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An Exposition of 1 John with an Emphasis on the Anti-Gnostic Elements

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AN EXPOSITION OF I JOHN WITH AN EMPHASIS
ON THE ANTI-GNOSTIC ELEMENTS

A Graduate Research Project
Presented to
the Faculty of
Western Evangelical Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Religion

by
Patricia Swann
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PREFACE

INTRODUCTION

An intensive study of the book of I John can be a rewarding experience, for despite its brevity, it is a book that is rich in practical and devotional thought. It is one of the most personal and intimate of the New Testament writings and has the effect of drawing the reader close to God.¹ It is strongly doctrinal without being dry and it is relevant to the daily life of the Christian believer. For instance it provides answers to such questions as: what is involved in walking in the light? Is it possible to live without sin? Is there forgiveness if one does sin? What is meant by not loving the world? Can the believer be assured of salvation now? These are some of the reasons why a study of I John is so beneficial.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to provide an in-depth exposition of the book of I John. This will be done by examining the book verse by verse in an attempt to understand the author's purpose and thought and to relate this

¹William Barclay, The Daily Study Bible: The Letters of John and Jude (Toronto: G.R. Welch Co. Ltd., 1976), p. 3.

to life today. The purpose also is to show that this letter was written to refute the teachings of incipient Gnosticism which was creating chaos in the Christian church. Although the author does not state definitely at any point that this is his purpose, it is clear throughout the book that this is what he is doing. His emphasis is on false teaching and false teachers and he raises questions for discussion that obviously are actual issues at the time. An example of this can be seen in the first chapter where he raises the issue of anyone saying that they are without sin. His denunciation in chapter two of those who deny that Jesus is the Christ is another example.

THE METHOD USED

The method used will be that of a personal study of the book and then to consult various working tools. Some of these will be commentaries such as The Wesleyan Commentary and works such as The Epistles of John by F.F. Bruce. Reference will be made to the original Greek where it is applicable, using such tools as Arndt and Gingrich, A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament, Machen's New Testament Greek for Beginners, and research in Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. English translations of the New Testament used will be the New American Standard, The Revised Standard Version and the King James Version. The Greek text used will be that of the United Bible Societies.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The study will be confined to an exposition of the English text with occasional reference to the Greek when it is especially helpful. Apart from an explanation of tense usage, no attempt will be made to explain the apparatus of the Greek text. The study will be at the devotional level and suitable for presentation in Bible study groups or the classroom. It will be arranged in lecture format. An overview of the background of the book and a chapter containing a brief sketch of Gnosticism will also be included in the study.

The format will follow the chapter divisions of the book for convenience in teaching the material. The first chapter will cover the background and history of the epistle, the second chapter will be the explanation of Gnosticism and the remaining chapters will be an analysis of the epistle.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Brief definitions of Greek terms will be given at times when they will give further insight into the study or enhance it. The terms Gnostic and Gnosticism will be used to describe the false teaching which attempted to unite Christianity with Greek philosophy and which was in its incipient form during the latter part of the first century. It will be discussed more fully in the second

chapter of the study. I John is a letter written by the Apostle John to Christians of the first century A.D. and it is included in the New Testament. The latter is a collection of twenty-seven writings officially canonized as scripture by the Christian Church in the fourth century A.D.

Chapter 1

BACKGROUND OF I JOHN

INTRODUCTION

The First Epistle of John is one of the most beloved of the New Testament books. It combines some of the most profound thought with vocabulary that is amazingly plain and simple. Thus it is clear enough for the youngest believer to understand but also reaches depths of thought which the greatest of scholars have never exhausted. Donald Guthrie's introduction emphasizes this and speaks as well of some of the problems connected with the epistle. He says:

This Epistle has always been loved and meditated upon in the Christian Church and with good reason. It combines profound thoughts and simplicity of expression. It is both practical and reflective. It gives insight into early Christian conditions in such a manner as to provide principles of thought and action which are applicable in any age. Yet nevertheless the Epistle poses many critical problems and attempts must be made to settle these if a full appreciation of its message is to be attained.¹

It is immediately noticeable that I John, as it is usually called, is not written according to the regular form of epistle. This can readily be seen by comparison

¹Donald Guthrie, New Testament Introduction (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), p. 864.

with the letters of Peter and Paul. It contains no salutations or greetings either at the beginning or end. There are no personal names mentioned, nor even any clue as to whom the original recipients of the letter were or where they lived.² And yet the very nature of its contents makes it unmistakably a letter. The expressions used, such as "beloved" and "little children" (ΤΕΚΝΙΑ), are deeply personal and affectionate. The writer speaks with tenderness and concern for his people.

Some have attempted to classify the writing as a sermon or homily but the personal allusions do not support such a conclusion. There is however, a very strong doctrinal emphasis in the letter. This is evident in the many references to sin, atonement, cleansing, and especially in the emphasis on the person of Christ.

Although there is strong evidence that the epistle was regarded as Scripture from very early times, there are problems connected with it and a knowledge of them is important to a better understanding and enjoyment of the book.³ These areas include authorship, date of writing, the place of writing and recipients, and the purpose of the letter.

²F.F. Bruce, The Epistles of John (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1970), p. 25

³Guthrie, p. 865.

AUTHORSHIP

Until recent years, there had been little discussion over the identity of the author of I John, and it had been generally accepted that John the Apostle was the author. However there have been many scholars in the last century who have rejected this and proposed other alternatives.

The reason for this is that I John, along with the other two letters of John, gives very few clues as to the identity of the author. His name is not mentioned and there is little else that would help to establish his identity, although he apparently was well known to the readers and his authority was recognized by them.

Some scholars have proposed that a second John, called the Elder, was the author. Guthrie points out that this idea is based on two points.⁴ One is the fact that II and III John, obviously by the same author, are written by "the Elder." The second point is based on a somewhat disputed reference by Papias, an early Church writer, who refers to two Johns, one called "John the Elder." This view lacks the support of early Church tradition and it is far from certain that the two names were not used of the same person. It seems highly unlikely that the early church would have become confused at this

⁴Guthrie, p. 868.

point, particularly on a writing that was regarded as Scripture. Another theory suggested is that the letter was written by a disciple of John. This view must of necessity be based on speculation, however, and there is little, if any, support for it.

The traditional view which has been held since apostolic times and which has the support of internal evidence as well as tradition, is that it was written by the Apostle John. Despite disputations, there is still insufficient evidence to prove conclusively that he was not the author. The earliest of the Church Fathers cite the work as that of John the Apostle. These include Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian. Donald Guthrie writes:

This evidence is sufficient to show that from very early times the epistle was not only treated as Scripture but was assumed to be Johannine, in spite of the fact that no specific claim to this effect is made by the writer himself. This strong tradition cannot easily be set aside, especially as no alternative theory of authorship was suggested in the early Church, as it was, for instance, in respect of the Apocalypse. It is against this strong traditional background of Johannine authorship that the internal evidence must now be examined to ascertain whether or not the ancient Church was uncritical in its assumptions.⁵

Alongside this evidence of tradition in the support of John the Apostle's authorship, is that which is contained in the letter itself. The most important fact is that

⁵Guthrie, p. 865.

the writer claims to have been an eye-witness of Jesus. In the very first sentence he makes it clear that he has seen, heard, and touched Jesus, the Word of Life; it is a definite claim to personal experience.

The letter is also permeated throughout with a strong air of authority which is entirely in keeping with apostolic authorship. Guthrie states "He clearly expects not only to be heard but to be obeyed." This would be especially true of John as the last living witness of the works and life of the Lord. This fact is underscored by F.F. Bruce.

John lived to a great age, until the time came when he was the sole survivor of those who had been in close contact with Jesus before His death and resurrection. It needs little imagination to understand how eagerly he would be sought out and listened to by people who valued first-hand information about the deeds and words of his Master and theirs. We know of two leaders in the Asian churches in the first half of the second century who never forgot what they heard from John — Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, who told his own young disciples in turn 'of his intercourse with John and the others who had seen the Lord', and Papias, bishop of Hierapolis, who thought that what he could get from books would not help him so much as what came from 'a living and abiding voice'.⁶

It is quite obvious that the original readers and the early Church were fully aware of the identity of the author of this epistle, respected his authority, and held him in high esteem. This, coupled with the fact that the letter was accepted in the early Church as Scripture, is strong evidence of apostolic authorship.

⁶Bruce, p. 15.

DATE AND GENERAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Most scholars agree that the epistle was written in the last quarter of the first century, that is, sometime between A.D. 75 and 100. The generally accepted date is A.D. 90 - 95. This is especially confirmed by the writings of the Church Fathers who quote from it. Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, who was a disciple of John, quotes I John 4:2-3 in a letter written about A.D. 107.⁷ This evidence prevents anyone assigning a later date as time must be allowed also for the letter to circulate and become known. An earlier date is unlikely due to the tone of the letter which reflects maturity, and also because time must be allowed for the development of the heresy which is refuted.

There is also the fact that the letter does not reflect any evidence of persecution at that particular date. There apparently was a lull in the imperial persecutions, which did not begin again on a large scale until the reign of Trajan in A.D. 98. Life had become easier and less dangerous for the Christians. Also, it was now more than sixty years since the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and these are second and even third generation believers. Some of the splendour and challenge of the early

⁷Edward A. McDowell, 1-2-3 John, The Broadman Commentary, Vol. 12 (Nashville, Tenn.: The Broadman Press, 1972), p. 191.

days had probably passed and the Christian life was becoming a habit or routine. At the same time these people were living in a strictly pagan society, but it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain the distinct separation that the Christian teaching demanded. While the threat of persecution hung over the church and profession of faith in Christ could mean a martyr's death, it had been easier to keep the separation from the pagan world. For people would consider long and well the consequences of a profession of faith which would bring immediate persecution upon them. This may account to some extent for the warnings in the epistle.

All of these are circumstances which have a bearing on the attempt to fix an accurate date on this epistle. In more recent years, the Dead Sea Scrolls and papyri and other archaeological discoveries have helped to shed more light on the dating of the letter.⁸ This is partly because they have supplied older copies of manuscripts which can be used in comparison.

PLACE OF WRITING AND RECIPIENTS

Tradition very strongly affirms that John lived in the city of Ephesus in his old age. This was one of the most important cities of Asia Minor. It was a seaport, located about half way down the west coast of Asia

⁸McDowell, page 191.

Minor. In addition to this it was also located on the main land trade routes between Rome and the Orient. Ephesus was a very beautiful city for much wealth had been lavished upon it by some of the emperors as well as wealthy citizens. Its great theater was large enough to seat 25,000 people. The market place and streets boasted marble gateways and pillars and the city was ornamented with beautiful pieces of marble sculpture. All of this was overshadowed however, by the magnificent temple which was dedicated to the goddess Diana. This temple, one of the wonders of the ancient world was the center of pagan life and worship. However as we know, this worship was vile in the extreme, involving legalized prostitution.⁹ The great temple was also a center of the black arts — witchcraft, exorcism, sorcery, and all types of magic. Here also were sold the amulets and charms connected with sorcery.¹⁰ A glimpse of this is seen in the events recorded in Acts 19:19. Thus for all its beauty, Ephesus was a wicked and degraded city. It was against this background that John wrote his epistle, and it was in this corrupt society that his readers lived. Although no clue is given as to the destination of the letter, scholars feel that it was probably to this church and to those in the surrounding area to whom John was writing.

⁹The Wesleyan Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), p. 372.

¹⁰William Barclay, The Daily Study Bible: The Letters of John and Jude (Toronto: G.R. Welch Co. Ltd., 1976), p. 124.

The familiar and personal tone of the letter indicates a close acquaintance with the readers.

RELATIONSHIP TO THE GOSPEL

While there are many scholars who trace similarities in the Gospel of John and I John, there are also those who declare that the differences are greater. The majority however do trace a common authorship of the gospel and the epistle. Guthrie points out the similarity in ideas such as light, love, and life; the description of Christ as *λογός*, found only in the Johannine writings. It is the language however which gives the strongest support, for in both works there is the use of repetition, simplicity of construction, many characteristic phrases and a frequent use of Hebraic antithetical parallelisms. Both works emphasize the person of Christ, the incarnation and the new birth.¹¹

Those who deny common authorship, noticeably C.H. Dodd, maintain that there are too many differences in style, religious background, and theology. However this does not make any allowance for the circumstances, the audience, nor the type of material covered. Taking these into consideration, the similarities are greater and support the view of a common author.

¹¹Guthrie, p. 877.

PURPOSE OF WRITING

John has more than one reason for writing this epistle. He states three of them in the body of the letter. In 1:4 he says he is writing that our joy may be complete. In 2:1 he is writing so that they may not sin, and finally in 5:13 that they may know that they have eternal life.

Throughout the letter however, there are many indications of a further reason which he has chosen not to state explicitly. He is writing to warn his people of the errors of the false teaching of what was probably an incipient form of Gnosticism. He raises, and refutes, many false statements and doctrines. He condemns those who have separated themselves from the fellowship. He uses the terms liars, anti-christs, and children of the devil. There are many exhortations and warnings.

Gnosticism, which will be considered in the next chapter, was a particular danger to the church. If it had been allowed to continue unchecked it would have destroyed it. The Apostle John was quick to realize this and became one of the first of many who fought against it.

Chapter 2

GNOSTICISM IN THE FIRST CENTURY

INTRODUCTION

The Gnostic religion is one of the most puzzling, tantalizing and elusive problems that has faced church historians through the years. What exactly was it? Can it correctly be termed "Gnosticism?" If so, how inclusive should the term be? What was the nature of Gnosticism and what effect did it have upon the early church? These are some of the questions and problems that surround the Gnostic religion.

Until the early years of this century, scholars knew very little about Gnosticism. Virtually no documents were extant and the only knowledge available was in the writings of the early Church Fathers who fought against it. Thus it was considered to be a religion of the second and third centuries, not of the first century.

In recent years however, much new light has been thrown on the Gnostics and their religion. The discovery of a Gnostic library at Nag Hammadi in Egypt was invaluable. Further research has led many scholars to the conclusion that Gnosticism was present in an incipient form during the first century A.D. and possibly even before.

As has been mentioned, one of the difficulties lies in the term "Gnosticism" itself. This is because it was never a formal, organized religion, but rather a variety of sects loosely grouped together under the term Gnostic. Thus it is very difficult to determine exactly how the term should be used and whether it should include the movements during the first century or only the fully developed forms of the second century. There is still divided opinion concerning this. In the interests of this study the term "early Gnosticism" will be used to cover the incipient forms of developing Gnosticism of the first century.

The traditional view has been that Gnosticism was a Christian heresy. This in recent years has been disproved. On the other hand there are scholars such as Bultmann who claim a pre-Christian development.

On the assumption that Gnosticism had developed before the rise of Christianity it is possible for Bultmann and other interpreters to view the New Testament itself as a stage in Gnosticism. That is the New Testament in both its earliest as well as its latest writings manifests the absorption, transformation,¹ and demythologization of the Gnostic Redeemer myth.

It is not difficult to see the dangers in this viewpoint and the position has been rejected by most

¹Edwin Yamauchi, Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973), p. 30.

evangelical scholars. They recognize the damage that this theory could do to the Christian faith, particularly in the area of such vital doctrines as Christology and the atonement.

R. McL. Wilson has made the statement concerning Gnosticism that ". . . it has proved impossible to identify one single source from which the movement could be said to take its origin."² In other words, Gnosticism was extremely syncretistic, and drew its doctrines and ideas from many and varied sources. It simply adopted into its system whatever ideas were attractive to it and could serve its purpose. Some of the identified sources from which it drew are Orphic and Platonic dualism, Syrian conceptions, Persian dualism, mystery cults, Mesopotamian astrology, and Egyptian religions.³ Therefore when Christianity came to its attention it had no difficulty in appropriating Christian doctrines and then invading the Christian church. However, despite its syncretistic nature and the many variations in its doctrines, there were two basic doctrines which were common to all of the numerous branches of Gnosticism in one way or another.

THE NATURE OF EARLY GNOSTICISM

Gnosticism is a doctrine of salvation, and it is

²R. McL. Wilson, Gnosis and the New Testament (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), p. 5.

³Kenneth Scott Latourette, A History of Christianity Vol. I (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1975), p. 123.

the nature of that salvation which leads to the first of the two common beliefs, which is dualism. This was the belief that all matter was evil and only spirit was good. Matter included the human body and also the soul which was considered to be that which gave the body its life and desires. The spirit of man, which was good, was a spark of divine substance imprisoned in the body and thus salvation was the liberation of the spirit from the evil material body.⁴

The means by which this liberation was to be accomplished led to the second common doctrine, that of a special secret spiritual knowledge or gnosis. This is where the term Gnosticism originates. The word comes directly from the Greek word γνῶσις, "knowledge." The special knowledge was available however only to those who received the spiritual revelations. Gnostic teachers claimed to have received secret teachings from certain disciples of Jesus, which perhaps had not been given to the other apostles.⁵

In general the Gnostics believed in a Gnosis, which was not a philosophy which issued from man's striving, but a knowledge that had been revealed and was transmitted to those who were initiated into it. It had the fascination which for so many inheres in a secret disclosed to the privileged few. It professed to be universal, incorporating whatever of truth had been disclosed in any of the faiths

⁴Justo L. Gonzalez, A History of Christian Thought Vol. I: (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), p. 30.

⁵Bruce, p. 15.

to which mankind gave allegiance. It regarded pure spirit as good, but thought of that spirit as having become imprisoned in corrupt matter. Salvation was the freeing of spirit from matter. This salvation was to be attained by the teaching of revealed truth which was presented in the form of mysteries and which by stages was to emancipate the possessor and bring him back to the realm of pure spirit.⁶

This shows very clearly how the Gnostics attempted to find salvation through the special gnosis.

It is not surprising to find that this spiritual liberation took two main forms, both related to the physical body. One was that because the body was evil it must be kept in subjection by severe discipline. This led to asceticism with the attendant neglect and abuse of the body. On the other hand however, there were those who believed that because the body, being matter, was evil, its actions could not affect the pure spirit within. The result of this thinking was libertinism. One could indulge in every type of immorality and sin without it affecting the spirit. Indeed some held that since they had been given gnosis it was the duty of the Gnostic to explore both the highest and deepest levels of life. Therefore they must explore the depths of sin as well as the heights of revelation.⁷

Barclay also points out the fact that some Gnostics who felt that they had achieved liberation felt

⁶Latourette, p. 124.

⁷Barclay, p. 10.

themselves to be "so spiritual that they were above and beyond sin and had reached spiritual perfection."⁸

In early Gnosticism there were two other important features and these were both in regard to the person of Christ. Again there were two main divisions of thought. The most common was what is called Docetism, from the Greek word *δοκέω* meaning "to seem." This was the view that Christ only appeared to have a human body but in reality He was just a phantom. It was a development from the dualistic belief about matter and spirit. If the body was evil then Christ as spirit would be unable to have a real human body and therefore He simply assumed the appearance of a man.⁹ It would be impossible for pure spirit to join with matter which was evil, according to the Gnostic concept.

Another form of teaching based on Gnostic thought was that of Cerinthus who developed the teaching that Jesus was an ordinary man, the son of Mary and Joseph. At His baptism the Christ spirit came upon Him in the form of a dove and then left Him at the crucifixion. This meant that only the man Jesus suffered and died, not the Christ who was pure spirit and therefore could not die.¹⁰

Barclay tells how the apocryphal "Acts of John" illustrates this. They say that while Jesus was being crucified, John was talking to the divine Christ in a

⁸Ibid.

⁹Barclay, p. 7.

¹⁰Barclay, p. 8.

cave and that He was telling John that it was not actually He who was being crucified, and that what people would say of Him was not true.¹¹

That these doctrines would have devastating effects on the Christian church is unquestioned. What these effects were and how they were opposed is the next consideration.

POTENTIAL EFFECTS ON CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

Even in the incipient forms of early Gnosticism the effects of such doctrines was evident. Doctrines which were at the very heart of Christianity were the ones involved. Most important was the doctrine which involved the person of Christ. Gonzalez states concerning this:

. . . Gnostic dualism had devastating consequences when applied to Christology. If matter, and above all this matter which forms our body, is not the product of the divine will, but rather of some other principle that is opposed to that will, it follows that matter and the human body cannot serve as a vehicle for the revelation of the supreme God. Therefore Christ, who came to make that God known to man, cannot have come in the flesh. His body cannot have been a truly physical body, but only a bodily appearance. His sufferings and His death cannot have been real, for it is inconceivable that the supreme God would thus give Himself up to the evil and destructive power of matter.¹²

Thus it can be seen that both Docetism and Cerinthianism were basically a denial of the incarnation, and of the

¹¹Barclay, p. 8.

¹²Gonzalez, pp. 132-3.

humanity of Christ. Both of these doctrines deny the reality of the suffering and death of Christ and consequently the atonement also. Christians believe in a Saviour who is and must be fully human as well as divine. In no other way could atonement be made for sin. The Redeemer must be human in order to identify with man and pay the price of sin, and He must be divine in order to be sinless and thus able to bear the sin of the world. Had these Gnostic views gained control they would have reduced Christianity to nothing more than another philosophical system, and completely negated the plan of salvation.

Dualism also affected the doctrine of salvation as concerning the body. All that God made is good according to the Judao-Christian view and that includes the body. It is the temple of the Holy Spirit and therefore not to be treated carelessly or with disrespect. Contrary to the Gnostic ideas, the actions of the body do affect the spirit. Christians also affirmed that the body was included in the plan of salvation and would one day be resurrected.

The doctrines concerning God and creation of the world were also involved in the Gnostic concept of spirit and matter. The doctrine of God as Creator of the material world is an important tenet of the Christian faith. This was denied by the Gnostic however, for how could God who was pure spirit have anything to do with

the creation of a material world which was evil?
Yamauchi quotes T.P. VanBaaren concerning the Gnostic concept: "The cosmos was not created by God, but, at most, it is the work of a demiurge who made the world either against God's will or in ignorance of it."¹³

There are other areas in which Gnosticism would have caused problems if it had been allowed in the church. Their claim to secret knowledge could not help but develop into spiritual pride and lead them to look down on those whom they would consider less spiritual. This would create divisions in the fellowship of the church.¹⁴ It is concerning this that Barclay writes:

The Gnostics, therefore, divided men into two classes — the psuchikoi, who could never advance beyond the principle of physical life and never attain to anything else than what was to all intents and purposes animal living; and the pneumatikoi who were truly spiritual and truly akin to God.¹⁵

It is obvious that this type of thinking would be completely contrary to Christian teaching and Jesus' own command for them to love one another. Spiritual pride and bigotry are devastating in the church.

CONCLUSION

Although there is still some disagreement, most scholars now feel that I John was written in refutation

¹³Yamauchi, p. 14.

¹⁴Barclay, p. 11.

¹⁵Ibid.

of a form of early Gnosticism. There is abundant evidence throughout the epistle that the writer was vigorously opposing false teachings. In 2:26 John mentions explicitly that he is writing about some who were seeking to deceive the group. In the previous section, verses 19 - 25, he calls these teachers anti-christs, liars and deniers of the Son. This is strong language indeed and must have been warranted for John to speak so. I. Howard Marshall summarizes some of the likely beliefs of these false teachers and John's references to them:

It seems likely that the claims which John denies at the beginning of the Epistle represent those of the false teachers. They were people who claimed to have fellowship with God and to be sinless (1:6,8,10). They said that they knew God (2:4). Very possibly they believed that God was light and said that they lived in the light (2:9). What lies beyond any doubt is that they held unorthodox views about Jesus. They did not believe that Jesus was the Christ or the Son of God (2:22; 5:1,5); they denied that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh (4:2; cf. 2Jn. 7). When John affirms that Jesus came not only by water, but by water and blood (5:6), it would seem that this statement was one denied by the false teachers. If they denied that Jesus was the Christ, they probably also denied that his death had any significance; if they claimed that they had no sin, it would follow that they felt no need of atonement and cleansing by the blood of Jesus. At the same time it also seems that they did not accept the validity of any commands given by Jesus (2:4).¹⁶

Though the church was able to overcome this threat of Gnosticism, its effect was felt and lingers on even today.

¹⁶I. Howard Marshall, The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistles of John (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), p. 15.

Chapter 3

I JOHN ONE

1: 1 - 4

The first four verses of the epistle form a prologue or introduction and also embody something of the basic theme. These lines are very similar to the opening words of the Gospel of John, which, as has been noted, is by the same author. There is the use of *ἀρχῆς*, "the beginning," which is also reminiscent of the opening words of Genesis. As in the gospel, there is the use of *λόγος* in relation to Christ, and also the words "life", "manifest", and "witness", which are used in both works. Although not as long as the prologue to the gospel, this is nevertheless majestic and compelling. In the Greek the first three verses are one long sentence. Curtis Vaughn writes:

If we are to follow the train of thought, it is essential that we understand the structure of the sentence. Three things are to be observed: First, the main verb (declare) is found in verse 3. The object of this verb is expressed by four relative clauses which, for the sake of emphasis, are placed at the beginning of the sentence in verse 1.¹

¹Curtis Vaughn, 1,2,3, John, A Study Guide (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), p. 18.

Another notable feature is the use of repetition which to a casual reader may not be significant but which to the early readers was significant indeed. It is to be noted that these references all pertain to the physical senses, and thus with the use of the words mentioned above, there is in these opening verses an inter-weaving of the divine and the human nature of Christ. It remains to find just what John's reason is for doing this.

Why does he appeal so strongly to the evidence of the physical senses? The most logical reason in the light of what has been studied² is the refutation of the Docetic ideas. They had undermined the doctrine of the humanity of Christ, teaching that He was not truly human but only a phantom, intimating that the apostles had been deceived or mistaken. To the Gnostic it was impossible for spirit to have any connection with matter. Vaughn says of this:

This emphasis on His physical tangibility was doubtless directed against the reckless and unfounded claims of the Gnostics. These heretical teachers combined pagan philosophy and superstition with just enough Christianity to make their system especially dangerous. They denied a real incarnation, some of them teaching that Jesus was merely a phantom, that He seemed to be a man but was not really a man. John, on the other hand, teaches that in Jesus the eternal God actually clothed Himself in human flesh and made Himself real to men through their senses. John and others heard Him speak, saw Him with their eyes, touched Him with their hands. In John's thinking God came all the way down to us. He took our nature; He became a man of flesh and blood.²

²Vaughn, p. 20.

This is John's emphasis in these verses, that Jesus was truly flesh and blood. Moreover, there is an intensity in these words. The flash of his eyes can almost be seen as he declares emphatically "I heard His voice and listened as He spoke, I heard Him laugh." Not only he, but all of the apostles had been eye witnesses. His excitement can be sensed as he writes "We saw Him, with our own eyes." Then John adds "looked upon." Is this just repetition? It is not, for this is an entirely different Greek word and it carries the sense of to gaze or look lingeringly at something, much as one would gaze at a painting, taking in every detail. They had not only seen Jesus but had looked long and searchingly at Him, absorbing His expressions and the atmosphere of His presence.

Then comes what appears to be the heart of the argument. Not only had they heard and seen and gazed at Jesus but they had also touched Him! John says "handled Him with our hands!" Thus they knew He was not a phantom, but that He was real. John's change to the aorist tense here has caused some scholars to feel that He was speaking of a one-time action, namely the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus when He invited them to handle Him, rather than an every day occurrence.³ This however cannot be proved and it seems more likely that John

³Bruce, p. 36.

would be thinking of the whole scope of Jesus' life and the fact that daily they had been with Him and therefore were competent witnesses of His humanity.

Although it was essential to prove His humanity, it was equally important to maintain the divinity of Christ. For it was at this point that the views of Cerinthus were particularly dangerous. He taught that Jesus was an ordinary man upon whom the Christ had descended for a time. Tradition tells of enmity between him and John and that John refused to enter a bath house while he was inside, lest it fall upon them! One thing is certain, and that is that John fought vigorously against his teaching.

In the opening phrase of his letter John affirms the divinity and pre-existence of Christ. He does not mention the name of Jesus here but instead at the end of the verse he writes that he is speaking of the Word of Life. There is divided opinion about this however, for some contend that it is not the person of Christ, but the message He brought, that is meant.⁴ But the strong emphasis on the physical aspect would seem to contradict this. Also John's use of the term *λογος*. This immediately reminds us of John 1:1 in which John states "In the beginning was the Word." The beginning, is a means of identifying the timelessness of the Word.⁵

⁴Vaughn, p. 19

⁵Edward A. McDowell, 1-2-3 John, The Broadman Commentary, (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1972), p.195.

He has always been. This thought is further emphasized in the word "was." In the Greek this is $\eta\rho$, the imperfect tense. It is used in the sense of what has always been; also as "to exist" or "to be." So then John is trying to express the fact that Christ was in existence from all time, from before time. He has always "been" and as such had no beginning. He is not a created being but is Himself the Creator. Christ was and is God. This is also reflected in Colossians 2:9 where Paul states "For in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." F.B. Meyer expresses very beautifully the concept of the pre-existence of Christ. He speaks of ". . . the expanse of eternity lying beyond created things, in which the Word was already existing." ⁶ Finite minds do not have the ability to comprehend all that this means. At best they can only grasp the shadow of the reality.

John's use of the word \logos reflects Greek influence to some extent. McDowell writes:

Both here and in the Gospel there is reflected the influence of Greek thought and the Logos concept propounded by the Jewish-Alexandrian philosopher Philo. But for Philo incarnation of the Logos was inconceivable - and this is just the difference between Greek philosophy and Christianity: a Logos which remains remote from man within the exalted supramundane realm as over against the preexistent Logos-Christ,⁷ who enters human history as a man, Jesus of Nazareth.

⁶F.B. Meyer, The Gospel of John (Blundell House, Goodwood Road, London: Oliphants, 1970), p. 13.

⁷McDowell, p. 195.

Logos is a very expressive term and it is rather difficult to do justice to it in English. It means more than just a spoken word, it carries the more philosophical connotation of a thought or concept, the means of expressing something. What John is saying is that Jesus was the expression or revelation of the eternal Godhead, in human form. In Jesus can be seen exactly what God is like, just as He Himself said: "He that has seen me has seen the Father," John 14:9. The writer of Hebrews, under inspiration, also expressed this. In Hebrews 1:3 he says that He was the brightness of His glory and the exact image of His person. The Greek word *χαρακτήρ* which is translated as "exact image" is especially interesting for it carries the idea of a seal which when stamped upon hot wax, leaves its exact image there. In such a manner Jesus revealed God to us.

In verses 2 and 3 again and again John states that he is declaring what was revealed to him and the reason is so that they might have fellowship with him. In using "us" he means himself and the apostles, but then goes on to tell them that this fellowship is with the Father and with Christ. John is reenforcing the apostolic witness, reminding them that he and his associates were the eye witnesses, not the false teachers. Fellowship together is an important aspect of the Christian life and communion with God is vital to maintaining it. John is sharing this so that his joy might be complete — the joy of seeing them experience that unity

and fellowship with God, and with each other that is so vital.

1: 5 - 10

The character of God necessarily determines the character of fellowship with Him. Indeed, as Ramsay writes, "If we lose sight of the ethical nature of God, we miss the truth on which all Christianity is based and land in moral confusion. The purity of the Christian corresponds to the purity of God. Without this moral kinship there is no fellowship" (p. 249). John therefore prefaces this entire section with a profound declaration concerning the nature of God: This is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all (1:5).

John declares very simply that God is light, but this is also a very profound statement for it deals directly with the nature of God. It reminds us again of the prologue to the gospel in which John declares that the Word was light, and also it reminds us of Jesus' statement that He was the Light of the World. John says that this is the message that has been revealed to him.

The Greek word used here for light is *φῶς*. It is not used in the sense of just ordinary light but is that of pure radiance or perfect brightness.⁹ It could be translated "glory", "radiance", "splendour." God is radiant light, piercing the darkness. This could be related to the

⁸Vaughn, p. 28.

⁹The Analytical Greek Lexicon (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), p. 432.

Shekinah glory of the Old Testament, brilliant light, which was always the sign of God's presence with His people.

The Greek is very strong both in word order and in the double negative used with the further statement that there is no darkness in Him at all. John is making a very emphatic statement. There are, of course, different interpretations as to the exact meaning of it. However it is evident that the moral nature of God is certainly included. Vaughn states that this may be directed against the Gnostic idea that both light and darkness was included in Deity.¹⁰

The concept of light and darkness was common at that time. Zane Hodges points this out in his article.

As has often been pointed out, the light-darkness motif was widely prevalent in the hellenistic conceptual world of John's day. Moreover, more recently, we have learned also of its presence in the thought patterns of the Jewish sectaries of Qumran. But the apostle is not concerned with the analogies and parallels available in contemporary society, but with the divine origin of this affirmation. It was the message which we have heard from him. And for John, the concepts of light and darkness are, above all, ethical concepts. The truth, which he associates with light, is not merely something to know but also something to do (cf. v. 6; John 3:21). By contrast, darkness is linked with the doing of evil deeds (John 3: 19-20). Hence, to affirm that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all is to affirm God's absolute holiness and His complete freedom from any taint of evil.¹¹

Light does symbolize God's purity and holiness, while evil hides itself with darkness. But in God there is no darkness

¹⁰Vaughn, p. 30

¹¹Zane C. Hodges, Fellowship and Confession in I John 1:5-10 (Bibliotheca Sacra, Jan. 1972), p. 50.

and only good.

Darkness stands for everything that is opposite to light. John is using contrast here and uses it twice more in this section. As the following verse shows, darkness symbolizes the type of life a person lives away from Christ. Ignorance, chaos, immorality, rebellion, are all a part of the darkness. Paul says that Christians have been delivered from the power of darkness, Col. 1:13. He reminds the Ephesians in 5:8 that once they were in darkness, and in I Thess. 5:4-5 he speaks of them as children of the day.

So then, John's next statement is no surprise. Introduced by "if", it is very clear. If anyone claims to have fellowship with God and yet is walking (or living) in darkness, they are lying. He makes it clear that no one can do the things which are associated with a life of darkness, and live in fellowship with God, who is light. To live in sin is to live in disobedience to God and therefore to be out of fellowship with Him.

This is hardly a hypothetical statement and John no doubt has the Gnostics in mind at this point, with their views concerning the body and spirit. They might teach that they can have fellowship with God while indulging in sin, but John declares the impossibility of it. The deeds of the body do affect the spirit. In fact sin arises first in the thoughts and intentions of the heart and then finds expression in the deeds of the body. Through the centuries however, there have always been those in the church who have tried to

find license for sinful pleasure and still claim to be Christians.

John continues in verse 7 to complete the second contrast with the statement "but if we walk in the light...", and gives the results of obedience. If walking in darkness signifies a life of sin and disobedience, then walking in the light means living according to God's commandments, following Him to the best of our ability. The results are two-fold. There is fellowship with one another, and this, of course, is directly related to fellowship or communion with Him. When believers are living according to His will there will be a sense of harmony with each other as well as a sense of God's presence and blessing.

. . . when our hearts are completely open to God and to all that His Word has, or may, reveal to us or about us — it is then that we are transparently moving in the sphere of light. Apostolic truth — God's truth — thus illumines our lives. This does not involve sinlessness, of course, but a willingness to see sin and to treat it for what it really is. John is quite clear in fact, that walking in the light does not involve the total absence of failure from our lives.¹²

The second result of walking in the light is cleansing through the blood of Jesus. This is one of the most precious and reassuring thoughts in all of Scripture. John assures his readers that a life of obedience results in cleansing. It is important to notice at this point that in both of these verses, the present tense is used throughout. This indicates continuous action, something that is taking

¹²Hodges, p. 54.

place right now. If we are living in the light then we have fellowship and the blood of Jesus is cleansing us from sin at this moment. This is a point which many English translations do not emphasize, but which can bring joy to believers. The blood speaks of Jesus' sacrifice and death for sin on Calvary. Only through His atonement is salvation possible. The Greek word for cleanse is *καθαρίσει* and it is used in the sense of making something pure.

Another point to notice is that John says "all sin." Many limit this simply to the guilt of sins committed, however the Wesleyan Bible Commentary points out that the power of the blood is not limited, and that it provides for the purifying of the heart from the sin principle.¹³ Both aspects are in view here and as one walks in the light he experiences constant cleansing through the blood of Christ. There is a distinction in these verses between sin and sins. Generally speaking, "sins" plural, are what we do, while "sin" is what makes us do them.

In verse 8 John brings up another false claim. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." Obviously such a claim was being made. It is likely that some of the Gnostics felt that they had risen above sin and therefore it had no effect on them. John states bluntly that anyone who denies sin is deceiving himself.

¹³The Wesleyan Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), p. 324, Vol. 6.

It again appears that John means the sin principle. Denial of a sinful nature has not been confined to the Gnostics and it is still with us today. This can only lead to denial of the need of a Saviour, which helps us to understand the intensity of John's feelings here and the grave danger that faced the church. The Gnostic claimed that he lived in the spiritual realm and therefore he was immune to sin. Sin for him did not exist. Therefore the deeds of the body were of no consequence and could not affect his spirit.

John continues on in verse 9 to explain that instead of deceiving ourselves we need to confess our sins. He uses the plural here indicating acts of sin. Confess in the Greek carries the meaning "to speak in accordance", or "to admit." It means that the believer agrees with God's verdict that he has sinned, and acknowledges his failure to do what is right. John gives assurance that God is faithful and will honour honest confession with complete forgiveness, as well as cleansing. The Wesleyan Bible Commentary remarks about this verse:

Implicit in this promise is the atonement of Jesus. One's confession of sins is not an atonement in itself; faith for salvation must rest on the merits of Christ's death. Thus confession of sin is also a confession of faith. The confession of sin and the act of faith are not works. Both are humble recognition of one's helplessness in himself and of hope in Christ. When there is this recognition coupled with acknowledgement and faith, God forgives.¹⁴

¹⁴The Wesleyan Bible Commentary, p. 326.

A third error is brought out in verse 10. This time it is a denial of having committed any sin, and the result of this is to make God a liar. This would be a logical claim for the Gnostic who, if he denied a sin principle and the need of a Saviour, would also deny that he had committed any sin. Again this is not a sentiment limited only to Gnosticism. Many today refuse to admit to sin.

"Have not sinned" translates a perfect tense, suggesting that the speaker claims to be in a condition of never having committed an act of sin. Such a person, John charges, makes God "a liar" (verse 10b). "This," Barrett remarks, "is the final and most awful result of the denial of sin" (p. 61). Such denial makes God a liar because God's entire plan for the redemption of men is based on the fact of human sin. As Ramsay says, "To claim exemption from sin is to impeach the verdict of God on the human race. If sin be not the fundamental fact in man's present condition, the gospel is irrelevant" (p. 254).¹⁵

The final conclusion is obvious for no one can make God a liar and have His word in them. They have rejected the message of the gospel, indeed they have denied any need for it.

¹⁵Vaughn, p. 35.

Chapter 4

I JOHN TWO

2: 1 - 11

For the first time John addresses his readers with the affectionate term "little children" (ΤΕΚΝΙΑ). It is a means of conveying his love and concern for them in the midst of this spiritual danger.

Although John has just been pointing out that the person who claims to be without sin is deceived, he does not, on the other hand, want to leave the impression that sin is a necessity in the Christian life or that it is to be accepted as normal. He wants them to avoid sin. What he is doing is setting before them God's ideal. However he does not say that as Christians they are not able to sin, or that they will not sin, but that they should not. This passage does not support sinless perfection in the sense that once a person is a Christian he can never sin again. As long as anyone is in the flesh there will be the possibility of sinning and he will never be beyond the need for the cleansing of the blood of Christ.

The tense of the verb here is aorist, denoting a single definite act, not a continuous state or way of life.

"That ye may not sin" shows that John's purpose in writing was not to condone sin, but to prevent it. The tense of the Greek verb suggests isolated acts of sin rather than a habitual state. It points up that John's object was not simply to secure that the main current of his reader's lives be godly, but that they be kept from committing even a single sin. This, of course, is the ideal.¹

But John recognizes the fact that times of weakness and temptation do come and when they do, we are not to give up in despair for John quickly continues with the words "If anyone does sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." Though the ideal is that believers do not sin, still provision has been made for the times of failure and weakness. Attention is focused here on the word translated "advocate" which is *παράκλητος*. I. Howard Marshall writes:

The English word is based on the Latin *advocatus*, which in turn corresponds to the Greek word *parakletos*, and literally means "one called alongside (to help)." In the present context the word undoubtedly signifies an "advocate" or "counsel for the defense" in a legal context. It means a person who intercedes on behalf of somebody else. That this was one of the meanings of the Greek word is well attested, and the idea of intercession before God was at home in the Old Testament and Jewish background of the New Testament.²

What a vivid picture this gives of Jesus pleading His atonement before the Father on behalf of His people. It is to be noted that He pleads, not before an angry God, but a loving Father. Vaughn points out that the preposition

¹Vaughn, p. 36.

²Marshall, p. 116.

"with" denotes a relationship between equals.³

In verse 2 John immediately adds that not only is Jesus our mediator but He is also the propitiation or "atoning sacrifice" for our sins. The Greek word used is *ἱλασμός* and it has caused considerable controversy as to whether it should be translated propitiation or expiation. Propitiation denotes pacifying an offended or angry person, while expiation has the meaning of cancelling sin.⁴ Atoning sacrifice is a more adequate translation for it conveys the thought of the sacrifice of Christ for sin. John adds that this sacrifice was not just for us, but for the whole world. Right here is the universal atonement for sin.

In the following verses, John deals with the test of obedience. He says that if anyone knows God, he will keep His commandments. No one who really knows Him will want to deliberately do things that are contrary to His commands. It is a fact that if we love someone we do not want to hurt them. Therefore those who were saying "I know Him" but were living lives of disobedience and sin were liars. The contrast here is obedience and disobedience. Again John undoubtedly had the Gnostics in mind for this is just what they were doing. The Gnostic claim to superior knowledge was also involved but John deals more thoroughly with that later.

There was at this time, an emphasis in the ancient

³Vaughn, p. 37.

⁴Marshall, p. 117.

world, especially among the Greeks, on knowing God. The philosophers sought to know Him through intellectual reasoning and argument. Later they sought to know God though the emotional experiences of the mystery religions with all their high intensity of emotion. Neither of these necessarily led to any ethical standards and in fact they did not.⁵

John continues by adding that obedience leads to the perfecting of love for God. However this phrase ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ Θεοῦ is very indefinite.

The love of God may be interpreted in three different ways: man's love for God (RSV), God's love for man (Beck), or a God-kind of love (NEB). Someone has suggested that the indefiniteness of the phrase should be retained in translation, for all three of these ideas are indissolubly connected.⁶ If we must choose, the first is to be preferred.

F.F. Bruce points out that the perfecting of love here is in fact directly related to obedience to God.⁷

Verses 7 and 8 lead into a contrast of old and new commandments. Actually he is speaking of two different aspects of one commandment, the same one that Jesus had taught and to which He had given a new dimension — the law of love. From John's emphasis on love for a brother, which follows immediately, it would seem that Jesus' command to love one another was what John had in mind.

He refers again to light and darkness in verses 9 -11

⁵Barclay, p. 41-43.

⁶Vaughn, p. 41.

⁷Bruce, p. 52.

and also brings in the contrast of love and hate. He says that anyone who claims to be in the light and yet hates his brother is in darkness. Hatred belongs to the works of darkness and has no place in the light. By "brother" John means fellow-Christian. Also the present tense is used throughout these verses indicating a continuous state or pattern of life, rather than an isolated incident. He shows how the darkness of sin brings spiritual blindness and causes the person to lose his way.

There is the possibility that John again has the Gnostics in mind because of their emphasis on special revelations and the effect it would have on their attitudes. Those who claimed to have received the secret spiritual knowledge looked with contempt on those whom they considered as earthly and not spiritual. This attitude would be destructive in many ways. Thus John warns against hating any of the brethren and he enlarges on this a little farther on in the letter.

2: 12 - 17

There has been considerable difficulty over the rather unusual passage of verses 12 - 14. Scholars have wrestled over the forms of address and the tenses of the verbs and have suggested many ideas. The main problem however is whether John is addressing three different groups of people or whether he is simply using the three forms, fathers, young men, and children, interchangeably for the same group.

Another possibility is that "little children" is general and that the age groups are indicated by the other terms. Barclay points out however, that the blessings mentioned are not confined to any particular age group.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty is that the blessings of which John speaks are not the exclusive possession of any one age group. Forgiveness does not belong to the child alone; a Christian may be young in the faith, and yet have a wonderful maturity; strength to overcome the tempter does not — thank God — belong to youth alone. These blessings are the blessings not of any one age but of the Christian life.⁸

The gifts and blessings mentioned however, are the most important aspect. There is the forgiveness of sins through Jesus, which is the heart of the gospel message. It is notable that John says that it is through the name of Jesus. There is power in His name and this is why Christians pray in the name of Jesus.

Knowledge of God is mentioned. They have come to know Him as a loving Father. The use of the perfect tense suggests an experience over a long period of time.⁹ It is the privilege of all believers to walk with Him through the many experiences of life.

Overcoming victory is the third blessing mentioned here.

Confidence of victory, a note found in all of John's writings, is here stated in the strongest possible language. Indeed, John asserts that victory has already been achieved by his readers, for "overcome" translates

⁸Barclay, p. 52.

⁹Vaughn, p. 52.

a perfect tense, denoting that they have conquered the evil one and remain victorious over him. In 5: 4-5 it is affirmed that the Christian's faith is that which gives him victory. Here (verse 14) John suggests that one factor in his reader's victory is the abiding with-
in them of the word of God. (the gospel message). ¹⁰

In Christ there is victory over every temptation. John says a little later "greater is He that is within you than he that is in the world." When the evil one seeks to drag us down there is within us a mighty Overcomer giving us strength to keep in the way of light and obedience instead of turning aside into the way of darkness.

The last three verses of this section deal with the question of love of the world. Every sincere Christian has pondered over the problem of worldliness. What is it, really? Is it what one wears, what one does, where one goes? The answer is probably yes and no. But the root of it all lies in our attitude and desires. John is giving a command not to love the world. It is necessary to be clear first of all on what John means by "world." The Greek word he uses is *κόσμος*. It can mean the material, created universe. It can also mean the present order of things, the secular world. The former can hardly be meant for God pronounced all His creation as good and Jesus loved and enjoyed the world of nature. John's obvious meaning is the latter, the present order or social order of the world apart from God. The pagan, godless society with its false values and false gods.

¹⁰Vaughn, p. 52.

In John's day the word for world (kosmos) had acquired a moral meaning. By it he meant human society organized on wrong principles, possessing base desires and having false values. The world was pagan society with its false standards and its false gods. Worldliness is taking God's creation and making it the end or goal of life. It is carrying on life's activities without consideration of the God who created these things. The world when treated as complete in itself becomes a rival to God.¹¹

This is what the Christian is not to love. He is not to adopt its materialistic values and concepts, its lifestyles and sensuality. That is why things must be thought through carefully and the motives examined.

John continues with the three things that are characteristics of the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. These refer to all the aspects of a life of sin. Barclay says of these:

To be subject to the flesh's desire is to judge everything in this world by purely materialistic standards. It is to live a life dominated by the senses. It is to be gluttonous in food; effeminate in luxury; slavish in pleasure; lustful and lax in morals; selfish in the use of possessions; regardless of all the spiritual values; extravagant in the gratification of material desires. The flesh's desire is regardless of the commandments of God, the judgement of God, the standards of God and the very existence of God.¹²

To do these things whether in a greater or lesser measure, to have this attitude, is to be loving the world instead of the Father, for no one can serve both. He must choose one or the other. John closes this section and introduces the next by contrasting the destiny of the world and the one who

¹¹Wesleyan Bible Commentary, p. 333.

¹²Barclay, p. 57.

follows God. There is no future for the world system. The use of the present tense is significant; it is already passing away right now. But he who follows God will live forever and has already entered into that process.

In writing that the world and "all its allurements" (NEB) is passing away John teaches that human society in its hostility to God has in it the seeds of death, and its final dissolution is certain. Because of this "the world" can give no permanent satisfaction. As an object of desire and affection it is evanescent, vain, and disappointing. To build one's life around it is therefore not only sinful, it is also foolish. It is to bind oneself to a doomed and dying order.¹³

2: 18 - 28

With verse 18, John brings into clear focus the fact that he is warning his people against false teachers. His use of the term "last hour" has caused considerable debate among scholars and many views are proposed. It seems wisest and most logical to conclude that John is referring to the whole period of the end of the age, though it has been far longer than John could have thought. The last hour will continue until the return of Christ.

What John is concerned about however, is the false teachers whom he now calls antichrists. He moves on from calling them liars to the stronger designation of antichrist. They are completely opposed to Christ. The word $\alpha\gamma\tau\epsilon$ is a Greek negative and can carry the meaning of "against" or "opposed to." It is a word that has been brought into

¹³Vaughn, p. 56.

English untranslated and which is used quite frequently.

These people who had obviously been a part of the fellowship had separated themselves from the church and it was now quite clear that they were not a part of it. It is a reminder of Paul's words to this church that "from among yourselves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them." (Acts 20:30).

In verses 20-21 John inserts a statement concerning anointing. They have received an unction or anointing from the Holy Spirit and by this they are able to distinguish truth from error. Vaughn points out:

The term signifies not the act of anointing, but the element with which the act is performed — literally, "anointing oil," "unguent." Here, however, it is used metaphorically of the Holy Spirit. That is to say, the "anointing" is the Holy Spirit received by the believer in conversion.¹⁴

There is undoubtedly reference here to the Gnostics again for they claimed a special anointing to receive their secret knowledge. There is a textual problem as to whether verse 20 should read "and ye know all things" or "and you all know." The latter has greater support as pointed out by F.F. Bruce.¹⁵

It also fits in with the type of error that John is fighting in which spiritual knowledge is confined to a very few. What John is maintaining is that the humblest believer has equal access to spiritual truths. This truth is relevant to our day also, for believers today need the anointing of the Holy

¹⁴Vaughn, p. 66.

¹⁵Bruce, p. 71.

Spirit to guard against the many false teachings that would lead them astray. The Holy Spirit is faithful and He has promised to lead us into all truth.

With verse 22 John makes a declaration that goes to the heart of the problem. Anyone who denies that Jesus is the Christ is a liar and antichrist. This is precisely what some of the Gnostics thought, particularly those who followed Cerinthus. To them, Jesus was an ordinary man completely separate from the Christ. Jesus was not divine nor God incarnate, because of their belief concerning spirit and matter.

What is involved in a denial of Jesus as the Christ? The seriousness of this lies in the fact that it strikes at the very heart of the Christian faith. If Jesus is not the Christ, then He is not the Son of God, which is a denial of His divinity and of the incarnation. The incarnation is a vital doctrine to Christianity. The entire plan of salvation rests on the fact of a divine-human Saviour.

The denial of Jesus as the Christ is a denial of the need for redemption and consequently a denial of sin. This was typical of the Gnostic teachings. No wonder John works so desperately to expose this heresy which was seeking to undermine the very foundations of the faith. If they had gained control the plan of redemption would have been lost and Christianity would have become just another philosophy.

This danger is still present in the church for there are those today who deny Jesus as the Christ. John

also points out that to deny the Son is to deny the Father as well. John is saying that it is impossible to dispense with Jesus and claim belief in God only. To deny one is to deny the other also. Perhaps John was thinking of Jesus' own words, "I and my Father are one," "He that has seen me has seen the Father."

The opposite is also true and again John is making use of contrast. Anyone who will acknowledge Jesus as the Christ is acknowledging the Father also. This would mean a public confession of Jesus as the Christ. Perhaps John has in mind some ancient confession of faith such as that in Romans 10:9, "If you confess with your lips Jesus is Lord. . . ." This was the confession that every Christian was expected to make. It is important to note in these verses the present tense. The denying or confessing is something that is going on continuously.

With verse 24 John continues by exhorting them to keep to the original teaching which they have received for it is the only true message of salvation. The result will be eternal life. John again refers to the anointing of the Holy Spirit who guards them and teaches them the truth. In the next few lines he emphasizes abiding in Him which can be translated as continue or remain, and indicates the believer's union with Christ.

The purpose of this abiding, which is a favourite word of John's is so that they will not be ashamed when Jesus returns. This is John's only use of the expression

"parousia." He is also using another contrast here. He wants them to have confidence rather than shame when they stand before Him. The last verse is somewhat of a test by which the believers may know each other. A righteous life is given as evidence by which they can tell the one who belongs to Christ.

Chapter 5

I JOHN THREE

3: 1 - 24

This is a crucial chapter in the study of I John. In it, John places more emphasis on the believers' daily walk with the Father. Several of his contrasts are in this chapter: present and future (3:2), righteousness and sin (7-8), children of God and children of the devil (10), good works and evil works (12), life and death (14), love and hate (14-15), and confidence and condemnation (21).

John's basic thrust in this chapter is to bring out the fact that a child of God cannot and does not, live a life of sin. He is concerned about the daily walk of his people. He has been leading up to this topic as he has spoken of confession of sin and cleansing, and of not loving the world. This is actually a continuation of the preceeding verses.

His opening words are an exclamation of wonder and amazement at the greatness of the love that the Father has bestowed on us to call us His children. Well might we spend some time considering "what manner of" love He has shown. Vaughn points out that the word $\pi\omicron\tau\alpha\pi\acute{\eta}\nu$ conveys the

sense of surprise and wonder.¹ Used as it is with "behold", it calls attention to the wonder and joy of the love which would claim us as children!

The word that John uses for love is ἀγάπη, that beautiful, selfless, divine love. English vocabulary makes little distinction in affection and uses the one word "love" for every form of it. The Greek uses three words, one denoting physical, another expressing friendship and affection and then ἀγάπη for the deepest expression of love. This can cause shades of meaning which are difficult to bring out in English.

John tells them that they belong to God right now. They are His children and He loves them with an unchanging eternal love. He adds that this is the reason that they are unpopular with the world — because it does not know or belong to Him.

The second verse introduces one of the contrasts — present versus future. John has just said that they belong to God now, and in this verse he tells them that it has not yet been revealed what the future will be, except that they will be like Him. Added to this is the fact of seeing Christ as He is, in His glory. Thus the joy of the present state contrasts the thrill of expectation of that which is yet unknown. What a glorious and sure hope is given here to

¹Vaughn, p. 74.

the believer — to be like Jesus at last. This could also be a refutation of Gnostic teaching as they put so much emphasis on the special secret knowledge of spiritual things, available only to a very few. John is saying that there is a limit to what can be known in this life.

With this he continues on to what the believer's life should be now. He says something rather unusual in verse three in relation to this; that anyone who has this hope of the future, purifies himself. The word is *ἀγνίζω* and comes from *ἀγρός*. It means exactly that, to purify.² How can anyone purify himself? The Scripture says that we can do nothing for ourselves spiritually but must depend on Jesus to work in us. A clue is given in that the word is used in the sense of morally, and also from what John says in verse four. A person can in a sense purify himself by living in constant obedience to God's commands. In other words, by walking in the light. Living in as far as he knows, in God's will for him and allowing nothing in his life that is displeasing to Him. The present tense is used throughout, denoting present continuous action.

The next verses clearly refute the Gnostic belief about indulging in immorality. The spirit is affected by the deeds of the body. It is a fact that a person's attitude towards sin is reflected in their life-style. The Gnostics

²The Analytical Greek Lexicon (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1974), p. 4

simply dismissed the idea — for them it was not relevant. But John states plainly that no one who professes to be a Christian will live a life of conscious sin. He will not habitually practice sin as a way of life. The use of the present tense, continuous action, is significant here in these verses, as much of our understanding and interpretation hinges upon them. V. Kerry Inman in his study of the vocabulary of this passage states in regard to the tense used:

The use of the phrase in I John 3:4 does not add to the present investigation, in that neither continued nor completed action can be deduced from the context. I John 3:8, the only other Johannine passage using the phrase besides the text under consideration does contribute to our understanding. In this passage the one who sins (*ποιῶν ἁμαρτίαν*) is of the devil because the devil sins (*ἁμαρτάνει*) from the beginning. The argument here that the one who sins (the participle again indicating continued action) is of the devil is based on the obvious similarity the sinner bears to the devil. This is that he sins from the beginning. He has pursued a sinful course of action. Thus the view that *ποιῶν ἁμαρτίαν* indicates³ continues action is supported here contextually.

However, it is logical to conclude that if John is using the phrase in verse 8 to indicate continuous action then he is also using it in the same way when he speaks of the same subject in verse 4.

In this passage then, John is not talking of single isolated acts of sin which are a result of temptation and weakness. He has already dealt with that in 2:1 and the tense is completely different (aorist). But he is concerned

³V. Kerry Inman, "Distinctive Johannine Vocabulary and the Interpretation of I John 3:9," Westminster Theological Journal, Vol. XL, No. 1, Fall 1977, p. 141.

lest the licentiousness of the Gnostics should gain a foothold. His language becomes stronger as he moves on; whoever lives like that is of the devil. This introduces two other contrasts; righteousness versus sin, and children of God versus children of the devil. No one can indulge in sensuality in the flesh and not have his spirit affected, and he cannot live this type of life and be a child of God for this is in direct opposition to the purity God has commanded.

His words in verse 7, "Let no one deceive you" are of particular interest. Apparently they were being deceived or he would not have occasion to write as he does. It is again noticeable that his language is very strong.

With verse 10 he is quite emphatic as he says that this is the test by which the children of God and the children of the devil are known. Those who are practicing sin as a way of life are obviously not obeying God's law and therefore they do not know Him or belong to Him. Those therefore who are seeking to obey God and are keeping themselves pure are seen to be His children.

What John does not mean is that the Christian is unable to ever sin again. In no way does he advocate sinless perfection for he has clearly stated the believer's need for confession and cleansing in the blood of Christ.⁴ John's first century readers would be well aware of the situation and also could probably understand the letter more clearly than we can.

⁴The Wesleyan Bible Commentary, p. 341.

However it does have relevance for today, for this type of thought is still prevalent and the stern warning that this letter holds is needed. It applies also to any form of sin, which basically is rebellion against God and need not take the form of heretical Gnostic doctrines.

John has mentioned already in chapter 2 the importance of loving the brethren and here in verse 11 he brings it up again. Obviously the commandment and the message which they have heard from the beginning are one and the same -- love one another. He uses Cain as an illustration and example. Far from showing love to his brother, he had murdered him in a fit of rage and jealousy. Why? Because his brother's righteous life contrasted sharply with his own life. Verse 13 must be linked directly here to make it clearer. It might be said "so then -- do not be surprised if the world hates you." There is here an indication of why the non-Christian seems so often to instinctively hate the Christian for no apparent reason. It is because the life of a true Christian condemns the unbeliever and brings him under conviction for his own ways. In his innermost heart he knows what he should do but does not want to give up his way of life. It is perhaps just a glimpse of the power of Satan that he can so blind and hold men.

In verse 14 John states again that one of the tests of being a child of God is love for other believers. Those who have no love for believers, no desire for fellowship with them, or for worship together, are still in darkness

and do not know God. Then he goes even farther and says that anyone who hates (this is present tense and means to detest or abhor) is a murderer and no one who does that has eternal life. This may again reflect the Gnostic tendency to despise or look down on those whom they considered incapable of receiving spiritual revelations. This is expressly forbidden for all believers are equal and no one has access to secret knowledge. Unfortunately some of this attitude did linger on in the church.

If people really do love one another then they will express it in practical ways, such as being willing to help another who is in need. If anyone has the means to help and refuses to do so, it shows that they do not really love. John warns that talking about love is not enough, it must be put into action.

The expression of this love brings assurance to the heart is John's basic idea in 19 - 20. This is a difficult section and scholars are not agreed on the proper interpretation of it.

There are differences of opinion as to the meaning of verse 20. Some hold that, when the heart condemns God's **greater knowledge** confirms the condemnation (Clarke, Wesley, Whedon). Others hold that, though the heart condemns, God's greater knowledge gives assurance of acceptance (Brooke, Steele, Vincent, Wescott).⁵

It seems however, that the most usual position is that the heart may condemn falsely but God is greater and gives

⁵The Wesleyan Bible Commentary, p. 345.

reassurance to the troubled believer. It is pointed out that this may be connected with the Gnostic thought that John is refuting and which may have caused such problems among the Christians.⁶

The importance of a clear conscience is shown in verses 21-22 for if we have confidence to come before God our prayers will be answered.

A sin-stained conscience is the most effective barrier between man and God; where the stain is blotted out, the barrier is removed, and instead of separation from God there is 'boldness toward God' — openness in His presence.⁷

It is important to remember that the blood of Jesus is the remedy for all sin and that it is possible to have a heart that is free from sin.

Care must be taken not to misinterpret the statement "whatever we ask, we receive of Him." This is not blanket coverage for anyone to ask for whatever he wants. It is a reassurance that when prayer is according to His will He will answer.

In verse 23 John returns to the commandment. They are to believe, place their trust, in Jesus Christ and also love one another. It can be noted that the verb "believe" is in the aorist tense (completed past action) while "love" is in the present tense indicating continuing action. Once people have believed in Jesus they continue to love one another.

⁶The Wesleyan Bible Commentary, p. 345.

⁷Bruce, p. 99.

Obedience to His commands is evidence that they are truly abiding in Him and also that He is living in them through the Holy Spirit. This verse also serves as an introduction to the next chapter in which John again returns to the theme of the false teachers.

Chapter 6

I JOHN FOUR

4: 1 - 6

John catches his reader's attention again at this point with the affectionate term "beloved." Perhaps it is an indication that something vital is to be presented next. Immediately after referring to the Holy Spirit in 3:24, he now warns his people to prove the spirits to see if they are of God. Barclay gives important background material on the situation in the early church.

Behind this warning is a situation of which we in the modern church know little or nothing. In the early church there was a surging life of the Spirit which brought its own perils. There were so many and such diverse spiritual manifestations that some kind of test was necessary. Let us try¹ to think ourselves back into that electric atmosphere.

He goes on to tell of the situation which surrounded the early church. The spirit world was very near and real; spiritual beings sought to enter human bodies. Spirits inhabited rocks, trees and mountains. They were aware of a personal power of evil and of the battle between light and darkness. Barclay also points out that the coming of the Holy Spirit had been accompanied by much more visible

¹Barclay, p. 89.

phenomenon than we have ever seen. Added to this is the fact that prophets were common in the church and many were travelling ones.² This brought its own dangers and Barclay says of this:

The early church was full of this surging life of the Spirit. The exuberance of life had not been organized out of the Church. It was a great age; but its very exuberance had its dangers. If there was a personal power of evil, men could be used by him. If there were evil spirits as well as the Holy Spirit, men could be occupied by them. Men could delude themselves into a quite subjective experience in which they thought — quite honestly — that they had a message from the Spirit.³

Under these circumstances, it was therefore imperative that some criteria should be set forth by which to judge between the true and the false. The test which John sets forth is confession that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. The Broadman Commentary points out that in this section there is ". . . the heart of John's assault upon the false teachers."

The highly significant feature of John's renewal of his attack upon the heretics here is the manner in which he relates the work of the Holy Spirit to the Jesus of history. In the previous attack upon the false teachers, branded as antichrists (2: 18-27), the emphasis was on their denial of the deity of Christ as the Son of God. Here it⁴ is on their denial that he was actually a human being.

By his emphasis on the fact of Jesus Christ being in flesh, John obviously has in mind those Docetic teachings which denied that Jesus had a real human body and judged Him

²Barclay, pp. 89-90.

³Barclay, p. 91.

⁴McDowell, p. 212.

to be merely a phantom. The vital doctrine in question here is of course the incarnation. To deny this is to deny Jesus as Saviour and thus negate the whole plan of redemption. That is why John is so emphatic on the point that Jesus was a real human being and also the Son of God. In his gospel he has pointed out that "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." (John 1:14). Here he insists that Jesus Christ has come "in flesh" not "into flesh." This would also refute the teachings of Cerinthus that the Christ Spirit only came upon the man Jesus. In the Greek here, there is no definite article before "flesh."

This issue is still present today; there are still false teachers who attempt to deceive and it is still necessary for believers to prove or test that which they see and hear.

Barclay points out the repetition of the phrase ἐκ τοῦ Θεοῦ in this passage and the difficulty which it has caused translators. He maintains that the logical translation is "from God" for this indicates God as the source, and that whatever it is used with has its origin in God. This would apply to testing the spirits to see whether they originate from God.⁵

In verse 4 however, John gives his people some wonderful reassurance. They do have victory in Christ over the powers of evil because, John points out, greater is He, the Holy Spirit, who is dwelling within you, than he, the

⁵Barclay, p. 92.

false spirit, who is dwelling in the world. He does not leave one to struggle alone but gives the sure and certain guidance of His Spirit. Not an influence from without but a person within. John also says that those who know God will listen to us and those that don't will reject us and by this we will know the difference.

4: 7 - 21

At verse 7 John abruptly changes the subject and reverts again to the subject of love for one another. He has covered this already in 2: 7-11 and also in 3: 10-18, but here there is a progression of thought and the development of an idea. In chapter 2 he simply brings up the fact that anyone who hates his brother is in darkness. Then in chapter 3 he develops it in a stronger way. Hatred is murder but love will lay down its life for another. In this passage the emphasis is very strong. Love one another because love is from God; it has its origin in Him. Believers are also to love one another because He loves them and because God is love.

John's word for love throughout this passage is ἀγάπη. Vaughn points out that it is used 32 times in this section alone. He also mentions that this word, almost unknown in secular Greek, has been given its rich beauty by the New Testament use of it. In its fullest meaning it is spontaneous, self-giving and indifferent to the merit of the object

loved.⁶ This is the love that comes with the infilling of the Holy Spirit. It is a result of walking in the light and being cleansed from all sin. John says that the one who does not love does not know God, because God is love — His very nature is that of love.

Verse 9 tells the result of that love. God sent His only begotten Son into the world so that all might have life. A little farther on he refers to Him as the Saviour of the world. This is the supreme revelation of the love of God for man. Jesus was God's love made visible. Vaughn points out that the perfect tense is used, "has sent", indicating the continuing results of Christ's coming. He also says of the divine love:

. . . it is seen in the greatness of the gift which love prompted God to bestow on us: "his only begotten Son." Nowhere else in the epistle does John use this full title. In other places he speaks of "the Son," "his Son," or "the Son of God." The emphasis is not simply on the fact that God sent Jesus, "but that Jesus, who was sent, is God's Only-Begotten Son (Law, p. 73).⁷

God's express purpose in sending Christ was that He might be the propitiation, or sacrifice, for sin. John points out in verse 10 that we did not love God but that He loved us. And because of this, he continues in verse 11, we ought to love one another. It is perhaps significant that John's emphasis in this chapter is on God's love to us and our love for each other. Little is said of our love to God. It would almost be expected that John would be more concerned

⁶Vaughn, p. 102.

⁷Vaughn, p. 105.

about that. But John knows that if the heart is filled with love then the first impulse will be to return it to God. It is necessary only to ponder on God's love and provision and the heart will respond in love and adoration to Him.

John seems to introduce a new thought in verse 12, "no man has seen God at any time." He is speaking of God in His very essence, His spiritual being. John goes on to say that through the Spirit the believer can know that he abides in Him. With the gift of the Holy Spirit there is that deep inner witness and assurance that we belong to God. Then immediately John follows it with the external evidence — confession of Jesus as the Son of God. It is noticeable that John has again turned to the subject of the Gnostics and their false teachings, and the ancient confession of faith. Confession of Jesus as Son of God meant acknowledging the incarnation — that the man Jesus was also divine. This ran counter to the view of those who taught that Jesus was merely a phantom. This confession is made vital to abiding in God.

The essence of the confession is an acknowledgement of Jesus as the eternal Son of God (cf. 4:2 and II John 7). This, however, is far more than the recital of a creed. Calvin expresses the view that John uses faith and confession as interchangeable ideas. And Barker reminds us that "to confess Jesus as Messiah and Son of God was a costly act in the first century A.D.; it sundered from the nation of Jews and from the social life of paganism. That "confession" would only be made by one who knew Jesus Christ as an indwelling power to whom absolute loyalty was due, and who made that absolute loyalty a possibility" (p. 69).⁸

⁸Vaughn, p. 110.

John follows this with the thought in verse 16 that abiding in love is abiding in God. This is a logical conclusion to the thought that God is love.

Verses 17 and 18 speak of the perfection of love and its results. Love is perfected within us, or brought to completion. John gives the reason for this as the means of assurance so that the believers will have confidence in the day of judgment.

Perfect love in the heart of the believer will give boldness in the day of judgment (v. 17). John is very concerned that Christians have strong assurance before God. No one need be surprised in the day of Christ's appearance and shrink back because of fear (2:28). When the final day of judgment comes, perfect love will give boldness before the throne of justice. In that day "when all stout-hearted (unbelievers) shall tremble", those with⁹ pure love will be quiet, confident, and unafraid.

John states that perfect love casts out fear. The Wesleyan Commentary points out that this fear is that of a dread punishment. It is a fear which can remain in the hearts of believers and deprive them of peace and assurance. The Greek word here which is translated fear is *φόβος* from which we get our word "phobia" to describe deep-seated and sometimes irrational fears. John is pointing out that when the heart is made pure and filled with love, fear will be cast out. Fear is tormenting, and real fear can cause a person to disintegrate emotionally and physically. John uses the present tense here indicating that the person is living in a continuous state of fear.

⁹Wesleyan Bible Commentary, p. 354.

John closes this chapter with further exhortations about love for the brethren. He maintains that if anyone does not love his brother then he is lying when he says he loves God. He has seen his brother but he has not seen God. John emphatically equates love for the brethren and love for God. For him, neither can truly exist without the other. John's theme of love continues into the following verses, though a chapter break has been made here.

Chapter 7

I JOHN FIVE

5: 1 - 12

In the first verse of this chapter John states that belief in Jesus as the Christ results in a person being born of God. This necessarily involves belief in the incarnation and thus it is obvious that John is again dealing with the Gnostic teachings. However, until now he has used the word "confess" in connection with this. Here he uses "believe." This indicates the inner faith and conviction while the former seems to suit a public stand. Thus John has included both aspects in his letter. Both are necessary. He goes on to the idea that those born of one family are expected to love one another. Love for God means that one will keep His commandments and this will at the same time be an indication of his love for others. This is because the child of God now possesses divine love, for if he is abiding in God he is abiding in love. This is obviously a very important subject to John for he has already dealt with it three times: in 2: 9-11; 3: 11-17, 23; and in 4: 11-12, 20-21. It is well to consider it thoroughly for the very fact of such repetition in Scripture is significant of its importance. How much do believers today really love their brethren? Would anyone think of testing their experience by this? Would they want to?

Then John goes on to say again that love for God will show itself in obedience to His commands. In short, if there is love for God in the heart, there will be obedience to Him also. And the obedience will be a response of love rather than just a duty. John says that His commands are not burdensome, they do not weigh one down. This is a reminder of Jesus' words "my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Why are the commands of God not burdensome? In remembering other things that Jesus said one may wonder — but there are three things, according to Barclay, that make them light. One is that God does not and will not, require anything for which He does not give the strength. In other words, God Himself supplies the power to obey His commands. It is not necessary to struggle to follow Him for He is there giving the strength that is needed.

Then also, love turns duty into joy. Some things can be done joyfully, out of love, which would otherwise be a burden. When a person loves much he will gladly serve. What would be an impossible sacrifice for a stranger, becomes a willing gift for a dearly loved one. So it is with love to God.

Finally there is faith. This is what gives the ability to trust God for the help needed to obey Him. It is also vital to every aspect of the Christian life.¹

In verse 4 John says that the one who is born of God

¹Barclay, pp. 104-105.

overcomes the world. But immediately he points out that victory over the world has come by faith. In the Greek two different tenses are used here. The first is present, indicating that the overcoming is still in process, while the latter part of the verse has the aorist or past tense. The initial victory over the world has already been won; the true believer carries it on and in both cases it is won by faith. I Howard Marshall writes:

To believe that Jesus has been victorious is to have the power that enables us also to win the battle, for we know that our foe is already defeated and therefore powerless. And it is precisely faith that we need. To the natural man the power of evil appears uncontrollable, and to the weak Christian the force of temptation appears irresistible. It requires a firm belief in Jesus to enable us to dismiss this appearance of irresistible, uncontrollable evil as being merely appearance. Nor is such faith a means of escape from conflict; on the contrary it is right in the middle of evil's display of power that the believer is able to call its bluff and proclaim the superior might of Jesus. Such faith is far from being wish-fulfilment or sheer illusion. On the contrary it rests foursquare on the fact that Jesus Christ has defeated death,² and anybody who can defeat death can defeat anything.

The world of course is again the world system rather than the visible, material world.

Verse 5 completes the thought by showing that this faith is centered in Jesus. Faith means believing that Jesus is the Son of God. As Vaughn points out, the two natures are combined in this phrase. "The form of the statement . . . emphasizes the union of humanity and deity in the

²Marshall, p. 229.

one person . . ."³ The next verse adds a new thought but one which is also rather obscure. He speaks of Jesus as coming by water and blood, not by water only but by water and blood. What did John mean by suddenly introducing this statement? The interpretations, as might be expected, have been many and varied. Vaughn outlines some of the major ideas as to the meaning.

The words have been variously interpreted. Some, for instance, have taken them to be references to the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. However, the use of the past tense ("came") rules out this interpretation. Others have seen in the words an allusion to the crucifixion of Christ when His pierced side gave forth blood and water. This interpretation is highly improbable. Here we are told that Christ came "by" (or "through") water and blood. At the crucifixion the blood and water came "out of" Him. Calvin, who interpreted the preposition ("by") to mean "with" or "accompanied by", looked upon "the water" and "the blood" as symbolizing, respectively, the cleansing and atonement brought to us by Christ.⁴

Most scholars now agree however, that John is still refuting Gnosticism. The insistence on both water and blood here is the clue that it was more than just a declaration. There was a purpose behind it even though the centuries have obscured it for today. It is almost certain that the reference is to Jesus' baptism and His death on the cross.

He is claiming that Jesus Christ truly was baptized and truly died on the cross. The reason why John emphasized these two events in the life of Jesus is to be seen in the second part of the verse where he stresses that Jesus did not come by water only but by water and blood. If we read, as it were, between the

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⁴Vaughn, p. 119.

lines, it is not hard to guess that John's opponents accepted that Jesus Christ came by water but not by blood. We have already seen who these opponents were (see 2 Jn. 7; 1 Jn. 2:22 and nn.). They were people who held that the heavenly Christ descended upon Jesus at his baptism but withdrew from him before his death, so that it was only the earthly Jesus who died and not the heavenly Christ.⁵

But John argues that Jesus was not just human but divine as well; he was born the Son of God. This same argument would also refute the Docetic views of a phantom Christ. Only flesh and blood could be baptized and a phantom does not die and shed blood in the process. John may also have had in mind what he had written in his gospel as an eye witness of the crucifixion (John 19: 34-35). He had seen this event take place. In the verses immediately following, John takes up the subject of the witnesses.

It must be noted first of all that verses 7 and 8 present a textual problem that has caused some controversy. The fact is that a major part of these verses as given in the Authorized version, is not in the original Greek at all.

The spurious words begin with "in heaven" (verse 7, KJV) and continue through "in earth" (verse 8, KJV). Biblical scholarship is unanimous in its opinion that these words did not form a part of the original text of 1 John. Every Greek manuscript before the fifteenth century omits them. Every ancient version of the first four centuries omits them; in fact, every version earlier than the fifteenth century omits them, except the Latin. Furthermore, no Greek father quotes the passage in discussing the doctrine of the trinity. All of this is conclusive evidence that⁶ the words are not a part of the authentic Greek text.

⁵Marshall, p. 232.

⁶Vaughn, p. 121.

The correct reading is "For there are three that bear witness, the Spirit, and the water and the blood, and these three are in agreement." But although the water and the blood bear witness to the reality of Christ's claims, it is the Spirit who is the primary witness and John emphasizes it by declaring that the Spirit is truth. The voice of the Holy Spirit speaks strongly that Jesus is the Christ. He bears witness to this truth in the hearts of believers, though He is not limited to that alone.

Vaughn points out some facts about this witness. He reminds us that it is a three-fold witness, which would conform to the stipulation of the Mosaic law. It is a continuing witness for the present tense is used. These main events of Jesus' life plus the inner assurance of the Holy Spirit continue to bear witness that Jesus is the Son of God.

With this in mind, John goes on in verse 9 to remind them that if they will accept a testimony from men then they should be ready to believe God's witness. He points out that what he has just written is indeed the divine witness

that God has given of His Son. Through the Holy Spirit, God is bearing witness. In the following verse, John says something that is tremendously important. This is what the old Methodists called "the inward witness." For John says that the person who believes in Jesus as the Son of God will have the witness in himself. By this he means that the Holy Spirit ministers the assurance of the new birth to his heart.

"Hath the witness in himself" refers to the inward witness of the Spirit and means that the believer is given a profound certitude of the rightness of his decision to commit himself to Christ. In addition, there is the thought that the inward witness is a subjective confirmation of the testimony set forth in the preceding verses.⁷

The first part of this verse is in sharp contrast to the second part where John states explicitly that the person who does not believe makes God a liar. He has refused to believe what God has said.

In verse 11 he states that God has given eternal life. Though "eternal life" is not defined in Scripture, it means more than just simply existing forever. Would anyone want to live forever in a world such as this, plagued by sin, disease, and trouble? As Barclay says, it would be an intolerable burden rather than a shining gift. And yet there is the urge within every person to live forever. This will be fulfilled for the believer in a life which will be free from sin and unhappiness. Whatever God has designed for eternal life, it will be a life lived in His presence forever.

There are other points to notice in this verse. One is the fact that this is a gift from God. John seems to underscore the concept of grace here. It is not earned, it is given freely. Then John also points out that it is in His Son. All of the benefits and blessings of eternal life are in Jesus and it is only through faith in Him that they can be received.

⁷Vaughn, p. 123.

Finally there is the tense that is used; John uses the aorist — God gave. It is not necessary to wait for eternal life to begin at death, God has already given it to us. When one becomes a child of God, he receives the gift of eternal life. So, in a sense, eternity begins now and death is just stepping into a fuller realization of it.

That this is only possible through Christ is made very emphatic in verse 12. John states simply "He who has the Son has life and he who does not have the Son does not have life." Without faith in Jesus as the Son of God, eternal life is an impossibility. It is to be noticed that John uses the present tense, indicating again that this is something that is possessed right now, rather than in the future.

5: 13 - 21

John gives another reason for writing in verse 13. He is writing to those who already believe in the Son of God, so that they may know that they have eternal life. The Greek is a shorter and different reading than the Authorized Version, which adds the phrase "and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God."

It is very likely that the conflict with the Gnostic teachers and their doctrines had upset and confused many of the Christians and perhaps it had caused them doubts about the validity of their salvation. John tells them that he has written these things to reassure them and so that they

could have confidence that they have eternal life. He has already pointed out that Jesus is the source and that they must believe in Him as the Son of God.

In the closing verses of the letter, John moves on rather abruptly to other subjects, mainly that of prayer. He speaks of the confidence that they have in God, and says that whatever they ask in accordance with His will, God hears. This is the basis of prayer; to know and believe that when prayer is made God is listening. Would there be any comfort in praying to God if He could not hear? And then the principle is that prayer must be in His will. It may not always be possible to be certain what God's will is but in this case there is the help of the Holy Spirit who will guide the believer as he prays. Because of the context, this may refer especially to prayer for those who are going astray and for sinners, and this is always in His will. It should be kept in mind that prayer is not an attempt to change God's mind or to force Him to act, but rather it is helping to push back the powers of darkness so that God can work. There are conditions which must be met however and Barclay points them out. The believer must be abiding in Him; he must pray in the name of Jesus.⁸ There is power in the name of Jesus and He is the access to God, which is why prayer should be closed in His name. It goes almost without saying that the will must be yielded to God so that the believer desires only what He

⁸Barclay, p. 115.

wants. Then John states that if one knows He hears, he will also know that he will receive his requests.

From this John goes immediately to the subject of sin in verse 16. Marshall states that he has been deliberately leading up to this as his main topic, and this would appear to be so.⁹ In this verse he also differentiates between sins that are unto death and those that are not. This has caused considerable controversy and there are varied opinions as to the meaning.

Many interpretations have been given of "sin unto death" (TEV: "sin which leads to death"). Some, for instance, understand it as a specific act of sin, such as murder, adultery, blasphemy, and so on. Those who take this approach see in the words an allusion to high-handed or wilful sin (Num. 15:30). Others say that the reference is not to a specific act of sin, but to a state or habit of sin wilfully chosen and persisted in. Plummer, for example, speaks of it as "constant and consummate opposition to God" (p. 123). These interpreters point to the absence of the Greek article before "sin" and emphasize that the reference is not to "a" sin unto death but to "sin unto death."¹⁰

Barclay mentions the Greek *πρός θάνατον* which literally means "going toward death." In other words its end is death. This could involve deliberate, wilful sin.¹¹

Vaughn points out that according to the background of the letter, this could also be directed at the Gnostics who were wilfully denying the person and work of Christ.¹² There can be no salvation for those who reject Him.

⁹Marshall, p. 245.

¹⁰Vaughn, p. 132.

¹¹Barclay, p. 120

¹²Vaughn, p. 133.

In verse 18 John says that those who are born of God are not committing sin (present tense) and this is reflecting back to chapter 3. He goes on to say that the one born of God keeps him. There is a textual difficulty here for the best manuscript evidence reads "him" rather than "himself," and this makes a considerable difference. The Christian does not keep himself but he is kept by Christ who is the begotten of God. Because of this, Satan has no power over us.

The verses 18, 19, 20, each begin with a definite statement of knowledge. It is important to know that it is not necessary to sin, there is victory over it; that the believer belongs to God rather than the world; and that the Son of God has come.

John's last line is a very short and abrupt command which is softened by his last use of the tender expression "little children." The command is to beware of idolatry, or to keep themselves from the pollution of heathen worship. This does not have the same significance today that it would have to those early Christians living in the very center of idolatry. It must be remembered that John was writing from Ephesus to the surrounding area. This was a city dedicated to the worship of Diana, the goddess of fertility. The great temple of Diana was one of the wonders of the ancient world but it was also a center of vileness. Barclay gives at least three things that would uphold John's command to keep away from it.

It was a center of prostitution. This was their form of worship. It was the refuge of criminals. Any criminal was safe if he could reach the temple and remain there. Thus it was the haunt of every type of criminal and any association with it involved the very dregs of society. It was the center for the sale of charms or amulets and these were connected with sorcery. It was the center of the black arts; witchcraft, astrology, exorcism, and all types of magic.¹³ It is little wonder that John ao strongly urged complete separation for the Christian. He knew the perils of the world in which he lived. He also knew that his people must take a strong stand for their faith in the midst of a corrupt society.

The Christian today must still guard against adopting the ways and worship of a godless society. Jesus Christ must have first place in the heart of every believer for He alone is the way to eternal life.

¹³Barclay, p. 124.

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