

Breathing Assurance: Light and Love in 1 John

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Introduction to the First Epistle of John

Assumption: The apostle John penned this document some time after the Gospel of John in the 80-90s while he resided in Asia Minor, presumably Ephesus.

The Genre of 1 John

Some believe that it is an epistle or circular letter (Francis, Dodd), that is, it was intended for a general audience and circulated among churches in Asia Minor. However, there is no greeting or salutation, and there is no epistolary closing. It does not begin or end like a letter.

Others believe it is a tract or homily (sermon). (Houlden, Marshall). But these categories can have a wide range of meaning so that one can claim this is so ambiguous that everything fits it that is not an epistle. Also, there are no homiletic signals like those that appear, for example, in Hebrews.

Others believe it is a handbook or *Enchiridion* (Grayston, Hills). Grayston (p. 4): "neither epistle nor treatise but an *enchiridion*, an instruction booklet for applying the tradition in disturbing circumstances." There are ancient models for this genre, such as Epictetus' *Enchiridion* that summarizes the ethical teaching of his *Diatribes* (Edwards). Hills argues that it fits a kind of "church order manual" which includes the following elements: (1) credentials; (2) affectionate address; (3) communal discipline; (4) warning of heresy; (5) ethical exhortation; (6) eschatology; (7) responsibilities; (8) qualifications for testing ministries; (9) instructions about liturgy/sacraments; and (10) testamentary features. While 1 John does not have all these features and some are not fully developed, nevertheless it has the same function of keeping a community on the "right course in their journey of faith" (Edwards, p. 45). This is probably the best way to think of this document; it is a kind of published book that was intended to be read by John's community of faith throughout Asia Minor. However, for purposes of ease, I refer to 1 John as an "epistle."

The "Opponents" in 1 John.

John's epistle reflects a situation where some believers had left the community. They are secessionists (cf. 2:19; 4:1). Apparently the secessionists deny the Son (2:23), deny that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (4:7; cf. 2 John 7), and deny that Jesus is the Christ (2:22). John responds that the community believes that Jesus is the Christ (5:1), Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (4:2), that Jesus is the Son of God (1:3,7; 2:23; 3:8, 23; 4:9, 10, 15; 5:11), and that Jesus came "by water and blood" within concrete history (5:6).

However, the problem is not simply "doctrinal" but ethical. The secessionists boast that they are "without sin" (1:8, 10), they "have fellowship" with God though they walk in the darkness (1:6), they know God but nevertheless are disobedient (2:4), they "love God" but hate their brothers and sisters (4:20), and they are "in the light" but hate their fellow Christians (2:9). But the community believes that to abide in God is to obey him--it is to walk as Jesus walked (2:6), to sin willfully shows that one has not know God (3:3-6; 5:18), whoever acts sinfully belongs to the devil (3:7-10), we should love one another (3:11-12, 17,18), refusing to love one's brother or

sister means that one has not inherited eternal life (3:14-15), and God is love--and to know him is to love (4:8-10)

What creates this doctrinal and ethical difference within the community so that some leave the community? Some (O'Neill) believe that it refers to non-messianic Jews who leave the community because of its Christological teaching. Some deny that Jesus is the Messiah, but it is unlikely that practicing Jews would have ever become full members of a Christian community. The dispute seems to be more about the proper interpretation of Christology rather than a denial of Messianic meaning.

Others (Westcott, Stott, Bultmann) believe the document reflects the teaching of the Cerinthians, the followers of Cerinthus who lived in the late first and early second century and explicitly denied that the human Jesus was the divine Christ (Son of God). He distinguished between the Jesus who was born in the flesh and the Christ who descended upon him at baptism. But there is an absence of argument concerning other heretical notions of Cerinthus, that is, that Jesus was the son of an inferior God (Demiurge). While we might say that 1 John contravenes a Cerinthian idea, it is too much to say that it is a letter written against Cerinthianism.

Others (Schnelle) believe it is written against Docetism. Docetism (from *dokein*, to seem or appear) was probably current or developing in Asia Minor in the late first century. It is present by the time of Ignatius (ca. 112-114). 1 John does oppose docetic ideas and affirms the fleshly reality of the Jesus the Christ. However, if this letter intended to refute Docetism, it did not argue the case at any length (unlike the early second century writer Ignatius) and generally assumes that the community shares a common understanding.

Others (Dodd, Bogart) believe it was written against a Gnostic sect. 1 John offers antithetical contrasts, e.g., between 'light' and 'darkness,' and vocabulary utilized by Gnostics in the second century. But there is no fully developed Christian Gnosticism in the first century, other Gnostic ideas are missing from 1 John, and the contrasts and vocabulary may reflect Hellenistic, even Qumran-like, Judaism more than Gnosticism.

Perhaps it is not important to identify with specificity the exact character of the opponents. What is important is what the community believed. Indeed, the document is written to the community. It does not refute the secessionists but recognizes that they have left. Rather, it encourages the community to remain together and hold to their Christological and ethical beliefs that make them a community. This is what distinguishes them from the darkness (whether heretical or pagan).

The epistle assumes a shared community. It is a proclamation they have heard. They share terminology that is not explained (antichrist, anointing, seed). They have a shared understanding ("you know," "we know") and a shared history ("from the beginning"). Along with others (Lieu, Edwards, Neufeld, Perkins), it is probably best to read 1 John in a non-polemical way. There are several problems with a polemical reading—a reading that assumes that John is arguing a case against the secessionists. For example, there is no argumentation or refutation of opposing views. The polemical reading tends to overread the antitheses that are in the epistle.

It is best to see this as an exhortation to the community from within the community. "The words of the text do not simply describe the author's or community's theological position, but enact belief" (Neufeld, p. 135), or "form the center of the spiral--and so of the theology of 1 John--the eternal life that is known,

and how it may be known; the letter is marked not by argument but by certainty and exhortation, by what is the case and how it might be proved to be the case" (Lieu, p. 23). *The letter seeks to stabilize community in perilous times and deepen its communal ties of faith and love.* The text calls the community to enact Christological faith, ethics, and community.

Structure of the Letter.

The letter begins with a prologue/introduction (1:1-4) and ends with an epilogue/conclusion (5:13-21). The body of the letter (1:5-5:12) consists of two major parts: God is love (1 John 1:5-3:10) and God is love (3:11-5:11). Brown, Smalley, and Burge all follow this kind of structure for the epistle.

Indeed, the epistle may reflect the same pattern as the Gospel of John (Burge, p. 44; derived from Brown).

The Gospel of John

The First Letter of John

<p>A. Prologue 1:1-18 The entry in the beginning of the word of life into the world.</p>	<p>A. Prologue 1:1-4 The revelation of the life in Jesus Christ who appeared "in the beginning."</p>
<p>B. The Book of Signs 1:19-12:50 The light shone in the darkness of Judaism and was rejected.</p>	<p>B. Part One 1:5-3:10 God is light and like Jesus we must walk in his light.</p>
<p>C. The Book of Glory 13:1-20:29 Jesus cares for and nurtures "his own," those who believe in him.</p>	<p>C. Part Two 3:11-5:10 God is love and those who know him must love one another</p>
<p>D. Epilogue 21 Final Resurrection stories about Jesus and explanation of purpose.</p>	<p>D. Epilogue 5:13-21 The author explains the purpose of the letter.</p>

Burge (p. 45) outlines the 1 John in this fashion:

A. Prologue: 1:1-4

The word of life that we have witnessed among us.

B. Part 1: 1:5-3:10: God is Light--and we should walk accordingly.

"This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you."

- 1:5-7 Thesis: walking in the light and walking in the darkness
- 1:8-2:2 First Exhortation: Resist Sinfulness
- 2:3-11 Second Exhortation: Obey God's Commands
- 2:12-17 Third Exhortation: Defy the world and its allure
- 2:18-27 Fourth Exhortation: Renounce those who distort the truth
- 2:28-3:10 Fifth Exhortation: Live Like God's children

C. Part 2: 3:11-5:12: God is Love--and we should walk accordingly.

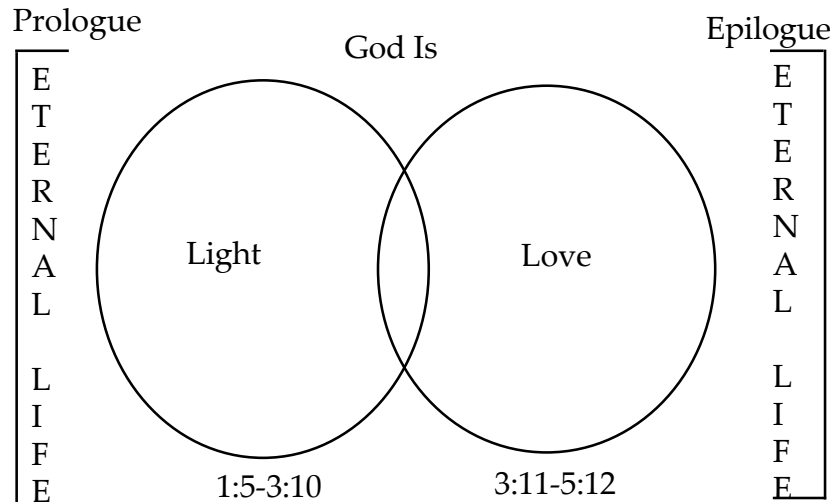
"This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another."

- 3:11-24 Love one another in practical ways
- 4:1-6 Beware of false prophets who would deceive you
- 4:7-21 Love one another as God loves us in Christ
- 5:1-4 Obey God and thereby conquer the world
- 5:5-12 Never compromise your testimony

D. Conclusion: 5:13-21

The boldness and confidence of those who walk in God's light and love.

Below is my visual representation of this structure and its theology.



Theme of the Letter

We have a shared community with the Father and each other through Jesus Christ, and this community is eternal life itself that reflects the righteous love of God in Jesus Christ.

The prologue, body and epilogue unite several ideas: eternal life (1:2; 2:25; 3:11; 5:11; 5:13, 20); "I write that" (1:4; 2:1; 5:13), and fellowship/having God (1:3; 1:7, 8; 2:23; 5:12; 5:18). *John writes so that we might know that we have eternal life through fellowship with God.* This is an epistle about assurance and living in community in such way that assurance is the natural air we breathe.

The theological center of the letter is that God had revealed himself in Jesus Christ. It is what the community has proclaimed (1 John 1:2, 3, 5; 3:11) as eternal life (1:2; 2:25; 3:11; 5:11,13,20). Jesus is the unique one, the Word of Life, the Eternal Life himself (1 John 1:1-4; 5:18-20). Consequently, everything else is idolatry (1 John 5:21). Jesus reveals the God who is light and love.

John proclaims that eternal life has come in Jesus Christ, and this revelation announces the message that God is light and that God is love by which God invites us, through Jesus, to share his own eternal community. The community knows they have eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ, through loving each other in Jesus Christ, and by the testimony of the Spirit in the life of the believer.

1. When God Breaks In 1 John 1:1-4

Authentic spiritual community has been made possible through the divine initiative. The “word of life” has been revealed. Its proclamation makes fellowship possible – both with God and with a community of his redeemed people.

Exegetical Notes

1 John 1:1-3a is a single sentence rhetorically structured by the five-fold use of the neuter relative pronoun (ho, "that which" or "what"). This is followed by a single declarative sentence that elaborates the nature of the fellowship envisioned.

*What (ho) was from the beginning;
what (ho) we have heard;
what (ho) we have seen with our eyes;
what (ho) we have beheld and our hands touched
concerning the word of life
(and the life was manifested,
we have seen it and testify to it,
and we announce to you the eternal life
which was with the Father and
has been manifested to us)
what (ho) we have seen and heard,
we also announce to you,
in order that you might have fellowship with us.*

*And truly our fellowship is with the Father and his son
Jesus Christ.*

The basic sentence is “What was from the beginning we announce to you so that you might have fellowship with us.” What was from the beginning is the incarnational reality—the presence of eternal life or the word of life in concrete form (in the flesh, John 1:1,14). This reality was “seen” (3x), “heard” (2x) and “beheld and hands touched.”

This incarnational reality is "from the beginning". There is a question whether this phrase refers to eternity (as in the prologue of the Gospel, though there it is "in the beginning") or to the beginning of the revelation of Jesus Christ. I prefer the latter (though with an echo of the former). The phrase occurs also in 1 John 2:7, 13, 14, 24; 3:8, 11. It is this incarnational reality that is proclaimed, that is, the whole of the ministry of Jesus Christ is affirmed (thus, the neuter rather than masculine gender of the relative pronoun).

The incarnational reality reveals life. It is about life, embodies life; it is life. The text highlights this point: “life was manifested” (2x), “word of life,” “eternal life,” and it is life that participates in the life of the Father (“with the Father).” The life revealed is eternal life, the word of life. Does this last phrase mean "Word of life" (thus, linking to John 1:1) or "word of life" (thus, referring to the message)? I prefer

the former here because this "Word" was "with the Father" (pros ton patera) just as the "Word" was "with God" (pros ton theon) in John 1:1. This is eternal life itself. Thus, to have the Son is to have eternal life (1 John 5:13, 20).

The nature of this life is the life that the Father and Son share. It is the life that is the life of the Son with the Father. In the beginning, the Son was with the Father, and this was life. It is the very definition of life itself—the fellowship of the divine communion, participation in the divine community.

Thus, John writes that “we proclaim” (2x) or “testify” about the fellowship and life that this incarnational reality brings. The message proclaimed is the incarnational reality that grounds the fellowship between God and humanity. “We” refers either to the original eyewitness community that testifies to the genuine reality of this revelation or to the handed-down tradition of that testimony (depending on who you think authored the letter). Either way, it is a witness grounded in history and a witness concerning eternal life. Further, it is a witness that establishes and shapes a community.

This fulfills the goal of God—to share the fellowship of the divine community with the human community. Our fellowship is with each other (the humanity community) because the human community has been invited into the fellowship of the divine community (Father and Son). John writes: you “have fellowship,” which reflects the abiding character of this possession; it is a continuing possession. The author, audience and the divine community share the eternal life together. They form one community through this fellowship.

1 John 1:4 express the purpose of the letter: *“And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.”* “These things” refers to the whole letter. Here the purpose is focused on the writer (“our joy”) whereas the purpose statement in 5:13 is focused on the audience (“you might know”). The two are intertwined. The knowledge that his children have eternal life is the joy of the author. This reflects the pastoral character of the letter as John finds his joy in his children's welfare (cf. 3 John 3).

This prologue to the letter has plunged us into the thought-world of the Gospel of John. There are many shared terms between this prologue and the one in the Gospel (John 1:1-18): the beginning, word, life, testifies, Father and Son. Just as those in the Gospel “heard and saw” (John 3:32; cf. 3:11), so the author here testifies as well. Consequently, “complete joy” here, as in the Gospel of John (3:29; 15:11; 16:24; 17:13), is shared communion with fellow-believers as that community is enveloped and loved by the divine community. Genuine, authentic joy is the joy of communion with God and each other in love.

Theological Perspectives

First, the incarnational presence of God in Jesus is the fundamental truth of the Christian community. Christology is the focus of the message. But this is not a Christomonistic message, but one that reveals the eternal life that the Father and Son share. It is theocentric as it reveals the Father and Christocentric as Christ is the medium of that revelation.

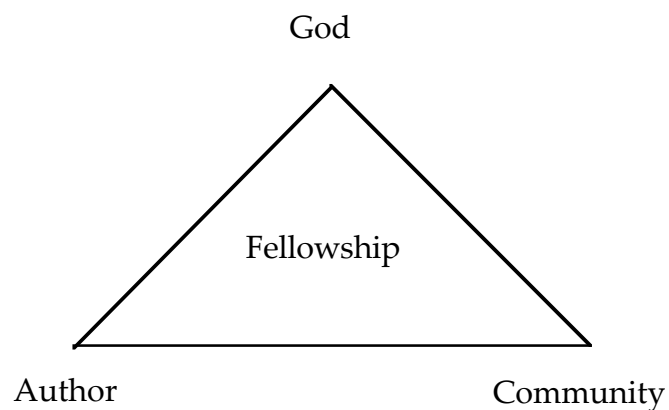
The genuine character of this revelation is grounded in the historic act of the incarnation. The Christological revelation of God is tangible, empirical and historic. God was revealed in the flesh that

was seen, heard and touched. The historical Jesus is the Christ of faith. The historical Jesus is the revelation of the eternal life of God in the flesh.

The intersection and union of the finite and infinite -- of humanity and deity -- is the uniqueness of the incarnation. It is the uniqueness of Christianity and centered in this thought: the eternal God was manifested in the historic Jesus. We know who God is because we know Jesus. This was no mystical union, but it was a "hypostatic" union (the person of the Word was united with flesh) -- God became one of us ("The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us," John 1:14).

The tradition (what was proclaimed from the beginning) provides rootage and continuity and is the basis for the ongoing testimony of the community. Through that testimony we believe that we have eternal life in Jesus. That tradition is proclaimed in the prologue of the Gospel of John. John 1:1, in particular, is significant. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." In other words, the Son existed before the creation of the world ("was the Word"), and was in fellowship with the Father ("Word was with God") and shared the eternal life of the divine community ("Word was God"). This Word became flesh (John 1:14) and dwelt among humanity exhibiting the glory of God—a glory that comes uniquely from the one who comes from the bosom of the Father and makes known (exegetes) the Father (John 1:18). The Father and Son are one—the share the same life, community and love. To know one is to know the other. The Son became flesh that we might know God and thus participates in the divine life, that is, to have eternal life.

Second, the fellowship of the redeemed community is triangular. The triangle is the author (the tradition=Gospel of John), audience (community) and God (the divine community existing as Father and Son).



The fellowship is what the three hold in common (what they share). I think this is fundamentally "eternal life" for John. The Father is eternal life and this life is revealed in his Son who shares it with the humanity community. The author and the audience have fellowship because they both share the eternal life of the Father and Son. God shares his eternal life with his people and therefore they form a community with the Father and Son.

Eternal life, then, is shared in community. It is not found through some mystical, independent or "Lone Ranger" Christianity. It is found in the community of God as believers live out their faith together in accordance with the message that has been proclaimed "from the beginning." Our present community has continuity with the original community through the tradition (the message from the

beginning) and the reality to which that tradition testifies (the revelation of eternal life in Jesus Christ) that is proclaimed.

Third, the literary function of the prologue is to link the letter to the tradition in the Gospel of John and to anticipate the conclusion of the letter in 5:20. The prologue, then, is a hinge on which the Gospel of John and the letter swing.

The theological function of the prologue is to root the fellowship of the community in the fellowship of the Father and Son through the incarnational reality of God in Jesus. This is the message that the church proclaims that the eternal life of God is revealed in Jesus Christ and it is through Jesus Christ that we have fellowship with the Father and with each other.

Teaching Points

It is important to link this text with John 1:1-18. The letter seems to summarize the Gospel's prologue. Consequently, the reader should remember the prologue and fully embrace its theological message. It is the backdrop and ground of the whole letter.

The leader, for example, might read 1 John 1:1-4, and then immediately take the group to John 1:1-18 for a summary of what is presumed by 1 John. One can elaborate the themes of 1 John 1:1-4 in the context of John 1:1-18.

However, what 1 John 1:1-5 addresses specifically something which John 1 does not (though implicit even there), that is, the element of community. Specifically, the purpose of 1 John is to ground, illuminate and encourage the "fellowship" that exists between God and humanity. This is the fellowship that the Son shares with the Father, but now the Father shares with us through the Son so that we might experience the divine community with each other. The community is one and the experience is a shared one.

The leader should note carefully the relative pronouns in 1 John 1:1-4 and how what is seen, heard and touched is eternal life itself. Jesus is the embodiment of eternal life in the flesh—he is the presence of the Father with the humanity community and through whom the human community has fellowship with the Father.

In terms of application, several themes come to the front. First, the uniqueness of Jesus is proclaimed. We are living in a pluralistic age when one way to God is as good as another, or Jesus is relativized as a good man or religious genius. The tradition, however, affirms that Jesus is eternal life, the one through whom we have fellowship with God. We flee all idols in the light of God's revelation of himself in Jesus (1 John 5:21).

Second, this revelation of God in Jesus is no mere mystical or spiritual revelation. Rather, it is historic in character. It is empirical in nature. In Jesus, people saw, touched and heard God. Christianity is not a mystical religion, but one rooted in the historic life of Jesus as the incarnate one. God came in the flesh—walked, lived, taught, and died. Christianity is no mere devotion of the mind to revealed light, but it is a way of living that follows the life lived by God in the flesh.

Third, the importance of community is highlighted. Christianity is a fellowship. It is not individualistic, but communal in nature. Eternal life is communal life—the life of the Father and the Son. We have eternal life when we have fellowship with the Father and Son. It is a communal life that we share in community with each other as well as the Father and the Son.

Teaching Particulars

Function of Text: It roots the triangular fellowship between God, author and community in the historic incarnational reality of Jesus Christ as the one who reveals eternal life.

Theology: Eternal life is revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ and is experienced through fellowship with him.

Application: We rejoice in the eternal life God has given us in Jesus Christ, that is, we rejoice in the experience of communion with the divine fellowship.

Teaching Outline: Where is Eternal Life?

1. Postmodern uncertainty abounds and pluralism is the new religious norm. Where do we find God? How do we come to know God? Why does not God show himself?
2. The message of the Christian faith is that God has shown himself: God has been seen, heard and touched in Jesus Christ. We know God in Jesus. We find God in Jesus. God entered history. God became one of us.
3. In Jesus, God has offered eternal life--genuine communion with him. It is a shared life in fellowship with God and each other. This is what is real. This is what is genuine. Here authentic joy is found. Here is the certainty of faith.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Have you encountered pluralistic thinking in your discussions with people or through the media? Provide some examples.
2. How does this text address pluralism? How does it answer pluralistic tendencies? What does this text affirm that stands over against pluralism?
3. What does “incarnation” mean? How is that a revelation of God? How does Jesus reveal God and make him known? Why is this a definitive revelation?
4. What does it mean conceptually that we have fellowship with the Father and with the Son? How is “eternal life” conceived in this connection?
5. What does it mean experientially that we have fellowship with the Father and with the Son? How is “eternal life” experienced in this connection? What does it mean in terms of our present

experience to have “eternal life.” Offer a testimony of your fellowship with the divine community.

6. How do you experience fellowship with other believers? What forms or kinds of experiences are means of communal fellowship for you? Offer a testimony of your fellowship with other believers.

2. Sin Isn't What It Used to Be

1 John 1:5—2:2

Because of our participation in the community of light, sin looks, feels, and influences us differently. In the light, it is less attractive. In the incarnational community, we battle it confessionally. By virtue of Christ's blood, it cannot defeat us.

Exegetical Notes:

God is Light (1 John 1:5). The fundamental theological premise for this text (and for the whole of 1 John 1:5-3:10) is that "God is Light" (1 John 1:5). This is the tradition that the author has heard and proclaims. The "message" is what we "proclaim" and it is what was "proclaimed" from the beginning (all the words in "quotes" come from the same Greek root). We pass on the continuity of the message. The term "message" some understand as John's equivalent to Paul's use of the term "gospel" (cf. Brown). I think this is correct. This is John's "gospel"--it is the message that God has revealed through the incarnation.

The Truth is that God is light and in him is no darkness at all. This is the content of the message (the second point comes in 3:11). In the incarnation, God is revealed as "light." This certainly refers to the ethical quality of God's life. There is no evil in his life; there is no darkness. This was not a new idea. It is found in the Old Testament. God is pure, holy, and righteous.

The Johannine tradition identifies "light" with Jesus. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is the light (John 1:4-5; 3:19; 8:12; 9:5; 12:35, 46). The God of light is revealed in Jesus who is also light. Jesus is God's light to the world because he reveals God's light in the world. Jesus reveals God.

Walking in the Light (1 John 1:6-2:2). This text has a series of balancing clauses which the below charts represent. Carefully read and compare the charts.

"If we say..."

"we..."

"But if we..."

"we..."

	"If we say..."	"we..."		"But if we..."	"we..."
1:6	If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness,	we lie and do not do what is true;	1:7	but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light,	we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.
1:8	If we say that we have no sin,	we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us	1:9	If we confess our sins,	he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
1:10	If we say that we have not sinned,	we make him a liar and his word is not in us	2:1	But if anyone does sin,	we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

"If" (ean) Clauses
(adapted from Burge, pp. 67-68)

"If we say..."

"But if we..."

1:6	If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness....	1:7	but if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship....
1:8	If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves...	1:9	If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins...
1:10	If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar...	2:1	But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father

The Disapproved Conditions
(Adapted from Brown, p. 231)

The "If" Clause

The Result Clause

1:6ab	If we boast, "We are in communion with Him," while continuing to walk in darkness	1:6cd	we are liars and we do not act in truth.
1:8a	If we boast, "We are free from the guilt of sin,"	1:8bc	we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.
1:10a	If we boast, "We have not sinned,"	1:10bc	we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.

The Approved Conditions
(Adapted from Brown, p. 237).

The "If" Clause

The Result Clause

1:7ab	But if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light	1:7cde	we are joined in communion with one another and the blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanses us from all sin
1:9a	But if we confess our sins	1:9bcd	He who is reliable and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all wrongdoing
2:1b	But if anyone does sin	2:1cd- 2:2abc	we have a Paraclete in the Father's presence, Jesus Christ, the one who is just, and he himself is an atonement for our sins, and not only for our sins but also for the whole world.

Fellowship with God in the Light (1:6-7). "Walk" is a metaphor for life, the way we live life. It is analogous to "living by the truth" (or, literally "doing the truth"). The contrast between light and darkness is the contrast between a way of life fellowshiping with the darkness or with the light—it is about our orientation in life. Whoever is oriented toward the light understands that God is light, but whoever is oriented toward the darkness does not understand the light of God and does not understand (know) God. Of course, no one who walks in the light is sinless, and thus the cleansing atonement ("blood") is necessary for life in the light. This is a walk we share with others and thus commune with others in it. Our fellowship is dependent upon the cleansing blood but conditioned upon walking in (or, being oriented toward, or living out the values of) the light.

Confessing Sin (1:8-9). The statement denies that sin exists in us as a quality or "active principle" (Brooke). Brown, Smalley and Burge defend the idea that the point here is qualitative (much like Paul's "sinful nature" or "flesh") rather than quantitative (specific sins). Not only does this provide a contrast with verse 10, but it also makes better sense of the verb "have" as it is used in Johannine literature. John's use seems to indicate a general quality, a state of being (thus, having joy, fellowship, hope, confidence and life). Thus, we cannot deny that we live within the framework of the fallen world and there is something that actively engages us that is hostile to God. We "have sin," that is, we are sinners who struggle against the very fabric of the fallen universe. We are "sinners" and we will always be such as long as we live in the flesh. All other sin arises out of this condition.

The response to that recognition is God's gracious forgiveness. God intends to cleanse and purify. God does not deny the sinfulness of his creatures, but he forgives it. This is a function of both God's faithfulness and his righteousness. Faithfulness reflects God's unswerving desire to redeem his people and that he will always be true to his promise of redemption. But righteousness seems out of place. How does the righteous God cleanse us from unrighteousness? There is an assumed testimony of the community here, but it will show itself in at least two places in 1 John (2:2; 4:10).

The link between our sinfulness and God's forgiveness is our confession. We must recognize our condition; we must face reality and throw ourselves on the mercy of God's forgiveness. Acknowledgment is critical to forgiveness. We must recognize our sin, admit it and seek God's gracious redemption.

The power of self-deception is tremendous. Sin blinds us. Here is a boundary marker that illuminates self-deception. If we say that we have no sin -- if we say that we do not wrestle with sin or we say that we no longer have a problem with sin -- then we are self-deceived. Then, the truth is not in us, that is, the reality of God's revelation in Jesus Christ is not in us because he came to destroy sin and deal with sin (as the next section notes).

Dealing with Sin (1:10-2:2). We do sin. In distinction from verse 8, here John uses the verb "to sin," that is, we commit acts of sin. The contrast between verses 8 and 10, then, is the contrast between being and act, between sinful nature and acts of sin. We cannot deny that we sin because to do so is to make God a liar. God's whole redemptive plan is to save sinners. The atonement ("blood") is God's forgiveness, and if we have no need of forgiveness, then we make God a liar. To deny that we have sinned is to make God the Devil (the liar) and to confuse darkness and light. Thus, his word is not in us.

But we have an intercessor: Jesus is our advocate (*parakletos*). The Gospel of John applies this term to the Spirit (John 14:16,26; 15:26; 16:7), but also associates Jesus with the title by the phrase "another Comforter" (John 14:16). Jesus is the righteous one who stands in the presence of the God who is light,

and Jesus is the one who laid down his life in love that stands in the presence of the God who is love. The righteous one pleads the case of the unrighteous. Believers have someone who defends them rather than accusing them before the Father. We have an advocate in the heavenly court.

There is atonement: Jesus is our propitiation. But how can the righteous plead the case of the unrighteous? The raises the question of atonement and the function of "propitiation" in 1 John is to provide the rationale for the righteous one (2:1) to intercede before the righteous God (1:9) for unrighteous people. We also have a high priest in the heavenly temple. I think it is best to retain a strong sense of propitiation (averting wrath) in this term, though it is highly debated. But the focus in 1 John seems to be expiation (the removal of sin). The sacrificial context ("blood" in 1:7) ties us to the Old Testament rituals where the removal of sin is paramount (Brown) but also includes the idea of averting God's wrath. Whatever the exact meaning, this phrase "atoning sacrifice for sin" is the reason the just one can plead the case of the unjust.

Theological Perspectives

How does 1:6-2:2 elaborate the message that "God is Light"? God is righteous (1:9), Jesus is righteous (2:1) and God cleanses us from all unrighteousness (1:9). God cleanses us from sin by the blood of Jesus (1:7) and atones for sin through Jesus (2:2). God is just and Jesus is just to cleanse us from unrighteousness so that we may dwell in the light with God.

To say that "God is Light" means that God deals with sin righteously. God does not deny sin or sweep sin under the rug (that is the human tendency). Rather, God acts in accordance with the light to forgive, cleanse and atone. God acts out of love (1 John 4:10), but he acts righteously. God recognizes sin and atones for it in order to create a community.

Since the God who is Light dealt with sin righteously, we are called to avoid sin and walk in the light where this righteous forgiveness is graciously applied. The call for the ethical handling of sin (acknowledgment and confession) is rooted in God's own righteous dealing with sin.

Teaching Points

This text is full of potential applications and discussion. Here are several possibilities. First, all Christians struggle with assurance. If God is light, how can we who sin experience the fellowship of God? This assurance is not rooted in our actions, but in the act of God in Jesus. The righteous God deals with sin through the righteous blood of his Son and thus cleanses us from sin. Further, the Son continues as an advocate for us. He continually intercedes and defends us. Thus, assurance is grounded in the objective work of God for us in Jesus. It is not grounded in our abilities or actions. Rather, God is faithful and just—forgiveness arises out of the character of God, not out of our character.

Nevertheless, this assurance is experienced as we "walk in the light." It is at this point that assurance becomes a problem. How do we know that we are "walking in the light"? Does this mean some kind of perfectionism? Does this mean that we obey God perfectly? Does walking in the light mean we never sin? No—otherwise what sins would need cleansing by the blood of Christ for those

who walk in the light? What sins would those who walk in the light confess if walking in the light means that we do not sin or that we perfectly obey his commandments?

Walking in the light should be read in the context of the whole epistle. To walk in the light is to confess that Jesus has come in the flesh and to love the brothers. It is an orientation toward God, a way of life. It is the ethical orientation toward being God's light in the world through faith in Jesus. It is not perfection, but direction. It is not sinlessness, but an orientation. Walking in the light is a mode of existence—a mode of life that seeks God and yearns to be like him.

On the ground of what God has done in Christ we live in the light (fellowship) as we are oriented toward the light (seeking God). This means we demonstrate an ethical life and thus obedience to divine commands. But it does not mean we are perfect. On the contrary, we confess our sins even as we walk in the light. Part of walking in the light is the confession of sin, not the absence of sin.

Second, confession is a significant dimension of this text. It is a confession of our fallenness, of our human predicament. We, as fallen human beings, are sinners, and thus we confess our utter failure to be like God. We are darkness, and we confess the darkness. As a result, we seek the light, are grateful for the light and yearn to be in the light. But in order to enjoy the light, we must confess the darkness.

Honesty with ourselves is part of our honesty with God. We must recognize our predicament. We recognize that without the divine light we are fully in the dark. Thus, we are totally dependent upon God for the light—the light of knowledge, the power of holiness, and the sense of goodness in life. We confess that we are utterly without light when God is not the light in our life. Otherwise, we deceive ourselves.

Third, the work of Christ is the ground of our salvation. The righteous God purifies us from all unrighteousness through the righteous acts of Jesus who is our advocate and atonement. We should not interpret this as Jesus somehow trying to convince the Father that he should redeem or forgive us. The Father does not have to be convinced to love us. Rather, the Son and Father deal with sin—its unrighteousness, injustice and darkness—through a redeeming act that involves the blood (death) of Jesus. The death of Jesus in some sense averted the wrath (justice) of God so that God could be just and justifier (cf. Romans 3:25-26). God's act in Jesus was a self-sacrifice and a self-propitiation whereby the righteous God dealt righteously with sin through the righteous Son so that he might cleanse his people from all unrighteousness.

The intent of the divine work in Christ is for the sake of the whole world. God intends to atone for all sin, not just for the sins of the community of believers. The mission of God is toward the world, not just the church. God's love for the world (John 3:16) means that Jesus is for the world, not just for the church. The act of God in Jesus is missional and arises out of his love. Thus, the church should also be missional and act for the world out of love.

Teaching Particulars

Function of Text: Because God is light, he deals with sin righteously and will not tolerate a flippant attitude toward sin.

Theology: Our communion with God is not based on our righteousness but on the atonement and advocacy of the righteous one, Jesus Christ.

Application: We trust in the faithful righteousness of God that forgives our sins even as we acknowledge the reality and depth of our sin.

Teaching Outline: Dirty, but Clean

1. We tend to choose self-deception rather than self-humiliation. We make excuses rather than make confession. We are victims rather than sinners.
2. But we can't say: "There is no darkness in me," or "I have conquered sin in my life," or "I don't sin anymore." That would make the revelation of God in Jesus Christ a lie. Yet, if this is true, then where is the joy of eternal life? How can we commune with the God who is light?
3. Our confidence is found in Jesus Christ who is our advocate and our atonement. God does not lightly pass by sin, but he deals with sin--the righteous God cleanses us by the blood of the righteous one. God atoned for sin so that we might have fellowship in his light.
4. Consequently, we live with assurance and we trust the work of God in Christ for us.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What were some saying in the community about their relationship with God and sin? (Note the "if we say..." statements). What claims were they making? What do you think they meant by those claims?
2. Practically, what does it mean to "walk in the light"? How do we know we are walking in the light? (Perhaps we need to read the whole epistle to know the answer to that question.)
3. Is it possible to have a flippant attitude toward sin in the light of divine forgiveness? How so? What does that look like? How have you had a flippant attitude toward sin at times? What counsel would you give someone who says "God will forgive" when their life does not reflect the light?
4. Does our understanding and joy over grace sometimes weaken our understanding of the depth of sin? How should grace shape our understanding of sin?
5. When we sense the darkness in our lives, what hope does this text offer us? How do we apply this text when we feel unforgiven or unworthy of forgiveness?

3. Obedience Isn't What It Used to Be 1 John 2:3-11

In the world's fellowship – and under its influence – obedience to the holy was hateful and oppressive. It put boundaries on our selfishness! In heaven's fellowship of light, obedience to the command "Love one another" is revolutionary to every dimension of our existence.

Exegetical Notes

This text easily breaks down into three sections: (a) 2:3-5a; (b) 2:5b-8; and (c) 2:9-11. The first section is the necessity of obedience, the second is the definition of obedience as love, and the third is the contrast between light (love) and darkness (hate). In each section, John comments on the self-declaration ("I...") of people in the community. When people in the community say they know God, or they abide in Christ, or that they are in the light, the evidence of the reality of those declarations is found in the lives they live. The below chart illustrates point of each section in relation to these self-declarations in the corresponding three sections of the text. We know that we know God through obedience (2:3).

<i>Text</i>	<i>The one who says</i>	<i>Obligation</i>	<i>Progression</i>
2:4	"I know him"	and does not keep his commands...is a liar	obedience as a test of relationship with God
2:6	"I abide in him"	ought to walk as he walked	Jesus is the standard of obedience
2:9	"I am in the light"	and hates his brother is still in the darkness.	Love as the command to obey

The Necessity of Obedience (2:3-5).

What does it mean to know God? To share his life, to abide in him, to be in the light with him. This is a relational concept of knowledge--to reflect the perfection of God in our own lives, that is, to image him. We know we know God when we see the life of God within us; when we see the fruit of God within us.

Walking in the light is obedience. If we "know God" (that is, have fellowship with him; cf. 1:6), then we keep his commandments (that is, we walk in the light). If we fail to keep his commandments, then we walk in darkness. The parallel between 1:6 and 2:4 is illuminating for understanding the correlation between walking in the light (obedience) and fellowship (knowledge) with God.

1:6 and 2:4 Paralleled

1:6	2:4
If we say that	The one who says that
we have fellowship with him	I know him
and we walk in darkness	and does not keep his commandments
we lie	he is a liar
and we do not do the truth	and the truth is not in this one

John speaks generally about God and light in 1:6, but interprets this as obedience in 2:4. He will bring light back into the subject through the prism of love in the following sections. Thus, he will fundamentally interpret obedience in terms of love. Consequently, walking in the light is loving God and his family.

And this is assurance--it is how we know we are in God or abide in God. Brown calls this the "Johannine theology of immanence" (p. 283) that is a mutual indwelling. The kind of indwelling that the Father has in the Son and the Son in the Father is offered to God's children. God dwells in them and they in God. The Triune fellowship is offered to the human community.

What is the meaning of God's perfected love in us? The love from God manifested in Jesus Christ is perfected in us when we obey his word, that is, when we love each other. The fullness of the divine immanence is manifested in a community of love between God, others and ourselves.

The New Command: Love One Another (2:6-8).

The claim of God's immanence in a life ("abide in him") is measured in the light of God's own character. The standard of obedience is the walk of Jesus who manifested the light by his own life of love.

What is the oldness of this command? It is "from the beginning." This refers to the beginning of the preaching of the light, from the ministry of Jesus. The church has always proclaimed this command just as it has proclaimed that "God is Light" from the beginning event of the incarnation of the Word of Life.

What is the newness of this command? It is as old as the Mosaic Law. But the newness is the present eschatological situation where the darkness is passing way and the light is already shining. It is last hour.

Notice that the "truth" (walking in the light, loving each other, obeying his word) is seen "in him and in you." It is seen in Jesus Christ who revealed God's light/love and it is seen in our participation in the light when we love as he loved or walk as he walked.

3. Darkness and Light (2:9-11).

Light and hate are mutually exclusive just as love and darkness. Here John explicitly defines what it means to walk in the light. It is to love each other. If we love, we walk in the light. If we hate, we walk in darkness.

Walking in darkness is blindness. When one hates his brother, he cannot lead because he does not know where he is going and he does not understand the light. He does not understand God. He does not recognize the God who is light. Consequently, while the blind person will stumble, the one who loves will not.

Theological Perspectives

What does it mean to walk in the light as he is in the light? It means obedience. But obedience is not perfectionism or compliance with a set of abstract rules. Rather, it is a life of love. To love is to obey.

We know that we walk in the light when we love each other as God, who is light, has loved us. We know that we walk in the light when we obey the command to love because God is love. Love is light and light is love. To walk in the light is to perfect the love of God within us by loving each other.

The embodiment of this love and walk in the light is Jesus himself. He is the standard of life lived in the light. He is the standard of love. When we walk as he walked, loved as he loved, then we walk in the light. God's love is demonstrated and revealed in Jesus. He is the Word of Life who reveals the love of God and the nature of the fellowship within God. The fellowship between the Father and Son is love, and therefore the fellowship of humanity with God is located in the experience of this love that overflows to loving others.

This is the newness of the command—it is embodied, located, demonstrated and lived out in Jesus Christ. It is an old command—it has been God's intention from the beginning (that humanity love humanity), but it is a new command in the sense that there is a new experience, demonstration in Jesus. Something has changed. The world is different after the coming of Jesus and the revelation of the love of God he offers. The light has entered the darkness, and the darkness is passing away. A new era has dawned, and the light is encroaching on the reign of the darkness and dispelling it.

Consequently, to fellowship God and walk a life of love is to have the love of God perfected in us. We become like God when the love of God works on the inside to shape us into his own love and that love blossoms (is perfected) in our relationship with others. Thus, we love each other. When God's love is perfected in us—when it is present, experienced and given—there is no stumbling block in us and we see because the light illuminates the path. We experience the God of love through loving others and through loving others we know that we walk in the light.

This is the mark of true discipleship (John 13:35-36), and it is the fundamental command—to love each other. It distinguishes between light and darkness. Where there is no love, there is darkness, because God is love and he is light. Wherever hate is, God is not. Whoever hates is lost in the darkness and cannot see the truth that God is love. Darkness debilitates.

Teaching Particulars

Function of Text: The test that we truly know (have genuine fellowship) God is obedience to God's command to love one another.

Theology: Walking in the light means to love each other as Christ has loved us, and this is the command he gave us from the beginning.

Application: We know God when we see the light of God shining in our communities through loving each other.

Teaching Outline: The Obedient Lifestyle

1. Who knows God? Is it the one who knows about God? Is it the accumulation of knowledge? Show me the person who knows God, who truly enjoys the communion of light in a walk with God. Show me the person who has a genuine relationship with God.
2. That person is an obedient person. Obedience is the lifestyle that truly reflects a walk with God. It is a walk that walks as Jesus walked. We walk in the light with Jesus. Christ is the model of our obedience.

3. But obedience here is not the completion of a list of commands. Obedience is not a checklist of 614 commands. Rather, obedience is loving each other. It is a lifestyle of love. The one who truly knows God is not the one who knows the most about God but who loves as God has loved in Jesus Christ.
4. This is the light that shines in the darkness. This is the dawning of the coming age. Love dispels the darkness and the community of God shines the light of God in the world through loving each other.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What is "obedience" in this text? "Obey his commands....obey his word...new command." How do verses 9-11 give content to the new command and to the nature of obedience?
2. What does it mean to say that the love of God is perfected in us? What does that look like? How is that experienced?
3. What is the new command even though it is old? What is the new/old contrast about in this text? What is different in the light of 1:1-4 that makes everything new?
4. In your own experience, how do love and hate shape our experience and distinguish good and evil? Share from your experience of how hate/love make a difference in the revelation of God in your circumstances and life?
5. How is assurance genuinely assuring in this text? How do we know that we walk in the light? Obedience? How do we know we obey enough? Love? How do we know that we love authentically?

4. Be On Guard! 1 John 2:12-17

God's incarnational community that is learning to live in his light. Yet we remain surrounded by darkness! Its threat to our faith is real and ever-present. Even though it is passing away, we must be on our guard against its dangers.

Exegetical Notes

Here John provides a general warning to his community. Even though the darkness is passing away, it is still present. It can still infect and hinder the community. There are real dangers to faith. The solution to the danger, however, is to live in community and to have confidence in the community of believers who love God and love each other.

Confidence in the Community (2:12-14).

The text might be structured in this way to highlight the parallel thoughts.

I write	children (<i>teknia</i>)	because	your sins have been forgiven
	fathers	because	you have known him
	young men	because	you have overcome the evil one
I wrote	children (<i>paidia</i>)	because	you have known the Father
	fathers	because	you have known him
	young men	because	you have overcome the evil one
			the word of God lives in you, you are strong

Why the difference in tenses between "write" and "wrote"? Some think the past tense refers to a previous writing (e.g., Gospel of John or 2 John), but I think it is best to see it as an emphatic "I have already written" (or, "let me say this twice"). John does use the aorist tense for what he has just written elsewhere in the letter (2:21, 26; 5:13). Consequently, whatever the point is, John is making it emphatically. The repetition underscores its importance.

Who are these groups? I do not think the difference between the two different words for "children" is anything more than stylistic variation in the repetition. It functions almost like a parallelism. Consequently, there are no more than three groups here. Watson suggests that John is employing the Greek rhetorical strategy of *distributio*, *conduplicatio* and *expolitio* (distribution, reduplication and polishing). He addresses children (the church as a whole), and then distributes between two groups ("fathers" and "young men"). Then he reduplicates the whole saying and varies his reasons for addressing the groups as a form of polishing. Watson claims that the whole section is a digression that serves the affective function of endearing himself to his audience and creating goodwill. While it is possible that this rhetorical style influenced John, it may be more simply a reflection of Semitic repetition. Nevertheless, I think his distribution analysis makes sense and the total impact is that of the Greco-Roman rhetorical style. The three groups, then, may be seen in this light (with Brown, Westcott,

and others): the whole church addressed as "children" who are then addressed as two groups within the church ("Fathers" and "Young Men").

Is the distinction between "Fathers" and "Young Men" based on age, dignity or pedagogy (teacher/student)? Some even think that John may be addressing elders and deacons (Houlden) that I find implausible. But it may be any one of or some combination of the former three. "Fathers" probably refers to church leaders who were responsible for teaching and have a long history in the community as godly people. That would certainly suit "elders" as a category, but "fathers" is probably broader (potentially including women leaders in the community). "Young men" may refer to a specific group exclusive of women or a specific group of young men distinct from the "fathers" and the rest of the community, but probably refers to everyone who is not a "father" (to the rest of the community). "Fathers" probably refers to older members of the community, and "young men" the younger members of the community.

The "fathers" are praised because they know Jesus who is "from the beginning" which may reflect their pedagogical role. The youth are praised for their strength, commitment and defeat of the Evil One. Both are children who know the Father and their sins have been forgiven.

What is the point? This is the community. It has been forgiven of its sins and it knows the Father. It walks in the light. The leaders are praised because they remain steadfast in their knowledge of Jesus who walked in the light. The rest of the congregation is praised because it stands firm against evil in the strength that God provides. It is an affective, endearing appeal to the community as a united people in their walk with the Father and the Son. It is affirming and preparatory for the warnings to come in the rest of the chapter.

Warning: Appropriate Dualism (2:15-17).

Smalley (p. 80) notes three conceptual contrasts in these verses. The love of the world is contrasted with the love of the Father (2:15), the different origins of that love (2:16—one "from the world" and the other "from the Father"), and the duration of that love (2:17—worldly love passes away but the love of the Father remains forever).

This contrast forms the central flow of these verses. The elements of the world which human beings love so much are identified and set in strong dualistic opposition to what comes from the Father. The elements of the world and the love of the Father are opposites. This is another way to state the dualism of light versus darkness. This is not a contrast between material and spiritual, but between good and evil, between righteousness and unrighteousness.

While the world passes away, the one who "does the will of God" (like "do the truth") remains forever. The one who does the will of God is the one who loves like the Father loves, walk like Jesus walks, or the one who abides in the light of God. Only the love of the Father endures; the world will not. This is an eschatological perspective on human existence and the permanent character of God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ.

I appreciate Brown's comment on the "pride of life." He translates the phrase as "material life that inflates self-assurance" (Brown, 311). It is a false security in the materiality of life or overconfidence in one's security due to one's station or wealth or power. Worldliness is reflected in the attitude of withholding from your brother what he needs because you are driven by materialism and wealth. You

may say you love your brother, but you do not "do the truth" (cf. 1 John 3:17-18 where failure to share the "world's life" is failure to love in deed and truth).

Burge rightly comments (p. 116): "These three characteristics are frequently compared with the temptations of Eve in the Garden of Eden or of Jesus in the desert (wrong interest, wrong passion and pride), but the parallels seem weak. John is rather sketching a sweeping portrait of what it means to be seduced by worldliness and the allure of sin."

What is the point of this dualism here? It contrasts light and darkness in yet another way and it drives home the point that the source of darkness is the world. The source, then, of a failure to love your brother in deed and truth is worldly. The dualistic picture here serves to support the command to love your brother rather than love the world. It serves to call again one to walk in the light by living out of the love of the Father rather than a love for the world.

Theological Perspectives

Stability in faith derives from sharing the love of the Father in community. John reminds his readers of the communal nature of their life together. They have "fathers"—links with the past. They share life together—they are all children of the Father, and they have all experienced victory in their lives through redemption. They have a shared experience, a shared history and a shared Father. Community is critical to faith and the endurance of faith.

Another factor, however—and foundational—is the "love of the Father." This is the ground of community itself. This is what endures and it is the reason we endure. The love of the Father has an eternal quality that gives life and perfects us in life.

Consequently, John addresses two dangers here: the danger of losing a sense of connectedness with the community and the danger of losing the experience of divine love because the "world" has become too enticing for us. Darkness looks pretty on the outside, but it blinds those who embrace it. Its beauty does not last. But the love of the Father endures forever. It is eternal life.

Of course, for John the love of the Father is demonstrated, revealed and experienced in relation to Jesus Christ who is the Word of Life.

Teaching Particulars

Function of Text: This appeals to the community to remain united in their walk with the Father and Son over against the dangers that the world offers.

Theology: The community has experienced the eternal nature of the Father's love so that what it has is permanent but what the world offers is transitory.

Application: Do not love the world because it is a darkness that is passing away. Rather, remain within God's community of light where genuine joy remains forever.

Teaching Outline: Whom do you Love?

1. Memory is an important factor in communal life. Memory shapes our future and the past provides stability for the future.
2. The community knows the Father and their sins have been forgiven. They live in the light of God's love and faithfulness. Our leaders have known God and we have overcome the Evil One. We are strong in God's light.
3. Therefore, do not be deceived by the glitter of the world's darkness. There is nothing permanent there. It is passing away. It will not endure.
4. Eternal life (permanence) is found in love of the Father. The light of God endures and the one who walks in the light endures.
5. The test is whether you love the brothers or hate them. When you love, you experience the eternal life of God, but when you hate, you participate in the passing darkness of the world.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How does the poetic saying of 2:12-14 root a community in a shared history, experience and faith?
2. Characterize your own community of faith in the light of its history and experience. How does it give your faith life and endurance? How has it shaped your faith? What victories are present in your communities that encourage you to remain within it?
3. What does it mean to "love the world"? How is "world" defined here? Illustrate how worldliness is exhibited around you?
4. How does this worldliness endanger the community? How does it endanger your own personal faith? Where does the love of the world compete with the love of the Father in your own life?

5. Not Everybody Who Talks About Jesus Really Knows Him

1 John 2:18-27

The antichrists seek to bring the world's darkness into the Christian community! Those who know the truth about Christ and have embraced the light of his presence must stand fast against their deceptions and falsehoods.

Exegetical Notes

While 2:12-17 constituted a general warning, John is more specific in this text (2:18-27). He warns his community about the Antichrists.

This section has an urgency that is apocalyptic in character: antichrists are present in this last hour that are leading some astray. These antichrists have left the church already, but they still have influence within the Johannine community. John here seeks to bolster his community's opposition to these secessionists and to stabilize the community.

[In terms of structure, I break 2:18-27 from 2:28-3:10 because there is a shift in topic and he uses two different words for "children" in 2:18 (*paidia*) and 2:28 (*teknia*). The latter is perhaps a stylistic signal for a transition.]

In terms of the internal flow of this section, it is significant to note that John begins a sentence with the second person plural pronoun three times ("you" in 20, 24, 27). While verses 18-19 announce the danger of secessionist deceivers, verses 20, 24, 27 exhort and remind the readers about their grounding in the truth (20-23), what they have heard (24-25), and the anointing (26-27).

The Secessionists (2:18-23).

John exhibits an "eschatological" understanding of the Christian life. It is the "last hour." This is not a chronological note, but a theological one. It is an awareness that the manifestation of the Light of God (incarnation of Jesus) signaled a shift in the ages when a new age dawned that is the last age. History is at its end as it anticipates the fuller revelation of the Light of God (second coming). History is always on the brink of ending by the second coming of Jesus. We must live, as Christians, with eschatological awareness.

There are two signals of the last hour. Burge writes (p. 127): "John sees in the personal catastrophe of his congregation echoes of the eschatological evil that waits on the world's horizon. The work of antichrist has been successful in his own church." The first signal is the arrival of the Antichrists. While once part of the community itself, these denied the essential meaning of the coming of Jesus in the flesh. Their rejection of the community's faith in Jesus is antichristian. The hostility of the world has invaded the community through the presence of the antichrists.

Another signal of the last hour is the dissolution or breakdown of community. Presumably one reason the secessionists left the community is that they could no longer share a common theological conviction about Jesus Christ, if they ever did. In some sense, they never really belonged to the community. They were only apparent members, or superficial members, or nominal members. Those who truly belong to

the community will remain with the community. These antichrists never believed the truth of Jesus Christ and so they left. They functioned as part of the world even as they were members of the community. These individuals probably never were members of the eschatological community (invisible church) though they were members of the visible church, as Brown (p. 339) comments: "their visible enrollment did not correspond to their real being." This does not mean that this is the case for everyone who leaves the community, but that this particular group was never really part of the community.

The situation illuminates the reality that Truth is at stake (2:20-21). Everyone knows the truth [I opt for "all of you know" instead of "you know everything" in the textual tradition] and everyone has an anointing (chrisma; only occurs 3 times in the NT and all in this section of 1 John). He does not explain the anointing at this point, but he probably introduces it here in contrast with the antichrist (antichristos) and anointing (chrisma which both come from the same verbal root ("to anoint," chrio). Whatever the anointing is (discussed below), it is clearly related to a knowledge of the truth. This truth is central the community and defines it as an orthodox and orthopraxitic (right practice, or right living) community. The truth is contrasted with a lie here.

And the truth is the identity of the Son (2:22-23). There are liars and these are those who "deny the Son." The antichrist is identified as one who "denies that Jesus is the Christ" (Christos). This denial is a denial of the Son that is at the same time a denial of the Father. What is the denial?

First, he denies that Jesus is the Christ. This separates the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith. It denies the continuity between the two. We will learn more about the nature of this continuity later in the epistle as it applies to this problem, but clearly the point at stake here is identity. Is the Jesus who walked upon the earth in the flesh the Christ who brings eschatological life? The revelation of God is objectively rooted in the historic, fleshly Jesus. God is revealed in Jesus who is the Christ. Some kind of Cerinthian distinction between the Jesus of Nazareth and the heavenly Christ that descended upon him may be operative here. That makes sense, but it is not certain. At bottom, I think, is the need to affirm that God truly revealed himself in the historic Jesus; that the fleshly Jesus is the Son of God (heavenly Christ). God truly became a human being in order to reveal himself and inaugurate the new age.

John does not tell us what they actually believed, but only what they denied. Did they believe Jesus was a prophet we should follow, but denied that he was the heavenly Messiah? Or did they follow the heavenly Messiah and rejected Jesus as incidental to the faith? Did they claim some kind of charismatic, spiritual anointing that they had received directly from Christ and thus followed their own spiritual revelations rather than the message about Jesus (cf. Brown)? I think this last position makes good sense.

Second, the Antichrist denies the relationship between the Father and the Son. How does this deny the Father? Because the Father locates himself in the incarnate Son, in Jesus. The Father reveals himself through the incarnate Son. Consequently, to deny the Son is to deny the Father. As Marshall notes, probably "Christ" and "Son" are near synonymous terms for John here.

It is a rejection of the revelation of eternal life through the incarnation of the Son (cf. v. 25). The object of revelation was the Life of God, both in terms of God's Light and God's Love. This life is eternal life

Here we see that sometimes unity is broken for the sake of truth. Here is a truth which, if denied, destroys fellowship. Unity is not the ultimate value. Community must exist, at least partly and

necessarily, through shared understanding of the truth that grounds the community's fellowship with the Father and the Son.

The Corrective (2:24-27).

Deception (v. 26) is countered by two things, according to John: (1) "what you have heard" and (2) "the anointing".

"What you have heard" is clearly the proclamation of the message summarized in the prologue (2:24-25; cf. 1:1-4). This refers to the objective preaching of the Word of God. It is the message that was from the beginning about the incarnational ministry of Jesus Christ that reveals God as Light and Love. John reminds them of the original message, and if this original message remains (as you continue to believe it), then you remain in fellowship with the Father and the Son (in contrast with those in 2:22-23). This is the essence of the promise: fellowship with the Father and Son is the possession of eternal life which is the same eternal life that was revealed in the incarnation of the Son.

What is this anointing (2:26-27)? I think the point is that the deceivers do not have a "leg up" on the members of the Johannine community. They do not have some anointing that others do not have. In other words, their charisma is not more divine or spiritual than others within the community.

First, note several characteristics of the "anointing." (a) Everyone has it. No one can claim their anointing is superior. This is something all believers share so that the truth it teaches is confessed by all. The deceivers do not have access to something that the whole community does not. (b) It is sufficient in such a way that there is no further need for teaching [that is, they know all things in the sense of meeting needs, not in the sense of omniscience]. This does not deny the need for further teaching in the church, but it does deny the claim of the false teachers that something in addition to their original understanding of Jesus is needed. The secessionists probably claimed additional revelation or knowledge beyond what the anointing signifies here. The anointing taught the truth and there is no further need of revision by the deceivers. (c) It abides within us and teaches us. The presence of the anointing is an assurance for life in God (abiding in God).

Second, is the anointing the historic proclamation of the Word or the Holy Spirit? It seems that the historic proclamation of the Word was the point in verse 24. The point in verse 27 seems related but distinct. Verse 27 appears to amplify or extend the point in verse 24 rather than repeating it.

The language is pneumatic (Spirit) in character. John's understanding of the church is pneumatic, that is, everyone has received the Spirit and this is the means by which one is assured that one abides in God (1 John 4:13). The language is reminiscent of John 14:14, 26; 15:26 and 16:13 and the "Spirit of truth" in 1 John 4:6. In conversion God anoints his saints with the Spirit, just as Jesus himself was anointed.

I think there is a balance between the objective Word ("what you have heard") and the subjective presence of the Spirit ("anointing"). Marshall (p. 155) quotes I. de la Potterie as saying: "The anointing is indeed *God's word*, not as it is preached externally in the community, but as it is received by faith into men's hearts and remains active, *thanks to the work of the Spirit*." Thus, the objective and subjective dimensions are linked so that the anointing is consistent with and rooted in the objective work of God but that the work of God is not reduced or limited to the objective dimensions of human experience.

Theological Perspectives

We are already living in the new age. The darkness is passing, and the light of God has been revealed in Jesus. The last hour has arrived, and in this last hour there are some who deny that the light has dawned or deny the Jesus is the one through God has illuminated the world. The Antichrists are not simply future, but they are always present just as the darkness is still present and will be present until the fullness of the kingdom of God is revealed. Christians live with eschatological expectation, fervor and vitality. We recognize that the last days are upon us and we are living in them. We are on the edge of the fullness of the kingdom, and we wait for it, expect and yearn for it.

But the enemy (darkness) is still present in this new age because the old age has not fully disappeared as yet. The darkness exhibited itself in John's community through the secessionists who denied Jesus and did not trust the fullness of the revelation of God in Jesus. Ultimately, they could not accept the uniqueness and finality of the revelation of God in Jesus. They denied the Son.

But John's community knows better. They know the Son, and thus know the Father. And their knowledge is rooted in the "anointing." The anointing has both an objective and a subjective character. They know the truth because they have heard it from the beginning. Those who first touched, saw and heard the Word of Life have proclaimed the message. Those messengers proclaimed the message to the community and shaped the community with that message. The basic message is that the Son is Eternal Life, and those who fellowship the Son fellowship the Father. The proclaimed Word, then, maintains an objective connection with the community, its history and the story it proclaims. It is public truth, communal truth.

However, this is not sufficient. The anointing also involves a subjective dimension. It is the presence of God by his Spirit. Faith embraces the objective message, but it internalizes that message through the presence of the Spirit who perfects the love of God in us. It is our experience of the message lived out in the transformation of our lives that assures us of the truth. God is not only present in the historic flesh of Jesus as the Son of God, but he is present in the subjectivity of the human soul by the presence of the Spirit who pours the love of God into our hearts and we experience that love in our lives and relationships.

Consequently, the community does not need to listen to the secessionists. They cannot teach them anything. The community does not need anyone to teach them the truth since they have believed it from the beginning and have experienced its reality in their lives. The anointing teaches what is important—Jesus and the experience of his love. Nothing else is ultimately needed.

Teaching Particulars

Function of Text: The antichrists are the presence of the world's darkness in the Christian community and the community must reject them.

Theology: The Christian community is formed by the central conviction that Jesus is the Christ, and this truth is the foundation of communion between God and believers.

Application: You know the truth both intellectually and experientially that Jesus is the Christ so do not be deceived by those who deny the reality of God's eternal life in Jesus Christ.

Teaching Outline: The Times are Perilous

1. Y2K caused quite a stir. The Iraq war raised questions about Armageddon. LaHay's books have fomented eschatological discussions about the rapture, coming of Jesus and the "last days." Millennial fever is high. This is the last hour, but it has been the last hour since the days of John.
2. John saw the last hour in the presence of the Antichrists and in the dissolution of community. These are perilous times--the reality of God in Jesus is under attack and the church is in the throes of turbulent waves. The Jesus Seminar divorces the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith, and churches split when they should remain united in Jesus Christ--these are perilous times.
3. But the truth has been revealed. God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, and there we have fellowship with the Father and Son.
4. We know the truth: (1) we have heard the testimony from the beginning; and (2) we have the anointing. Jesus is the Christ is the testimony and we know anything contrary to that truth is false. We have heard and we have experienced this truth in the community of God.
5. Consequently, we will rest in the assurance that God's Word and Spirit offer us. We will not be disturbed by perilous times, but we will be vigilant.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What is the mark of authentic Christianity here? How does this relate to community, truth, what is believed and what is lived?
2. What are some characteristics of the "anointing"? How do you understand this enigmatic phrase (a phrase unique to John's letter)?
3. Why do believers not need teachers? What does John mean by that when he himself is a teacher of the faith through this letter?
4. How does one tell the difference between new insights into the Christian faith and teachings that undermine it? What is John's criterion here?
5. In what ways have you experienced the subjective dimensions of authentic faith? How is this experienced in our walk with God? What is the nature of this experience? How does community relate to the experience?

6. Who Is on the Lord's Side? 1 John 2:28—3:10

The hallmark of heavenly community is love. There is no place for the works of the devil in this community! The proof that one belongs to Christ rather than Satan is a distinctive lifestyle of love for one's brothers and sisters.

Exegetical Notes

This section is an exhortation to live as God's children, that is, to live a godly life in the light and to live a life of love. The exhortation is rooted in the doxological understanding of God's grace in calling us his children. Since we are his children, let us live as his children.

The Structure of the Text

"Everyone Who..."

	Text	Nominal Participle	Verbal Result
A	2:29b	everyone who does righteousness	has been born of him
B	3:4a	everyone who does sin	also breaks the law
C	3:6a	everyone who abides in him	does not sin
D	3:6b	everyone who sins	has never seen nor known him
A'	3:7b	[everyone] who does righteousness	is righteous
B'	3:8a	[everyone] who does sin	is of the devil
C'	3:9a	everyone who has been born of God	does not sin
D'	3:10b	everyone who does not do righteousness and who does not love his brother	is not of God

This structure clearly marks 3:1-3 as parenthetical. It breaks the flow of the text, and language of 3:1-3 ("Behold") indicates a spontaneous sense of wonder and praise evoked by the wondrous thought that we truly are children of God as reflected in the final words of chapter 2 ("born of God"). In order to pick up the structure again, John concludes his parenthesis (3:3b) with another "everyone who" saying which is a synonymous parallel with 2:29b. This keeps the symmetry of the text. Such care indicates how carefully constructed the document is rather than one that is a haphazard, free-flowing, careless redundancy.

3:3a	everyone who has hope this hope in him	purifies himself
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The structure, then, is four pairs of sayings (with a parenthesis). It has a chiastic flow. Further, it begins and ends on the idea of divine begetting or origin. The fundamental contrast is between the divine

origins of the Johannine community versus the devilish origin of the deceivers (presumably the secessionists).

The righteousness (law-keeping) envisioned and the sin rejected (law-breaking) is the lack of love for the family of God. Those who are born of God love the family of God. The righteousness envisioned is obedience to the "command" of 2:7. The one who does not do righteousness is the one who "does not love his brother" (3:10). This, then, is the concluding line that leads John into a fuller exposition of what it means to love one's brother (3:11-5:12).

The "dear children" and the "and now" of 2:28 provide a natural break with the previous section, and also offers an introductory topic sentence for the whole section: confidence at the second coming of Jesus.

Our Confidence (2:28).

Here we see John's eschatological interests. He is looking from the end-time. Confidence and lack of shame are eschatological values. As we abide in Christ (walk in the light, keep the command to love the brothers, remember the truth of the anointing), we will have confidence in the climatic eschatological event--the coming of Christ.

John has used the word "revealed" for the incarnation (twice in 1 John 1:2; 3:5,8; 4:10). But "revealed" is used for the second coming in 2:28 and 3:2. It is a further revelation of Jesus Christ. The first one is incomplete though it served its purpose. There is yet another revealing. Thus, there is a sense of eschatological completion. This comes out most clearly in the parenthetical note.

The theme of "confidence" and "shame" is important because one of John's purposes is that Christians might "know" they have eternal life (1 John 5:13). That knowledge includes a confidence about the eschaton and the second revelation of Jesus Christ. John uses "boldness" four times (2:28; 3:21; 4:17; 5:14). "Shame" only here.

Children of God (2:29-3:6).

Since we are "born of God," we are called to righteousness (2:29, 3:4). Born of God is the key idea here, as indicated by the parenthesis and his use of the term elsewhere in 1 John. This is the first use of the term (2:28; also 3:9[2]; 4:7; 5:1[3], 4, 18[2]). This introduces the theme into the letter.

This means that righteousness is a standard for behavior. This is because Christ is himself righteous. Note the Christological standard here--Christology is never far from John's mind. The ethical character of Jesus Christ is the model and pattern for Christian behavior.

We are Children of God! (3:1-3). This is a subject of doxological wonder (3:1). I take this as a digression from the flow of the letter. It is a doxological interruption that expresses awe and wonder. The love of the Father is the source of this wonder. At the same time this "wonder" explains why the world is hostile to the Christian community--the world does not know the Father like we know the Father.

It is a wonder, however, that is filled with eschatological anticipation and expectation (3:2-3). While there is a "now," there is also a "not yet." John's eschatology -- his living on the edge of history -- is filled

with hope. That hope is defined by a full revelation of God in Jesus Christ and full conformation to the image of Jesus Christ. 3:3 returns to 2:29 for its theme and enables a smooth transition to 3:4. This hope purifies us in the present, but yet wait for the fullness of that purity when the purity of Christ is revealed eschatologically.

But Christology is not only a positive paradigm. It is a negative model. How do we treat sin and relate to sin (3:4-6)? He has no sin and he came to take away sin (the expiatory function of Christ's atoning work). Thus, we are called to reject sin as well. "Lawlessness" here refers primarily to the love command and the anarchy of relationships where there is no righteousness.

Children of the Devil (3:7-10).

The Secessionists work for the Devil; they are of the Devil (3:7-8). They are the deceivers. Satan has been sinning since the beginning. Exactly what John has in mind here is unclear, but he will clarify it later in the epistle and hints at it in 3:10b. The work of the Devil is the hatred of brothers. From the beginning (even with Cain and Abel) Satan has introduced hate into the family of God.

Jesus Christ appeared to destroy the work of Satan--to renew the world with love rather than hate. The atoning work of Christ also had a negative function--to destroy the works of Satan. It intended to reverse Satanic evil.

Believers are born of God and thus have the seed of righteousness (3:9-10). The relationship between "birth" and "seed" is obvious. We have the sperm of God that generates our childlikeness. Because we are children of God (because we have been born out of his sperm), we cannot sin. As the seed remains in us, so we remain children of God and live like children of God.

Here is how we tell the difference between "children of the devil" and "children of God": doing righteousness/loving the brothers vs. sinning/hating the brothers. This is the "revelation" (manifestation; only time used in 1 John as a noun) of the difference. It is the light and the darkness in contrast, God and the Devil in contrast. The focus is on the Christological revelation of God as the light/righteousness/purity, and whether we will follow that light or seeking more Satanic avenues. Who are you? And the test is: "do you love the brothers?"

Theological Perspectives

Eschatology is important in this section. Our confidence is in the coming of Christ, and when he comes we will see him as he is and be like him. This is our hope. The darkness is passing away, but has not yet fully vanished. Rather, we are present in the world as the light in the darkness and we hope in the future when the light will fully dispel the darkness. In that moment we will be fully like Christ—but we are not yet there.

But the darkness has always been around—the Devil has been here from the beginning. Consequently, there has been a constant battle between light and darkness, between love and hate, between God and Satan. That battle now focuses on us in the present. What is our identity? Do we find our identity in the light, or in the darkness?

Christ appeared to destroy the work of the Devil. This perspective on the atonement is a bit different from the one in 2:1-2. While earlier the idea was to avert God's wrath, here it is to reverse the work of the Devil. Theologians call this "Christus Victor," that is, Christ the Victor who defeats the forces of evil. He defeats them, however, by his suffering servant life. He defeats them by being light in darkness and the darkness cannot exist with the light. The righteousness of Christ defeats the Devil.

So, whose side are we on? Where do we find our identity? Our identity is evidenced in the orientation of our lives. Are we oriented to sin and darkness, or are we oriented to righteousness and light? The fundamental dimension of this orientation is how we relate to the community and live in relationship with brothers and sisters. Indeed, the final phrase in this section reminds us of the basic orientation of light: loving the family (3:10b).

I think this is the meaning of saying that "one does righteousness" or the "one does not sin." It is not about some kind of perfectionism or legalistic righteousness. To "do righteousness" is to identify with the light, pursue the light and walk in the light. It is not achieving some kind of status before God whereby we can call ourselves righteous. "To not sin" does not mean that we never sin but that we do not have a habit or a lifestyle of sinning. We are oriented to God's light rather than pursuing the darkness. Anyone who lives in sin and continues to sin does not know the light because if they knew the light, the light would transform them.

In contemporary theology, there are two interpretations of this text that I believe are problematic. It is understandable how each of these interpretations gains a following if we abstract the words from their literary context and from the theological story of Scripture.

The first problematic interpretation is what I call the legalist construction. It has been common among Churches of Christ to use this text in a legal manner. Sin is defined in legal terms and righteousness is defined in terms of strict obedience. Indeed, the text "the one who is righteous does righteousness" has been used to define the nature of justification.

Several points undermine this particular understanding of the text. First, the primary point is about loving your brother. It is not about legalistic or strict obedience to a set of rules. The law that is in the mind of John is loving your brother. This is a relational text, not a legal one.

Second, this text is about sanctification, not justification. It discusses the quality of life in terms of those who have been born of God. The righteousness under consideration is a sanctifying righteousness not a justifying one. The "not yetness" of our purification also renders this sense of justification moot. We are not yet fully righteous, even as we are righteous when we love the brothers.

The second problematic interpretation is what I call the perfectionist construction. Wesleyan and Holiness theologians have long used this section (along with Eastern theologians as well) for perfectionistic ideas. It is rooted in the idea that the one born of God does not sin and cannot sin.

I think the appropriate response here is to say that "cannot sin" does not mean never does sin because then that would be a lie (1:9-10). "Does not sin" refers to the orientation or habitual character of sin in the life of the believer. It does not mean that we perfectly love. This text reflects an eschatological revealing where we become like the one who is revealed. There is, then, a sense of "not yet" in this text (we are not yet fully like Jesus), but there is a sense of "already" because we do not sin (that is, we do not pursue the habit of sinning; we are oriented correctly toward God's intent).

Teaching Particulars

In teaching this section, you may want to consider how 3:1-3 is a digression from the main point of the text. It is a spontaneous outbreak of praise and doxology for the wondrous thought that we are children of God. Spend some time in the class with doxology. Sing and pray with praise and thanksgiving, perhaps hear some testimonies of conversion stories.

In the light of this perspective, I have given two teaching outlines below. They can be combined, of course. But there is a different flavor to each of these sections—one is didactic (2:28-29; 3:4-10), and the other is doxological (3:1-3).

A. Whose Child are You? (2:28-29; 3:4-10)

Function of Text: The children of the world (devil) are revealed through sin and hatred, but the children of God are revealed through righteousness (light) and love.

Theology: Eschatological confidence is present through the fruit of righteous love which is evident in the lives of God's children.

Application: You know you are God's child when you love God's children.

Teaching Outline: The Signs of Belonging

1. How can I be sure? How do I know I am a child of God? What is the sign that I am a child of God?
2. We struggle with perfectionism on one hand--"only if I am perfect can I be sure," and with cheap grace on the other--"I know I'm not serving God but I am his child no matter what." The former is a lack of confidence and the latter is a false confidence.
3. Genuine confidence derives from the testimony of God's light in our life. It comes from the evidence of our new birth in the pursuit of righteousness. The seed of God generates our Christlikeness and that is the evidence that we are children of God.
4. To whom do you belong? Christ or Satan? The evidence is your lifestyle. The child of God is not oriented to sin and does not pursue a life of sin, but the child of the Devil does. The child of God participates in the work of Christ for the destruction of sin, the child of the Devil advances the kingdom of his father.
5. To whom do you belong? The test is: "do you love the brothers?" The light of God is the love of God. Righteous obedience is loving each other.

B. Doxology: We are the Children of God (3:1-3)

Function of Text: It expresses the doxological wonder of our status before God and the hopeful expectation of the fullness of that wonder.

Theology: We are already the children of God, but we have not yet received the full measure of God's gift.

Application: Praise God for his wonderful grace--both in the present and in the future.

Teaching Outline: Awesome!

[The form of this section needs to reflect the digressive nature of this text as an expression of doxological wonder. Consequently, I would saturate the worship time with praise about God's fatherhood and the wonder of his grace; perhaps even dividing the worship into two movements as delineated below.]

1. The Love of the Father: we are the children of God. God so loved the world that he called us to be his children. This is the heart of God from creation throughout redemption. We should live in confidence because of this love.
2. The Revelation of Jesus Christ: we will be fully like Jesus at his coming. God will bring about eschatological intention in Jesus when we are fully sanctified. We struggle against sin now, but then we will struggle no longer.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What motives for living a holy life does John give in this text?
2. What are the sources of tension between the believing community and the world?
3. How does "eschatology" (the second coming of Jesus) function in your Christian walk? How does it shape your lifestyle? How does it shape your ethics?
4. Share a testimony about the wondrous nature of God's love in calling us children. Perhaps share your conversion story, or share the moment it dawned on you that you truly are a "child of God"?
5. What does it mean to say that the one born of God does not sin? How does this evidence the source of one's identity?
6. From this text, how do you recognize the identity of others as children of God? What is the evidence that they are born of God?

7. The Gospel in a Word is Love

1 John 3:11-18

When the church behaves like Cain and brothers and sisters in Christ “murder” one another with hateful attitudes, selfishness, and strife, what we have called the “hallmark” of the incarnational community (i.e., love) has been abandoned. Death has replaced life. Darkness is enveloping the light again.

Exegetical Notes

Topic Sentence (3:11): *This is the message which you have heard from the beginning: that we should love one another.* The topic sentence is tied to the last sentence in the previous section that links the two halves of the epistle.

3:10 -- the one who does not love his brother

3:11 -- we should love one another

This topic sentence is structurally parallel with 1:5 that was the topic sentence of the first half of the epistle that God is light. While "God is love" does not appear until chapter 4, it is the dominant motif and root of the command to love each other.

This section falls into three natural divisions: (1) Cain (3:12-15); (2) Christ (3:16-18); and (3) Confidence (3:19-24). There are several indicators of this structure. John begins (2) and (3) with the phrase "by this we know" and concludes (3) with the same phrase (3:16, 18, 24). It also indicates that assurance is a key theme in this section as it relates to faith and love.

The first section (3:12-15) is primarily negative as it contrasts death and life; love and hate; Cain and Abel; evil and righteousness. It links the beginning of the second part of the epistle with the first part of the epistle: light vs. darkness (even though those terms are not used). Thus, Cain offers us the path of darkness as a bad example. But we know the path of light through the Christological revelation of God.

The Bad Example: Cain (3:12-15)

Does the 3:12 mean that Cain was from evil (NRSV) or that Cain belonged to the Evil One (NIV)? I think the latter makes more sense. It is more consistent with other uses of *ponhroß* (evil; cf. 2:13,14; 5:18,19). Even though absent in Genesis, John attributes Cain's actions to the inspiration of Satan. It is because he belonged to the Evil One that his actions were evil. He "butchered" (slaughter; often used to describes sacrificial offerings in the OT) his brother.

The contrast between evil and righteous is strong here, and the sibling relationship ("brother") is important for the point John makes. Rivalry between brothers is hatred and it leads to murder. Early Jewish and Christian writers focused on the Cain and Abel story quite often. Philo wrote four books on Cain.

Who is Cain here? Does John have in mind the opponents, or does he have in mind potential hostility within the church? Are the secessionists the ones who do not love the brothers, or is there ongoing conflict in the church surrounding the schism or surrounding something else? While the secessionists

are probably not far from John's mind, I think John is more concerned about the community's life together against the background of that schism. John appeals to the brothers not to be like Cain, but the secessionists are already like Cain, that is, they already belong to the Evil One. They are antichrists! Now, the community must learn the lesson of love and deal with the inner tension of the community.

I think this inner tension may be specifically related to economics and hospitality rather than what created the schism over Christology. Faith (Christology) and Love (Christology as well) must exist together in order to form community.

The Contrasts

Cain	Abel
Death	Life
World	Brothers
Hate	Love
Murder	[Share - 3:17]

This is the light vs. darkness contrast restated in terms of love and hate, and against the background of Cain and Abel. Cain hates Abel, and the world (including secessionists) hates Christians, but we should love each other (and, by extension, we should love the world, just as God loved the world too, as we will see in 1 John 4).

"Eternal life" is a concept injected again from the prologue and we will see again in the epilogue. It appears here at the juncture where we are moving from the first part to the second part of the epistle. It is the life we now possess as we abide in the one who himself is eternal life (1 John 5:11, 20). We have already passed from death to life when we love as Christ has loved. This leads to the next section. The transition from verse 15 to 16 is Christological.

The Good Example: Christ (3:16-18).

What Christ Did (3:16a). "Christ" is not in the original text. Rather, refers to "that one" which surely refers to Christ. The NIV supplies "Jesus Christ." Christ laid down his life for us. There are three components to that sentence. First, it was a voluntary "laying aside" [only here in 1 John; but in John 10:11, 15, 17, 18; 15:13]; it was a self-giving. Second, he gave himself, fully and wholly with no "holding back". He gave his "soul" (life in the fullest sense). Third, it was for our benefit. It was about sin (2:2), but for our advantage.

What We Should Do (3:16b-18). Our response should imitate Christ. We should do for each other what Christ did for us...even to the point of laying down our "souls" for each other.

But how does this translate practically? How do I love as Christ loved? If Christ would lay down his "soul" for us, should we not be willing to give up some "material possessions" (bion) for each other. We see the need, we have the compassion (this word only here in 1 John) and we share our bion. This is the "love of God" (cf. 2:5; 3:17; 4:9; 5:3). We know what love is because of what God did in Christ, and if we will not do the same, then we do not have the love of God. If we do not love the brothers, then we have not passed into the eternal life of God's love.

Thus, we love in deed as well as word. We love in truth (reality) as well as tongue. It is not a mere appearance--it is not a mere verbalization, but a concrete reality in our actions toward the brothers.

This may simply be an example of a specific way in which to love, but it also may reflect some tension in the community. Love is demonstrated through hospitality and sharing. It is demonstrated by helping those in need. Perhaps it is connected with the traveling evangelists who need hospitality. Do you love the brothers? Then you will offer hospitality to those in need.

Theological Perspectives

John offers us two models: Cain and Christ. The former is fratricide and the other is self-sacrifice. One belongs to darkness, hate, murder and the Evil One. The other belongs to light, love, self-sacrifice and God.

Our actions arise out of our orientation in life, and our sense of belonging and community. Cain hates because he belongs to the "dark side" (that is, he belongs to the Evil One), which is death. Christ loved because he belonged to the light, which is love. Their actions demonstrate to what community they belong and their orientation to life.

As we exist in community, our actions will demonstrate to which community we authentically belong. In particular, how we respond to needs of our community will demonstrate the direction of our orientation. We can say we love the brothers and sisters, but only our actions will demonstrate that we do so.

Hate is the attitude that is evidenced by the neglect of the needs of others. Our hate murders fellow believers, just as Cain murdered Abel. Our actions may not be so overt (though they can be as in church splits, envy among Christians, etc.), but the failure to share sacrificially is an evidence of this hatred. When we have the means, but do not share, we act like Cain. When we share, we act like Christ.

Thus, whether we share with those in need is a genuine test of whether we belong to the community of light and love. It is a demonstration of our passage from death to life; it evidences that we follow Christ rather than Cain.

The central theological point is the origin and nature of our experience of God. If we hate the brothers and thus murder them, then we have "no eternal life" in us (3:15). If we neglect our brother who is in need, then the "love of God" is not in us (3:17). Eternal life and love are through Jesus. If the nature of our experience of life (how we relate to each other, whether we share with each other, whether we treat each other as "family") is directly related to whether "eternal life" and the "love of God" are in us. The seed of God's love and the experience of "eternal life" shape how we exist in community with each other. God's love and life will transform our hate and selfishness into a sense of community sacrifice. It is the love and life of God in us that generates and shapes our communal relationships. As a result we love the brothers and place their needs above our own. This is the love and life of God revealed in Jesus.

Teaching Particulars

Cain and Christ: Contrasting Examples (3:11-18)

Function of Text: The text contrasts living in the light (eternal life) and living in darkness (death) by the examples of Cain and Christ who illustrate the lifestyles of hate and love respectively.

Theology: Jesus Christ demonstrates that eternal life is a communion of love where there can be no hatred or murder within that fellowship.

Application: Your actions will demonstrate your attitude--you will murder or you will share, and your actions will demonstrate whether you follow Cain or you follow Christ.

Teaching Outline: Whom Do You Follow?

1. Sibling rivalry--will my kids ever stop fighting? Will petty jealousies ever cease? Will churches ever stop fighting among themselves?
2. When the world invades the church, the church begins to hate, fight and murder. This is the invasion of Cain rather than the model of Christ. Death destroys life.
3. Christ gives himself fully for our benefit at great cost to himself. Our response to that model is to lay down our lives for each other, particularly to share our material substance with each other. This is the demonstration of love.
4. Thus, love is not only a verbalization ("I love you"), but also a deed. Love acts. Love cares and it shares. Love is concrete or else is not genuine love.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What in the story of Cain illustrates the general attitude of the world towards God's people? How does this attitude infect the community of God? How does John use this as another test of a true Christian?
2. In contrast to Cain, what stands out to you about what genuine love involves as modeled in Christ?
3. How is assurance related to loving each other self-sacrificially? What is the evidence of this love in our lives?
4. What Cain-like attitudes do you see in your own life?
5. In what ways should we "lay down our lives" for the community—our brothers and sisters? What examples of such have you seen in your community? Who are the models of such life-giving love in your community?

8. Blessed Assurance

1 John 3:19-24

Minister's Summary: How does a beleaguered fellowship of God's people live with confidence when it is surrounded by darkness? When we live in the light (i.e., Christ's incarnational presence) and walk in love (i.e., authentic care for one another), the Holy Spirit bears witness and brings comfort to our hearts.

Exegetical Notes

This section begins and ends with a standard of assurance ("by this" in 3:19, 24) and contains a statement of confidence (boldness; 3:21). The dominating theme of this section, then, is assurance (knowing we are God's people). But how is this linked to what is previously discussed? I think the linkage is the call to love as Christ loved, and this is how we know that we do have the love of God in us. This is how we know that we are God's people. We know it through faith in Jesus Christ, love for the brothers (obedience to the command to love one another as in 3:11), and the gift of the Spirit. I think Burge's three points (pp. 170-71) are better than Smalley's six points (p. 199). "This is how we know" is faith, love and Spirit.

Restful Hearts (3:19-22).

Confidence is the key idea in this section. Notice several key words that only appear in this section in 1 John: (1) "heart" (three times -- 3:19,20,21); "set at rest" (NIV; "reassure" in NRSV; to persuade); and (3) "presence." Further, "confidence" is used here, and only at 2:28; 4:17; 5:14 in the rest of 1 John.

Assurance is rooted in what God does or knows. This is a theocentric understanding of assurance. It is the beginning point of assurance: (1) God is greater and (2) God knows everything. Our "knowledge" is rooted in God's "knowing." Our hearts are confident because of God's relationship to us. If we are "out of the truth" (belong to the truth; oriented to the truth), then we have assurance even when our hearts condemn us. If we walk in the light -- even if our hearts condemn us -- we have assurance.

Because of God's relationship to us, we are confident in prayer. We will receive anything we ask because we keep his commandments. Here we must put "commandment" with the first part of verse 19 ("by this"). We have assurance when we love the brothers. These are the commandments we keep. This is how we please God. We please him when we love the brothers.

Assurance Through Obedience (3:23-24).

The last line of verse 22 anticipates the fuller statement in verses 23-24. Here we have the three tests of assurance (where the "commandments" are identified).

We believe in Jesus Christ. This is the first time the verb "believe" or the concept of faith has entered the discussion of 1 John. It prepares us for what follows in the rest of the epistle ("believe" in 4:1,16; 5:1,4,5,10[3],13). The climactic use is 5:13 where assurance is linked to faith in Jesus just as it is here. To believe in the name of the Son, Jesus Christ is to confess the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and trust him for our cleansing from sin. Consequently, this is a doctrinal confession that involves one in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I think it is significant that "his Son, Jesus Christ" appears only

here (body) and in 1:3 (prologue) and 5:20 (epilogue). Faith involves a Christological affirmation about who Jesus Christ is.

We love one another. The command is revealed here. The command is to love one another. This is test of obedience that is uppermost in John's mind and everything else may be reduced to it. It is not love alone, but faith and love that are the tests of assurance.

We are filled with the Spirit. This probably points back to the anointing. God gave us his Spirit partly as a function of assurance. God lives in us by his Spirit. This, then, assures (persuades) our hearts.

Theological Perspectives

Assurance is often a practical difficulty. As soon as we say that assurance is connected with the loving the brothers, then it is natural to ask whether we love the brothers enough? Have we shared enough? Assurance, then, quickly becomes a matter of self-evaluation and is rooted in our own critique of our sanctification and the depth of our holiness. After all, whose heart does not condemn when we subject it to critical self-evaluation?

John responds to this concern in this section. Our hearts do condemn us, but God knows the heart more intimately than we can ever know our own. God knows us from the center of our being. Assurance begins with a confidence in God's love for us, his understanding of our hearts and his anointing Spirit within us. Our hearts can rest in God's presence because we know he is greater (has fuller knowledge, understanding) of our hearts as we seek to live in a pleasing way before him. We can always find elements to condemn our hearts, but these are outweighed by God's initiative and knowledge.

But there is a sense in which our hearts do not condemn us. This does not mean there is a sense in which we are sinless, which would contradict 1 John 1:7-10. Rather, it means that there is a sense in which we can be confident before God about our orientation toward light and love. Our confidence does not arise out of our perfection, but out of God's initiative in Christ and our response to that initiative.

In particular, in the light of God's initiative, obedience gives rise to confidence. And this obedience is fundamentally faith and love. It is faith in name of Jesus and love of the community. Faith and love are the tests of community and as we pursue these, we are confident about our relationship with God. This is the nature of obedience. It is not perfection. Rather, it is to believe in Jesus and to love each other.

But as we live in faith and love, this confidence is not simply how well we love and how deeply we believe. This would turn assurance into climbing a ladder—the higher climb, the deeper the assurance. Rather, as we pursue faith and love, our assurance comes from the testimony of the Spirit.

The role of the Spirit in assurance is an important dimension for John. That we live in God is rooted in the fact that God lives in us. God takes the initiative through Christ, we respond in faith and love, and God surrounds us with the presence of his Spirit that assures us of relationship with him. Assurance is not fundamentally self-assessment, but it is the experience of relationship with God through the Spirit. Assurance is existential and subjective—it is the work of God in our hearts and not primarily the cognitive assessment of our obedient life.

Assurance involves an evaluation of our faith and love—do we believe in Jesus and love the brothers? But that evaluation is preceded by God’s own initiative that sets our evaluation in the context of God’s love for us and his knowledge of us. Also that evaluation is permeated by the presence of God’s own Spirit who lives in us as a witness of God’s love and empowers us with hope in the pursuit of faith and love. Assurance is the experience of God’s love toward us and within our own hearts. The work of God in Christ by his Spirit generates confidence, even when our hearts condemn us. We set our hearts at rest because we know who God is, how he has loved us, and how he continues to live in us.

Teaching Particulars

Restful Confidence (3:19-24)

Function of Text: Through faith and love, the people of God rest peacefully in the assurance of God's relationship with them.

Theology: Confidence is theocentrically (God) grounded, Christologically (Christ) focused and pneumatically (Holy Spirit) evident in the lives of God's people.

Application: You can know that God lives in you by the gifts he has offered you in Jesus Christ.

Teaching Outline:

1. Assurance is easily misconstrued as arrogance or it is totally lost in self-doubt. We are either self-righteous or self-doubting. What do we do when our hearts condemn us? How can we be assured without being arrogant?
2. Our hearts are persuaded by God's relationship with us even when our hearts condemn us. God assures our hearts by his great love. Assurance begins with God's love for us and his work for us in Jesus Christ. God is greater than our hearts.
3. And this is how he assures us: (a) faith in the name of Jesus Christ--God has entered history to ground the objectivity of our faith, (b) love for the family of God--God lives in us so that we experience a community of love within the church, and (c) the gift of the Spirit--God bears witness that we belong to God by the presence of the Spirit in our hearts.

Questions for Discussion:

1. In the context of 1 John 3:11-24, to what does John attribute assurance? How do we “know”? Note the various ways John pinpoints this knowledge.
2. In verse 23, what is central to authentic Christianity? Is this too simplistic? In the light of this study through 1 John, how do we define “faith” and “love”?
3. Share your own struggles with assurance? What have been your ups and downs? What generates the “ups” and what generates the “downs”?
4. How does this text help your struggle with assurance? What resonated with you in the text in relation to assurance?
5. How does a sense of community relate to assurance? How do we know that we “belong to the truth”? Is assurance possible without community?

9. Wolves in Sheep's Clothing and Life in God's New Community

1 John 4:1-16b

The Spirit of God not only gives assurance to the community of faith but also gives it the power of discernment between truth and error. The doctrines of the antichrists (i.e., false teachers, secessionists) must be put to the test against an orthodox confession of Jesus Christ as God who has come in the flesh. Christian love within the incarnational community is rooted in God's very nature and modeled on his love for us. One must understand that he cannot love God unless he also loves all those whom God loves and in whom he has set his Holy Spirit.

Exegetical Notes

The previous section's emphasis on knowledge and certainty leads naturally to a discussion of spiritual discernment. Assurance is based partly on faith in Jesus Christ, but faith in Jesus Christ has a specific content. Spiritual claims must be tested against this content. Indeed, the *en toutos* "(by this) we know" of 3:16, 19, and 24 is also found in 4:2 though here it is "by this you know." It is part of the testing of legitimate assurance.

Structurally, 4:1-6 is problematic. It is clearly digressive from the main point. So, why is this teaching on discernment set between two sections on love? What is the link? I think it fits well as a digression that reminds the readers of two significant points in relation to the secessionists. For all their claims of love, their Christology and their community do not reflect the "spirit of truth" and "the Spirit of God." Consequently, while talking about love, John offers yet another warning about the secessionists. They appear to exalt love, but they do not have the love of God's heart or the Spirit of God's life in their community.

The Presence of False Prophets (4:1).

The use of the word "prophet" and the claims of "anointing" may point us to the charismatic character of the secessionist group already identified in 2:18-23. Apparently, there was much talk about "spirit" and prophetic word. The question is, to whom will you listen and who listens to whom (cf. 4:5-6)? Every spirit is not credible and we should not believe every spirit. Rather, we should only listen to the "spirits" that are from God. How, then, do we discern whether a spirit is from God or not? John provides two tests, and both fit into John's dualistic vision of the reality. This dualism is the means by which one identifies the "false prophets."

God	Evil One
Confesses Jesus	Denies Jesus
Spirit of God	Spirit of the Antichrist
The One In You	The One in the World
From God	From the World
Listens to Us	Listens to the World
Spirit of Truth	Spirit of Falsehood

Two Tests (4:2-6).

The two tests are identified by the dual use of "know" in 4:2 and 4:6 which also serve as structural bookends to this section: (1) "by this (en touto) you know the Spirit of God" and (2) "out of this (ek toutou) we know the Spirit of truth."

First Test: Christological Confession (4:2-3). The first test is what one says about Jesus. Burge summarizes what it means to confess Jesus as: "(1) that the man Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the Divine Word of God; (2) that Jesus Christ was and is fully divine as well as fully human; and (3) that Jesus is the sole source of eternal life since he alone reveals the Father to us and atones for our sins" (Burge, 174-75). This three-fold picture seeks to integrate the specific statement of 4:2-3 with the surrounding context (4:7-21) and the frame of the book itself (prologue and epilogue). I agree that we cannot take this confession in isolation but we must see it as a contextually meaningful confession in the situation of John's community.

The particular statement by John, "that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh," speaks to the unity of Jesus and Christ, the reality of the incarnation and the abiding significance of that incarnational event. It is abbreviated as "confessing Jesus" in 4:3. The whole of John's Christology is involved here. Whoever will not confess that reality and its significance is not from God. It is allegiance to a person who reveals God and brings God's communion into the world. It is a loyalty to the definitive revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Second Test: Communal Commitment (4:4-6). The second test is communal in character. To which community do you belong and to whom do you listen? How does the world treat you? With whom are you aligned and what is the effect of this alignment?

False prophets are lined up with the spirit of the Antichrist and with the world. The world listens to them and likes them, but they do not listen to God. They no longer share the community of the disciple (they do not listen to "us"). Notice the significance of the first person plurals in this section. It is "they" vs. "we" in verses 5-6.

The spirit within the believer must be in harmony with the Spirit that testifies to Jesus Christ and the Spirit that generates community. The leadings of the spirit must be discerned in relation to Jesus Christ and the community. These are objective tests for believing the voice of any spirit.

Transition from 4:1-6 to 4:7-16b

While in 3:10-24 John exhorted us to love each other (more practical orientation), in 4:7-21 John unveils what inspires this love for each other. 3:10-24 is the practical imperative, but 4:7-21 is the theological indicative. One cannot appreciate or seek to obey 3:10-24 without understanding the theological reality portrayed in 4:7-21.

Brown notes that Dideberg reflects on the three discussions of love in 1 John in this manner: "in 2:3-11 fraternal love represents the observance of a command; in 3:10c-24 fraternal love is the imitation of a Christ who gave his life; in 4:7-21 fraternal love is related to its source in the God who is love" (Brown, p. 546, n. 8).

The structural understanding of this section is difficult and varies widely among the commentators. Some believe this section should include 5:1-4 as well. I will follow Brown's structural breakdown (Brown, 512-13). I think his assessment is best because it maintains the theme of love which not only appears in 4:7-12, but also in 4:16 and 5:4 though the emphasis shifts to faith.

He uses "Beloved" (4:7, 11) as a structural key that marks off respective sections (4:7-10; 4:11-16b). These two sections parallel two further sections (4:16c-19; 4:20-5:4a). Thus, there are four sections in two groupings. The two groupings parallel each other. The second extends the first. Since the theme of love ends in 5:4a, it is best to break the section there. The whole text, then, offers a relationship between faith and love.

What is the relationship between faith and love? Those who believe in Jesus Christ are born of God, so they love the children of God. Those who believe God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ understand that they must love, as God is love. Faith in Jesus is the foundation of loving each other because God has revealed himself in Jesus.

The Revelation of Love (4:7-10).

Love one another because of the relationship between God and love (4:7-8). These verses focus on the relational quality of this love. We love due to our relationship with God and everyone who does love has a relationship with God. Love does not exist as an independent reality in which both God and us share, but God is love. He is the loving reality, and when we love, we love through him. When we truly love, it is God's love with love others with. It is not a reservoir of love within us, but it is drawn from the reservoir of God's own being. All love derives from God because God is love.

God has manifested (revealed) his love through Jesus Christ (4:10-11). "By this" (*en touto*) the love of God has been revealed among us (4:10). God sent his Son into the world that we might live. "By this" (*en touto*) love is [known] (4:11). God sent his Son as a propitiation or atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Verse 11 is an elaboration of verse 10 in almost a kind of Hebraic synonymous parallelism where the second line furthers the thought of the first line. God sent his Son into the world that we might live, and we live only because the Son is a sacrifice for sin. The focus here is on the love of the Father, whereas in chapter 3 it was on the Son's love. This parallels John 3:16 but includes the idea of sacrificial atonement.

The Obligation of Believers to Love (4:11-16b).

We ought to love one another because God has loved (4:11-12). Ethical obligation arises out of God's love for us. Our love for each other arises out of God's love for us and the fact that God lives in us. For if God lives in us, then God's love lives in us because God is love. When we love one another, his love in us is perfected. We become the instruments of his love. His love is completed through us because it reaches its goal, that is, that not only he loves but that we love others with his love. This is the perfection of God's love *in* us.

We are assured of God's love (by this we know...; 4:13-16b). Verses 13 and 16a-b form the bookends of this section. The term "know" occurs in 4:13 and 4:16a. We know (and believe) that God loves us because.....

- God has given us the Spirit (4:13)
- we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son (4:14)
- we confess Jesus is the Son of God (4:15)

Theological Perspectives

Discernment is a necessary dimension of communal life. The community does not believe everything it hears. Rather, it discerns the difference between the Spirit of God and the spirit of the world? Christians are neither gullible nor pluralistic. They have a test for “truth.” It is the confession that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.

What is the theological point of the confession of Jesus? This distinguishes what is from God and what is from the world; it distinguishes truth (reality) and falsehood (deception). The specific data that John articulates is that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.” But what exactly is the point?

As mentioned above, this is not an isolated confession. Rather, John’s language here is informed and contextualized by his whole letter. It involves an understanding of Jesus that lies at the heart of his letter. Jesus, as the Son of God, reveals in the flesh (incarnationally) the eternal life and love of God. He is the one who atones for the sins of the world and reveals the fullness of God’s life and love in the flesh. He thus unites God and humanity as the Eternal Life in the flesh. He is the criterion of authentic revelation and the one through whom we possess life. Jesus is unique as the incarnate one who is eternal life and brings the message that God is light and love.

The experience of the Spirit is Christologically grounded, that is, no one can claim to have the Spirit of God if they deny that God came in Jesus Christ or that God is revealed in Jesus Christ through the flesh. Any claim of an experience of the Spirit that undermines the uniqueness of God’s revelation of himself in Jesus is a false and deceptive claim.

But this Christological experience of the Spirit is found in community—in a shared message, shared love and shared life. Consequently, we know who to listen to. We have a sense of identity that comes from belonging to this Christological community. We recognize a difference between the world and the community of God. He listens to each other within community, but we do not listen to the world (that is, we do not listen to them in the sense that we draw our values from that quarter).

Theological ethicists often refer to the indicative and the imperative in biblical ethics. Grammatically, the indicative describes a state of affairs, such as “the door is closed” or the “window is open.” Theologically, it describes what God has done or is doing. God has loved us. God has loved us in the death of Christ. Christ loved us through his own death. Grammatically, the imperative prescribes an action, such as “shut the door!” or “close the window!” Theologically, it prescribes our response to divine action. Love each other! Believe in God!

Theologically, the indicative (God loves us) grounds and empowers the imperative (loving God and each other). We are called to love each other because God has already loved us in Jesus. We love because he first loved us in Jesus, and we love because God empowers us to love through his ongoing work in us by his Spirit. The imperative is not an isolated command, but is a command rooted in the nature of God (“God is love”), the work of God (“he sent his Son”), and our experience of his love in our own lives (“love made complete in us”). We do not love of our own or out of our own resources, but we love out

the resources of God's own love which he has poured into us. The love with which we love is the love of God perfected in us by his work.

"God is love" is subject to varied understandings. Too often it is abstracted from the context of the story of Scripture. As a result, it is turned into some kind of mere sentimentality, or worse some kind of unbounded tolerance. It is reduced to "God loves me, he wants me to be happy, so whatever makes me happy, God okays!" But this not only ignores the story of God's relationship with humanity in Scripture, it undermines John's first point in this epistle: "God is light."

God is love, but he is also light. We should not reduce one to the other. God is both love and light (holy, righteous, just). God's love is a holy love and his holiness is loving. Consequently, we should not reduce the love of God to mere sentimentality, and neither should we reduce God's holiness to a kind of personal vengeance. They must be balanced. Love shapes light and light shapes love so that God is holy love or loving light.

Indeed, they are balanced in the climactic event of God's story—the work of Jesus. In the ministry of Jesus, he did not tolerate sin, but neither did he hate the sinner. And John points us to the act that clearly demonstrates both the love and light of God. God demonstrated his love for us at the cross, but the cross also had atoning significance because it averted the wrath of God. At the cross, the love and light of God met to redeem humanity. God dealt with sin justly in a way that demonstrated his love for us.

Our knowledge of this, however, is not merely cognitive. It is not simply an intellectual grasp of what God has done, but it is the experience of what God is doing in our lives. We know God because he lives in us. The cross is not merely a historic, past event that forgives sins, but it is also the power of transformed living in the present by the presence of the Spirit. "God lives in us and we live in God"—this is the essence of Christian experience. It is not simply a piece of information, but the dynamic relationship that exists between God's love poured into our heart by the Spirit that transforms us into people who love as God loves.

Teaching Particulars

Test the Spirits and Love Each Other (4:1-16b)

Function of Text: Assurance entails spiritual discernment and an understanding that there are competing claims in the marketplace of ideas, and, at the same time, this text unveils what inspires, motivates, and empowers that love, that is, that God is love.

Theology: The Spirit of God is at work in God's community testifying to the reality of the incarnation in Jesus Christ and forming a community of people grounded in that testimony. The imperative to love each other is rooted in the divine indicative that God loved the world in Jesus Christ before we loved him.

Application: You must test the claims of spiritualists since the marketplace is full of false claims and pseudo-communities, and we can rest assured in the love that God has for you because he has demonstrated that love in a unqualified manner. Nothing should undermine your confidence in God's love.

Teaching Outline: Loving Discernment

A. Don't Believe Everything You Hear

1. Urban legends abound with social media. You have heard some of them: flashing lights and gangs, virus bugs, etc. You heard many rumors surrounding Y2K. There are also many competing claims in the religious marketplace, even within "Christian" circles.
2. We must recognize that there is a difference between the Spirit of Truth and the spirit of error. There are antichrists who clothe themselves in the dress of christs. They confess Jesus but they do not confess Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who has come in the flesh. The community of God is rooted in the truth of that confession.
3. John offers two tests for spiritual discernment. One is Christological and the other is Pneumatological (Spirit) that creates community on the ground of the work of Jesus Christ.
4. Today is a time that calls for spiritual discernment and the unqualified confession of Jesus Christ as the one who truly reveals God. We must not permit the values of pluralism and toleration to undermine the Christian confession and the Christian community.

B. This is How We Know God Loves Us

1. We have two problems with love: (1) we find it difficult to love some people, and (2) we sometimes find it difficult to believe that God loves us. We want others to love us first; we want others to take the initiative. At other times, we have been so wounded by those whom we thought loved us (a father, a mother, a spouse) that it is difficult to believe that God could love us too. ["If my own father won't love me, then God can't either."] Or, such tragedies have surrounded us that it is almost impossible to believe that God loves us.
2. But God has revealed his love in such a way that the testimony of love is unequivocal if we will but believe the testimony. God demonstrated his love in that he sent his Son into the world as an atoning sacrifice for our sins that we might live. He loved first. He took the initiative.
3. God is love--it is the experience of God's own community, his own nature. God does not simply love or love is not simply something that God participates in, but God is love. He is the very definition of love, and we see it in his actions. God's acts are acts of love, and his actions can never be divorced from his love. Consequently, the love of God is constant and unending. No matter what our circumstances, the love of God is as enduring and everlasting and certain as God himself is.
4. Our response is not simply to love God in return, but to love those whom he himself has loved. Our obligation to love each other arises out of God's own love and the love with which we ought to love each other is not a love drawn on our own resources, but a love drawn on the inexhaustible love of the one who is love.
5. When we understand that God is love, then we are empowered to love others (even when they are unlovable) and we are confident of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. We know and believe that God loves us because he has sent his Son and he has given us his Spirit.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How does this text run counter to the spirit of our age where pluralism, toleration, and relativity dominate?
2. What is the nature of "truth" in this text? Is it merely cognitive? Is it experiential? Is it communal?
3. In what ways does our culture (world) reflect the "spirit of the antichrist" and the "spirit of

falsehood”? What does John provide here that helps you discern the “false prophets”?

4. In what ways do we “listen to the world”? Is there a positive sense in which we should “listen to the world”? What does John mean by “listen” here?
5. How does community help discernment? How does community function in the task of discernment? To what extent does listening to each other help distinguish the spirit of truth from the spirit of falsehood?
6. “Love” is the key word in this text. What are different ways in which the word is used? How do these different uses illuminate the meaning of the word?
7. What does it mean to say, “God is love?” How is this related to “God is light”? Why do we tend to define God in terms of love more so than light? Given John’s language in this epistle, how do we balance our understanding of God as both light and love?
8. What is the “Trinitarian” (or triune) picture of God in this text? How do the Father, Son and Spirit relate to our experience of salvation and love? Think about how the divine community has shared love with us and this grounds the sharing of love in our own community. How is love communal in character? [If God is love, and God is a triune community, love is experienced as communal, and thus the love of God is most authentically expressed in loving each other.]
9. With God as the standard of love, Jesus as the exemplar of love, and the Spirit as the power of love, how do John’s words help you experience and practice that love? How does this text motivate and empower you to love?

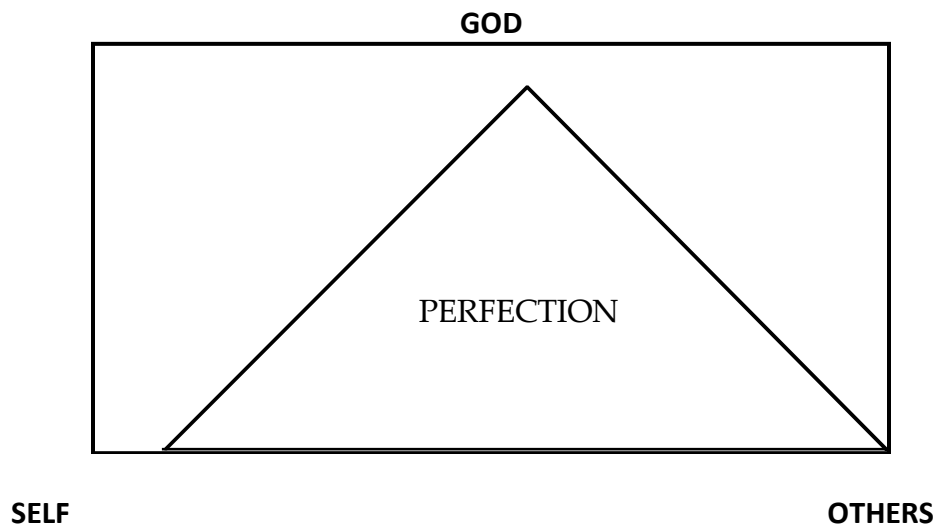
10. We Keep God's Command to Love
1 John 4:16c-5:4a.

Exegetical Notes:

The Experience of Love (4:16c-19).

The experience of love is the mutual indwelling of God with his people, and this is an experience of love because God is love. "God is love" repeats what John said in 1a (4:8) of this section and thus provides a structural parallel.

This love has been perfected "with us" (4:17) as distinguished from "in us" (4:12). The latter reflects the internalization of the love of God in the believer's life, while the former reflects the communal dimension of the love of God among believers. If we love one another, not only is the love of God perfected in us subjectively, but also it is also concretely present communally or objectively. I agree with Brown that "with us" means that God's love is perfected in the expression of love that believers have for each other and for God; it is the cooperative dimension of perfected love (Brown, pp. 527-8).



The witness of this experience of love is the loss of fear and the presence of boldness. When the love of God is internalized and concretized in practice, then we lose the fear of God's final judgment because we no longer fear the punishment. We are assured, not arrogant. We do not fear the punishment because we share God's life of love. Consequently, when we truly love one another, we no longer fear because God's love has been perfected in us. Yet, we cannot be arrogant about this love because God took the initiative by loving us first! Again we see how eschatology invades John's perspective.

The Command for Believers to Love (4:20-5:4a).

This section identifies "the command" (4:21) which takes us back to 2:9-10. Believers in Jesus Christ must love each other just as they claim to love God. Indeed, whether we love each other is a test of whether we truly love God as we claim we do. When we fail to love each other, we fail to perfect the love of God among us and thus deny that God is truly love. We thereby demonstrate that we do not love God as we claimed.

While many separate 5:1-4a from 4:20-21, 5:1-4a actually extends the discussion by introducing the two tests of community: (1) faith in Jesus Christ; and (2) love for God which entails that we love each other. This is signaled by another en touto ("by this") in 5:2. All believers in Jesus Christ are born of God (thus, children of God), and we share this community by loving each other. Thus, the means of assurance is loving God and loving each other ("keeping his commands").

The idea of "command" here takes us back to 4:21--it is the command to love each other. This is not burdensome because it is the heart of God himself, that is, God is love. If we love God, then we will love others and so God's love is perfected in us. But the non-burdensomeness of the command is rooted not only in the character of the command (to love as God's love has been given to us), but also in the assured moral victory (we have overcome the world). Thus, the command is not a burden because we are able to keep it by the work of Jesus Christ in the world to overcome the Evil One. When the love of God fills our hearts, the command to love each other is not burdensome, but natural. When we love with the love of God, loving each other is easy.

Theological Perspectives:

When the love of God is perfected "in" us, it will be experience and perfected "with" us (or, NIV has "among us"). Ultimately, the love of God—as experience with the divine community of Father, Son and Spirit—is experienced in community as believers love God and each other. Christianity is a fellowship with the divine community and the human believing community. It is not a "lone ranger" adventure, but an adventure in community sharing life with the divine community. The perfection of the love of God is experiential—both subjectively (within our own hearts) and objectively (within the community).

The subjective and objective dimensions of this love—as experienced in community—is perfected love, that is, it is a genuine experience of the love of God. This perfected love casts out fear. Fear is dispelled because love is the genuine experience of God himself, and there is no fear in God.

This communal experience is evidenced in our relationship with each other. There the love of God becomes concrete. It is no longer the private experience of the believer ("I love you in my heart"), nor merely a vertical relation to God ("I love God"). Rather, it is the pragmatic and practical relation of loving each other in action rather than merely in word.

How do we know we know God? When we love God and keep his commands (e.g., when we love each other). The command we are to keep arises out of our faith in Jesus and is located in the act of loving each other. When we love God and the brothers, we keep the commands of God. Loving God involves obedience, and this obedience is supremely expressed in loving each other.

When this command seems burdensome, then it may be the result of several factors. We may think of the "commands" as a list of rules, a kind of yoke to bear. But it is not a list of rules, but the rule—love each other. Yet, even loving each other can seem burdensome, but only when we lose sight of God's love and how our experience of that love enables us to love each other. To love each other is not burdensome when it arises out our own experience of God's love. When we try to love without our own resources, it is difficult to love the community of believers, but when we love with God's love (that is,

when we love with “the stuff” we have experienced in our own relationship with God), then it is not burdensome. We must learn to love each other out our own experience of God’s love in our lives.

Teaching Particulars

The Love of God Experienced (4:16b-5:4a)

Function of Text: Because God is love, God expects his people to experience that love in a community of believers.

Theology: Through faith God has fathered a community of children who now are called to live in familial love toward each other as obedient children. The love between the Father and Son (the divine community) is perfected when that love is experienced in community among his children.

Application: You only truly experience the love of God when you love the family of God. You cannot love God and live in disobedience to the command to love each other.

Teaching Outline: An Easy Command

1. Some people fail to see the love of God because they have been spiritually raped by others who claim to act in the love of God or act as a representative of God. Often the church has failed to testify to the love of God in its community.
2. The love of God must be perfected in community if there is to be a real testimony to the love of God in the darkness of the world. The love of God must not only be perfected "in" us but also "among" us.
3. When this love is experienced in community, then fear, doubt and suspicion dissipate. When this love is experienced in community, then eschatological hope can live.
4. Because God is love, this command to love each other is not burdensome--it becomes the easiest load in the world when the love of God is perfected in our hearts and within community. It is because we love with God's love.
5. Yet, at the same time, we think of loving each other as the most difficult of tasks. But John will have none of this moral defeatism--we have the victory already. Faith means that we bear witness to the love of God in Jesus, the work of Jesus to destroy the devil and his work, and the power of the Spirit who lives within us. Faith is the victory. We can love each other because the God who is love lives within us and has overcome the world. We have overcome the world through him. We love because he is love.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What kind of fear is John describing? How has this fear been part of your life in the past or present? What is the resolution of that fear? How have you experienced that resolution?
2. How does fear relate to loving the community? If we fear, we are not perfected in love, and if we are perfected in love, we do not love the brothers. Does fear keep us from authentically and fully loving our community? How does fear hinder love in community?
3. Have you ever felt the commands of God were burdensome? Why did you feel that way? What did that feel like? If you have not, why have you not?

4. Is Christianity best defined as faith in Christ, loving God and loving each other? Why do so many resist such a “simple” definition of the Christian faith?

11. Confessing the Son 1 John 5:1-12

John moves to the conclusion of this epistle with a strong confession of the testimony God has given concerning his Son. Our faith must grasp and confess the same Spirit-revealed objective reality that Jesus has come "by water and blood." Just as the Son identified with our humanity in his baptism (i.e., water), so did he offer himself as an atoning sacrifice (i.e., blood) for the entire human race.

Exegetical Notes:

The certainty of victory over the world is rooted in the work of Jesus Christ. Faith in Jesus Christ is the certainty of our victory.

The Victory of Faith (5:4b-5).

The dualism that pervades John's writing again enters here. It is believers against the world, and faith is victory over the world. But it is faith that "Jesus is the Son of God" (which is the confession of 4:15). Jesus, as the Son of God, was revealed to destroy the work of the Evil One (3:8).

What is it to "believe in the Son of God" or to "confess the Son of God"? I think we get a clue in 5:11. What we believe is that God gave eternal life in his Son. We believe that Jesus is the revelation of God's love, light and life. We find in Jesus the revelation of God himself. The blood of God's Son cleanses us--making us holy; the Son is the eternal life of God; and the Son is the revelation of God's love in his own person. Christology is the central theme because the Christological revelation is theocentric: it reveals who God is and offers God's eternal life. Thus, the believer in Jesus shares in the life of God through a mutual indwelling based upon what God has done in Jesus Christ.

The Testimony of Spirit, Water and Blood (5:6-8).

The testimony about Jesus is three-fold: (1) Spirit; (2) water; and (3) blood. This is a divine testimony about Jesus Christ.

Three Understandings "Water and Blood"

- (1) water and blood refer to the sacraments of baptism and Supper (Luther, Calvin, Cullmann).
- (2) water and blood refer to death of Christ as in John 19:34 (Augustine, Thompson, Grayston).
- (3) water and blood refer to the baptism and death of Christ (Brown, Smalley, Burge).

John is clearly offering some counterpoint to what was being said about Jesus. It was said that Christ only came by water, but John says he came by "water and blood." Perhaps John is opposing a Cerinthian-like notion that Christ came at the baptism of Jesus but was not present at the death of

Jesus. John affirms the unity of "Jesus" and "Christ" (he is "Jesus Christ"), and the unity of his life (baptism and death). However, Brown and Smalley are probably correct when they argue that it is not a Cerinthianism that is at stake here, but rather an interpretation of Jesus' baptism that makes the bestowal of the Spirit the most significant salvific event. Thus, the view he opposes would think water and Spirit were the significant moment in the life of Jesus and de-emphasize his death. But John's point is that it is was the atoning death of Jesus that is significant, not just his incarnation or pneumatic experience/mission. In either event, John opposes a view that devalues the meaning of the cross in Christology. This contrasts also with current movements in contemporary theology where atonement theology or "blood" theology are seen as ancient relics, superfluous or even superstitious. The Johannine Christianity still affirmed the central significance of both incarnation (water; baptism as identification with humanity through real flesh) and atonement (blood; the cross as the authentic death as human being).

Because of the charismatic/pneumatic tendencies in the community, John emphasizes that the Spirit bears witness to the death as well as the baptism of Jesus. In what way did the Spirit testify? Is this a reference to the Gospel of John itself where the Beloved Disciple testified about the death of Jesus as well as the baptism of Jesus (cf. John 19:35)? In any event, no pneumatic witness can deny the significance of the cross because the Pneuma Himself (the Spirit) has testified to its salvific role. And this is a divine testimony.

The Testimony of the Father (5:9-12).

God has testified about Jesus Christ, and those who believe his testimony have that testimony in their hearts. This is the subjective, experiential dimension of Christian experience to which John points. This testimony is in our hearts.

But if we do not believe God's testimony about his Son, then we make him a liar. What is God's testimony? What is the point? It is that God gave us eternal life in his Son. Without the Son, no eternal life; without the Son, no divine presence. Thus, the salvific presence of God in the world is Christological.

Theological Perspectives

The experience of love in community is rooted in God's love for us. The root of this experience, however, is faith. Everyone who believes is born of God, and those born of God have the love of God within them. Faith, then, is the victory; it overcomes the world. It transcends the world and overcomes it. Faith affirms a reality that is not apparent from living in the world. Faith asserts that something decisive has happened that has changed everything—changed from darkness to light, from death to live. It affirms victory when there is only apparent defeat. Faith empowers a life; a love that transcends the world and conquers it because faith arises from something transcendent that is beyond the world and radically different from it.

This faith is rooted in the reality that Jesus Christ came in the flesh to destroy the Devil but to atone for the world. Faith believes that transcendent light and love entered the world to redeem it, and this light and love came "by water and blood." It is no fairy tale; it is real, concrete and authentic. The Eternal Life, the Son of God, truly came in the flesh—he was baptized and he died. These were real events, but

events the involved the Transcendent One. God came to us in Jesus and revealed eternal life to us.

God, by this Spirit, has given his testimony—and this testimony is that life is found in the Son. But this testimony is not merely the concrete, historic event—a matter of history discerned within the pages of Scripture or history books. Rather, it is a testimony that exists in the heart of believers. The Spirit authenticates this story—this history—in the hearts of believers as they experience the transcendent reality in their own lives through transformed living that is evidenced by living in loving community with others.

Teaching Perspectives

The Eternal Life Came by Water and Blood (5:4b-12)

Function of Text: The certainty of eternal life is grounded in the testimony of the Father and Spirit through the water and blood.

Theology: The certainty of faith is rooted in the reality of the Son of God who experienced water (incarnation/baptism) and blood (atonement/death). The Spirit and the Father testify to this reality.

Application: You have the testimony of God himself that he has given us eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. Do you believe it?

Teaching Outline: Water and Blood.

1. What is the essence of the Gospel? How would you summarize the singular events of the gospel? What saves you?
2. Our study through 1 John has focused on the incarnation and atonement of Jesus Christ. In this section John summarizes that by the phrase "water and blood." Both of these elements point to the reality of the flesh of Jesus Christ, but they are also the foundational events of the gospel itself.
3. Jesus came by water--he identified with sinners through undergoing the ritual of immersion designed for sinners, he was anointed by the Spirit as the Son of God, and he lived out his ministry as the incarnate one among us.
4. Jesus came by blood--he offered his own life for an atoning sacrifice for our sins and the sins of the whole world.
5. This is God's testimony about himself. He has given eternal life in Jesus Christ. Without the Son, there is no redemptive divine presence in the world. God gives eternal life through Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ provides it through "water and blood."

Questions for Discussions:

1. How has God given witness about Jesus through "water" (his baptism) and through "blood" (his death)? What is the point of each of these events?
2. How does faith in this testimony become a victory that overcomes the world? What does it mean to say that faith "overcomes the world"? What kind of victory does this describe?
3. What convinced you that "true life" was found in Jesus? What is the testimony that you believe? How have you experienced this testimony?

4. What is the function of the Spirit in relation to the water and blood? What is the role of the Spirit in our experience of assurance? How does the Spirit's testimony "agree" in terms of the objective (water/blood) and subjective (our experience) dimensions of assurance?

12. The Boldness of Faith

1 John 5:13-21

Surrounded as we are by the darkness of lies and hatred, the incarnational community of God on Earth is challenged to live in confidence. Because we have eternal life, we have the grace-given right to pray boldly for any and all things that are consistent with the life of light and love to which we have been called.

Exegetical Notes

1 John 5:13-21 is John's epilogue that corresponds with the prologue of 1 John 1:1-4. The body of the letter was complete with 1 John 5:12. However, an epilogue is not an appendix or a mere addendum. Rather, this epilogue functions to summarize the point and intent of John's letter. It provides a hermeneutical lens through which to read the whole letter again. Indeed, we should reread the letter to see if we caught and understand his purpose when we read it the first time.

Purpose Statement (5:13).

This statement links 5:12 and 5:14. It is a transitional sentence that concludes the body of the letter and begins the epilogue.

John gives us the purpose of his tract or letter. He writes to assure us that we have eternal life. This assurance has come in primarily two ways: (1) faith in Jesus Christ and (2) love for each other.

Confidence and Prayer (5:14-17)

Prayerful Expectation (5:14-15). The confidence we have is linked to faith in Jesus Christ. It is because Jesus Christ is our advocate that we have confidence in prayer. Our faith yields confidence.

John's assurances about prayer here reflect the Gospel as well (John 15:7) and it is linked to a relationship with God. The confidence of prayer arises out of the relationship we have with God as his children.

The problem here is absolutizing this confidence in such a way that God simply because a cosmic Santa Claus or a Sears Catalog. It is best to read this promise in the context of shared assumptions, for example, walking in the light, the will of God, etc. Nevertheless, we do not want to gut the promise so that it becomes meaningless.

Prayerful Discernment (5:16-17). Marshall correctly observes that John has been leading up to this point throughout the whole epistle. His contrasts between community and secessionists, between light and darkness, between loved and hate, between righteousness and sin have prepared his readers for this statement.

In the light of these contrasts, John offers yet another. It is the contrast between a sin that leads to death and a sin that does not. Since the context is eternal life and spiritual communion with God, I will assume that "death" here means spiritual death or eternal separation from God.

- (1) Venial vs. Mortal Sin?
- (2) Unintentional vs. Intentional Sin?
- (3) In Community vs. Outside of Community (Secessionists)?
- (4) Momentary Weakness vs. Deliberate Rebellion (Apostasy)?

I am inclined to think with Brown that (3) is the point, but that the text also yields the principle of (4). Thus, in this point we have the two communities clearly divided into two camps: death and life. The secessionists belong to death, but the Johannine community has eternal life.

Three Certainties and a Final Exhortation (5:18-21).

This section provides the reason for Christian confidence. We are bold, certain and assured because we know three things.

"We know...." (5:18-20).

What We Know

	<i>Primary Statement</i>	<i>Complimentary Statement</i>
5:18	...that those who are born of God do not sin	but the one who was born of God protects them, and the evil one does not touch them.
5:19	...that we are God's children	and that the whole world lies under the power of the evil one.
5:20	...that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true	and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

We know we are not enslaved by the Evil One. The theme of chapter 3 returns in this certainty. Children of God do not habitually commit sin. They are not oriented to sin. They do not belong to the Evil One and the Evil One cannot harm them because of Jesus Christ.

The difficulty in this certainty is the meaning of "the one who was born of God"? Brown (pp. 620-22) offers five alternatives:

- (a) The begetting by God guards the Christian (Harnack).
- (b) The one begotten by God [Jesus] guards the Christian (Bultmann, Dodd, Bruce, Stott, Westcott, Brooke).
- (c) The one begotten by God [the Christian] guards himself (KJV).
- (d) The one begotten by God [the Christian] holds on to him [God] (BAG).
- (e) The one begotten by God [the Christian], God guards him (Schnackenburg, Brown).

The main objection to (b) is that nowhere does 1 John refer to Jesus as "begotten," but I think this is rather frivolous since 1 John does call Jesus "Son."

We know we belong to God. The dualism is strong here. The distinction between "us" and "the world" is clear. We belong to God, but the world belongs to the Evil One from whom we are protected.

We know we have the true revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The sense of 5:20 is clear. Jesus, the Son of God, has given us an understanding of God so that we might know the true God. The themes of OT literature are important here. The contest between the true and false gods is won here by the clear revelation of the true God through Jesus Christ.

The difficult exegetical question here is the antecedent of "this one": "He (this one) is the true God and eternal life." Does this refer to the Father or to the Son? See Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), pp. 239-53 for a thorough discussion.

Some think it refers to the Son (Schnackenburg, Burge, Brown, Marshall, Houlden, Bultmann, Strecker, Thompson). Arguments: "Jesus Christ" is the nearest antecedent; Jesus is "life" in Johannine literature ("life" as a predicate always refers to Jesus); "true" is applied to Jesus in Johannine literature; Christological *inclusio* [just as the Gospel beginning with 1:1 and ending with 20:28, so also 1 John begins and ends with expressions of the deity of Christ in 1:2 and 5:20; and 5:20 echoes 5:6 with the expression "this one is"].

Some think it refers to the Father (Harris, Wescott, Law, Brooke, Dodd, Stott, Smalley, Grayston). Arguments: John 17:3; God as life in Johannine literature; the Father is the referent for "true" in 5:20cd and the few references to Jesus as "God" in the New Testament.

I think it is fairly ambiguous, and perhaps intentionally so. Perhaps the identity of the Father and Son is so close -- the eternal life they share is so full -- that one cannot make a distinction in terms of "true God". They are both true God. I am inclined to think that John is primarily referring to the Son here because the Son is the manifested eternal life. But I am immediately reminded that John does not separate the Father and Son in terms of that eternal life--it is a shared reality that they, in turn, share with the Johannine community (with us).

Nevertheless, however one might decide the exegetical question, the theological point is clear: Jesus Christ is the revelation of the true God, whether that is found in his own person as well as in the Father or whether it is due to his relationship with the Father.

"Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (5:21).

Meaning?

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|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Literal exhortation against pagan idolatry (Hills; Edwards; Dodd). 2. General exhortation against sin (Schnackenburg, Strecker). 3. Metaphorical exhortation against the "false gods" of the secessionists (Houlden, Brown, Smalley). |
|--|

The letter concludes with a final warning against the "false gods" the secessionists in contrast with the true God revealed in Jesus Christ. Thus, John undermines pluralism. There is not two gods, but only one True God, and this one True God is revealed in Jesus Christ. There is a finality and a certainty that stems from God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

The message of the epistle of John, then, is (1) believe in Jesus Christ as the true revelation of God's light and love, (2) love each other in righteousness, and (3) in the context of community the Spirit bears witness that we are the children of God.

Theological Perspectives

Several theological problems emerge in this text. First, does every believing request receive an automatic affirmative answer? Some have construed this text in that way. But this renders prayer almost manipulative, and it ignores the many examples in the story of Scripture where God answers "no" to prayers. We should read this in the context of the fuller embedded picture—shared values, shared goals, walking in the light, loving each other, etc. In other words, prayer requests are subject to evaluation by the will of God (his ethics, values, etc.) and determination by the will of God (his purposes, plans, etc.). We pray in confidence that God will hear, that he will respond in character (his love, light, and purposes), and that however he responds he knows that his response is best.

Second, what is the "sin unto death"? We may pray for those who commit sins not unto death, but we may not pray for those who commit sins that lead to death. In other words, some sins do not condemn, but others do. I think we need to read this in the light of the whole epistle, particularly in the light of the secessionists who have left the community. They do not love the community; they have rejected the message; they have chosen to live in darkness. In other words, their life is one of deliberate rejection of the revelation of God in Jesus. It is rebellion, a deliberate reorientation toward the world and a rejection of God's life, values and ethics.

This is very different from sins of weakness in which everyone participates. Even when we are walking in the light we still sin otherwise we would not need the continual cleansing the blood of Christ provides. These, however, are sins that do not condemn as we walk in the light. The sins that do condemn are those that do not participate in the light.

The difference, then, between a sin unto death and a sin that does not lead to death is the difference between sins that committed even though we are oriented to the light (we believe in Jesus, love each other, seek to obey God's commands) and sins we commit because we are oriented to the darkness (we have rejected the message, hate the brothers, and separated ourselves from the community in a deliberate way). The former are sins of weakness, but the latter are sins of rebellion.

Third, why is John's final exhortation to flee idolatry when he has never mentioned idolatry in the whole epistle? Because anything other than faith in Jesus is idolatry. Even the secessionists are idolatrous because they substitute their own message for the message of Jesus. 1 John does not sanction pluralism. Rather, it points everyone to the Eternal Life revealed in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ.

Teaching Particulars

Faith, Confidence and Prayer (5:13-17)

Function of Text: Faith provides boldness in the presence of God so that we know our prayers are heard as we pray with spiritual discernment.

Theology: Eternal life means we speak freely in the presence of God; eternal life is a quality of relationship whereby God communes with his people by sharing his own life (presence). But since this communion is with the God of light, our prayers must be spiritually discerning.

Application: Because you have eternal life, ask God anything with boldness but ask in accordance with the values of his own eternal life.

Teaching Outline:

1. Some people find prayer difficult because it is such a bold thing to approach God and speak freely. Indeed, some resist speaking freely and honestly to God. The prayer lives of many are dead because they have no sense of sharing God's eternal life.
2. Yet, the assurance of eternal life has this byproduct: we are privileged to speak freely to our God. This boldness is not only rooted in our assurance and in God's love, but it is also rooted in the assurance that God will hear us. Assurance means confidence. Confidence means boldness to speak freely before God and to know that he hears and will answer.
3. But the blanket appeal to pray does not mean that there are no boundaries to prayer, or that prayer does not need spiritual discernment. There are some for whom we should not pray--we do not pray for those who in rebellion and deliberate sin reject the testimony of God. We do not pray that God will forgive their sin. They are advocates of darkness, the antichrists. We cannot pray for them without sharing in their darkness and thus dimming the light of God in the world. Our prayers must reflect the values of God's own eternal life. God's answers will reflect those values.
4. Yet, we do pray for those who have not deliberately rejected God's light in their rebellion. All believers have the priestly privilege of intercession. God will forgive their sin through our prayers. We pray for the weak. We pray for those who stumble in their Christian walk. And we know God hears and redeems. God is faithful and just to forgive those for whom his people pray. This is a reflection of the communal life we share together--we pray for each other in the confidence that God hears and forgives.
6. We are assured of eternal life and we are assured that our prayers are heard, and we are committed to the God of light rather than darkness.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How has reading this letter helped you to "know" that you have eternal life? How has the epistle accomplished its purpose in your own life?
2. Is the statement "we know that we have what we have asked of him" absolute? Is it contextualized in any way? What is your confidence in prayer?
3. John seems to indicate that though all wrongdoing is sin, not all sin leads to death? What kinds of sin is John talking about here? What is the nature of the distinction that John introduces here?
4. Why does John discourage praying for people who have committed the "sin that leads to

death"? How does that affect your prayer life?

Three Certainties of the Christian Faith (5:18-21)

Function of Text: This section provides the rationale of Christian assurance. We are assured because we know three truths that may be summarized in the statement, "We are the children of the true God."

Theology: The history of redemption is the contest between the Evil One and Jesus Christ, and this conflict is waged in the battle between two communities: the children of God and the world. Jesus Christ came to testify to the true God.

Application: Live confidently in this fallen world. Even though it is pervasively controlled by evil, we know we are the children of the true God and the Evil One cannot harm us.

Teaching Outline:

1. Like righteous Lot, Christians are disturbed by the evil in the world. We are appalled at both the pervasive and radical character of evil. How can a Christian live confidently in a world so full of evil?
2. We live confidently in such a world because we know three truths about our relationship with the world.
3. We know that we do not participate in the sinful lifestyle of the world. We will not share its darkness and the darkness has no power over us because the Son of God protects us from the Evil One.
4. We know that we are God's children. We know where the great divide is between the world and God. We know on whose side we stand. While the world is under the sway of the Evil One, the God of love and light lives inside us to testify that we truly are children of God.
5. We know that the Son of God has revealed to us the true God. We know the difference between true God and false god. True God is Jesus Christ, and everything else is false.
6. Security and truth cannot be found in any other place than Jesus Christ who is the revelation of the true God. This revelation is the answer to ambivalence and uncertainty. It is the light and love of God in the darkness and hatred of the world.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Given that John's purpose was to assure us that we have eternal life, what three pieces of knowledge does John offer us in this text? We know because we know....? In what is our confidence/assurance rooted?
2. What kind of confidence do you have in living in the world? Do we live with fear of being tainted? Do we live with fear of being rejected by God, by others, by our community?
3. What kinds of idols undermine this confidence/assurance in our contemporary setting? If you were writing this letter and you got specific about the "idols," what would you identify as dangerous idols in the contemporary world?

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