first letter was written to people who were already Christians but who were being troubled by false teachers about the Lord Jesus Christ. The letter is written with pastoral warmth – John wanted to warn his readers about false teaching and to draw their attention back to Christ and what he had done for them. Fellowship with God being the main theme of the letter, John wants his readers to be sure of their salvation that is based on the historical Jesus whose deity and humanity are equally emphasised. Assurance of salvation, John reminds his readers, is possible by knowing the truth about Jesus, is evidenced by love for believers based on God's love shown in Jesus, and by seeking to obey God's commandments.

These studies are closely based on radio talks recorded for *Serving Today* by Pastor Keith Noldt from Australia to whom we are very grateful for this helpful guide to this part of the Bible.

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Chapter 1 - Five facts about Jesus (1:1-4)

During the first three hundred years of its existence, the church struggled to understand and to define the person of Christ – that he was both true man and true God in one person. But, of course, there were false teachers who were always ready to do Satan’s work by leading Christians astray. Nothing much has changed over the years and for today’s church, similar situations arise. The beginning of John’s first letter is a declaration of five things about the reality of Jesus:

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.” (1:1-4)

These first four verses set out the historic foundation for Jesus. The Apostle John makes it clear that Jesus is a real person (“*That which was from the beginning, [that] which we have heard, [that] which we have seen, [that] which our hands have touched...*”). Jesus was someone that John and the other disciples had actually seen and known.

John needed to show that the mere opinions of false teachers were nothing when compared to the historical facts known about Jesus by the Apostles. He therefore makes the following statements about the true historic Jesus.

First of all, *Jesus is eternal*. The phrase “*That which was from the beginning*” is a deliberate echo of Genesis 1:1 and John 1:1. In the first chapter of his gospel, John demonstrates that Jesus already existed from the beginning. 1 John 1:2 says “*The life appeared*” or was manifested. In other words “*The life*” already existed but became visible at a specific point in history. John is declaring both the pre-existence and the deity of Christ – that Jesus is eternal and that Jesus is God which is central to the Christian faith. If the truth that Jesus is God is taken away, then the whole of the Christian faith falls to pieces. Jesus Christ’s teachings, his miracles, his death for sinners, his resurrection, and his promises about the resurrection of the dead, forgiveness of sins by faith and the judgement of the world, are all based on the fact that Jesus is the God-man.

The second fact that the Apostle John states is that *Christianity is based on historical reality*. Jesus “*appeared*” means he was born as a human being. Real Christian faith cannot be reduced just to the teachings of Jesus because that takes away from both whom Jesus was and what he came to do. Real Christian faith is inseparably linked to the perfect life and perfect death of Jesus. God

came into the world at a real point in time, in a real place on the earth. His life, death and resurrection provide the only way for man to be reconciled to God. Therefore, the Christian faith is based upon real historical evidence.

The third thing that John says is that *Jesus is physical*. The emphasis on “*heard... seen... touched*” drives home the fact that Jesus was a real man of flesh and blood because towards the end of the First Century a heresy emerged that was later known as ‘Docetism’ – from the Greek word for ‘to seem’ or ‘to appear’. This was the wrong belief that Jesus was purely God and that he only ‘seemed’ or ‘appeared’ to be human. In these opening words, John is attacking the false teachers who were troubling the early Christians by their denial of Jesus’ human nature. Another error that emerged later was ‘Gnosticism’ from the Greek word for ‘knowledge’. Gnostics claimed to have special knowledge and denied Jesus’ deity. They said that Jesus was human and that the divine spirit only descended on him at his baptism and left him before his crucifixion. This therefore makes both the incarnation and the atonement impossible. Gnosticism gained widespread influence in the Second Century.

Fourthly, *Jesus is the “word of life”* (see end of 1:1). The phrase “*word of life*” can only refer to the Lord Jesus himself. It’s also used to mean the Good News which includes all that Jesus came to do and what he taught. Both are true because Jesus is both the message and the messenger; we mustn’t try to separate the message and the

person as some have tried to do. As previously stated the message of Jesus is inseparably linked to his person. Elsewhere the Apostle Paul says: “*We preach Christ*” (1 Cor 1:23) and the writer to the Hebrews says: “*In these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son.*” (Heb 1:2)

And fifthly, there is the historical fact that *Jesus gives life*. This is a term for the spiritual experience that God gives to his people. All human beings have physical life, they’re alive physically, but without the Lord Jesus there is no spiritual life, they’re spiritually dead (see 3:14). The well known verse in John 3:16 says that spiritual birth and life are a gift from God, but best of all is eternal life.

The opening words of John’s first letter are magnificent as we think about the societies in which we live where people worship all kinds of false things, idols and other gods. These words are significant because they declare that the real thing to worship is far better because the Lord Jesus is eternal, he is historically real, he is physical, he is the Word of life and he gives life to all who will come in faith to him.

Chapter 2 - Linking the historical Jesus to today (1:3,4)

The historical foundation of the real Jesus has been affirmed in 1:1-4, but it is also important to link what happened over two thousand years ago and the world we live in today. This is done through the apostolic

proclamation of verse 3:

“We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard.”

The Apostle John uses ‘we’ by which he must have meant himself and those who along with him had seen and been with the Lord Jesus. What he and the other apostles proclaimed was “*the Word of life*” (1:1) and “*eternal life*” (1:2). That there should be such a reliable apostolic witness to the Lord Jesus is a matter of thanks to God. The apostles were truly privileged to have been with Jesus during his earthly ministry as the Lord Jesus himself once said to them:

“But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.” (Matt 13:16-17)

Many generations later the Apostle John could therefore write, “*we have heard... we have seen.*” And he says the same thing in his gospel, speaking of himself as a witness to the crucifixion:

“The man who saw it has given testimony and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies to that so you also may believe.” (John 19:35, see also John 21:24)

The problem is that Jesus Christ is not here on earth today so it is impossible to physically check out his nail pierced hands and spear torn side. Instead, Jesus Christ can be known through the writings of the apostles in the New Testament – they are the link between the historical facts and our present understanding of these facts. Some muddled thinkers claim that ‘all religions lead to God’, but this is impossible because that would include mutually contradicting beliefs. The apostles, on the other hand, never made such claims. Instead, in the face of the false teachers of their day, they proclaimed that the Eternal One, who had been with the Father from all eternity and was therefore equal with God the Father, had become man. He was true God and true man at the same time, he was life and he gave life, he is life and still gives life.

This apostolic preaching of the word of life, or the receiving of eternal life has many consequences, of which John refers to two. The first consequence is fellowship:

“... so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.” (1:3)

The word ‘fellowship’ is used a lot in Christian circles; some churches call their building ‘The Fellowship Hall’ or something similar. Fellowship can mean Christians sharing a meal together and maybe going on a picnic together or meeting together. There’s nothing wrong with such expressions of fellowship, but there is more to it than

that – fellowship means having something in common, or jointly participating in something. So if Person A has the gospel and Person B has the gospel, then both have Jesus Christ in common because they jointly share the gospel, that is, they share in the life of which Christ is the only true source. Person A is in fellowship with Christ, Person B is in fellowship with Christ; it therefore follows that both must be in fellowship with each other. The problem comes in trying to show it and live it out. The point the Apostle John was trying to make could be expressed like this:

‘If you accept the message we apostles are teaching, and you receive eternal life in Christ, then it’s not some isolated, one-off experience. Rather, by accepting the message and the promised life you’re becoming part of something bigger than yourself, you’ll be in partnership with others who’ve also accepted that life.’

It’s wonderful to know that each individual Christian is in fellowship with other believers throughout the world.

With fellowship also come certain obligations: it can only be with those who truly believe the Bible; it means having responsibilities towards other Christians; they are lovingly to care for each other. Fellowship also has benefits as others are caring for us and praying for us. Christian fellowship can be experienced at different levels: in a Christian family, in a small Bible study group or in the Sunday morning meeting at church, these are all part of the fellowship that believers share together in the Lord Jesus

Christ.

The second consequence of receiving eternal life is joy:

“We write this to make our joy complete.” (1:4)

John meant that his joy would be complete by knowing that the believers to whom he was writing were sharing with him in the fellowship of the gospel. The same joy affects any believer when other people in their own family, in their village, in their neighbourhood come to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a great joy to know that others now share in the same faith in the Lord Jesus. There is a distinction to be made between joy and happiness: happiness depends on circumstances, but joy can be experienced whatever happens to us. Nor is joy something which can be manipulated or generated externally. For example, being at a sporting event can make people happy, but only Christians, even when being persecuted, or being punished or sick, can still know joy.

So in verses 3 and 4, the Apostle John talks about those who have fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ and because of that they share each other’s joy.

Chapter 3 - The nature and characteristics of fellowship (1:5-2:2)

The Apostle John now begins to unfold the nature and characteristics of the fellowship mentioned in verse 3, what this fellowship is to be like and, as he does so, he starts by saying something about God. The first letter of John is structured around three statements about God: “*God is light*”, “*God is righteous*” and “*God is love*”. In this section, we look at the first one: “*God is light*” (1:5) meaning that God is pure, holy, and absolutely perfect, but that we are not, we’re impure and sinful. Therefore, we need to have a genuine and a realistic understanding about our own sin and there are five statements that can be made about this from these verses.

Firstly, *sin exists in our very nature*. We need to recognise that sin is real and that all of us sin. Verses 6 and 7 say that we can’t sin and claim fellowship with God at the same time. Yet verses 8 and 9 tell us that we’re sinners by nature and conduct – we can’t completely stop sinning, but we’re commanded not to sin. It’s like asking a blind man to see or a deaf man to hear. Rather than denying that sin affects every individual, the solution to this problem is to recognise the reality of sin:

“*If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves*” (1:8)

The Bible teaches that all people everywhere without exception have inherited a sinful nature from Adam. This

truth needs to be acknowledged and all need to be honest about it: people everywhere are deceiving themselves by thinking they are good and that they do not sin.

Secondly, this passage teaches that *sin exists not only in our nature but in our conduct*, that is in what we do. To claim not to have sinned, that we haven’t committed any actual sins amounts to saying that God is a liar. The reason for this is the common understanding of what sin is: people think of it as really bad things such as adultery or murder, which are indisputably sin. However, many in today’s world think that gossip or cheating on your tax are just little things that don’t really count. The truth is that whether small and large, all are sin, and this needs to be acknowledged. The Bible defines sin as “*lawlessness*” (3:4), breaking God’s moral law (the Ten Commandments), it’s thinking that sin doesn’t matter, and that as long as you do it politely, then sin is actually all right.

Thirdly, *sin spoils our fellowship with God*, which is why God calls upon all people everywhere to repent and believe the Good News. All people everywhere need to be reconciled to God, which is the point of verses 6 to 10. To be reconciled to God is impossible if you don’t realise that you need to be reconciled with God.

The fourth truth is that *sin can be forgiven*:

“*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will*

forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1:9)

This is just as true for the person who has just come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, as it is true for every other believer ever since they became a Christian. It’s useless to think ‘*Nobody’s perfect*’. The remedy is to face our sin, admit it, confess it to God, and to turn from it – the Bible contains many commandments to that effect:

“He who conceals his sins does not prosper but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.” (Prov 28:13)

“Turn to me and be saved all you in the ends of the earth.” (Isa 45:22)

“Repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15)

Finally, *sin has been remedied*. Through the death of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross a person can plead guilty and so receive God’s forgiveness:

“My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” (2:1-2)

The Lord Jesus Christ is described as the “*Righteous One*”, the only perfect one. We then learn that he is a ‘propitiation’ or an “*atoning sacrifice*” which means that by his death he is warding off the wrath (or anger) of God at sin. He comes between us and God protecting the people he’s dying for – all those who in every age past, present and future who will come to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, he’s taking their sins upon himself so that the punishment will not fall on them. This is such a wonderful truth! And the phrase “*the whole world*” doesn’t mean that every person in the world will be saved, this isn’t the Bible’s teaching, but rather that a great number of people out of every nation and every tribe and every people and every language will come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and so have their sins forgiven.

Chapter 4 - Assurance of fellowship with God (2:3-27)

The Apostle John’s first epistle is about fellowship with God through the Lord Jesus Christ and with other Christian believers. It’s also about assurance that we really are in fellowship with God because it answers the question “*How can I know I’m a Christian?*” Being sure that they really are right with God is something that some Christians struggle with.

In 1 John 2:3-27, the word “*know*” is used eleven times. A person can know if they are in fellowship with God, and that they really are a Christian. What follows is a

suggested way to preach from this passage and to answer those questions.

According to verse 3 it is possible to “*know*” that we are a Christian, and the Apostle John develops three tests to address this. Firstly, there is the moral test of ‘obedience’:

“We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands.” (2:3)

To love God means loving what pleases him and doing it. For this, the Bible is our guide, therefore Christians do what it says, obeying his commands. When John wrote this letter there were some people who claimed to have special knowledge about God, but their lives did not show it. John obviously would have rejected that idea and he wants his readers (and us) to have nothing to do with it either. The way we live is to be the evidence of what we claim to believe, and that’s the point of 2:4-6:

“The man who says, “I know him,” but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God’s love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.”

Some make a distinction between love and law, suggesting that being a Christian is not a matter of obeying rules, but of loving God and loving our neighbour. Whilst there is some truth in that, it is nevertheless a false distinction –

both love and obedience are required. Indeed, the point of these verses is that we show our love to be real by our obedience to God’s law. The obedience test has two parts: obeying God’s commandments and imitating Christ by showing love.

Secondly, there is the ‘social’ test of brotherly love. Verse 10 states this positively and verse 11 puts it negatively:

“Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.”

Christians are to love each other as brothers in Christ. This old commandment given by John was spoken by the Lord Jesus himself, it’s as old as the gospel. Jesus Christ made it new in the sense that he expanded its quality. We’re not just to love as unbelievers love, but we’re to love in the same way that Jesus loved (see John 13:34).

The threefold appeal of verses 12 to 14 is to various groups of people within the church: children, fathers and young men. This is because a local Christian church is composed of all kinds of people, of different ages, different experiences and different levels of Christian maturity. John drives home the negative aspect of the test of brotherly love:

“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” (2:15)

We are to love each other, but not the world. This means not loving those aspects of the world around us that are in rebellion against God, and contrary to God, nor should we let the world mould us into its shape. There are two reasons for this: we can't serve both the world and Christ, and besides, the world won't last. So the second test is about whether or not we love other Christians as brothers, and, whether or not we love the world.

The third test is the 'doctrinal' test of what we believe. Just as John was concerned about false living, he also was concerned about false believing. The doctrinal test revolves around the rejection of error. In second Thessalonians chapter 2, the Apostle Paul referred to a person called the Antichrist who will be revealed just before the Lord Jesus returns to this earth. However, Satan who will be behind the Antichrist, is already at work now and even when John wrote. John said that many Antichrists had already come and were at work opposing Christ even then. These are false teachers who emerge from within the church though *“they did not really belong to us”* (2:19). An Antichrist is a religious teacher who proclaims a Christ but not the Christ revealed in the Bible. They may proclaim the Christ who is not quite God and who doesn't quite save, as often is the case with the cults. They may put forward a Christ who offers health and wealth or a Christ

whom you invite into your life to make you feel good. We need to know how to recognise such Antichrist and false teaching.

The Apostle John says there are three things to remember when faced with false teaching: the testimony of the Holy Spirit who helps us be discerning (2:20-21). Secondly, if a teaching is true, there must be true profession of Christ, the Christ of the Bible will be held up and exalted. Thirdly, there's a holding on to apostolic teaching (2:24). Christians are to believe and teach what Christ's apostles believed and taught; there's no place for novelties and new ideas. It is important to be cautious about something that has supposedly just popped up after twenty centuries, so always ask *‘what was the Apostles’ teaching on this supposed new idea?’*

So, a Christian who is in fellowship with God can be sure. There's the threefold test of obeying God's word, the Bible, of living a life that shows brotherly love for other Christians instead of loving the world, and believing the Bible as God's infallible word over against the false teaching of Antichrists.

Chapter 5 - Practical Righteousness (2:28-3:10)

The theme of this section is that God's children don't sin, but Satan's children do sin:

“And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming. If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him. How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure. Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. No-one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No-one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him. Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work. No-one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother.” (2:28-3:10)

In this passage words and expressions like *“Dear children”* or *“children of God”* are used seven times and *“born”* or *“born of him”* are used three times. The Apostle John wants us to get the idea that Christians have become God’s children in a special way. We become the children of God in a spiritual and redemptive way when we are justified before God by faith in Jesus Christ. In his gospel, John says:

*“To all who received him, to those who believed in his name he gave the right to become children of God.”
(John 1:12)*

Here, 1 John 2:28-29 summarises what it means to follow Christ – that a Christian is someone who’s been born again by God’s power and because God is righteous his new children should be righteous too. Then in 3:1-10, the Apostle John develops what that means in daily living. This can be summarised with the saying *‘like father, like son’*, or, Christians should display the family likeness.

First of all, we should have an appreciation of our special privilege - you get an idea of this at the beginning of chapter 3. John was an old man when he wrote this letter, but he still hadn’t lost any of the wonder of God’s grace, God’s undeserved favour given to sinners:

“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is

what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.” (3:1)

God, who is righteous, perfect and holy, stooped down to people like us who were separated from him by our sinful natures and he sent his perfect son to die in the place of such sinners. That’s wonderful enough, but even more wonderful is that he should raise up those who believe in Jesus Christ and adopt them into his family. It’s so wonderful as to make our hearts burst with praise – just like John does!

Secondly, as well as appreciating our special privilege, there should be an expectation of our certain prospect:

“But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” (3:2)

This means that once in the family, we’re there to stay and we will be there for the glorious climax. We’re going to see the Lord Jesus and we’re going to be like him. The first part of the certain prospect is that the Lord Jesus will come again to the earth – the world as it stands is not all that there is. Christ will come again and raise the dead, judge the whole world and gather his children to himself for ever. That Jesus will return is something we can be certain of. The second part of the certain prospect is that we will be like him, the Christian will be made like Christ in his body. As we get older, our bodies decline (some faster than others!), however, the promise of God to his

people is that one day after the resurrection we too shall have a glorified body that will never die. The third part of the certain prospect is that we shall be like Christ in terms of righteousness. In this world sin is all around us, but in heaven we’ll be unable to sin. For every Christian, that should naturally lead to a desire for practical righteousness. In the meantime this is what we do:

“Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself just as he is pure.” (3:3)

We constantly do our best to live in a way that pleases God knowing this certain prospect ahead of us. We press on towards it with the desire to please God. These verses have been problematic for some Christians especially verse 9 which seems to suggest that a Christian cannot sin. Of course we’re only too well aware that Christians can and do sin. Indeed, “*to claim to be without sin*” is self delusion (1:8), “*to claim [to] have not sinned*” is to call God a “*liar*” (1:10). Sin is falling short of God’s mark, like an arrow that doesn’t quite reach its target. It’s “*lawlessness*” (3:4), this is not just breaking God’s law but acting as if there is no law, just doing what we like and pleasing ourselves. The pre-Gnostics (see chapter 1, page 7) believed that what was physical was separate from the spirit, so what a person did with their body didn’t matter, because their spiritual status wasn’t affected. The false teachers would say that having special ‘*knowledge*’ about God was enough and that sin itself didn’t matter. But as John states in verses 7-10, living a sinful life originates from the devil and a non-

sinful (although not ‘sinless’) life comes from God. Once a person becomes a Christian, they will no longer want to live a sinful life because they have been given a new heart with an inbuilt hatred of sin and a new love of righteousness. To be clear, this means that we do not go on *regularly* sinning like we used to. Whereas non-Christians sin and don’t care about it, Christians may sometimes sin but care very much about it, they hate it and flee away to Christ.

Chapter 6 - Brotherly love (3:11-24)

In the previous section, we saw that Christians should display the family likeness because a Christian is a child of God and should live like a child of God. This in turn means having a godly lifestyle. One of the evidences of true godliness is brotherly love. That’s what 3:11-24 is about, summarised as “*Love one another*”.

The main idea that John wanted to convey in this letter is fellowship with God. Because God is light, righteousness and love, his followers ought to be living in the light, living righteously and living in love. The term ‘*children of God*’ (3:1,2,10) does not refer to literal children, no one is born physically a child of God, rather we are reborn whenever God enables us to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore at some point in life, through faith in Jesus Christ, a person becomes a child of God and from then on they should demonstrate and show Christian love. This is clearly

commanded:

“This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another.” (3:11)

There’s no ambiguity: “*We should love one another*”. This is so much a part of the gospel that John reminded his readers that it had been preached from the beginning by the Lord Jesus himself (1:7). But what is love? Christian love, according to this letter, is not a sentiment or just a warm feeling that loves everyone and everything whether good or bad, in fact, it’s quite the opposite. Christian love hates evil and loves the truth, so we should hate what God hates and love what God loves. In this passage, the word for love used is the distinctly Christian word that 1 Corinthians 13 describes. It is used of God the Father’s love for his son the Lord Jesus and for us, it’s used of our love for God and our love for each other. Such love is unqualified and sacrificial; it wants to give rather than to get. Love is a ten letter word called ‘commitment’, that is, the sort of love Christians are to have for one another – commitment to each other. A clear contrast to this is Cain’s behaviour because his action in murdering his brother Abel was the dreadful outcome of hatred. Just as hatred shows a person to be a stranger to God, we should reflect the loving attitude of our father God, and brotherly love shows that a person belongs to God. Love is the fruit of salvation, not the cause of salvation, in fact love is the necessary fruit of salvation:

“We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death.” (3:14)

Although it's not the complete picture that a person is a Christian, one of the evidences is that he or she loves other Christians. As well as the command to love there's also an example of love in verses 12 to 18. This helps us in this very demanding aspect of Christian lifestyle. John sets an example for us in verse 16:

“This is how we know what love is...”

Because the word love is so devalued these days, we need to be reminded of what true Christian love is. John sets before us the example of the Lord Jesus Christ:

“Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.”

He loved us so much that he came into this world to die on the cross and bring us into fellowship with God. That's the supreme act of love. By our own death we can't irrevocably secure the salvation of anyone, yet John still says:

“We ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.”

John gives us a simple illustration of how we might do that in verse 17: if a Christian has possessions and sees another Christian in need but does nothing about it, then he's not

showing the love of God. Patting the needy person on the back and saying *‘Trust the Lord, brother’* is no good. If we have the means of helping to solve the problem, we should do so. Let's not just talk about being a Christian, rather let us demonstrate it by the way we live and the love we show (3:18).

Thirdly, we see that love brings assurance (3:19):

“This then is how we know that we belong.”

Genuine love for Christ shown by obedience and sincere love for other Christians has the side effect of assuring us that we really are Christ's disciples. We don't love Christ and one another in order to earn assurance, nor is our love perfect, but as we take our eyes off self and focus on Christ and each other, we become aware that this is God's work within us – that's what assures our hearts. So *“if our hearts do not condemn us”* (3:21), it's because we're resting in the forgiveness Christ has secured for us on the cross which is a wonderful blessing.

To sum up these verses, hatred characterises the world as demonstrated by Cain, it originates in the Devil, it may lead to murder and is evidence of spiritual death. However, love is to characterise the church as demonstrated by Jesus Christ, it originates in God and leads to self sacrifice and is evidence of eternal life. If we are in Christ, we are to be characterised by many things, but chief among them is love for each other. Let us put it

into practice.

Chapter 7 - Spiritual does not equal gullible (4:1-6)

One commentary tells the story about a radio preacher in the USA who urged his listeners to stay tuned to the programme because at the end of the message he would tell them how to obtain an autographed picture of Jesus Christ. The offer was repeated and ‘surprise, surprise’ the listeners were encouraged to send a gift of money to get the picture. Anyone with a little common sense would know that cameras were not invented when Jesus was around and therefore he couldn’t have autographed any photos. The so-called radio preacher was in fact false, he was a liar. Just because a person claims to be a Christian and claims to have a message from God does not necessarily mean that he really is a Christian or that he’s telling the truth. This is especially so when the teaching appears to be accompanied by what might be spiritual phenomena. We need to be warned that demons may be active and can penetrate our churches.

In this passage (4:1-6), the Apostle John warns us that we need to be aware of false teachers and to discriminate between truth and falsehood. False teachers will not have a sign tattooed on their foreheads announcing themselves as false, so how are we to know? The answer is to have two attitudes and apply two tests.

The first attitude is that of *discernment*. We’re instructed to test the spirits which is the same instruction the Apostle Paul gave in 1 Thessalonians 5:21: “*Test everything. Hold on to the good.*” Christians are to have an attitude of discernment, there’s nothing spiritual or pious about being gullible or stupid. Strange as it may seem, there are people who will believe almost anything especially if a religious person says so, but the Apostle John tells his readers not to believe everything and anything they hear. It can be difficult to exercise such discernment but, as someone has said:

“We’re under obligation to love all humanity, we’re under no obligation to believe all humanity.”

Instead, we need to know the Bible and be discerning.

The second attitude is *confidence*:

“You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.” (4:14)

All Christians have the Holy Spirit who is greater than the false spirits and the resulting false teaching of this world. Christians need to have confidence that God is the victor and that they’re on the right side.

Having said that, how do we know if we’re correctly discerning truth from falsehood? The answer is to apply

two tests, the first of which is the test of Christology or the *doctrinal* test; what we are to look for is correct teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ:

“This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them.” (4:2,3,5)

The point the Apostle John is making is that it's very important to believe in the incarnation which is Christ coming into our world and the true humanity of Jesus. If we do not believe this and confess it, we're not Christians at all. Therefore, if a teacher or a spirit does not confess the true humanity of Christ, he's false, no matter how spiritual and religious the teaching may sound. To deny both the humanity and the deity of Jesus Christ is false teaching because the Lord Jesus is both true God and true man; he is God and he has come in the flesh. Thus, we are to have a right view of Christ and test all other claims by that right view.

The second test is that of *biblical authority* – it's the foundation for the first. The truth about Jesus Christ is known to us because it's to be found in the Bible:

“We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognise the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.” (4:6)

By using the pronoun 'us' and 'we', John is referring to the apostles, in effect saying *“We apostles are of God and therefore anybody who belongs to God will listen to us.”* There is a clear dividing line between those who accept the apostolic word and those who don't. Nowadays the apostolic word is heard through the Scriptures, especially in the New Testament. The dividing line is the same – those who submit to it and those who don't. Another way of expressing this is: those who love God, love good teaching, hear the message of the apostles whose message is in the Bible. The Bible is loved because it tells us of our Lord Jesus Christ and how we might live to please him more. To listen to the apostles is to listen to God who spoke through them.

This challenge for us is to read the Bible, learn the Bible, believe the Bible, and to love the Bible. We need to cling to the truth and not be led astray by false teachers. So when some new idea is being taught, we're not to judge it by how attractive and eloquent the preacher is, nor how plausible it seems, or how polished the TV presentation is. Rather, we are to assess it by its content, does it conform to the word of God, the Bible?

Chapter 8 - “Love one another” – again (4:7-21)

One of the characteristics of first John is repetition: themes reappear throughout the letter and the theme of love considered back in chapter 3:11-24 occurs again in 4:7-21. The basic message is clear: because God loves each Christian, we ought to love each other:

“Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” (4:11)

“We love because he first loved us.” (4:19)

The command to love all people including non Christians is found elsewhere in Scripture, for example in the parable of the Good Samaritan. This is something that Christians must acknowledge, remember and do. Here, the emphasis is on the love of Christians for each other. The phrase “love one another” occurs three times.

Firstly, there’s a command to love one another: “let us love one another” (4:7). True Christian love is an attitude of the whole being which involves a determination of the will: it’s not a case of waiting until we have a nice feeling about someone. Instead, we are to determine to consider the well being of our fellow Christians. It’s a conscious decision and choice, we’re commanded to do it and we must choose to do it.

The word used for love used in First John and other parts

of the Bible is the word that describes how God loves us. God’s love is of course perfect yet Christians are commanded to love each other in the same way:

“Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.” (4:7,8)

Such love is sacrificial; its aim is not what I can get but what I can give. John illustrates this with two examples of how God’s love for us prompted his actions. First of all, God loved us, so he sent his son – God’s sending of the Lord Jesus Christ into the world to live a perfect life and die a perfect death is a real historical declaration of his love for his people. John repeats this three times:

“God sent his only begotten Son into the world” (4:9)

“God sent his Son” (4:10)

“He sent his Son.” (4:14)

The purpose of sending is also declared: “that we might live” (4:9), to be “an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (4:10), “to be the Saviour” (4:14). God sent his Son because he loved and because he loved he sent his Spirit:

“We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.” (4:13)

This enables us to know that we are Christians because we have the Holy Spirit who motivates and enables us to live a life pleasing God. The Holy Spirit is a wonderful gift from God. God's example of love is that he loved and therefore he gave – he gave Jesus Christ, then he gave us the Holy Spirit.

As John considers the gracious gift we've received from God he comes to a different conclusion than might be expected. Instead of saying '*God loved us therefore we ought to love God*' which is no doubt true, he actually says:

“Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” (4:11)

Clearly there is an obligation and duty of Christian self-sacrifice which derives from Christ's self-sacrifice. In fact, the definition of Christian love is also deduced from Christ's sacrifice. John is saying: '*This is how we know what love is.*' The basis for Christians' love for one another is more than feeling nice about each other and more than being nice to each other, it involves being willing to suffer in the place of others.

In verse 10 Jesus Christ's death is referred to as a sacrifice of atonement. A better word for this is '*propitiation*'. This is the understanding that on the cross, Jesus bears God's holy anger at our sin and turns that anger away. This comes from the Old Testament, where sin was 'atoned for' or propitiated by the sacrificing of animals. This way of

dealing with the problem of sin was not perfect, so in the New Testament God himself, in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, appeases his own anger (or 'wrath'). John the Baptist uses the prophet Isaiah's words to portray Jesus as "*The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*" (see Isa 53:7; John 1:29). The result of this is that Christians can know and experience reconciliation with God. Therefore, no-one who has seriously considered the meaning of Jesus Christ's death on the cross, that display of immeasurable, unmerited and unselfish love, can easily go back to a life of pleasing self. Instead, we have a duty to love all true Christians, irrespective of race, education, social standing or denomination. We must love them just because they are true Christians.

Thirdly, there are practical outcomes from loving one another:

“but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.” (4:12)

The "*if*" at the beginning of the verse implies that certain consequences will follow as the second part of the verse tells us. The phrase "*is made complete*" or 'is perfected' means that love has borne fruit in us – the first is that we reflect the all powerful, all knowing, all holy God to the world – what an awesome responsibility that is. The second fruit is that we lovingly fear God. In the Bible, 'to fear God' usually means having reverence for him and a dread of displeasing him. Fearing God in this sense inspires

carefulness in our dealings with him and with others. The third fruit is the absence of hypocrisy, it begins with another “if”:

“If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.” (4:20,21)

A person who claims to be a Christian but can't wait to gossip about someone else is either not a Christian or a hypocrite. We are not to be like that; we are to be what we claim to be.

In this section, there is a commandment to love other true Christians. We therefore ought to love other true Christians and know the blessings of loving other true Christians.

Chapter 9 - One way (5:1-12)

A church whose meeting room had recently been re-decorated had a sign painted on the door showing one raised finger with the caption: ‘One way’. The idea was to draw attention to the truth that there's only one way to be counted right with God – through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. These verses teach that same truth, firstly, that faith alone leads to victory:

“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.” (5:1-5)

The Bible states that all mankind, each and every human being is marked by sin, all people have inherited Adam's sinful nature and actually commit sins (see Rom 3:23; 5:12; 1 John 1:8,10). As a result, all people everywhere are sinners separated from God. During his ministry on earth, the Lord Jesus made it clear that the only way out of this situation is to be born again. The evidence that new birth has taken place is genuine faith in the Lord Jesus Christ which means that becoming a Christian is a matter of rebirth into God's family – God brings a person to believe in or to have faith in Jesus Christ. Just as in a family the love between parents and children is natural so there must be the same love within the Christian family. As has already been said, God loves us and we in turn are to love him, love the Lord Jesus and love other Christians.

How do we show that love? By obedience to his commands (5:2). This is not some grievous or difficult burden imposed on us, but rather it is proof that we really

love God and it is faith alone that gives us the victory:

“for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.” (5:4)

The world seeks to stop us loving God and others as we should, just as the world opposed Jesus Christ and his teaching. (Here, the ‘world’ means all the powers that are opposed to God and which make obedience difficult.) The world slandered, rejected, criticised and finally killed the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet it failed because after the cross came victory, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and his bodily return to heaven. The world now opposes us too but the phrase *“overcomes the world”* is used three times in verses 4 and 5, in each case faith is the key. Faith is the victory and it is by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ we share in his triumph over the world.

The logo of the world famous sportswear company Nike is the well-known tick (or ‘swoosh’). In biblical Greek, the word ‘nike’ is the root word for ‘victory’, so whenever we see the Nike logo or symbol, it’s a reminder that faith alone in Jesus Christ is the Christian’s victory. This is expressed again in verses 6 to 12:

“This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the

Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. We accept man’s testimony, but God’s testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.”

It’s always clear in First John that salvation is only through Jesus Christ, but what does it mean that Jesus came by water and blood? This seems to refer to major events in Christ’s earthly ministry but they are hard to understand. Could they possibly be connected with baptism and the Lord’s Supper? Protestant reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin certainly thought so, but blood is the thing signified not the sign. Or does this refer to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ because water and blood flowed from Jesus’ side when he was on the cross? Augustine, the early church father, thought this to be the case because it would affirm the reality of Christ’s death. The problem is that the main theme of First John is Jesus’ humanity and deity, not so much his death. Another explanation is that it meant Jesus’ baptism and death – the water of his baptism and the blood of his death. This is the most likely explanation because at the time John wrote this first letter a heresy, a false teaching, was being taught according to which Jesus

became God only after his baptism and that God's spirit left him before his death. It seems then that John was correcting this error by saying that Jesus always was God, before his baptism and even at his death. However, the most important matter is that salvation and eternal life can only be found through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ who was, is and always will be God.

Chapter 10 - The Christian's privileged possessions (5:13-21)

John's gospel was written so that people might become believers in the Lord Jesus Christ whereas he wrote his letter so that people who were Christian believers might be assured of their fellowship with God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

As he comes towards the end of the letter, he sets out many things about which a Christian can be sure and have confidence in. The phrase "you know" or "we know" is used eight times in these verses emphasising what we can know and be sure about. The first is *assurance about salvation*:

"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." (5:13)

This is a clear example of God's word (the Bible) teaching

on assurance or being confident that we possess eternal life in Christ. There is of course the danger of presumption but, in this letter, John has set out with three tests to verify assurance and guard against presumption: believing that Jesus Christ is both true God and true man; loving those who also believe in him; and seeking to keep the Lord's commandments. Failing one of these tests might lead to presumption. However, at this point in his letter John is not dealing with presumption but with assurance. Satan will try to rob us of assurance but God has graciously given us many aids to build up our assurance including the Bible, prayer, fellowship, baptism, the Lord's Supper and the evidence of his providence in our lives.

The second thing we can be sure about is *confidence in prayer* – this is what assurance of salvation leads to:

"This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him." (5:14,15)

Assurance of salvation leads to confidence in prayer – if we're confident that God is our father then as his children we can also confidently approach him in prayer. This is similar to what's written in Hebrews:

"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who

has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” (Heb 4:15,16)

In 5:14, this is based on the condition that our prayers should be according to his will. It is vital therefore that our prayers be governed by our knowledge of God’s will revealed in the Bible. Praying according to his declared will means we’re bound to be heard.

At this point 5:16,17 may seem a bit difficult to understand. The “*sin that does not lead to death*” is where forgiveness has been asked for and God is willing to give. Whereas the “*sin that leads to death*” is where sin is not repented, there is rejection of the person of Christ as taught in this letter, there is disobedience to God’s commandment to love other Christians. This can be seen as a state of rebellion against God when sin is treated lightly, rather than with the seriousness it requires. There should be prayer of and for repentance both for ourselves and others.

Another thing we can be sure about is *perseverance in holiness*:

“We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him. We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.” (5:18,19)

The Christian’s assurance about salvation and confidence in prayer extends to persevering in holiness. We acknowledge that it is God’s will that we should not continue in sin but rather we are going to be committed to progressively becoming more and more like Christ. This is something John says “*we know*”.

How are we going to steadfastly maintain that position? The “*one [...] born of God*” in verse 18 is Jesus, he is the one who keeps the Christian and as he does so, we work at being more like Jesus. This is called ‘sanctification’ – we work as God works in us to keep on keeping on; this is both a comfort and a challenge at the same time. The result is that although Satan who dominates the world may attack us and tempt us, he cannot cling on to the Christian to harm him. That’s such a precious confidence for us to have.

There’s another certainty – *being sure about the experience of understanding*:

“We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true—even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.” (5:20)

Being a Christian doesn’t mean switching off our brain, but rather it increases our responsibility to use our minds in understanding God’s word and thereby knowing Christ

better. All these certainties that we can be sure about and have confidence in are after all the result of the Lord Jesus Christ coming into the world. This is a foundational statement that repeats a theme seen throughout this first letter of John: God has come into this sin affected world, Jesus is true God and true man. We are to look to the Lord Jesus, believe him, know him, follow him because he is true God and he is eternal life. This is the one we are to know and to use our understanding to know better.

The first letter of John ends where he began – with a clear focus on the Lord Jesus Christ. He began with “*That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you*” (1:1), and ends with Jesus Christ “*true God and eternal life*” (5:20).

In fact, John actually ends with a sentence that seems to come from nowhere:

“Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.” (5:21)

It doesn't really come from nowhere because idolatry is what could undo all that John has been teaching in this his first letter. The worship of idols is the complete opposite of fellowship with God through the Lord Jesus Christ which, as we have seen, is the theme of first John. Dear friends, do not abandon the real for the illusory!

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