

INTRODUCTION TO 1 JOHN

1. Authorship

Tradition has attributed the authorship of 1 John to the apostle John, the son of Zebedee and the brother of James.

a. External Evidence

1 John enjoys the strongest external attestation of the non-Pauline epistles. Only it and 1 Peter, among the writings in this section, were placed by Eusebius in his acknowledged or undisputed category (*homologoumena*) of NT documents (*Eccl. Hist.* 3.25)

- (1) There are a number of late first century or early second century works that appear to allude to the epistle. Included among these would be the writings of Clement of Rome (c. 100), the *Didache* (c. 120), and the *Epistle of Barnabas* (c. 130).

The earliest direct evidence of 1 John comes from Polycarp (c. 70–160). In his *Epistle to the Philippians* (c. 115), he writes, “For whosoever does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is antichrist... (7.1).” This reference in Polycarp appears clearly to have been drawn from 1 John 4:2–3.

In addition, Eusebius (c. 265–340) records that Papias (c. 60–130) “made use of testimonies from the First Epistle of John” in his work entitled, *Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord* (*Eccl. Hist.* 3. 39. 17).

- (2) Irenaeus (c. 140-203) is the first to identify the author by name. Irenaeus cites 1 John 2:18–19; 4:1–2; and 5:1 and states that he is quoting from John’s epistle, identifying the author as John the disciple of the Lord and the author of the fourth gospel (*Adv. Haer.* 3. 16. 5, 8).

Moreover, the earliest known list of NT writings, the Muratorian Canon (c. 170), includes the epistle in its compilation of canonical writings and ascribes it to John.

- (3) Almost all of the Greek and Latin Fathers from the end of the 2nd century onward accepted the epistle as being from John. Included in this list are Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215), Tertullian (c. 160–220), and Origen (c. 185–254), all of whom treat the epistle as Scripture and attribute it to John, the disciple of the Lord.

The only exceptions to this were Marcion (c. 110–160) and an obscure sect by the name of the Alogoi (c. 170). Marcion rejected it, not because he thought it was spurious, but because it conflicted with his peculiar anti-Jewish views. The Alogoi, on the other hand, attributed all of John’s writings to the heretic Cerinthus simply because they distrusted the Johannine teaching on the *Logos* or “Word.”

b. Internal evidence

- (1) The letter does not include the standard epistolary introduction with the author’s name nor does the author identify himself elsewhere in the epistle.

It can be assumed from this that the writer was familiar to his readers that his identification was unnecessary. The letter itself gives every indication that the writer was well known to his readers and that they were well know to him.

- (2) The writer speaks throughout the epistle with an air of authority consistent with that of an apostle. This authoritative tone is particularly evident in the author’s categorical declarations and dogmatic commands. He clearly writes as one who expects to be both heard and obeyed (see, for example, 4:6)

- (3) The writer declares that he was an eyewitness of the person and work of Christ (1:1–3; 4:14). His repeated use of “we,” “us,” and “our” in this context appears to be a vivid avowal that he was one of a group of eyewitnesses who saw, heard, and personally touched the incarnate Lord. His intimate, personal knowledge of the Lord is best understood as reflecting the perspective of a disciple. The overall impression is that the author is speaking as a representative of the apostolic body of which he was the last surviving member
- (4) There are a number of similarities between the epistle and the fourth gospel which suggests a common authorship. These similarities include not only vocabulary, but also style and theology.

The Fourth Gospel and 1 John also reveal similarities of style. In each there...[is the] frequent employment of disconnected sentences and the union of an affirmative and negative expression of thought.... There is a restricted range of vocabulary in both writings, which is identical to an extent without parallel in two independent works. The Greek word *paraklētos*, “paraclete,” for example, occurs four times in the Gospel and once in 1 John but nowhere else in the New Testament....

Both works use the literary device of contrast: life and death, light and darkness, love and hate, and truth and the lie are examples. This similarity between the two writings is all the more remarkable when it is remembered that the nature of the Fourth Gospel is objective narrative, whereas the epistle is hortatory and polemical. The acceptance of a common authorship for these two writings greatly strengthens the evidence for the Johannine authorship of 1 John because tradition emphatically ascribes the Fourth Gospel to the Apostle John (Hiebert, *Epistles of John*, p. 7).

c. Arguments against Johannine authorship

Not all agree with the interpretation of the evidence as cited above. Beginning with the rise of higher criticism in the eighteenth century, a number of writers since then have rejected common authorship of the gospel and 1 John. Based primarily on internal evidence, these critics have argued that the differences outweigh the similarities and conclude that the two works are not from the same hand. They either deny John’s direct involvement in writing the epistle or attribute both documents to separate authors within a Johannine community seeking to preserve the teaching of the apostle.

- (1) Some have attempted to distinguish between the gospel and the epistle on the basis of their respective styles. The gospel, they say, has a richness of language that is wanting in the epistle. The thought in the gospel is characterized by clarity of expression whereas the epistle is noted for its ambiguities. Furthermore, this expression of thought in the epistle is far simpler than and not as smooth as that of the gospel. For example, it has been noted that there is a markedly greater degree of repetition in the epistle than there is in the gospel.

Respondents have countered by saying that the respective occasion and purpose for each more than adequately explain whatever differences there may be between the two. The gospel is more historically oriented, intending to give an account of the person and work of Christ, while the epistle has a more didactic focus, endeavoring to reinforce certain truths for the readers. Furthermore, the writer’s sense of urgency in view of the crisis facing the readers would also account for the ruggedness of expression in the epistle.

- (2) Others point to apparent differences in the religious background of the two documents as proof against common authorship. An example of this, they say, is that the gospel frequently quotes or alludes to the OT whereas the epistle does not. From this they conclude that there is a “Semitic coloring” in the gospel that is absent in the epistle.

Again, the respective occasion and purpose for writing can explain whatever differences may be evident in the religious coloring of the two writings. The OT quotations in the gospel are found primarily in the discourses between Jesus and the Jewish community rather than in the author's narrative sections. The fact that these discourses include references to the OT is consistent with the historical record of Jesus' ministry.

The epistle, on the other hand, does not incorporate such discourses. It was written with a different purpose under different circumstances to primarily Gentile readers (see 5:21 and the discussion below under recipients). The apparent absence of OT citations in the epistle is consistent with the purposes of the author and the background and culture of the audience.

- (3) Still others argue that the epistle reflects a different, often more primitive theology than does the gospel. Specifically, they say that the person and work of the Holy Spirit is not as developed in the epistle as it is in the gospel. In the epistle the Spirit is simply referred to impersonally as the *anointing* while in the gospel he is called by his title and identified as having a much more broadly defined role. Furthermore, Christ is described in the epistle as the *Paraclete* but in the gospel this designation is attributed to the Spirit.

Furthermore, the epistle presents Christ's death as propitiatory while this propitiatory element is lacking in the gospel. Lastly, they say the epistle reflects a more traditional form of eschatology, anticipating the near return of Christ and the judgment of the world. The gospel, on the other hand, allegedly reinterprets these events. The judgment supposedly is taking place now (3:18) and Christ's return is being experienced presently in the lives of the believers (14:18).

To a large extent the issues raised here are matters of interpretation. The gospel does speak of a future, personal return of Christ (21:22-23), consistent with

what is found in the epistle (2:17, 28). In addition, Jesus in the gospel speaks of the Holy Spirit as "*another Paraclete*," indicating that He too bears this designation (14:16), parallel with the use of the term in the epistle (2:1). While the gospel does not specifically use the term propitiation, the concept is latent in the statement about Christ being the "lamb of God" (1:29). And, the Spirit is described in the epistle in personal terms as the One who indwells (3:24; 4:13) and who bears witness (5:8) that closely parallel the presentation of the Spirit's ministry in Christ's farewell discourse in the gospel.

d. Conclusion

The external and internal evidence strongly supports the traditional view that the apostle John is the author of 1 John. First, the author of 1 John claims to be an eyewitness of the Lord's earthly life and ministry and he speaks with what is virtually apostolic authority. Second, there is a long and unbroken testimony in the early church that the epistle was written by John, the disciple of the Lord. Finally, the early church was unanimous in its understanding that the apostle John wrote the fourth gospel and the writing style of 1 John is so close to that of the fourth gospel that common authorship remains the most convincing explanation.

2. Date and Place of Writing

Several factors must be taken into consideration in dating 1 John and locating the place from which it was written. These factors include (a) the chronological relationship between the gospel and the epistle, (b) the evidence from church tradition, and (c) the evidence from the epistle.

- a. The chronological relationship between the gospel and the epistle. Comparing the content of the gospel with that of the epistle suggests that the gospel was written first. The most telling factor in the priority of the gospel is that there are many passages in the epistle that appear to assume a prior knowledge of the gospel or that are made more understandable when viewed against the backdrop of the gospel.

John's stress upon love as Christ's new Commandment (John 13:34–35; 15:12, 17) is assumed to be already familiar to the recipients of the epistle (1 John 2:7–8; 3:11; 4:21). The equally Johannine emphasis on eternal life (John 3:15–16, 36; 10:28; 17:2–3) is also referred to as a concept well-known to the readers (1 John 2:25; 5:13, 20).... And it is taken for granted (1 John 2:20–21, 27) that they are aware of the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit (John 15:26; 16:13–14).

A Careful verse-by-verse comparison of 1 John with the gospel reveals that at least eighty percent of the verses in the epistle reflect concepts to be found in the gospel. This finding confirms the assertion that the readers were previously familiar, at the least, with Johannine teaching, but it also strengthens the probability that they possessed that teaching in the written form of the fourth gospel (Burdick, *The Letters of John*, p. 40).

- b. The evidence from church tradition. The evidence from church tradition is somewhat mixed. Those denying John's authorship argue along two lines. The first line involves an argument from silence. Critics say that there is no evidence in Acts or the Pauline epistles that John went to Asia. Furthermore, they add, Ignatius does not mention John when writing to the churches in Ephesus shortly after the supposed date of John's death.

In response, neither Acts nor Paul's epistles mention John's Asian ministry because the date of that ministry took place after these were written. Revelation 1:1–3:22, on the other hand, clearly gives evidence of John's ministry in Asia. As far as Ignatius is concerned, admittedly his failure to mention John in his correspondence to Ephesus shortly after John's demise is perplexing, but it is an argument from silence, nothing more.

The second line of argument developed by those not holding to Johannine authorship is the supposed early martyrdom of John. Jesus predicted that the sons of Zebedee would drink the same cup He drank (Matt 20:23; Mark 10:39), a reference, critics argue, to the martyrdom of both men. From

this they argue that John must have been martyred at the same time as his brother James. According to Acts 12:2, James suffered martyrdom sometime in the mid-forties. To support this point, critics cite a testimony allegedly from Papias that states, "John the Divine and James his brother were killed by Jews."

Again, by way of response, the problem with the assumption that John was martyred with James is that the record in Acts specifically mentions only the death of James. Furthermore, Galatians 2:9, written around the time of the Jerusalem council in A.D. 50, gives clear evidence that John was in fact alive after the death of James. Lastly, the alleged testimony from Papias is derived from two sources written between the eighth and ninth centuries, neither of which is generally viewed as historically accurate.

Those supporting John's authorship note the following evidence. Although church tradition does not address the dating of John's epistles, it does place John in Ephesus and places his writing of the gospel in that location. After discussing the writing of the first three gospels, Irenaeus states, "Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia" (*Adv. Haer.* 3. 1. 1).

Added to this is the tradition that John came to Ephesus later in his ministry, was exiled from there to the island of Patmos during Domitian's reign (A.D. 81–97), and returned to Ephesus in the first year of Trajan (A.D. 98–117). Eusebius states, "At that time the apostle and evangelist John, the one whom Jesus loved, was still living in Asia...having returned after the death of Domitian from his exile on the island" (*Eccl. Hist.* 3. 18. 1). And, Irenaeus writes, "Then again, the Church in Ephesus, founded by Paul, and having John remaining among them permanently until the times of Trajan..." (*Adv. Haer.* 3. 3. 4).

Comparing the above with the evidence from the New Testament suggests that John remained in Jerusalem until just before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. According to Galatians 2:9, John was still in Jerusalem sometime around A.D. 50. And, in the mid-sixties when Paul

stations Timothy in Ephesus and fails to mention John when writing to Timothy indicates that John had not yet come to Asia. Since Irenaeus and others locate John in Ephesus from the time of Domitian (A.D. 81–97), it may be assumed John took up residence there some time before that and remained there until his death shortly after Trajan took office in A.D. 98. All of this supports the fact that John wrote his gospel while in Ephesus, probably sometime in the eighties.

- c. The evidence from the epistle. Three arguments from internal evidence are offered for the dating of the epistle. The first is that there is a distinct impression gained from the epistle that John was an elderly individual when he wrote and that he had spent considerable time ministering to his readers prior to his writing the epistle. He appears to be well aware of their spiritual condition (2:12–14, 21) and of the dangers that were confronting them (2:26; 4:1). He addresses some of his readers as mature believers who had been saved for a number of years (2:12–14). And, he also views himself as something of their spiritual father. Several times he refers to his readers as his “little children” (2:1, 12, 28; 5:21) or addresses them as “beloved” (3:2, 21; 4:1, 7, 11).

The whole tone of the Epistle would seem to indicate that it is the work of a man of mature years...who, out of the depths of a profound experience through many years of the riches of the grace of God, addresses his frequent loving exhortations as to his “little children” (Ross, *The Epistles of James and John*, p. 118).

The second argument from the internal evidence is that dating the letter later in John’s ministry in Asia allows sufficient time for the heresy that John combats in the letter to have developed. The heresy itself appears to be a form of incipient Gnosticism, a heresy that began to develop in the last quarter of the first century, but whose full bloom did not appear until later in the second century (see the discussion below under the occasion for the letter). Added to this is the third argument, that of the absence of any reference in the epistle to persecution. This suggests placing the writing of the letter possibly after or more likely before the persecution instituted in the last years of Domitian’s reign.

Conclusion

Taking all of this together suggests dating 1 John sometime after the writing of the gospel in the eighties and before the persecution under Domitian broke out sometime in the nineties. Thus, a date somewhere between A.D. 85 and A.D. 95 fits the circumstances. And, the evidence from both Revelation and early church tradition suggests that John wrote the letter while he was ministering in Ephesus.

3. Recipients

As mentioned earlier, First John does not begin with a standard epistolary introduction where the readers are formally identified. Any information about the original readers must be gleaned from the content of the epistle and from early church tradition. Some have argued that the terms used in the epistle reflect Jewish concepts and influences (e.g., “antichrist,” 4:1; “lawlessness,” 3:4) and conclude from this that the readers were Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora. However, these terms may simply reflect the fact that the author was a Jew and that the Christian faith defended in the epistle finds its roots in the Old Testament concepts and revelation.

On the other hand, the internal evidence offers some indication that the readers were primarily, at least, Gentile Christians. This is seen from the fact that, first, the epistle contains no direct quotations from the Old Testament and, second, it does carry an explicit warning against idolatry (5:21). This latter point, taken at face value, would be difficult to explain if the readers were primarily Jews. This evidence, limited as it is, favors a Gentile readership. At the same time, it is also likely that those addressed included Jewish believers living among the Diaspora. The evidence both within and outside the New Testament indicates that such was the makeup of the churches throughout the empire, outside of Judea.

As was mentioned earlier, the author writes as a teacher and leader who was intimately acquainted with the readers and who had labored among them for a period of time. In view of the early church tradition about John’s ministry in Asia and in harmony with the evidence provided of John’s ministry in that region from

Revelation, it seems most natural to locate the readers in that area as well. The extent of John's Asian ministry, as well as the absence of all that is merely local in the epistle, leads to the conclusion that the letter was written to a group of congregations under the general authority of the writer. Thus, strictly speaking, First John is not a general epistle addressed to the churches everywhere, but was directed to the specific churches in Asia under John's direct influence.

As was previously shown in the discussion of date and place of writing, John spent his latter years in Ephesus and apparently wrote his first epistle from that city. His activity while residing there seems to have been made up largely of ministry among the churches of Asia. This included oral proclamation of the gospel, according to Eusebius, as well as church administration. Clement of Alexandria indicates that John traveled among the churches in areas surrounding Ephesus for the purpose of choosing men for the ministry...and dealing with church problems. The apostle's relationship to Asia is further confirmed by the address and contents of the...book of Revelation...sent to "the seven churches which are in Asia" (1:11)....

John's preaching, his administrative work, and his literary activity all had to do with the Asian churches. Because 1 John gives evidence of having been written for a number of churches, the most reasonable suggestion concerning the intended recipients is that the letter was addressed to the churches of provincial Asia, among which John exerted apostolic influence during his later life (Burdick, *The Letters of John*, pp. 47-48).

4. Occasion

The occasion for the writing of 1 John must be pieced together by examining both the internal evidence and the evidence from early church history.

a. Internal evidence.

The evidence from the epistle indicates that the overriding occasion for writing 1 John was in response to the threat of false teachers facing the churches. In 2:26, John warns,

"These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you" (2:26; cf. 2:18-26; 4:1-6; 5:5-12). The extent and nature of this threat can be seen in John's further references to these individuals. In 2:18 he cautions his readers by saying, "Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have appeared; from this we know that it is the last hour." And, in 4:1 he admonishes his readers, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

The internal evidence further indicates that these false teachers were at one time associated with the congregations represented by the readers. At some point, however, they had come to embrace heretical beliefs and, as a consequence, found themselves in conflict with their respective congregations and had withdrawn from the fellowship of the churches. John declares in 2:19, "They went out from us, but they were not *really* of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but *they went out*, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us." It is clear from John's warnings above that those who had separated themselves were continuing to propagate their false teachings in an effort to enlist others in their heretical beliefs. Thus, First John was written in response to the grave threat this insidious heretical movement posed for John's readers.

The nature of the heretical beliefs embraced by these false teachers must be inferred from John's statements in the epistle. At the core of the heresy was an erroneous view of the person of Christ. For example, in 2:22 John declares, "Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son." From this and other passages in the epistle it is evident that John is using "Christ" and "Son" interchangeably (cf., 4:15 with 5:1). Thus, to deny that Jesus is the Christ means to deny that Jesus is the Son of God, the pre-existent second Person of the Trinity.

This denial is stated slightly differently in 4:2-3, "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that

Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God..." Here the denial involves specifically the incarnation. Combining the two passages, it is evident that the faulty Christology espoused by the false teacher was nothing less than a denial that the human Jesus and the divine Christ were united in one person.

Doctrinal error, however, represented only one side of the heresy John was combating. The false teachers were also guilty of serious moral defections. This may be seen from John's repeated warnings that those who walk in darkness, who do not keep His commandments, and who continually practice sin, are not of God but are of the devil (cf. 1:5; 2:4; 3:8). Behind these moral deficiencies was a faulty view of sin that denied personal sinfulness. In 1:8 John describes those who deny their own depravity, and in 1:10 those who deny that they commit sins. These denials should not be taken as a claim of sinless perfection. John has in view those who on the one hand walk in darkness and practice sin and yet, on the other hand, claim that they are neither sinful nor guilty of committing sin, on the other. How the false teachers explain their claim is not stated. All that can be said is that John is combating an antinomianism that teaches that sin is not sin and that the sinner is not sinful.

John specifically condemns certain ones who were guilty of showing hatred rather than love toward believers. John declares in 2:9, 11, "The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now...the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes." Even more forceful is John's description in 3:14–15, "...He who does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him." Assuming John is addressing a single group in these warnings, it may be concluded that those whom John describes as hating believers are the same ones who are denying the incarnation and who explain away the biblical view of sin.

b. Heresies in the early church.

Among the heretical movements confronting the early church, the following have been suggested by interpreters as candidates for the specific false teaching John was combating.

Gnosticism. Gnosticism was one of several syncretistic movements that developed during the apostolic or post-apostolic eras. It was a somewhat diverse system that combined Jewish, Christian, and pagan religious elements within an overall philosophical framework. It did not reach its full bloom until the second and third centuries, but the general consensus among interpreters is that its roots extend back to the last half of the first century. As a speculative philosophy of religion, Gnosticism was grounded in a neo-Platonic dualism that viewed the non-material universe or spirit world as good and the material universe or world of matter as evil. As such this dualism created a gulf between the true God and the material creation.

The Gnostics or knowing ones, as the name implies, viewed the human spirit as entrapped in a material body. Deliverance was to be gained through esoteric knowledge that allowed them to escape the inherent liabilities of the material world and apprehend the realities of the heavenly domain. This knowledge had been revealed through Christ as the messenger of the true God. Thus the Gnostic Christ was not so much a savior as he was a revealer in that he came for the specific purpose of communicating this secret gnosis or knowledge. Since matter was essentially evil, Gnostics denied the incarnation. According to their system, matter and spirit could not unite in any real or vital union and hence the incarnation was an impossibility.

This claim to special revelation naturally led to a sense of pride and superiority, where they viewed themselves as the elite of Christendom. This in turn fostered an attitude of contempt for the unenlightened members of the churches that expressed itself in open disdain and even hostility toward the uninformed who resisted their teaching. Their philosophical assumptions also often led to their disregarding the ethical demands of Christianity. By distinguishing the material world from the immaterial, they

viewed the activities of the material world as inconsequential and unable to impact their status as members of the inner circle of the enlightened. Others, however, taught that the material world was to be overcome through a rigorous asceticism or harsh treatment of the body.

Docetism. An early form of Gnostic teaching was that of Docetism. Derived from the Greek word meaning “to appear” or “to seem,” Docetists rejected the incarnation as incompatible with the fundamental dualism between the material and the immaterial, saying that Christ only appeared to have a human body. In addition, they denied the reality of the atonement, teaching that Christ did not in fact die since that would require his having an actual human body, but he only seemed to suffer and die. Ignatius, writing a decade or two after John wrote 1 John, warns the church in Antioch about this heresy,

Stop your ears, therefore, when anyone speaks to you at variance with Jesus Christ, who was descended from David, and was also of Mary; who was truly born, and did eat and drink. He was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate; He was truly crucified, and died. [There are those who are] unbelievers [who say] that He only seemed to suffer....not confessing that he was [truly] possessed of a body (*Trall.* 9–10; *Smyr.* 1–5).

Cerinthianism. Another early expression of Gnosticism, Cerinthianism was named for its chief proponent, Cerinthus. According to several post-apostolic writers, Cerinthus was a Jewish philosopher who lived in Ephesus during the time John was ministering there. Cerinthus taught that the man Jesus and the divine Christ were separate and distinct entities. Jesus, the son of Joseph and Mary by natural birth, was a wise and godly man. Cerinthus taught that the divine Christ, as a true spirit, came upon Jesus at Jesus’ baptism and then departed from Jesus while Jesus was on the cross, shortly before Jesus died. Thus, the man Jesus suffered, died, and rose again, but the divine Christ did not. In separating the human Jesus from the divine Christ, Cerinthus maintained the distinction between the material and immaterial, but in so doing destroyed both the reality of the

incarnation and that of the atonement (cf. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.26.1; 3.2.1).

Nicolaitanism. Nicolaitanism, named for its founder Nicolas, was another heresy of John’s day that showed similarities to Cerinthianism. Little is known of this movement outside the references in Revelation 2:6, 15 and the writings of Irenaeus. Irenaeus identified the Nicolaitans as forerunners of Cerinthianism and speaks of John as writing to counter both,

John, the disciple of the Lord, preaches this faith, and seeks by the proclamation of the Gospel, to remove that error which by Cerinthus had been disseminated among men, and a long time previously by those termed Nicolaitans, who are an offset of that “knowledge” falsely so called....The disciple of the Lord therefore desiring to put an end to all such doctrines, and to establish the rule of truth in the Church, that there is one Almighty God, who made all things by His Word, both visible and invisible; showing at the same time that by the Word, through whom God made the creation, he also bestowed salvation on men included in the creation (*Adv. Haer.* 3.11.1).

Simonianism.

OUTLINE AND EXPOSITION

Theme: *The Tests of Eternal Life* (5:13)

John establishes his overall theme in 5:13 as that of assurance and, specifically, assurance of eternal life or salvation. He develops this theme through a series of tests, tests in the areas of belief and conduct that are consistent with one who has eternal life. The intent is that his readers would examine themselves and gain assurance as they see the evidence of eternal life manifested in their own lives.

I. John's Prologue, 1:1–4

John accomplishes three things in the prologue of his letter. First, he establishes his credentials as an apostolic eyewitness to the gospel. As an apostolic eyewitness, his proclamation of the message of the gospel is not only accurate and trustworthy but divinely authoritative as well. Second, he gives the essence of this message, namely, that eternal life has been made manifest in the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ. The prologue emphasizes the reality of the incarnation as the hallmark of the apostolic message and experience. Third, John gives a preliminary identification of the purpose of his letter. His intent in recounting the specifics of the apostolic message is to confirm his readers in their fellowship with the apostles and, especially in their fellowship, that is, in their saving relationship with the triune God.

A. The Essence of the Apostolic Message, 1–2

John's message centers on the Word of Life, a reference to Jesus as the revelation of the Father and as the source of eternal life. John declares that this Word, which existed before the beginning of creation (cf. John 1:1), became incarnate, that is, took upon Himself humanity. John along with the other apostles were eyewitnesses to the incarnation of the Word, having heard Him speak, having seen and observed Him with their own eyes, and having actually touched Him with their hands (v. 1). John reaffirms that this Word as the source of eternal life was indeed manifested in human form and that, having seen this, he and the other apostles were proclaiming the message of eternal life and that this life resides in Him who was with the Father in

eternity past and who was revealed to them in the incarnation (v. 2).

B. The Purpose of the Apostolic Message, 3–4

This Word of Life that had been manifested in human form and that John and the other apostles had both seen and heard was the very essence of the message that he and the others were proclaiming. The purpose of their proclamation, John declares, was that his readers might be *confirmed* in their fellowship with the apostles. However, this fellowship was nothing less than a sharing in the eternal life that the Word provided. Therefore, having fellowship with John and the other apostles necessarily meant having fellowship with the Father and with the Word, that is, with His Son, Jesus Christ (v. 3). John also was proclaiming this message about the Word so that, the readers being confirmed in their fellowship, John and the others' joy might be increased in every way (v. 4).

Eliminating all opening epistolary formalities, John at once plunges into a weighty theological prologue which verifies the heart of the Christian gospel, namely, that eternal life has been made manifest in the incarnate Son of God. This Prologue elaborates on the reality of the incarnation in the apostolic experience, a reality that is crucial to the faith and life of the Christian believer. The tone of this opening paragraph is not polemical. The cardinal truth set forth is the cornerstone of the Christian faith; as such it is also the touchstone with which to test and expose false doctrine (Hiebert, *The Epistles of John*, p. 35).

II. The First Test: Eternal Life Defined as Fellowship with the Father and the Son, 1:5–2:27

The body of John's letter is divided into three sections, each identifying a specific test by which the readers were to examine themselves and gain assurance of salvation. Each of these tests, in turn, is composed of two parts, the ethical demands and the doctrinal demands. Evidence of eternal life necessarily involves both proper conduct and proper belief. The first test examines eternal life from the perspective of fellowship with the Father and the Son (1:6–7; cf. 2:3, 5, 6). As with the other tests, John begins with the ethical demands of fellowship and then transitions to the doctrinal demands.

A. Fellowship Tested on Ethical Grounds, 1:5–2:17

The first division addresses the ethical demands that are the evidence of true fellowship with God. John lists five specific ethical responsibilities within this division.

1. Fellowship Demands Moral Likeness, 1:5–7

John begins by identifying the basis for fellowship, grounding that basis in the very nature of God. He then applies that basis first by describing those who fail the test and do not have fellowship and then by describing those who pass the test. As he does so often, John applies these tests in terms of polar opposites. He does this to make the difference between those who have eternal life and those who do not as clear as possible. He also does this in order to exhort his readers *indirectly* to continue to pursue the standards consistent with eternal life.

a. The Basis for the Demand, 5

The message that the apostles had heard from the Son had as one of its cardinal elements the fact that God is light (v. 5). As elsewhere in the New Testament, John is using light in its common figurative or metaphorical sense to refer to the dual concepts of truth and righteousness (cf. John 3:19–21). By declaring that God is light, John is

affirming that God's nature embodies both absolute truth and absolute holiness, so much so, John adds, that there is no darkness, or the opposite of light, in God *at all* (emphasis original).

b. The Demand for Moral Likeness, 6–7

John now applies this statement by posing two hypothetical situations that stand as antithetical to each other. The first addresses those who would claim to have fellowship with God, but who walk in darkness. John uses the present tense to describe the walk or conduct of these individuals. He is saying that their lives are characterized by falsehood and sin, the very opposite of light. All who would make such a claim of fellowship with God while having their lives marked by spiritual darkness are lying and are not practicing the truth, that is, they are not living according to the light that God has given (v. 6).

In contrast, those who walk in the light, the light in which God Himself exists, have fellowship with other believers (v. 7). Again, John uses the present tense to describe this walk, a walk or conduct that is characterized by light, that is, by righteousness and truth. But from 1:3 John has made it clear that those who enjoy genuine fellowship with other believers are those who, in fact, have fellowship with the triune God, they are those who share in the eternal life that God gives. John adds that those who walk in the light enjoy ongoing cleansing from sin. The means by which this cleansing is experienced is spelled out by John in verse nine. The basis for this ongoing cleansing, John states, is the blood of Jesus His (God's) Son, a reference to the sacrificial death of Christ on Calvary's cross in making atonement for sin.

2. Fellowship Demands Confession of Sin, 1:8–2:2

This is the second of five ethical responsibilities John identifies in this section that are the evidence of eternal

life. The passage itself is composed of two parts. The first addresses the actual ethical demand and the second, the theological basis for the demand.

a. The Demand for Confession of Sin, 1:8–10

As with the preceding verses, John introduces a series of hypothetical situations to build his case. He begins with a negative example of one who denies human depravity, he then turns to the positive example of one who confesses sins, and he ends with a second negative example, in this case of one who denies committing sins. The two negative examples counter heretical positions espoused by the false teachers; the positive example identifies the one who possesses eternal life and, thus, enjoys fellowship with God and with other believers.

Those who claim to have fellowship with God and, yet, deny their own depravity, that is, they deny that a sinful disposition lies within them, deceive themselves and the truth of God's word does not reside in them (v. 8). God has declared that all men are born in bondage to the sin principle or disposition that resides within. Furthermore, this sinful disposition, although dethroned in salvation, nevertheless is not removed until glorification or the receiving of a glorified body (cf. Rom 6:1–14; 1 Cor 15:50–57). Therefore, to deny such is to be self-deceived as to the reality of human depravity and, at the same time, to deny such is to deny the truth of God's word. Accordingly, those who claim this fail the test of eternal life and are not saved.

On the other hand, those who confess their sins are given assurance that God who is faithful and just will forgive them their sins and cleanse them from all unrighteousness (v. 9). To confess means to acknowledge our sins before God, both the fact that we have sinned and the fact that we are guilty and responsible for our sins. To confess also means that we repent of our sins and that we seek divine

forgiveness. As before, John uses the present tense to indicate that confession is something that those who have fellowship with God will continue to do as a regular, daily pattern of life. Such ongoing confession is the necessary evidence of eternal life.

God, who is faithful to His promises and who is just in forgiving, has promised to cleanse completely those who confess their sins. The confession of sins in this verse is not addressing how one is saved. Rather, it describes the ongoing activity of one who is already saved. The sins we commit as believers, as those who are saved, do not and can not jeopardize our eternal salvation (cf. Rom 8:1, 28–39). However, they are not to be taken lightly because they do affect fellowship with God and bring divine chastisement if not confessed (cf. 1 Cor 11:27–32).

In contrast to the above, those who claim to have fellowship with God and, yet, deny that they have committed sins, make God a liar and demonstrate that God's word is not in them (v. 10). Here, John addresses the counterpart to verse eight. These are claiming not to have committed sins. Again, by claiming this, they have in effect made God a liar, because God has clearly declared that all men are sinners both by disposition and by act. By denying this, these show that they have never appropriated the truth of God's word and thus are not saved. They do not enjoy fellowship with God because God's word does not abide in them.

b. The Basis for the Demand, 2:1–2

In 1:9 John has identified ongoing confession of sin as the evidence of eternal life. In these verses, John accomplishes two things. First, he makes clear that by affirming the reality of sin in the life of the believer, he is in no way condoning sin. Second, he supports God's faithfulness in forgiving the believer's sins by identifying the circumstances surrounding this forgiveness.

Addressing his readers affectionately as though they were his own children, John cautions them about what he has just written. His intent in acknowledging the reality of sin in the life of believers was not to be taken as though he were making light of sin. Because of indwelling sin, John has recognized that believers have not and will not attain sinless perfection in this life. For this reason, confession is needed. However, the fact that believers will not attain perfection in this life does not mean that they should stop striving to overcome sin. John affirms that while sin is a reality and confession necessary, nevertheless his purpose in writing is to exhort his readers not to sin (v. 1a). The standard of perfection is beyond the reach of believers in this life, yet believers are to continually strive to reach this standard as a necessary part of their ongoing sanctification (cf. 1 Pet 1:14–16).

Having exhorted his readers not to sin, John turns to address the provisions God has made for believers when they do sin. The first provision is that believers have an advocate who intercedes on their behalf (v. 1b). The idea of an advocate is one who testifies on behalf of another in a court of law. Here the advocate is Jesus Christ. He is the altogether righteous One who stands in the very presence of the Father interceding on behalf of believers whenever they sin.

This role of an advocate is actually part of the Lord's larger role as the believer's High Priest (cf. Heb 2:17–18; 4:14–16; 7:23–28). As the believer's High Priest, He has in the offering of Himself provided for the full and complete forgiveness of sins. And, the Father has accepted the Son's sacrifice and has raised Him and exalted Him to His right hand. It is on this basis that the Lord intercedes on behalf of those who are saved. Thus, His advocacy cannot and will not fail.

John clarifies Jesus' role as the sacrifice for sins to reinforce the effectiveness of the Lord's intercession and to identify the second provision God has made for the readers. John declares that the One who is the believer's Advocate is at the same time the One whose death has provided for the propitiation of the believer's sins (v. 2a). The concepts of sacrifice and propitiation are frequently linked in both the Old and New Testaments. Sin ultimately is an offense against a holy God. God's holiness demands a just payment to remove or expiate sin's guilt and to satisfy or propitiate divine wrath. John affirms that in the offering of Himself as a sacrifice for sins, Christ has provided for both, with the emphasis in this verse on the removal of God's anger.

However, John does not stop there. He adds that Christ's death also served as the propitiation for the sins of the whole world (v. 2b). The contrast between "our sins" and the sins of the "whole world" can only be understood as a contrast between the sins of believers and the sins of unbelievers. Yet, by saying this, John is not arguing for universalism, that is, that all are or will be saved. By referring to Christ as the propitiation for sins, John is specifically referring to what Christ's death has *provided*, not to what has actually been *applied*. The application of the saving benefits of Christ's sacrifice is conditioned upon repentant faith. John's point is that Christ's death has provided for the forgiveness of sins. And, those who have put their faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior and, thus, have been justified, can be assured that His advocacy on their behalf will secure their continuing forgiveness.

3. Fellowship Demands Obedience to Christ, 2:3–6

This is the third of five ethical responsibilities John identifies in this section that serve as the evidence of eternal life. John begins this passage by identifying the basic principle underlying the test of obedience (v. 3).

He then identifies two hypothetical situations, one negative (v. 4) and one positive (v. 5), to illustrate and apply the principle for his readers. Finally, he concludes the passage by restating the principle (v. 6).

a. The Basis for the Demand, 3

The readers can have assurance that they have come to know Christ, John declares, if they keep His commandments (v. 3). John uses the expression “come to know Christ” to refer to those who have entered into a personal, saving relationship with Christ, that is, to come to know Him as Lord and Savior. From the larger context, it is clear that this relationship is entered into through repentant faith. And, from the preceding verses, keeping Christ’s commandments is parallel to walking in the light (1:7) and, thus, refers to obeying the moral directives that Christ has given in His Word. As before, John uses the present tense in this test, describing those whose lives are characterized by obedience to Christ’s commandments. The principle then is that the evidence of this saving relationship, this knowing Christ, is found in those whose lives are characterized by obedience to His word.

b. The Demand for Obedience, 4–6

Having established the principle, John now gives two hypothetical examples to illustrate and apply the principle for his readers. The first is negative, describing those who fail the test. Those who say that they have come to know Christ, but who do not keep His commandments, John says, are lying and the truth is not in them (v. 4). Consistent with his previous statements, John uses the present tense to describe the individuals in this illustration. Those who claim to know Christ and, yet, whose lives are characterized by disobedience to His word show their claim to be false. Their habitual disobedience demonstrates that the truth of the gospel has never taken hold within them.

Conversely, those who keep His word show that their love for God has been perfected and that they have come to know Christ (v. 5). John expands the test of obedience in this verse by adding the thought of loving God. The point is that those who show as a pattern of life their obedience (present tense) to the Lord’s word demonstrate two things. The first thing they demonstrate is that their love of God has been perfected. By “perfected” John simply means that their love for God has reached its intended goal. Love for God is a gift given by God’s Spirit in conjunction with salvation. The goal and evidence of this love is obedience to God. The Lord said, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word... He who does not love Me does not keep My words.” (John 14:23–24). Hence, by obeying Christ’s words, these show that their love of God has reached its goal. The second thing they demonstrate by their obedience is that they know Christ and, thus, have assurance of eternal life.

Having illustrated the test of obedience, John restates the principle, in this case in terms of a moral imperative, to reinforce the application for his readers. John declares that those who claim that Christ abides in them ought to walk in the same manner as Christ walked (v. 6). To “abide in Christ” is another way of describing a saving relationship with Christ as one that is ongoing or continuing, not one that is temporary or transitory. Those who claim to have this ongoing relationship must show the validity of this claim by living as Christ lived. Again, John uses the present tense to describe a life that is consistently lived in harmony with Christ. The implication is clear. Those who consistently live in this fashion show that they have a true saving relationship with Christ and gain assurance of their salvation. Those who habitually violate this pattern demonstrate that they do not have this relationship and, consequently, that they do not have eternal life.

4. Fellowship Demands Love of Fellow Believers, 2:7–11

This is the fourth of five ethical responsibilities John identifies in this section that serve as the tests or evidence of eternal life. John introduces this passage by linking this test to a commandment previously given by the Lord. The Lord's previous commandment serves as the basis for this test. As has been his custom, John next illustrates and applies this test through a series of hypothetical examples. John begins with a negative example, then gives a positive example, and then ends with a negative example.

a. The Basis for the Demand, 7–8

Addressing his readers as “beloved,” John states that the basis for this present test is not a new commandment but an old commandment that the readers have known from the beginning, that is, from the time of their salvation. John identifies this commandment as the word or message his readers had previously heard (v. 7). By describing the commandment in this way, John is calling their attention to the “new commandment” that the Lord had given His disciples. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another” (John 13:34). The Lord calls it a “new” commandment, not because love had never been commanded, but because He was making His love for them the standard. His disciples were to love one another, Jesus said, “as I have loved you.”

At the same time, John refers to this commandment as a “new commandment” in that he is calling his readers to reflect on what makes this new commandment new and to renew their commitment to it. What makes this new commandment new is spelled out in the rest of the verse. The newness of this commandment, John declares, is both true in Christ and true in them (v. 8). The newness is true in Christ in that His death on Calvary's cross has demonstrated once for all the true meaning of

divine love. If Christ's love is the example to be followed in this new commandment, and it is, then His sacrificial death on Calvary's cross establishes the true measure of that love. This is how his readers were to view the new commandment. They were to love one another as Christ loved them and gave Himself for them.

However, the newness of this commandment is also true in the readers. It is true in them, John states, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining. As in his earlier statements, John is using light and darkness in a figurative sense. Darkness refers to the falsehood and moral evil associated with sin; light refers to the truth and moral good associated with the gospel. John's point is that as the readers obey this commandment in loving others they demonstrate the reality of Christ's love in them. And as they love others, the love of Christ penetrates more fully in them and through them, dispelling the darkness and revealing the light. The newness of this commandment is true in them, then, as Christ's love is demonstrated in them and through them in their loving others.

b. The Demand for Love, 9–11

Having identified the standard for this test, John proceeds to give three hypothetical situations to illustrate and apply the test. The first is negative. Those who say that they are living in the light of God's word and yet hate other believers, show that they are, in fact, continuing to live in darkness (v. 9). The expression “hate” is in the present tense and describes an ongoing attitude of hostility against another, not simply a momentary flash of anger. Those who continue to show a hostile attitude toward others and, specifically, toward other believers demonstrate by this that they have never experienced the love of God through the gospel. Such are still living under the darkness and bondage of sin.

Conversely, those who love other believers abide in the light of the gospel and there is no occasion for stumbling in them (v. 10). John uses the present tense twice in this statement to describe the continuation of these activities. It is those who continue to love their fellow believers who are thus abiding or continually living in the light of God's word. And, because love is a fulfilling of the moral demands of the gospel, those who love have, for all practical purposes, removed anything that would cause them to stumble and fall into sin. John is not describing sinless perfection here, but simply a consistent testimony of obedience to God's word. Such a pattern of love and obedience among the readers demonstrates the reality of God's transforming love in them and gives them assurance of eternal life.

John concludes this passage with a negative example to reinforce the dangers of failing to follow Christ's commandment. John adds that those who hate other believers reside in darkness and are living in darkness. For this reason, these do not know where they are going because the darkness has blinded their eyes (v. 11). Again, John uses the present tense in his statement to depict the ongoing nature of the activities mentioned. Those who habitually hate other believers continue to reside in the darkness of sin and continue to live in that darkness. As a consequence, their sin has blinded them to the ultimate destination of their lives. The tragedy is that they fail the test of eternal life and are heading toward eternal condemnation and punishment and they are unaware of where they are heading. All of this serves as a powerful incentive for the readers to love one another as Christ has loved them and to distance themselves from the censure of this verse.

5. Fellowship Demands Separation from the World, 2:12–17

This is the fifth of the five ethical or moral tests John identifies in this section as the evidence of eternal life. Before addressing the actual test, however, John begins by expressing his confidence in the salvation of his readers (vv. 14–16). Following this, he states the test in the form of a prohibition and then gives three reasons that clarify and support the prohibition (vv. 15–17).

a. John's Expression of Confidence toward His Readers, 12–14

Throughout the preceding tests John has been uncompromising in denouncing those who claim to have eternal life and yet give no evidence of this. John has declared these to be liars and deceivers, imposters who are still in bondage to sin and under God's just condemnation. At this point, John pauses to give his readers assurance that his denunciations are not directed against them. What he has written he has written *for* his readers, not *about* them. The passage itself is a highly structured composition involving six declarations divided into two parallel sections of three declarations each, all describing the spiritual status of his readers. Each section begins with John addressing them as "little children" and then as "fathers" and finally as "young men." The first expression refers to the readers collectively (cf. 2:1) while the second and third divide the readers into two categories, "fathers" describing mature believers and "young men" describing those recently saved.

The *first section* starts with John addressing his readers collectively and stating that he is writing to assure them that their sins have been forgiven (v. 12). The forgiveness here refers to their justification, the complete and final forgiveness they have received at salvation. John adds that they have received this forgiveness for His name's sake, that is, on the basis of what Christ has accomplished for them in His sacrificial death. Next, John says he is writing to mature believers to assure them that they know "Him who was from the

beginning,” a reference to their knowing Christ as their Lord and Savior (v. 13a; cf. 1:1). Finally, John says that he is writing new believers to assure them that they have overcome the evil one (v. 13b). This describes recent converts as having been delivered in salvation from Satan’s power and dominion.

The *second section* also starts with John addressing his readers collectively and assuring them that they know the Father (v. 13c). Again, the idea in their knowing the Father is their having a saving relationship with the Father. They know Him as their Father because He has begotten them through the gospel as His children. John next addresses the mature believers among his readers, restating what he has said about them in the previous section. They know Christ, the One who existed before creation, in that they have come into a saving relationship with Him through the gospel (v. 14a). John concludes by turning again to the new converts, stating that they are spiritually strong, that the word of God abides in them, and that they have overcome the evil one (v. 14b). The thought here is that these have been strengthened spiritually because God’s word has taken root in their lives through the gospel and has given them victory over Satan’s control.

b. The Demand for Separation, 15–17

Having expressed his confidence in the salvation of his readers, John presents the test in the form of a prohibition. He then clarifies and supports the prohibition through three declarations that follow. The prohibition is designed to warn his readers about that which is antithetical to eternal life. The declarations that follow are intended to reinforce the danger of what is prohibited and to encourage the readers to heed the warning.

John warns his readers that they are not to love the world or the things in the world (v. 15a). The world John warns his readers not to love refers to the

present world of fallen humanity that is controlled by sin and under Satan’s authority and influence. As such, this present world is diametrically opposed to God and antithetical to the things of God. Thus, John’s prohibition is that his readers are not to place their affections on this present fallen world and, specifically, on the things this fallen world pursues or esteems.

To clarify and support his prohibition, John makes three declarations about this present world system. The first declaration is in the form of a hypothetical statement. John declares that if anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him (v. 15b). Again, to love the world means to place one’s affections on this world and all that this world represents. John’s contrast here is clear and absolute. Those who habitually (present tense) love the world demonstrate by this that they do not love God. God is not the true object of their highest affection, as would be the case for those who have experienced the mercy and grace of God in salvation.

The second declaration identifies the specific characteristics of this world the readers were to avoid. John declares that all that is characteristic of this world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life is not of the Father, but is of the world (v. 16). The lust of the flesh refers to any evil desire involving materialism or immorality that comes from the sinful disposition within. The lust of the eyes refers to sinful pleasures derived from what the eyes can see, specifically when the object of what is seen are those things this world desires. The pride of life refers to the false pride that comes from having what the world esteems as valuable. The reason the readers were not to engage in such activity is that all of these things do not come from God, but are the product of this fallen world.

The third reason John gives in support of the prohibition involves the transitory nature of the

present world and the permanence of God's will and those who do it. John declares that this present world and its lusts are all passing away, but the one who does the will of God will live forever (v. 17). While God's judgment of the world is yet future, nevertheless, there is a sense in which the world is already showing the signs of its own demise. Nothing that is esteemed or valued in this fallen world is of lasting value, but in fact perishes with use or with the passing of time. The implication from this is that those who are devoted to the things of this world will themselves not continue. They will be judged and excluded from the world that is coming. Conversely, those who are characterized (present tense) by doing God's will through obeying His word are assured of eternal life both now and in eternity.

B. Fellowship Tested on Doctrinal Grounds, 2:18–27

In the previous verses John has set forth the ethical tests for fellowship with God and eternal life. In these verses, he advances the doctrinal tests. John divides the passage into three sections. He begins by addressing the issue of perseverance (vv. 18–21), next he discusses a key Christological test (vv. 22–23), and he concludes by returning again to the issue of perseverance (vv. 24–27). Although the actual term John has used for fellowship does not occur in these verses, the concept is necessarily implied in the expressions John does use. In view here are the expressions “have the Father” (v. 23) and “abide in the Son and in the Father” (vv. 24, 27). Both are describing those who have a saving relationship with the Father and the Son and this is simply another way of saying that these enjoy fellowship with the triune God.

1. Fellowship Demands Perseverance, 18–21

John begins this section by warning his readers about false teachers or antichrists, as he calls them. It is the last hour, John says, and just as they had heard that the Antichrist is coming, even so now many antichrists have appeared, providing evidence that it is the last hour (v.

18). Similar to the phrases “last days” (cf. 2 Tim 3:1) and “last times” (cf. 1 Pet 1:20) the expression “last hour” refers to the period of time between the first and second advents of Christ. This period is viewed as the last hour in that the Lord's return is imminent, that is, it could come at any moment, and there are signs already present that point to the nearness of His return. Specifically, John says, the spirit of falsehood that will energize the future Antichrist is already present and active in the antichrists or false teachers now on the scene. John calls these antichrists because they are fundamentally opposed to Christ and the gospel.

These false teachers left the congregations represented by the readers, John states, but that simply revealed that they were never truly a part of the fellowship of believers. In fact, had they truly been part of the fellowship of believers, they would not have departed from the readers (v. 19). The fact that they left is proof that they were never part of the fellowship to begin with. What these lacked, and what the readers have, is the anointing or gift of God's Spirit dwelling within them. In that John's readers have this anointing, they understand the truth and they continue in the truth (v. 20). In other words, those who have God's Spirit and eternal life persevere in the faith. Since the false teachers have left the faith, it is clear that they do not have God's Spirit and do not have eternal life. John concludes by saying that he is writing these things to his readers, not because they have failed to understand and embrace the truth, but because they have embraced it. As such, they know the truth and are able to recognize all that is in conflict with the truth (v. 21).

2. Fellowship Demands a True Christology, 22–23

At the heart of the error confronting the readers was a heretical view of Jesus Christ, a view that denied the incarnation and, thus, the deity of Jesus. John directly addresses this heresy. He begins by asking a rhetorical question to identify the false teachers. Who is the liar, John asks, if not the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? The one who does this, John declares, is an

antichrist. By denying this truth, he is in fact denying both the Father and the Son (v. 22). John is using the title Christ to refer to the deity of Jesus. The false teachers were denying that the human Jesus and the divine Christ were united in one person. Instead, they taught that the spirit of the divine Christ came upon Jesus at His baptism and left Him while on the cross, just before Jesus died.

John declares that the one who teaches this is *the* liar, that is, the chief of liars in that this lie attacks the very essence of the gospel. To deny the incarnation is to deny the validity of God's message of salvation. If Jesus were not the God-man, at the same time fully God and fully man, He could not be the Savior. He must be fully man to die for man, and He must be fully God for His death to be of sufficient value to atone for sin. Since the Father is the one who authored the plan of salvation and the one who sent the Son, to deny this fundamental truth about the Son is to deny in effect the Father as well.

Furthermore, John adds, whoever denies the Son does not have fellowship with the Father. In contrast, the one who confesses the Son has fellowship with both the Father and the Son (v. 23). The implications of this issue are far reaching. The one denying the truth about Jesus does not have fellowship with the Father. In other words, the one denying this does not enjoy a saving relationship with the Father. On the other hand, the one who continues (present tense) to confess the Son, that is, he believes the truth about the Jesus and continues to embrace it, this one has fellowship with both the Father and the Son.

3. Fellowship Demands Perseverance, 24–27

In the previous verses John has denounced those who have defected from the faith. Here, John turns again to address the importance and necessity of persevering in the faith as the mark of those who have fellowship with God and eternal life. John exhorts his readers to let that which they have heard from the beginning abide in them. If the message they heard from the beginning

abides or remains in them, John promises that they will continue to abide in the Son and the Father (v. 24).

To speak of the gospel as abiding (present tense) in them is another way of saying that they were to continue to believe the gospel, they were to persevere in the faith. Those who persevere in the faith are assured that they will continue to abide in, that is, continue to have fellowship with both the Son and the Father. Furthermore, having fellowship with the Son and Father is nothing less than having eternal life, that which God has promised in the gospel (v. 25).

John declares that what he is writing in these verses was intended to warn them about those who were endeavoring to deceive them, a reference to the false teachers (v. 26). John's purpose in writing these things was thus to protect the readers from those who were denying the truth of the gospel. In the face of this threat, John's readers could take comfort. The anointing or gift of God's Spirit given them by God at salvation continues (present tense) to abide in them. As a consequence, John says, there was nothing the false teachers had to offer that the readers needed to be taught (v. 27a).

On the contrary, God's Spirit continues to teach them, confirming them in the truth, and the One instructing them is Himself absolutely true and without falsehood. Thus, just as the Spirit continues to instruct them regarding the truth, John's readers were to continue to abide in that truth, and by abiding in that truth they would continue to abide in Christ (v. 27b). John's point is not that persevering in the faith is a condition for fellowship with God and eternal life. Rather, John's point is that those who have been given eternal life through the gospel will persevere in the faith.

III. The Second Test: Eternal Life Defined as Divine Sonship, 2:28–4:6

Instead of viewing eternal life as fellowship with God, John transitions in this section to viewing eternal life as membership in God’s family. In other words, eternal life is the possession of those who have been born again into the family of God and, thus, of those who manifest divine sonship. Similar to the test of fellowship, the specific phrases describing sonship are found only in the first half of this section. Included here are the expressions “born of God” (2:29; 3:9) and “children of God” (3:1, 2, 10). Nevertheless, concepts of divine sonship are employed throughout. In the concluding passage, for example, John refers to those who are “of” or “from God” (cf. 4:1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6), which means virtually the same thing as those who are “born of God.”

As before, John presents first the ethical standards of divine sonship (2:28–3:24) and then the doctrinal standards (4:1–6).

A. Divine Sonship Tested on Ethical Grounds, 2:28–3:24

In human procreation, the life and characteristics of the parents are passed on to their children. The same is true with the new birth or regeneration. The life of God and the moral characteristics of God are inherited by all who are born of God. Thus, those who have experienced the new birth in salvation will manifest the traits of the One who has begotten them. This then becomes the basis for the present test. Those who manifest these traits can have confidence that they are born of God. Those who do not manifest these traits fail the test and by this show that they are not begotten of God. The specific characteristics John focuses on in these verses are righteousness and love. Those born of God will live righteously and will love others in the family of God.

1. Sonship Demands Righteous Conduct, 2:28–3:10

John divides this passage into two subsections. He first identifies the standard for sonship (2:28–3:3), grounding that standard in the righteous character of God. Following this he applies this standard by contrasting

the life of the children of God with that of the children of the devil (3:4–10).

a. The Standard for the Demand, 2:28–3:3

John identifies the standard for sonship (2:28–29) and then reinforces the importance of the standard by addressing certain implications that stem from this standard (3:1–3).

(1) The identification of the standard, 2:28–29

John begins by repeating his exhortation from the preceding verse, namely, that his readers were to abide in Christ, and then adds an incentive for his readers to heed the exhortation. As mentioned above, to abide in Christ means to persevere in the faith and in faithfulness. However, whereas the preceding verses have focused on the former of these two thoughts, persevering in the faith, here and in the following verses John focuses on the second thought, that of persevering in faithfulness. The reason his readers were to do this, John declares, is so that they might have confidence when Christ appears and not shrink from Him in shame at His coming (v. 28).

The expressions “when He appears” and “at His coming” are both used in the New Testament to refer to Christ’s return and to the events surrounding His return. The specific event in view in this passage is Christ’s coming to gather His church from the earth just prior to the seven year Tribulation period (cf. Rev 3:10). This event is referred to as the rapture of the Church and involves believers in the body of Christ receiving their resurrection bodies (cf. 1 Cor 15:50–57), being caught up together to meet the Lord in the air, (cf. 1 Thess 4:13–18), being taken to the third heavens (cf. John 14:1–3), and having their works evaluated at the *bema* or judgment seat of Christ (see attached).

Those who persevere in faithfulness to God's word, John explains, will have confidence in the Lord's commendation when they stand before Him. Those who have faltered in their faithfulness, on the other hand, will experience a measure of disappointment and shame. Assuming the two phrases referring to the Lord's return in this verse are both addressing the rapture of the church, the second group must refer to believers who because of a lack of faithfulness will suffer the loss of rewards (cf. 1 Cor 3:15).

It is quite possible, however, that John purposely changes from "when He appears" to "at His coming" in describing the second group to distinguish more clearly the two groups and the events in view. If this were the case, then the second phrase refers to Christ's coming to the earth at the end of the Tribulation to resurrect Old Testament and tribulation saints and to remove unbelievers from the earth (Dan 12:1-2; Matt 24:29-31, 36-41; 25:31-46). As such, the second group who shrinks away in shame would refer to unbelievers.

It is difficult to know which of the two interpretations is intended. John has consistently contrasted the response of believers with unbelievers in his epistle and that would favor the second interpretation. At the same time, in the immediate context he appears to be addressing a single group, here of believers ("little children"), and that would argue for the first interpretation. Since it is not clear that John is contrasting two entirely different groups in this verse or that he has two separate events in view regarding the Lord's return, the first interpretation is slightly preferred, but caution is warranted.

In the next verse, John supports his exhortation by establishing the principle upon which it is based. If the readers know that God is righteous, then they know that those who have been born of Him demonstrate this fact by righteous living (v. 29). John assumes his readers know that God is righteous, that is, that His words and actions are wholly consistent with His own character and that He is without sin. John also assumes his readers recognize from this that all those born into the family of God in salvation will demonstrate the reality of the new birth by having their lives characterized (present tense) by righteous conduct. Such conduct, John declares, is the necessary evidence of regeneration or the new birth.

(2) The implications from the standard, 3:1-3

Having established the standard by which sonship or the new birth can be identified, John reinforces the importance of this standard by reflecting on the implications of the new birth in the following three verses. The *first implication* is that the new birth defines the readers' relationship to God and to the world. In their relationship to God, John notes that the new birth constitutes the readers as the children of God and this relationship is a gift that reveals God's amazing love (3:1a). There is no other way to explain how sinners deserving eternal condemnation and punishment should be constituted as God's own children except as an unparalleled display of God's redeeming love.

The counterpart to this, John adds, is that the world of unbelievers does not recognize the reality of what the readers are. But this should come as no surprise. Humanity did not recognize the reality of who Jesus was, when He came as the Savior of the world (3:1b). For

this reason, John declares, neither does the world recognize who believers are. John's point is that, just as the world rejected Jesus, it will reject the readers as well.

The *second implication* of the readers' status as the children of God is that their full and complete conformity to the moral image of Christ is yet future. John states that while the readers already are the children of God, they are not yet what they will be in terms of Christ-likeness. At the same time, the readers know that when Christ appears, they will be made fully like Him, for they will see Him as He is in all His glory (3:2). Conformity in holiness to the image of Christ is a gradual and necessary process in this life for all who are the children of God (cf. 2 Cor 13:18). Yet, full conformity to Christ's holiness will not be realized until the Lord returns. At that time, believers will be given their resurrection bodies in which sin no longer dwells and they will be fully conformed to the moral likeness of their glorified Lord.

The *third* and final *implication* of the readers' status as the children of God is that they are to strive for moral purity in anticipation of the Lord's return. John says that all those who have their hope fixed on the Lord's return will purify themselves just as He is pure (3:3). To hope in the Lord's return means having a confident expectation that the Lord will return just as He has promised. Those who have this hope, John declares, will continually (present tense) purify themselves. This involves not only ongoing confession of sins (1:9), but also ongoing obedience to God's word.

The reason why those who are fully persuaded of the blessed hope purify themselves, John explains, is because they anticipate someday standing before Him who is their Lord and

Savior and who is absolutely pure of any and all defilement from sin.

b. The Demand for Righteous Conduct, 3:4–10

John next applies the test of sonship by contrasting the children of God and the children of the devil in three parallel statements. The three statements reinforce the fundamental incompatibility between the children of God and the practice of sin. Those who practice sin are children of the devil; those who practice righteousness are children of God.

(1) The Initial Contrast between the Children of God and the Children of the Devil, 4–6

John begins this passage by associating sin with lawlessness. John states that those who practice sin (present tense) are also practicing lawlessness (present tense) in that sin is in its essence lawlessness (v. 4). Lawlessness here refers to a purposeful disregarding of law and, specifically, to a purposeful disregarding of God's moral law. In other words, sin is not simply a moral weakness or a failure to measure up to a higher standard. John declares that sin is a conscious and willful rebellion against God and His moral law as that law is revealed in His word. As such, John says that those who practice sin are in open and ongoing rebellion against God and against His word.

Following his linking sin with lawlessness, John next reminds his readers of the purpose of Christ's coming. He came, John states, for the purpose of taking away sins (v. 5a). The expression "to take away sins" necessarily involves Christ taking away or removing the guilt of sins. But the expression also includes that idea of Christ taking away or delivering from the practice of sins, and that is John's focus in this verse. Christ came not only to remove the guilt and condemnation of sin, but

also to break sin's stranglehold and to equip believers for righteous living. And this purpose, John adds, is wholly consistent with Christ's own character. There is, after all, absolutely no sin found in Him (v. 5b).

Finally, John draws a logical conclusion from the preceding, applying the test of righteous living by way of a contrast. No one, John declares, who abides in Christ sins; conversely, no one who sins has seen Christ or knows Him (v. 6). Consistent with his previous statements, John employs the present tense in describing the activity in both halves of the contrast. In other words, John is contrasting those who habitually practice sin and those who do not. Those who do not, John declares, show by this that they are abiding in Christ. As before, to abide in Christ means to abide in a saving relationship with Christ, to be saved (cf. 2:6).

In contrast, those who practice sin show by this that they have neither seen Christ nor known Him. To see Christ means to see Him as He really is, to see Him as the righteous Son of God who takes away the sin of the world. And, to know Christ means to know Him in an intimate, saving way, to know Him as Lord and Savior. Thus, those who habitually practice sin demonstrate that they have never come to recognize who Christ is or come to know Him in salvation.

(2) The Subsequent Contrast between the Children of God and the Children of the Devil, 7–8

John continues developing his contrast from the preceding verse, prefacing it with a warning to his readers. Addressing them as his spiritual children, John cautions his readers about those who would deceive them as to the truth of what he is saying (v. 7a). John has in view the false teachers who were endeavoring

to lead the readers astray by driving a wedge between knowing God and living righteously.

With these in mind, John reaffirms that the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous (v. 7b). In other words, those whose lives are characterized by righteous conduct show that they have a righteous standing before God. John is not saying that justification, a righteous standing with God, is earned by righteous conduct. Rather, he is affirming the truth that those whom God justifies will demonstrate the reality of that justification by practicing righteousness. Furthermore, by practicing righteousness they are simply reflecting the life of the One who has saved them, has given them life.

Conversely, John declares, the one who practices sin is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning (v. 8a). John's contrast is clear and compelling. Those who practice sin demonstrate by this that they are of the devil in the sense that they are manifesting the character of Satan himself. John describes Satan as sinning from the beginning. The reference here is to the Garden of Eden where Satan tempted Adam and Eve to sin. John regards Satan as the father of sin and, hence, of sinners in that through his temptation he introduced sin into the race. Thus, those who practice sin are showing that they are the spiritual offspring of Satan, the author of sin.

Yet for this reason, John adds, the Son of God appeared in order to destroy the works of the devil (v. 8b). John's reference to the Son's appearance has in view the incarnation and one of chief purposes of the incarnation, John declares, was to destroy the works of the devil. The devil's works are all the sinful attitudes and actions of which he is the ultimate source, whether directly or indirectly. The destruction

of these refers specifically to what Christ accomplished at the cross. Not only was the devil himself judged at the cross, but also provision was made for deliverance from sin. Those who are the children of God have been delivered from the works of the devil in the sense that they have been delivered from the penalty and power of sin. It was the devil who brought about bondage to sin and it was the Son who destroyed the works of the devil by delivering the redeemed from that bondage.

(3) The Concluding Contrast between the Children of God and the Children of the Devil, 9–10

In his concluding statement contrasting the children of God and the children of the devil, John begins by repeating the test of sonship. No one, he declares, who is born of God practices sin (v. 9a). John is not denying that the one born of God ever commits sin (cf. 1:8, 10; 2:1). As in 3:6, the force of the present tense here describes the ongoing practice of sin. What John is denying is that those who have experienced the new birth in salvation will continue to practice sin, that is, will have lives characterized by the habit and pattern of sin.

The reason this is true, John explains, is because God's seed abides in the child of God and he cannot sin, because he is born of God (v. 9b). The seed that abides or continues to remain in God's child is a reference to the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who accomplishes the new birth and who, in conjunction with the new birth, takes up residence in the life of the children of God. In connection with His residing or abiding, the Spirit uses and applies God's word, convicting of sin, prompting confession and cleansing (cf. 1:9), and conforming to the image of Christ (cf. 2 Cor 3:18). As such, John says, those who have

God's seed abiding in them cannot continue to practice sin, because they are born of God and God's Spirit effectively works in them in sanctification.

Having restated the test of sonship, John once again applies the test by contrasting the children of God and the children of the devil. On the basis of this test, John declares, the children of God are clearly distinguished from the children of the devil. Specifically, anyone who does not practice (present tense) righteousness or who does not continue to love (present tense) other believers is not of God (v. 10). In other words, those whose lives are characterized by sin or unrighteousness fail the test and are not children of God, are not saved. The same may be said of those whose lives are characterized by hatred rather than love toward other believers.

The converse, implied by John's statement, is that those who practice righteousness and who are characterized by love of fellow believers pass the test and have assurance that they are the children of God.

2. Sonship Demands Love of the Children of God, 3:11–24

The second ethical test of sonship is love and, specifically, love for the children of God. John actually made the transition from righteous conduct as the test of sonship to love being the test in the preceding verse. Here he gives an extended discussion on love of fellow believers as an essential and necessary characteristic of the children of God.

John divides his discussion into four sections. He begins by identifying the standard for this test, the Lord's command that believers are to love one another, and then illustrates the command through two negative examples (vv. 11–13). Next, he applies the test by

contrasting those who love with those who do not love and then reinforces the contrast by adding a positive and then a negative illustration (vv. 14–17). Following this, John exhorts his readers to demonstrate their love toward one another and then gives two illustrations as incentives for his readers to heed his exhortation (vv. 18–22). He concludes by restating the standard for the test and then applies the standard by giving a positive example of those who pass the test and have assurance of sonship (vv. 23–24).

a. The Standard for the Demand, 11–13

John identifies the standard by which sonship is measured (v. 11) and then follows this with two illustrations to clarify the standard (vv. 12–13). The standard for measuring sonship, John declares, is the message the readers had heard from the beginning, namely, that they were to love one another (v. 11). The message John refers to here is the new commandment the Lord gave to His disciples while celebrating the Passover the night He was betrayed (cf. 1 John 2:7).

On that night, after Judas had departed to conspire with the Jewish leaders, the Lord said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34–35). This is the message, John says, the readers had heard from the beginning, that is, from the beginning the gospel was proclaimed among them, and this is the message that forms the standard by which sonship is measured.

John clarifies the Lord’s command through two negative examples, both of which illustrate the opposite of love. The first example involves Cain. Cain, John declares, was a child of the evil one and demonstrated this by his slaying his brother (cf. Gen 4:8). And why did he slay his brother, John

asks? Because, his deeds were evil, and his brother’s were righteous (v. 12). John’s illustration is a powerful example of the opposite of divine sonship and the characteristics of it. Cain manifested his spiritual kinship to the devil by slaying his brother. The Lord had declared that the devil was a murderer from the beginning, from the time of the fall of Adam and Eve (cf. John 8:44). And, by murdering his brother, Cain was manifesting the characteristics of the devil himself.

In answer to the question why Cain slew his brother, John states that it was because his deeds were evil and his brother’s were righteous. By answering the question in this way, John is pointing out the connection between hatred toward God and hatred toward God’s children. Cain’s deeds were evil because he refused to submit to God’s revelation, specifically in the matter of the kind of offering God required. And the reason he did not submit to God’s revelation was because, at the heart of the matter, he was in rebellion against God. In effect, Cain hated God and, as a consequence, he hated his brother who was a child of God (cf. Heb 11:4). John’s point is clear. Those who claim sonship from God and, yet, at the same time, do not love the children of God, show by this that they have never been born of God. They, like Cain, have a different father altogether.

John concludes with a second negative illustration. Do not be surprised, John warns his readers, if the world hates you (v. 13). John’s warning stems directly from his previous illustration. Having established the principle that those who hate God also hate the children of God, John now applies this principle to his readers. What is implied from the preceding verse is that the world—and the reference here is to unbelievers—hates the readers because it hates God. John’s logic is compelling. The world of unbelievers is in rebellion against God and, in fact, hates God and, as a consequence, it hates those who are born of God (cf. John 15:18–

20). Thus, anyone who hates those born of God is manifesting the characteristics of the world and therefore cannot be a child of God.

b. The Contrast between Those Who Love God's Children and Those Who Don't, 14–17

John next applies the standard of love by contrasting those who love the children of God with those who do not (vv. 14–15) and then reinforces the contrast through two illustrations (vv. 16–17).

The Contrast, 14–15. The readers know, John states, that they have passed out of death into life, because they love fellow believers (v. 14a). To pass out of death into life means to be delivered from the condition of spiritual death and to be given eternal life, all in connection with the new birth (cf. John 5:24). The evidence that this has happened in the readers, John declares, is that they continue (present tense) to love others who are born of God. As such, they meet the standard and pass the test of sonship.

Conversely, John says, the one who does not love the child of God abides in death (v. 14b). Thus, the opposite of the above is also true. Those who do not continue (present tense) to love God's children show by this that they do not have eternal life but, in fact, remain in the condition of spiritual death. Furthermore, John adds, everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and his readers know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him (v. 15). John links the inner motive, hatred, with its outward expression, murder, to reinforce the fact that the one who hates is not a child of God. As before, John uses the present tense to describe the one who habitually hates and, specifically, who habitually hates the children of God. Furthermore, John is not saying that hatred and murder are the same thing or that the one will always lead to the other. What John is saying is that murder is the ultimate expression of a heart that is filled with hatred. Since it is self-evident that no murderer has

eternal life residing in him, then it is also true that no one who is controlled by hatred can have eternal life residing in him.

The Illustrations, 16–17. John uses the supreme example of love to clarify for the readers the kind of love they were to show toward other believers. The readers know, John says, what love is because of the display of love that Christ has given when He laid down His life for them. As a consequence, John adds, they ought to follow the example of Christ's love in laying down their lives for fellow believers (v. 16). In other words, the love that believers are to show toward one another is the same kind of love that Christ has shown toward them.

Without question, the reference here is to Christ's sacrificial death on Calvary's cross on their behalf. Christ's sacrificial giving of Himself for the benefit of others has defined once for all the true nature of divine love (cf. John 15:13). It is this kind of sacrificial love that the readers were to show toward one another. At the same time, John is not saying that such love requires that they die for each other, only that such love is willing, if necessary, to die for the benefit of others in the cause and service of Christ.

To apply this principle for his readers, John uses a negative illustration to show how love must be demonstrated in day to day living. On the other hand, John asks, if someone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, and yet withholds his compassion from him, how does the love of God abide in him (v. 17)? John is asking a rhetorical question where the answer intended is obvious. The one who fails to help a believer in need, when he has the opportunity to do so, shows by this that God's love does not abide in him, that is, that he himself has never experienced the love of God in salvation. The force of John's negative illustration serves as a challenge for his readers to demonstrate

the reality of God's love in them by showing this love toward one another.

c. The Exhortation to Love, 18–22

In this section, John exhorts his readers to love one another (v. 18) and then gives two illustrations showing the benefits for those who love as incentives for his readers to heed the exhortation (vv. 19–22).

(1) The Exhortation Proper, 18

John's exhortation in this verse provides the positive counterpart to the negative illustration in the preceding verse. Addressing the readers as his spiritual children, John challenges them not to love simply in word or speech, but in deed and in truth (v. 18). John does not want his readers merely to talk of their love for one another. He wants them to demonstrate their love by actually helping other believers when they are in need. The very nature of divine love experienced in salvation is such that it will and, therefore, must manifest itself in good works done in obedience to God's word. That is what John means when he exhorts his readers to love in deed and in truth.

(2) The Incentives for the Exhortation, 19–22

Having exhorted his readers to love, John gives two illustrations that serve as incentives for his readers to heed the exhortation. The *first illustration*, verses 19–20, ties in love with the assurance of salvation. The readers will know, John declares, by their loving others in this way, that they are of the truth and will assure their hearts before God in whatever their hearts may condemn them (vv. 19–20a). John is saying that the readers can have confidence that they are of the truth, that is, that they are

saved, if they are loving believers in deed and in truth.

Furthermore, by their loving other believers in this way, they can overcome a heart or conscience that may be condemning them and raising doubts about their salvation as they struggle against sin. The reason, John says, that loving other believers can overcome such is because God is greater than their hearts and knows all (v. 20b). In other words, God knows that believers are frail and will struggle against sin. And, God is able to overrule a conscience troubled by human frailty by giving assurance of salvation for those who are loving others as God has commanded. By loving other believers, the readers can have assurance that they are indeed children of God and this assurance will answer whatever doubts their hearts may raise in their struggle against sin.

With his *second illustration*, verses 21–22, John links loving others with having confidence in prayer. This too serves as an incentive for the readers to heed his exhortation to love one another. Addressing his readers as those whom God has loved, John says, if their hearts do not condemn them, they can have confidence before God, and whatever they ask they receive from Him (vv. 21–22a). Here John discusses the counterpart to the preceding verse. Those whose hearts are not condemning them can have confidence before God when they approach Him in prayer. Whatever they ask, John says, God hears and answers their prayers.

This is true, John explains, because these keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight (v. 22b). John's point is that those whose lives are characterized (present tense) by obeying God's word and, thus, are pleasing Him, have a conscience that

is free from condemnation. Furthermore, because these are characterized by obedience, they can have confidence when they pray because there is nothing in their lives that will hinder God from hearing and answering their prayers. Obedience to God is not the meritorious cause for answered prayer. Rather, it is the necessary condition for God to hear and answer. And, God has promised to answer the prayer of those who love Him and obey His word.

d. The Restatement of the Standard, 23–24

John concludes this section by reaffirming the standard for the test of sonship (v. 23) and then applies the standard by giving an example of those who pass the test and therefore have assurance of salvation (v. 24). The standard for the test are the commands that the Father and Son have given the readers. Specifically, John says, this is the Father's commandment, that the readers were to believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and that they were to love one another, even as Jesus Himself had commanded them (v. 23). Although John uses the singular commandment at the beginning of this verse, there are actually two commands mentioned, one from the Father and one from both the Father and the Son.

The first is from the Father and involves the command to believe on the name of His Son, Jesus Christ (cf. John 6:29). To believe on the name of someone means to put one's confidence or trust in, to commit oneself to all that the name signifies, specifically here that Jesus Christ is the incarnate Son of God. What John is describing with this first command is the exercising of repentant faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ for salvation. The second command is from the Father and the Son and directs those who have obeyed the first

command to love other believers (cf. John 13:34; 15:12; 1 John 2:7–8; 3:11). By including both of these commands, John has expanded the test of sonship to include believing in Christ and loving other believers. Yet, the two commands go hand in hand, so much so that John is able to speak of them as one commandment.

Having restated the standard for the test, John concludes by giving an example of those who pass the test. The one who keeps His commandments, John states, abides in Him, and He in him. And the readers know by this that He abides in them, by the Spirit whom He has given them (v. 24). The keeping of God's commandments refers back to the preceding verse and the two commands specifically mentioned there of believing in Jesus and loving other believers. Those who continue (present tense) to keep these commandments, John says, show by this that they continue (present tense) to abide in the Father and He continues to abide in them. As before, to abide in the Father means to abide in a saving relationship with the Father (cf. 2:5–6). And, this saving relationship is further defined as a mutual abiding where the believer not only abides in the Father, but the Father also abides in the believer.

Furthermore, John adds, the readers know that the Father abides in them by the Spirit whom the Father has given them. What John means by this is that the Spirit of God given to the believer at salvation gives believers assurance in the abiding presence of God, that is, assurance that God has saved them and that He continues to work in them in their sanctification. And, the Spirit gives believers this assurance in connection with their persevering in the faith and their ongoing love of the children of God.

B. Divine Sonship Tested on Doctrinal Grounds, 4:1–6

Having identified the ethical tests for sonship in the previous section, John turns to address the doctrinal test in this section. The transition from the ethical to the doctrinal was actually introduced in the previous verses with the command to believe on the name of Jesus Christ (3:23). John uses this command as the focal point of the doctrinal test, with specific application to false prophets. John begins with a warning about false prophets and the need to test the message of the prophets (v. 1), he then identifies the doctrinal standard by which the message of the prophets is to be tested (vv. 2–3), and he concludes by applying the standard, contrasting those who are true prophets from those who are false (vv. 4–6).

1. The Warning about Testing the Prophets, 1

Referring to his readers affectionately as those whom God loves, John warns them not to believe every spirit, but to test the spirits to see whether they are from God. They are to do this, John says, because many false prophets have gone out into the world (v.1). It is clear from the last part of the verse that John is linking the prophets with the spirit energizing the prophets when they prophesy. Thus, to test the spirits means to test the prophets and, specifically, to test the message of the prophets to determine whether the message was authored by God's Spirit or by another spirit, that is, by Satan. The problem facing the readers was that Satan had sent out many false prophets into the world. These were claiming to be prophets of God, but were in fact false prophets, deceived as to their own status and under Satan's power and control. That is why John warns his readers not to believe every prophet, but rather to test the prophets to see if what they spoke was a revelation from God or a false prophecy from the enemy. The means by which the readers were to test the prophets is given in the following verses.

2. The Standard for Testing the Prophets, 2–3

In these verses, John presents the doctrinal standard by which the prophets and their prophecies were to be tested. By this, John says, the readers know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God (vv. 2–3a). This is how the readers were to know or recognize that God's Spirit was speaking through a prophet. Those prophets who confess and affirm in their prophecies that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, that is, that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God, are from God. By affirming this, John says, these prophets show that they are speaking by God's Spirit and are thus from God.

Conversely, any prophet who does not confess Jesus, that is, who does not confess that Jesus Christ is God's incarnate Son, is not from God. In fact, John says, this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which the readers have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world (v. 3b). Those who fail to confess the truth about Jesus, John is saying, show that they are in fact speaking by another spirit. It is the same spirit that will energize the future antichrist. And, although the antichrist has not yet come, nevertheless, the spirit that will one day energize him is already at work, speaking through these false prophets. The spirit who is currently empowering the false prophets and who will energize the future antichrist is none other than Satan himself (cf. 2 Thess 2:3–9; 1 John 2:18).

3. The Contrast between the True and False Prophet, 4–6

Having established the doctrinal test by which his readers could distinguish the true prophet from the false, John now applies the test by contrasting the ministry of the true prophet from that of the false prophet. Specifically, the true prophet is one whom the children of God listen to and follow; the false prophet, on the other hand, is one whom the children of the world listen to and follow. In effect, John is saying that a true prophet can be identified by the fact that the children of God recognize his message and embrace it.

John begins by addressing the relationship of his readers to the false prophets (v. 4), he then describes the relationship of the false prophets to the world (v. 5), and he concludes by contrasting the readers response to the apostolic message with that of the world's response (v. 6).

Addressing his readers as his spiritual children, John affirms that they are from God and have overcome certain ones, because, John says, greater is He who is in them than he who is in the world (v. 4). The ones the readers have overcome is a reference to the false prophets previously mentioned (cf. 4:1). The readers have overcome (perfect tense) these false prophets in the sense that they have thus far rejected the heretical teaching the false prophets were perpetrating. The reason the readers have overcome the false prophets, John explains, was because the one who is in them is greater than the one who is in the world. The one who is in the readers is a reference to God's Spirit (cf. 3:24) and the one who is in the world is a reference to Satan (cf. 3:8). John describes his readers as those who are of God, that is, as those who are born of God. As such, God's Spirit dwells within them and continues to guard them from Satan's deceptions and assure them of the truth of the apostolic message.

Others, on the other hand, are from the world. Therefore, John says, they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them (v. 5). John is describing the false prophets in this verse, portraying them as those who are from the world in the sense that their lives and their message are under the control of the prince and power of this world, Satan himself (cf. John 11:23; 14:30; 16:11; Eph 2:2). For this reason, John states, they speak what is consistent with what the world of lost humanity already believes and, thus, the world listens to their message and follows them. John's point is that those prophets whom the world of lost humanity hears and follows are not prophets of God. Rather, these are prophets of the evil one. As such, they fail the test of sonship and their message is to be rejected.

We, John says, are from God. He who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us (v. 6a). In contrast to the false prophets, John describes himself and the apostolic band as those who are from God, that is, those who are born of God. Furthermore, those who know God—a reference to believers who have come know God in salvation—listen to the message from John and the other apostles and embrace it as true. Those, on the other hand, who are not born of God, John declares, do not listen to or embrace the apostolic message.

By this, John concludes, we know the spirit of truth from the spirit of error (v. 6b). John's conclusion is simple and straightforward. By observing those who listen to a prophet, the readers are able to tell whether that prophet is a prophet of God or a spokesman of the evil one. Those who are born of God and have God's Spirit dwelling within them, illuminating their mind and heart, are able to recognize that a prophet and his message are from God. In contrast, those who are not born of God and do not have God's Spirit dwelling in them are in rebellion against God and reject God's message and His messenger. Thus, any prophet whose message is embraced by those born of God is a true prophet. His message is a message of truth given by God's Spirit. Conversely, any prophet whose message is embraced by the world is a false prophet. His message is a message of error derived ultimately from Satan himself.

IV. The Third Test: Eternal Life Defined as a Combination of Love and Faith, 4:7–5:12

In the previous two tests, John has defined eternal life as fellowship with God and as divine sonship. With his third and final test, John combines the concepts of love and faith as that by which eternal life can be identified or defined. The two concepts of love and faith are necessarily related. Those who love God, John declares, keep His commandments (cf. 5:3). And, keeping His commandments, John states, begins with believing the testimony that God has given concerning His Son (cf. 5:10). As before, John divides the third test between the ethical requirements and doctrinal requirements. In this division, love represents the ethical portion of the test (4:7–5:4) and faith, the doctrinal (5:5–12).

A. Love as the Evidence of Eternal Life, 4:7–5:4

At the heart of the ethical requirements is the premise that those who have experienced God's love in salvation will demonstrate that fact by their loving others and especially by their loving other believers. John develops the ethical portion of the test in four sections. He begins with an initial exhortation for his readers to love one another, basing his exhortation on the love that God has displayed in the gospel (4:7–10). He then repeats the exhortation, developing the relationship between loving others and the assurance of salvation (4:11–14). Next, John applies the ethical test to his readers, connecting faith and love, and then gives two illustrations to reinforce the importance of the test (4:15–21). Finally, he restates the connection between faith and love and then once again applies the test to his readers, linking their love of God and of others with their obeying God's commands (5:1–4).

1. The Initial Exhortation for the Readers to Love One Another, 4:7–10

John divides these verses into two subsections. He first exhorts his readers to love, relating love to assurance through the use of contrasting illustrations (vv. 7–8). Following this he rehearses the particulars of the gospel to clarify the nature and source of love (vv. 9–10).

a. The Exhortation to Love, 7–8

Addressing his readers as those whom God has loved, John exhorts them to love one another. The reason they are to do this, John explains, is that love is from God. Those who love one another are born of God and know God (v. 7). Although the exhortation to love could be translated as a declaration—John stating the fact that the readers do love each other—it is better to take it in agreement with modern translations as an exhortation. John is calling on his readers to practice (present tense) showing love toward one another.

The reason they are to do this, John says, is that such love is from God. In other words, the love John is exhorting his readers to show one another comes from God. It is the love that God has revealed in the gospel and it is the love that God sows in the hearts of those who are saved. That being true, John declares, those who love other believers show by this that they have been born of God and know God.

Conversely, John adds, the opposite follows. Those who do not love (others) do not know God, for God is love (v. 8). If God sows His love in the hearts of those who are saved, then those who do not practice (present tense) love show that they have not been born of God and, in fact, that they do not know God. As before, to know God means to have a saving relationship with God. Those who do not love others, John is saying, show by this that they do not have a saving relationship with God. God is love, John states, in the sense that God is characterized by love. Thus, those born of God will and must manifest this characteristic as proof that they have experienced God's love in salvation.

b. The Nature and Source of Love, 9–10

In the previous verse, John has declared that God is love. Here, John supports that description of God by pointing to the unparalleled display of God's love in the gospel. By this, John says, the love of God was manifested among them. It was manifested in this, that God sent His only begotten Son into the world so that sinners might live through Him (v. 9). The proof, then, that God is love is seen in the fact that God sent His Son into the world to save sinners. John's description of the Son as the only begotten refers to the Son's uniqueness, not to His origin. He is God's unique Son in that He shares fully the same nature and essence as the Father. Furthermore, the world to which the Son was sent was the world of lost humanity. It was a world populated by those in rebellion against God and under His righteous condemnation.

The reason God sent His Son into this world, John declares, was so that sinners might live through Him. Clearly, to live through Him means to be given eternal life through faith in Him, that is, through faith in the person and work of Christ. Here, then, is the unparalleled demonstration of the nature and character of God's love. God has demonstrated His love once for all in the sending of His unique Son to rescue those characterized by sin and worthy of His judgment. Hence, God's love is a gracious love in that it is exercised toward those who are in rebellion against Him and unworthy of it. It is also a compassionate love in that it seeks to deliver those who are under His righteous condemnation and judgment.

John reinforces the gracious nature of God's love by noting that His love was exercised toward those who did not love Him. In this is love, John says, not that the readers loved God, but that He loved them and sent His Son to be the propitiation for their sins (v. 10). John is actually making two points with this statement. First, he establishes the fact that God loved the readers even before the readers loved

Him. He loved them even though, at the time, they loved darkness and not God. The second point is that God's love is both tangible and sacrificial. His love is tangible in that He acted toward those whom He loved by the sending His Son. Furthermore, it is a sacrificial love in that God sent His Son to be the substitutionary sacrifice for sin. John's point is clear. Those who have experienced God's love in salvation must demonstrate that fact by loving others and, specifically, by loving other believers in a way similar to how the Father has loved them. The practice of this kind of love is the evidence of eternal life.

2. The Subsequent Exhortation for the Readers to Love One Another, 11–14

As with the previous passage, John begins by exhorting his readers to love one another (v. 11). Following this, he supports the exhortation by developing the connection between loving others and the assurance of salvation (vv. 12–14).

a. The Exhortation to Love, 11

Similar to the previous exhortation, John begins by describing his readers as those whom God has loved and then adds that, if God so loved them, then they ought also to love one another (v. 11). Building on the reference to God's love in the preceding verse, John declares that, if God so loved the readers, then they ought to follow His example and love one another. The expression, God so loved, could refer to the manner in which God loved the readers. He loved the readers in this way, that is, in a gracious and sacrificial way. Or, it could refer to the extent that God loved the readers. He loved them to the extent that He sent His unique Son to save them. The latter is preferred, though it is difficult to distinguish between the two in this context. In either case, John is using God's love for the readers as an example and incentive for his readers to love one another.

b. The Assurance of Salvation, 12–14

Having exhorted his readers to love one another, John draws a connection between loving other believers and the assurance of salvation as an incentive for his readers to heed his exhortation. No one, John declares, has seen God at any time. If the readers love one another, John adds, then God abides in them and His love is perfected in them (v. 12). With this verse, John answers an implied question, how is God seen in this world? Since God is pure spirit and absolutely holy, no man has ever seen God at any time. Yet, this does not mean that God cannot be seen. John's point is that God can and should be seen in the love that those who are born of Him show toward one another. Those who continue (present tense) to show love toward one another demonstrate that God abides in them, that is, they demonstrate that they have been born of God and that they enjoy a saving relationship with God. Furthermore, by loving other believers, God's love that has been sown in them is perfected in the sense that it is reaching its intended goal.

John next addresses the subjective element in the readers' assurance of eternal life. By this, John says, the readers know that they abide in Him and He in them, because He has given them of His Spirit (v. 13). The expression, by this, at the beginning of the verse points forward to the statement at the end of the verse about the readers having God's Spirit. John's point is straightforward. The readers can know, that is, they can have confidence that they abide in the Father and Father in them because of the presence of God's Spirit in their lives. As before, their abiding in the Father and He in them is a reference to the ongoing saving relationship the readers have with God through the new birth. Their knowledge or confidence of this relationship comes from the presence of God's Spirit in them. What John is referring to here is the internal witness of the Spirit

which gives believers assurance of their salvation. While the connection with the preceding verse is not explicitly stated, it is clearly implied. As the believers love one another, God's Spirit gives them assurance that they are the children of God and have eternal life.

Having established the relationship between loving others and the assurance of salvation, and having identified the subjective role of God's Spirit in this assurance, John concludes by addressing the objective aspect of assurance. The apostolic band has seen and is testifying, John says, that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world (v. 14). The objective element in assurance is the message of the gospel. Specifically, the gospel message is that the Father sent His Son to be the Savior of the world. As before, the world in view in this statement refers to the totality of lost humanity (cf. 2:2). John is not implying by this that all will be saved, only that the Son's sacrifice provides for the salvation of all. The objective aspect of assurance comes from the fact that God has promised in His word that all who believe the gospel will be saved. And, because the gospel John and the others are proclaiming represents the eye-witness testimony of the apostles, the readers can have every confidence that those who believe this gospel have eternal life (cf. 1:1–3).

3. The Initial Application of the Ethical Test, 4:15–21

John divides these verses into two subsections. He begins by applying the test of love to his readers (vv. 15–16). He then gives two illustrations to reinforce the importance of this test (vv. 17–21).

a. The Application Proper, 15–16

John applies the test of love to his readers, first in general terms and then in specific terms. Whoever confesses, John states, that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him and he in God (v. 15). Building

on his description of the gospel in the preceding verse, John declares that all who confess that Jesus is the Son of God can have confidence that God abides in them and they in God. To confess means here to profess faith and trust in the gospel. Specifically, it means to express personal conviction and commitment to Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son of God. All who do this, John says, can have confidence that God abides in them and they in God, that is, they can have confidence that they have a saving relationship with God.

Having established the connection between faith in the gospel and abiding in God, John now applies the ethical test directly to his readers, linking their belief in the gospel with their loving other believers. The readers have come to know, John states, and have believed the love which God has for them. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them (v. 16). In the opening part of this verse, John expresses his confidence that the readers have responded in saving faith to the message of God's love revealed in the gospel. The expression, the love which God has *for us*, is better translated the love which God has *in us*. In other words, John's confidence is that the readers have responded in faith to the gospel of God's love and, as a consequence, God's love has been sown in their hearts.

John then repeats his statement from 4:8, that God is love, to reinforce his point that those who have been born of God must show evidence of this essential attribute of God's character. God is love and those born of God must manifest this fundamental character of the One who has begotten them. This being true, John concludes by saying that all those who abide in love show by this that they abide in God and God in them. As before, this mutual abiding (present tense) is a reference to their having been born of God and enjoying a saving relationship with God. And, the evidence of this relationship is that they are abiding (present tense)

in love and, specifically, in their love for one another. Thus, all those who believe that Jesus Christ is the incarnate Son of God and who abide in loving other believers pass the test and have assurance of eternal life.

b. Two Illustrations Showing the Importance of the Test, 17–21

John gives two illustrations to reinforce the importance of the ethical test. The first illustration is positive in nature and involves the readers having confidence in the day of judgment (vv. 17–18). The second illustration is negative and addresses the inviolable relationship between love of God and love of believers (vv. 19–21).

(1) The Readers' Confidence in the Day of Judgment, 17–18

John illustrates the importance of love by linking love God and others with having confidence in the day of judgment. By this, John says, love is perfected with his readers, so that they may have confidence in the day of judgment, because as He is, so also are they in this world (v. 17). The opening words connect this verse with the preceding verse. John stated in the previous verse that those who abide in love abide in God and God in them. It is by this mutual abiding, John is saying, that God's love is perfected with the readers. The idea of love being perfected means that love has reached its goal, it has accomplished its intended aim. One of the chief goals of God's loving the readers in connection with the gospel is that they in turn might love one another. Thus, those who abide in loving others are having God's love perfected or accomplishing its goal.

Furthermore, the result of God's love being perfected with them, John says, is that the readers may have confidence in the day of

judgment. The day of judgment refers to the judgment seat of Christ where believers will stand before the Lord and have their works evaluated for the purpose of receiving rewards (cf. 2:28 and the excursus). John's point is that those in whom God's love is perfected will be able to stand before the Lord on that occasion with full confidence of His approval and commendation. And, the reason these will have confidence on that day, John further explains, is because of the fact that they are now manifesting in this world the attribute of love that is an essential part of the nature of God.

Having addressed the confidence that loving others provides for the readers, John considers the opposite to reinforce the importance of love. There is no fear in love, John declares. Rather, perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment and the one who fears is not perfected in love (v. 18). To say that there is no fear in love means that love and fear are mutually exclusive. Those who love have no occasion to be afraid. In the previous verse, John has described the confidence that those who are characterized by love can have at the judgment seat of Christ. Thus, fear must refer to the opposite. It is the fear or dread of future condemnation.

Furthermore, John says, perfect love casts out fear in the sense that those in whom the love of God is perfected, is accomplishing its goal, have no occasion to be afraid when they stand before the Lord at the judgment seat of Christ. The love of God having been perfected in them casts out, that is, removes altogether any occasion to fear. These can have full assurance of future commendation and not condemnation.

Fear involves punishment, John explains, in the sense that the one who fears is fearful of future punishment. And, the one who is fearful of

future punishment shows by this that they have not been perfected in God's love. Although this last statement could be taken as describing a believer who is immature, the contrast between love and fear in this verse indicates that John is describing an unbeliever. Those who love others demonstrate by this that they have experienced the love of God through the gospel and have assurance of eternal life. Conversely, those who do not love others show by this that they have not experienced the love of God and, consequently, are fearful of future condemnation and punishment.

(2) The Necessary Relationship between Love of God and Love of Believers, 19–21

John's second illustration reinforces the relationship between loving God and loving others. We love, John says, because He first loved us (v. 19). In the previous verses, John has established a connection between receiving God's love and showing God's love to others. With this verse, John explains why this connection is true. The readers are characterized (present tense) by their love of other believers, John explains, because God has first loved them. John's point is clear. Those who are the recipients of God's love through the gospel are transformed by that love. And, the evidence of this transformation is that they love other believers. Therefore, those characterized by their love of other believers show by this that the love of God has taken root in their souls and are given assurance of eternal life.

Having established the principle that those who receive God's love demonstrate this fact by their loving others, John now reinforces this principle through a negative illustration. If someone, John declares, says that he loves God and hates his brother, he is a liar. For, the one

who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen (v. 20). Based on the previously established principle, anyone who claims to love God while hating (present tense) fellow believers, betrays this claim. He is lying about loving God, for the one who truly loves God cannot at the same time hate the children of God.

How, John asks, can someone claim to love God, whom he has never seen, and yet hate the children of God, whom he has seen? The child of God, transformed by the love of God, cannot hate those who have been transformed by that same love. Since love is an essential part of God's character, those who have experienced this love in salvation must and will manifest this trait toward others. That is why John says that it is impossible for someone to claim to love God, whom he has not seen, and yet hate those, whom he does see, in whom this essential part of God's character has been sown. One cannot be attracted to God's love and at the same time hate those who manifest this trait. Hence, anyone who hates the children of God demonstrates by this that he has never truly loved God or experienced God's love in salvation.

John concludes this passage by restating the standard for the ethical test. And this commandment, John says, the readers have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also (v. 21). The actual commandment in view here is expressed at the end of the verse. It is the commandment about loving one's brother and goes back to the commandment that Christ had given to His disciples (cf. John 13:34–35; 1 John 2:7–8). Thus, all who say they love God, John notes, have been given a commandment from God. And, the commandment that God has given them is that they should love one another.

Hence, anyone who claims to love God and yet is not characterized by loving the members of God's family does not meet the standard set out in this commandment and fails the test of eternal life.

4. The Subsequent Application of the Ethical Test, 5:1–4

John divides these verses into two subsections. He begins by restating the necessary relationship between faith and love, that is, between believing the gospel and loving others (v. 1). Following this, he once again applies the test to his readers, linking their love of God and of others with their obeying God's commands (vv. 2–4).

a. The Necessary Relationship between Love of God and Love of God's Children, 1

John begins by restating the relationship between faith and love that he had established in the preceding section (cf. 4:15–16). Whoever, John says, believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the one born of Him (v. 1). Although the opening part of the verse has been taken as proof that faith (believing) follows regeneration (being born of God), the context and tenses of the verbs do not support this interpretation. John's point is rather that all who continue to believe (present tense) that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God show by this that they have been born of God. John's statement doesn't actually address the relationship between the initiation of faith and regeneration, only that ongoing faith in the true gospel is a sign of the new birth. Thus, those who persevere in the faith show by this that they have been born of God.

Furthermore, John says, all who love the Father also love the child begotten by Him. Although not stated, John assumes there is a necessary correlation between being born of God and loving God (cf. 4:16). In other words, all those who have

been born of God will give evidence of this by their ongoing (present tense) love of God. And, proof of the new birth and the love of God, in turn, is evidenced by an ongoing (present tense) love of the children of God. Thus, those who love the children of God show by this that they love God and have been born of Him.

b. The Application to the Readers, 2–4

John once again applies the ethical test to his readers, reinforcing the relationship between loving God, keeping His commandments, and loving the children of God. By this, John says, the readers know that they love the children of God, when they love God and keep His commandments (v. 2). Loving the children of God has been identified by John as a necessary trait of those who have been born of God and have eternal life (cf. 4:12). However, loving God's children, loving God, and keeping God's commandments are all inseparable. This being true, the readers can know or have confidence, John says, that they are loving the children of God by the fact that they are loving (present tense) God and are keeping (present tense) His commandments.

The commandments in view are those given by the Lord and recorded in the Gospels and the epistles. Collectively they are referred to as the law of Christ (1 Cor 9:21). John's point is simply this. Those who are born of God love God and keep His word. And, those who love God and keep His word also love those born of God. Since the three activities—loving God, keeping His word, loving the children of God—are intrinsically linked, those who are doing the first two can have confidence that they are of necessity doing the third as well.

Having established the interrelatedness of loving God, keeping His commandments, and loving the children of God, John now focuses on keeping God's commandments as the essence of loving

God. For, John states, this is the love of God, that they keep His commandments and His commandments are not burdensome (v. 3). John actually makes two points in this verse. The first point is that keeping God's commandments is the tangible proof of one's love of God. As before, keeping God's commandments means obeying His word and, especially, obeying the ethical demands of the law of Christ. Those who truly love God, John declares, will have lives that are characterized (present tense) by obedience to God's word.

The second point John makes is that keeping or obeying God's word is not something beyond the capability of those born of God. His commandments, John clarifies, are not burdensome in the sense that they are not too heavy to bear or impossible to obey. John is not talking about sinless perfection here. He is simply saying that those who love God will have lives marked by a consistent testimony of obedience to God and His word.

John concludes the passage by explaining why God's word is not burdensome. For, John explains, whoever is born of God overcomes the world, and this is the victory that has overcome the world—their faith (v. 4). The world here represents all that is opposed to God (cf. 2:15–17). It is through the new birth, John is saying, that believers are given the power or ability to overcome the forces of evil arrayed against them. Specifically, John states, that which has given the readers ongoing (present tense) victory over the forces of evil is their faith. With this statement, John connects the faith of the readers with their victory over the world. In other words, it was through the exercise of their faith in the gospel that they have experienced the new birth. And, it is the new birth that has given them the ability to resist the forces of evil operating in this world and to obey God and His word.

B. Faith as the Evidence of Eternal Life, 5:5–12

In his third and final test, John presents the combination of love and faith as that by which eternal life can be identified or defined. In the previous passage, John has addressed love as the ethical requirement for this test. Here, John turns to discuss faith as representing the doctrinal side of the test. John divides his discussion into two subsections. He first identifies the doctrinal standard for the test (vv. 5–9). Following this, he then applies the standard, distinguishing those who pass the test and have eternal life from those who do not (vv. 10–12).

1. The Doctrinal Standard for the Test, 5–9

John begins by presenting the standard for the faith, the core truth of the gospel that must be believed (v. 5), and then rehearses evidence God has given in support of this truth (vv. 6–9).

a. The Identification of the Standard, 5

In the previous verse, John linked overcoming the world with the exercise of faith and the new birth. Here John identifies the core content of the faith that overcomes the world. Who is the one, John asks, who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God (v. 5)? As in the previous verse, the world represents collectively the forces of evil that are opposed to God, that hold sway over the lost, and that endeavor to influence and control all who live in this world. To overcome the world means to have the power or ability to resist these forces of evil. John's point is that those who continue (present tense) to believe the true gospel, that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God (cf. 2:22–23; 4:2–3, 9, 15; 5:1), are those who consistently (present tense) overcome these forces of evil. Thus, persevering in the faith is the evidence that one has been born of God. And, those born of God demonstrate this by having lives characterized by overcoming the forces of evil in this present world.

b. The Support for the Standard, 6–9

Having identified the doctrinal standard, that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God, John now supports this standard by rehearsing the historical evidence concerning Jesus as the Son. Specifically, John identifies two historical events in the life of Jesus that support the standard (v. 6). He then comments on the agreement between these events and the witness or testimony of God's Spirit (vv. 7–8). And, he concludes by asserting the trustworthiness of the divine testimony (v. 9).

(1) The Presentation of the Historical Testimony, 6

In the previous verse, John declared that Jesus is God's Son. With this verse, John refers to two historical events recorded in the Scriptures that support his declaration. This is the One, John says, who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ. Not with water only, but with the water and with the blood (v. 6a). The expression, this is the One who came, refers to the coming of the Son of God in His first advent. John's description of His coming, that He came by water and blood, has been variously understood. Three views predominate among interpreters.

The *first* is that the two terms refer to the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper. The problem with this interpretation is that the expression "blood" by itself is not used elsewhere in the NT to refer to the Lord's supper. The *second* view takes the two terms to refer to the water and blood that appeared following the piercing of the Lord's side while He hung on the cross (cf. John 19:34). The problem with this view is that John makes a point in this verse that Christ's coming was not by water alone, but by both water and blood. There would be no reason why anyone would argue that only one of these elements came

from Christ's side, if this was the reference John intended.

The *third* view understands the two terms to refer to Christ's baptism and His death. Understood in this way, the two terms identify two key events in Jesus' first advent that give testimony to His true identity. This interpretation, although appearing somewhat enigmatic to modern readers, is the superior interpretation in that it fits the historical context of John's letter. Among the heresies John was combating was the heresy that the human Jesus and the divine Christ were essentially distinct. This heresy taught that the two were temporarily united at Jesus' baptism, but that the divine Christ left Jesus before Jesus died and, thus, did not experience death.

John's point, then, is that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God (v. 5) and that He experienced both baptism and death. The former represented the initiation of Jesus' earthly ministry and was the occasion where the Father testified to Jesus' identity as His Son (cf. Matt 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; John 1:31–34). The latter represented the culmination of Jesus' earthly ministry and, in a sense, the Father also testified to Jesus as the Son of God by raising Him from the dead (cf. Rom 1:3–4). Thus, both His baptism and His death offer testimony in support of Jesus being God's incarnate Son.

Furthermore, John adds, it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth (v. 6b). In addition to the Father's testimony alluded to above, John adds that the Spirit also testifies to the true identity of Jesus. John's reference specifically involves the Spirit's testimony at Jesus' baptism. As John has recorded in his gospel,

John (the Baptist) testified saying, "I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him. I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God" (John 1:32–34).

Hence, the Spirit has also testified concerning the identity of Jesus as God's Son and the Spirit's testimony is true, John says, because the Spirit is the truth. In other words, John is saying that the Spirit's testimony is true, because the Spirit Himself is the embodiment of the truth and, therefore, all that the Spirit testifies to is true.

(2) The Coherence of the Historical Testimony, 7–8

In the previous verse, John identified the historical witnesses supporting the identity of Jesus as God's Son. Here, John notes the essential agreement of these witnesses. For there are three that testify, John says, the Spirit and the water and the blood, and the three are in agreement (vv. 7–8). The three that are testifying are the three witnesses mentioned in the previous verse, specifically, the witness involving Jesus' baptism, the witness involving Jesus' death, and the witness of the Spirit, principally in connection with Jesus' baptism. All three of these, John declares, are in agreement. They all testify to the fact that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God. Implied here, but not stated, is the understanding that having three witnesses suffices as the number needed for legal proceedings (cf. Deut 17:6; 19:15; Matt 18:16) and that agreement in their

testimony implies the accuracy and, hence, the viability of that testimony.

Instead of the shorter reading given above, some of the older translations have a longer reading for these verses, “For there are three that testify *in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit, and these three are one. And there are three that testify on earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood, and these three are in agreement.*” The longer reading, commonly referred to as the Johannine comma, stems from a later expansion of the Greek text based upon the Latin translation of the Greek. The evidence is decidedly against the longer reading representing the original and it is left out or otherwise marked as a later addition in modern translations.

In terms of the evidence, the longer reading is not found in any Greek manuscript before the sixteenth century. It is not quoted by any of the Post-apostolic Fathers nor does it appear in any of the ancient versions, except the Latin. The earliest Latin translation that includes it comes from the ninth century. The earliest evidence of the longer reading is from a fourth century Latin work known as *Liber Apologeticus*. Erasmus did not use the longer reading in his first two editions of the Greek New Testament, but added it in his third edition (1522), when shown a late Greek manuscript that had the longer reading included. Erasmus’ third edition, with some alterations, became the basis for the *Textus Receptus*, from which the King James and other earlier versions were translated.

(3) The Trustworthiness of the Historical Testimony, 9

Having addressed the historical testimony in support of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God, John now affirms the trustworthiness of this testimony. If we receive, John says, the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater. For the testimony of God is this, that He has testified concerning His Son (v. 9). By using the expression, *if* we receive the testimony of men, John is not expressing doubt or uncertainty. The construction John uses means that, in fact, mankind does receive or accept the testimony of men as valid and trustworthy in legal proceedings. John’s argument is *a fortiori*. If we accept the testimony of men as trustworthy, and we do, how much more should we accept the testimony of God as trustworthy, and we should.

The rest of the verse supports John’s point and is best seen if the demonstrative “this” is placed at the beginning of the explanatory statement rather than at the end. For, John explains, *this* is God’s testimony that He has given concerning His Son. The testimony John is referring to here is the testimony involving Jesus’ baptism, Jesus’ death, and the witness of the Spirit that John has discussed in the previous verses (vv. 7–8). In other words, these three witnesses represent God’s testimony concerning His Son and God’s testimony is altogether trustworthy and, therefore, must be accepted as absolutely true.

2. The Application of the Doctrinal Standard, 10–12

In the previous verses, John has established as the core doctrinal standard the truth that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God. With these verses, John applies the standard in order to contrast those who have life from those who do not. The one who believes in the Son of God, John declares, has the testimony in himself (v. 10a). As in 5:1, the expression, the one who believes in

the Son of God, is in the present tense and refers to one who continues to believe in Jesus as God's Son. This one, John says, has the testimony in himself. The testimony in view is the testimony John referred to in the previous verses. It is the testimony that God has given concerning His Son, specifically in connection with Jesus' baptism and His crucifixion (cf. vv. 7–9). To say that those who continue to believe have this testimony in themselves means, in effect, that the Spirit of God has come to dwell in them and assures them of the truth of what they believe, the testimony that God has given concerning His Son (cf. Rom 8:16).

Conversely, John adds, the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son (v. 10b). Failure to believe that Jesus is God's Son is also a failure to believe God and the testimony God has given concerning His Son. In fact, John says, the one who does not believe the testimony that God has given concerning His Son has made God out to be a liar. Not believing God's testimony is the same thing as saying that God's testimony is not true. God has established in His word the testimony concerning His Son and anyone rejecting this testimony is calling God a liar.

Having linked believing in Jesus with believing the testimony God has given concerning Jesus, John now reinforces the connection between believing in Jesus and having eternal life. And, John states, the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life and this life in His Son (v. 11). In the previous verse, John has declared that those who continue to believe that Jesus is God's Son have God's testimony confirmed in them through the indwelling of God's Spirit. Here, John makes explicit what the Spirit is confirming in those who persevere in the true gospel. The internal testimony being affirmed by God's Spirit in those who continue to believe is that God has provided eternal life and this life is found in His Son.

Furthermore, John says, those who have the Son have the life. Those who do not have the Son of God do not

have the life (v. 12). The conclusion John draws in this verse is based on the fact John has just recorded in the previous statement. If eternal life is found in God's Son, then those who have the Son have eternal life. To have the Son simply means to have put one's trust in the Son and in the truth God has recorded concerning His Son. The opposite is also true. Those who do not have the Son in the sense that they have not put their trust in the Son, do not have eternal life. In other words, those who have the Son pass the test and have eternal life. Those who do not have the Son do not pass the test and do not have eternal life.

V. John's Epilogue, 5:13–21

Having presented the various tests by which eternal life can be discerned and false teachers exposed, John adds a few remarks by way of a conclusion. The conclusion itself is divided into four sections. John begins by giving a more formal statement as to the purpose of his writing (v. 13). Following this, he addresses the confidence that believers have in God's hearing and answering prayer (vv. 14–17). He then briefly restates certain truths that he has established in his letter (vv. 18–20). And, he finishes with a final exhortation for his readers (v. 21).

A. The Purpose of His Writing, 13

John has made several statements about the purpose of his writing (e.g., 1:4) and he concludes by restating the central purpose. These things, he says, I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life (v. 13). John is writing to those who continue (present tense) to believe in the name of the Son of God. To believe in the name of someone is to believe in all that the name of that person represents. Here the reference is to the person and work of Jesus as God's incarnate Son. Those who continue to believe in this name, John declares, can know or have assurance that they have eternal life, both as a present possession and as a future prospect. In other words, John has identified continuing belief in the true gospel as evidence of eternal life. Therefore, those who persevere in their faith in this gospel can have assurance of their salvation.

B. The Believer's Confidence in Prayer, 14–17

A corollary to the believer having assurance of salvation and eternal life is the confidence a believer can have in God's hearing and answering prayer. John divides his discussion on the believer's confidence in prayer into two sections. He first identifies the conditions for answered prayer (vv. 14–15) and then he gives an illustration of how God does answer prayer (vv. 16–17).

1. The Conditions for Answered Prayer, 14–15

Those who have assurance of eternal life can also have confidence in God's hearing and answering prayer. [And] this is the confidence, John says, which we have before Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us (v. 14). Having confidence before Him refers to the confidence that believers can have when they come before God in prayer. However, this confidence is conditioned upon believers asking for things when they pray that are according to God's will. God's will here refers to God's moral will, that which He has revealed in His word. In other words, praying according to the will of God means making prayer requests that are in harmony with God's word. When believers do this, John states, God hears them in the sense that He listens with favor to their requests (cf. John 9:31).

And, John says, if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him (v. 15). The "and" at the beginning of this verse indicates that John is continuing his discussion from the preceding verse about God answering prayer. When John says, if we know that He hears us, John is not expressing uncertainty. John has already declared that God does hear those who pray according to His will. What John is establishing here is the necessary connection between God's hearing and His answering prayer. In other words, John is declaring that those who pray according to God's will can know or have confidence that God both hears their prayers *and* gives them the things for which they have prayed.

2. The Illustration of Answered Prayer, 16–17

Having identified the conditions under which God hears and answers prayer, John now gives an illustration of the kind of prayer that meets the conditions and which God answers. If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, John says, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death, John continues. I do not say that he should make request for

this (v. 16). Two views predominate in the interpretation of this verse. The *first* view takes the one sinning as an unbeliever and the giving of life to eternal life. If this were the case, John would be saying that, if a believer observes a professing believer persisting (present tense) in sin, he shall pray for that individual and God will bring that individual to repentant faith and eternal life.

In this case, the sin that leads to death and for which the readers are not directed to pray would refer to the sin of apostasy. It is the sin which the false teachers John is combating in this epistle have committed (cf. 2:22; 4:3). In support of this interpretation, John has used the expressions life and death elsewhere in this letter to refer to eternal life and eternal death (cf. 1:2; 3:14–15; 5:11–12). Furthermore, John has described a true believer as one who does not persist in sin (cf. 1:6; 3:9).

The *second* view takes the one sinning as a believer and the giving of life as a reference to the restoration to faithfulness and the sparing of the individual from physical death. If this were John's intent, he would be saying that, if a believer observes another believer caught up in some sin (cf. Gal 6:1), he shall pray for that believer. In response, God will bring that believer to repentance, cleansing, and restoration to faithfulness, delivering him from chastisement and physical death as the consequence of disobedience. In this instance, the sin leading to death would be a reference to a believer persisting in sin to the point where God takes his life to prevent him from bringing further reproach on the name of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 11:30). In support of this interpretation, the term "brother" is used elsewhere in the epistle to describe a believer (cf. 2:9–11; 3:10, 14–15; 4:20; 5:1).

To reinforce the seriousness of sin, John adds a note of caution. All unrighteousness, he declares, is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death (v. 17). Having spoken of a sin not leading to death in the previous verse, John wants his readers to know that he is not in any way minimizing the seriousness of sin. Any act of unrighteousness is sin, John declares, and every sin has

serious consequences. At the same time, John concludes, there is a sin that does not lead to death. Depending on which of the two views above is embraced, John could be describing either the sin of an unbeliever or the sin of a believer as not leading to death.

The first view faces a problem with this phrase in that every sin an unbeliever commits leads to (eternal) death, unless of course God intervenes to save that individual. For the second view, the sin not leading to death would be any sin that a believer is caught up in that has not persisted to the point where God takes his life. In this case, the phrase "not leading to death" means that the sin has not reached the point where God intervenes to take the (physical) life of that individual.

It is difficult to choose between these two interpretations. John employs this illustration as an example of the kind of prayer the readers can pray with confidence that God will hear and answer. That being true, are the readers to have confidence when they pray that God will save the lost or that He will restore a wayward brother? Although both views appear consistent with the larger NT context, the second view is slightly preferred. John refers to the one in need of prayer as a "brother," a term John uses elsewhere in this epistle to describe a brother in Christ, a member of God's family (e.g., 3:10, 13–15). It is difficult to imagine that John would use the term here to describe someone who is lost and in need of salvation.

C. The Certainties of the Christian Faith, 18–20

With these verses John reiterates certain key truths that he has developed in the body of his letter. Specifically, John revisits three issues: the believer's victory over sin and the devil (v. 18); the believer's relationship to God (v. 19); and the reality of the incarnation (v. 20).

1. The Believer's Victory over Sin and the Devil, 18

Having spoken of a believer persisting in sin in the previous verse, John wants to reinforce the truth that a true believer cannot persist indefinitely in sin. We know, John says, that no one who is born of God sins. But, He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him (v. 20). By saying no one born of God sins, John means that no one born of God habitually (present tense) sins. John is not denying that a believer can be caught up in some sin (cf. 2:1). What John is denying, both here and previously in his epistle, is that the one born of God can be characterized by sin. The new birth delivers the individual from the bondage of sin so that the one born of God is no longer dominated by sin (cf. 3:9).

Furthermore, John says, the One who has been begotten of God, a reference to Jesus as God's Son, keeps the believer so that the evil one is not able to take hold of the believer's life. The expression "the evil one" is a reference to Satan. John's thought is that the Son of God, through the working of God's Spirit and the word, guards or preserves the believer. The Son delivers the believer from Satan's power and from persistent sin and leads him to confession of sin, cleansing, and a restoration to faithfulness. Hence, the believer is not characterized by sin nor does he habitually practice sin.

2. The Believer's Relationship to God, 19

John reinforces his statements in the previous verse by reaffirming that the believer belongs to God and is not under the power of Satan. We know, John says, that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one (v. 19). As in the preceding verses, the expression "we know" means that the readers know with certainty that what John says is true. And, what they know with certainty is that they belong to God. God has begotten them into His family and they belong to Him. In contrast, the world of unbelievers continues to lie in the power of the evil one. Not having been born of God, the unbeliever is under bondage to sin and under the power and authority of the prince of this present world, under the control of Satan himself.

3. The Reality of the Incarnation, 20

The third truth John reiterates in his conclusion is the reality of the incarnation, along with certain of its implications. And, John says, we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true. And, we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life (v. 20). The expression, the Son of God has come, is a reference to the incarnation and first advent of Jesus Christ. He has come, John says, and has given the readers understanding so that they may know Him who is the true God. In other words, as a result of Christ's coming and in connection with His saving ministry, Jesus has illumined the minds of the readers and brought them to saving faith in the gospel so that they have come to know the true God as their heavenly Father.

Furthermore, having come to know the true God through the gospel, the readers presently reside in spiritual union with the Father and with in His Son Jesus Christ. The Father has begotten the readers into His family where there is now a spiritual union with the Father, the Son, and the children of God. This is the true God, John concludes, and eternal life. To know the Father through the gospel is to know the true God and to have eternal life. Thus, the readers have come to know the true God and have been given eternal life through the gospel of His Son.

D. A Final Warning against Idols, 21

John concludes his letter by warning his readers against the dangers of idolatry. Little children, John cautions, guard yourselves from idols (v. 21). It is not clear what John means by idols here. A number of interpreters take the reference to literal idols that proliferated the religious culture of Ephesus and elsewhere in the Roman empire. Others see the reference as reflecting more closely the context of John's letter and interpret the term figuratively to refer to the heretical doctrines of the false teachers. The latter is

preferred. The former is somewhat abrupt in that John has not addressed literal idols elsewhere in his letter. The latter appears consistent with the larger context and John's warnings elsewhere in the letter (cf. 4:1). Thus, John concludes by warning his readers of the dangers of the heresies the false teachers were promulgating and to warn them to avoid these at all costs.