

EXPOSITORY NOTES

1 JOHN

Gordon Lyons

Expository Notes

1 John

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Introduction and Background

Author

The writer of this letter was the apostle John—the author of the Gospel of John and of Revelation. John (and his brother James) were the sons of Zebedee.

In this First Letter, John does not reveal his name. We have, however, the testimony of the early church fathers including Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Cyprian and Origen—all of whom identified the apostle John as the writer. Also, Polycarp—the disciple of John—quotes from John's First Epistle in his writings. Besides this testimony, we have the evidence of the letter itself. Both the style of the letter, and its modes of thought, are typical of the writings of the apostle John. As will be noted, there are a number of marked similarities between this letter and one of the writer's other major works—the *Gospel of John*.

Purpose

John wrote this First Letter at a time when the church was being infiltrated and disturbed by false and degenerate teachers. Among these false teachers were some who denied the true humanity of Christ by denying that the Messiah (or Christ) had come in the flesh.

The particular form of false doctrine affecting those to whom John was writing seems to have been a very early form of Docetism or Gnosticism. If Gnosticism, then this particular form became known as 'Cerinthianism'—after Cerinthus, its foremost proponent. Later Gnosticism taught a form of dualism. The spirit, they said, was wholly good or the source of all good; but matter, they said, was wholly evil, or the source of all evil. Therefore, the Gnostics taught that—whereas man's spirit was intrinsically good—his body was intrinsically evil.

The Word of God, however, refutes such an erroneous view. According to the Bible, both body and soul (including the spirit) is the creation of God—and therefore good in itself. Sin attaches to the sinful nature, not to the body as such—although people often use their bodies as instruments of sin. According to the Lord's teaching, sin originates in the heart (or mind). Heart or mind, however, is associated with the spirit (which, according to the Gnostics, was wholly good). The Lord's teaching of a sinful heart or mind, therefore, utterly repudiates the Gnostic view that the spirit is wholly or intrinsically good.

Again, according to Gnostic teaching, the way to find salvation was to find escape from the supposedly evil body. Such salvation came—not by faith in Christ—but by a special knowledge of God. In Greek, the word for 'knowledge' is *gnosis*. From this word, is derived the words *Gnostic* and *Gnosticism*.

Because of their false assumption that matter—and therefore, the body—was intrinsically evil, these early Gnostic teachers, especially the Docetic variety, felt obliged to deny that the Son of God had a true human body. These teachers said that the Lord did not assume a literal physical body like ours, but that he merely took on the *appearance* of a human body. Another view (referred to in the Notes) asserted that the divine Christ came upon the man, Jesus, when he was baptised by John the Baptist. This view goes on to say that Jesus' divine nature left him before his sufferings on the cross.

Whichever view is adopted, it led these Docetic teachers to proclaim that the Son of God did not assume a true human body (albeit, sin apart). However, their teaching was in serious error in that it denied the true humanity of the Son of God. Hence the reason John writes this letter to warn the church of the great dangers of these false doctrines, and to

emphasise both the true deity of the Son and his true humanity. John asserts that the believer does not come to salvation through a special knowledge of God, but through regeneration by God's Holy Spirit and through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Again, the apostle teaches that God has given an unction or anointing to the believer in the form of his Holy Spirit. This anointing—the indwelling Holy Spirit—leads the believer into all truth. There is, therefore, no need for the child of God to receive instruction from anyone other than the Spirit of God and the Word of God. These are the only means relied upon by God's properly appointed servants such as the apostles, preachers or teachers. In all cases, however, their teaching must be fully in accord with the teaching of God's Word and God's Spirit.

John's emphasis on love for fellow-believers is in direct contrast to the teachings of these early Gnostics (Docetic or Cerinthian). Those who truly love one another in Christ, have no desire to say or to do those things that would hurt or injure one another. However, because these false teachers placed so little emphasis on spiritual and moral values, they practically encouraged people to do those things that violated the law of God and the principles of brotherly love. Immorality was not only practised—it was accepted and condoned among their numbers.

To counter this tendency to grossly immoral and libertine practices, the apostle John reminds the church repeatedly of their obligation to love one another. Since they loved one another as brothers or sisters in Christ, they were under obligation to avoid inflicting harm or injury on their fellow believers. Certainly, believers must avoid the kind of injury or harm being caused by the false teachers through their acceptance and approval of evil practices among their followers. This, in itself, should have been a clear warning to the children of God that these teachers were not of God. Thus, in his letter, John says, *They went out from us—but they were not of us....*

1 John Chapter 1

Opening Remarks

In his introduction to his letter (vv.1-4), the apostle John speaks of the One who is the source of eternal life: namely, the eternal Son of God. Having established the true deity of God's Son, the apostle then proceeds to speak of his true humanity. John's aim and purpose is to maintain the Scriptural teaching of the Godhead and of the true divine and human nature of the Lord Jesus, in opposition to the early Docetic, Cerinthian or Gnostic teachings on these matters.

The Word of Life

1 John 1:1-4

John opens this letter with words clearly reflecting the first chapter of his Gospel. Jesus who—as the Son of God—is the One who has existed from all eternity. In his opening remarks, the apostle makes this abundantly clear when he says:

1 John 1:1

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. (NIV)

Not, of course, meaning from the time the Lord Jesus was born, but rather from before the beginning of creation; i.e., from eternity. The Son—or the Word—was with the Father in the beginning; and through the Son, God the Father made all things. Jesus the Son of God, therefore, is the Creator of all things—and being Creator, he must possess the full attributes of deity—the very characteristics of Almighty God. (John 1:1-3; Col. 1:15-16)

Here was the very Creator of the universe manifesting himself unto sinful mankind that he might converse with them! Jesus the Son of God was indeed God—God incarnate; God manifest in the flesh as a true and perfect Man, completely without sin. Jesus, the Son of God, had come into this sinful world to accomplish the work of redemption. In connection with that great work, the Gospel had to be preached and the Word and will of God had to be made known more fully to fallen men and women. (Heb. 1:1-3)

...which we have heard... declares the apostle John.

Together with the other disciples of the Lord, John had listened to and heard the Words of God from the lips of Jesus himself. John and the other disciples had heard the words of life, and they knew that Jesus was the One who is the way the truth and the life. (John 14:6) They had heard his testimony, and they had believed that this testimony was true. For it was the Word of the One who can never lie, or prove false to the Word he has spoken. It was God's Word spoken by his Son, and God's Word cannot fail. These disciples had heard at first hand what God had to say to them through his Son, Jesus Christ.

Thus, the disciples had not only heard from other people about what the Lord Jesus had said, taught and done, they had heard and seen him for themselves. These disciples or apostles of the Lord Jesus had remained with their Master for three-and-a-half years, during the entire period of his public ministry. They had seen him. They had spent time learn-

ing from him. They had accompanied him all over the country. They had had fellowship with him. They had seen his effects on the people as they had listened in amazement and in awe to his teaching. It was a teaching of almighty power; a teaching of immense authority—for it was the Word of the living Sovereign God to fallen sinful mankind.

Jesus, the Son of God, had made known to these apostles his Father's will. He had revealed to them the message of eternal salvation through the work of his Holy Spirit and through repentance and faith in himself. In addition, he had taught his disciples all those things that were necessary to life and godliness—to the daily practice of the Christian faith, and to the warfare that this faith entailed upon these apostles as the servants of the Lord.

Jesus, the Son of God, was the Word—the Word of Life. The One who was with God in the beginning had been sent by God to proclaim his Word of Truth and Life to sinful men and women.

Addressing all those whom God had brought into his kingdom by his sovereign grace and through faith in his Son, the apostle John reminds his readers of this Word of life. He reminds these faithful believers that they are sharers with him (and with all of God's redeemed children) in the glorious Gospel of the Lord Jesus and in the abundant riches of his grace.

Thus, in the next verse the apostle summarises what he has just said:

1 John 1:2

The one who is the source and giver of eternal life is God himself. He is *the life*. This life appeared in the person of his Son—the One who was God incarnate or God manifest in the flesh. (John 1:14). *In him was life, and that life was the light of men.* (John 1:4) Jesus—who is God the Son—appeared in this world to bring life and salvation. However, contrary to what certain false teachers had been saying, Jesus appeared in the flesh: i.e., in regard to his humanity, Jesus came as a true and perfect Man (sin apart). Though in very nature God, Jesus took upon himself the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death—even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:6-8) Jesus was, and is, the *Theanthropos* or God-Man. He is truly God and truly Man. Therefore, John writes concerning God's manifestation in the flesh as the incarnate Son, *The life appeared....*

Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, came into this world to pay the penalty for sin and to deliver men and women from their bondage to sin and death. Before our conversion, we all had been dead *spiritually* in trespasses and sins. We were alienated from God and at enmity with him because of our sinful nature, inherited originally from Adam, and because of our sinful attitudes, inclinations, thoughts, words and deeds. In addition, because of our sin, we faced the penalty not only of *physical* death, but also of *eternal* death—death in the lake of fire (involving eternal separation from the love, mercy and grace of God and from any hope of forgiveness or reconciliation with God throughout the eternal ages).

When we were dead in sin—*the life appeared*. The One who had come to impart life—abundant and eternal life—to repentant sinners, appeared in the flesh. God's Son, the Redeemer, had come into the world to suffer and die for sinners. How truly then does John say, *The life appeared....* The eternal, infinite and invisible God revealed himself to mankind in and through his Son, Jesus Christ. (John 1:14,18; 14:7-11)

John reminds his readers that, together with the other apostles, he and they were living witnesses of the One who had come to provide life, and to give his life a ransom for many. The apostles had heard what Jesus taught, and had seen him perform many mighty works in the name of his Father. They were present with him when he raised the dead to life. They knew that the Son of God could impart real life to the physical body, and real life

to the spiritually dead soul. They had witnessed the Lord's power to forgive sin, and they had seen what effect that forgiveness had had on the forgiven sinner. The sinner had been cleansed. His soul had been purified. He had been renewed. He had been given a spiritual birth that he had never previously experienced. He had been fitted for acceptance into God's kingdom, for he had been forgiven and reconciled to God. The apostles had seen all these things; and those who, like John, remained alive at this time continued to testify to these events as eyewitnesses.

In addition to all this, however, the forgiven sinner had been given the gift of eternal life—life in fellowship with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

To counter the false teaching of some, John again declares to his readers these most precious fundamental truths: i.e., that the eternal God manifested himself to men and women in and through the incarnation. Jesus is Immanuel or God with us. He is God manifested in the flesh. He was with the Father in the beginning, but now he had appeared in human form. In order to manifest himself in the flesh, the eternal Son of God was born as the baby Jesus—taking upon himself a true and perfect human body (sin apart). Jesus, therefore, is both truly God and truly man. (Isa. 7:14; 9:6; Matt. 1:23)

Therefore, implies John, those who deny that Jesus has come in the flesh, or that he became a true and perfect Man, are in fact denying that Jesus is the Son of God incarnate—the promised Christ or Messiah of God.

Thus, by way of instructive reminder to the churches, the apostle writes, *...we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.*

Continuing this theme in verse 3, John declares:

1 John 1:3

The apostle continues in verse 3 by reiterating that he was making known to these believers the truths concerning Jesus. With his own eyes, John had seen him. He had witnessed the Son of God in the flesh. Together with the other apostles, John had heard the Lord's words when he had declared that he had come from the Father. John and the others had listened to all that Jesus had taught concerning the Father, and concerning his relationship with the Father. This Jesus is the eternal Word—the One who became flesh and made his dwelling among us. (John 1:1,14) Therefore, writes John to the churches,

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

It is the apostle's desire that the beloved saints in Christ to whom he is writing should share in all the experiences of the apostles themselves—as far as this was possible. They could learn a great deal about the Lord Jesus who had loved them and died for them. Moreover, who better to learn from than those who had been with the Lord, and could tell them first hand all that the Lord had spoken and all that he had done? This teaching, however, was very different from the distortions of the truth that now were being disseminated among them by the false teachers.

Often, most is learned about the Lord from those who walk closest to the Lord. Their fellowship with the Saviour conveys itself to us in a way that words alone cannot fully express. However, in the case of the apostles, they had actually been in the presence of the Lord Jesus during his earthly ministry. Under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit, they—better than any others—were in a position to teach the churches and to preserve them from false doctrine. Furthermore, and in a very unique way, the apostles of the Lord were enabled by the Holy Spirit to preach and teach infallibly—unlike the false apostles or any other teachers since.

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At one time, before their conversion, these believers had been cut off from fellowship with God. As with all others outside of Christ, their sins had made them God's enemies. Their sin had alienated them from the Father and had made it utterly impossible for them to enjoy fellowship with him while in their unforgiven state. However, all this was in the past. Now, in Christ Jesus, their sins had been atoned for and blotted out of God's remembrance. By Jesus' atoning blood, they had been reconciled to God.

Thus, in the latter part of verse 3, John declares...*And our fellowship is with the Father...*

This, now, is our blessed and joyous privilege. The Father has made us his own. We are his sons and daughters. Now, he delights in hearing his children come before him daily and hourly in prayer. He delights in hearing them pouring out their heart to him, and of petitioning him for their daily needs. He delights when they cast all their burdens upon him, and when they trust him in every situation. In addition, he delights when his people praise and glorify his holy name.

God is our very own heavenly Father, and we are his children by spiritual rebirth and by adoption. As a true and merciful Father, God cares for his children with a love that cannot be measured and that will never fade or pass away. Moreover, this love toward us was demonstrated when the Father gave his only begotten Son to be our Redeemer. Therefore, writes John,

...our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

Then, in verse 4, the apostle says:

1 John 1:4

Already, these believers had learned to rejoice in their salvation. Already, they had experienced rich blessings with their fellowship in Christ—along with trials and persecutions. Now, however, John wanted to complete their joy. He wanted to make their joy abundant in the knowledge of what he had just told them about God the Son coming in the flesh, as the true and perfect God-Man, for their redemption. The apostle wanted these dear children of God to rejoice in the abundance of life provided in Christ. He wanted them to rejoice also in the fact that their fellowship was not only with the Lord Jesus Christ himself—glorious as this was—but also with the Father. This is the very One from whom they once had been alienated. Yet, because God's Holy Spirit had imparted new life to them, and because God had forgiven their sins through faith in his Son, these dear believers had been forever reconciled to their Father in heaven. Never would he forsake them, for never again could they be condemned. (Rom. 8:1) Therefore, says John,

we write this to make our [or, your] joy complete.

Walking in the Light

1 John 1:5-7

In verse 5, the apostle speaks of the revealing and illuminating light and glory of God, and of the necessity for the believer to walk in that light:

1 John 1:5

This is the Word of truth that has been conveyed by the living God himself to us through his Son: *God is light...* God is holy. He is absolutely pure and spotless in himself. He is the transcendently Holy One. There is none holy as he—save, of course, the other per-

sons of the Godhead. *God is light...* His light is perfect justice and righteousness—a light that is reflected through his glorious and perfect law. God cannot think, speak or do wrong. He is altogether just in all his ways—and all his ways are perfect.

...God is light... The beautiful, majestic and glorious light of his presence makes heaven what it is. His eternal glory shines forth in all its fullness in the midst of the holy angels, and in the presence of his redeemed saints. *God is light...* His Word reveals something of this glorious light to mankind. God's Word expresses eternal truths in a way that people can understand through the operations of the Holy Spirit. This eternal living Word tells us about the One whom the Father sent to be the light of the world and the light of life—Jesus Christ, his one and only Son. Therefore, writes the apostle, *This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light...*

God is not in any sense the author or originator of sin—for sin is darkness, and no darkness dwells in God. Darkness cannot dwell in the presence of light, for light expels or overcomes darkness. Darkness represents all that is evil in the world, and all that is evil in our own hearts and lives. However, light and darkness cannot co-exist. Perfect holiness cannot dwell together with sin. Therefore, writes John,

...in him there is no darkness at all.

What is true of the Father should be true also of his children.

However, what does the apostle say in the next verse?

1 John 1:6

Our Father in heaven is a God of perfect righteousness. We, his children, have been called to live a life that is worthy of our heavenly Father, and worthy of the calling we have received in Christ Jesus. God has given us his Holy Spirit, and he—the Spirit of holiness—sanctifies us to God as his holy temple. But how can the Spirit of holiness dwell in a temple of sin? Our bodies are that temple, and the parts of our bodies are parts of that temple. How, then, can we think, say and do those things which grieve the Holy Spirit, and which dishonour the name of our Father in heaven? (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19-20)

We cannot claim to be walking close to God, if our heart is not right with God. We cannot claim to have intimate fellowship with God, if we are having open or secret fellowship with sin.

Of course, there is not a believer on earth who is without sin. This passage of God's Word is certainly not teaching—or implying—sinless perfection. What God's Word is saying, is that we cannot claim to have fellowship with God *while we are walking in sin*.

Every believer sins and God has made provision for our sins. What God's Word forbids is the deliberate, wilful practice of sin: the idea that we can live a sinful lifestyle, or regularly practice specific sins, and then go to God to seek forgiveness for those sins. This makes a mockery of the atoning blood of Christ, for it treats as cheap and unworthy the precious blood that redeems a person to God, and that sanctifies him. Salvation includes not only *forgiveness* of sin, but also *deliverance* from sin—deliverance from sin's slavery and corruption.

But how does this deliverance come? Through the Word of truth, meditated upon and applied to our souls by the Holy Spirit. Without a regular searching of and feeding upon God's Word, there can be no real sanctification; no Holy Spirit power in our lives and no fruit of the Spirit brought forth in abundance. Therefore, for the redeemed children of God, there can be no *walking* in the darkness: i.e., no continual or deliberate practice of known

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sinful attitudes, thoughts or habits. To practice sin is to live a lie. Therefore, the apostle writes,

If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.

The apostle John continues:

1 John 1:7

If we forsake sinful practices, and if we practice walking in the ways of holiness, justice and righteousness, then certain blessings will assuredly follow.

From this, we see that sin not only cuts us off from fellowship with God. It also cuts us off from real fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Our guilty conscience makes us feel at a distance from our Father in heaven, but it also accuses us and makes us feel at a distance from other believers. In our hearts, we know things are not right with God. However, we want to keep this between God and ourselves alone. We do not want other believers to find out the truth about us. Therefore, we establish defensive barriers between our fellow believers and ourselves. Consequently, we do not have fellowship with one another—at least, not in the fullest sense of the word.

Of course, there may be many other reasons why we do not enjoy close fellowship with our brothers in sisters in the Lord. However, most of these reasons may originate from the same basic cause: sin. This may be either sin we have committed against God or against another believer, or sin that another believer has committed against us. Whatever the truth, there can be no real fellowship with our brothers and sisters until that sin is dealt with and we have been restored to fellowship with God and/or with the one who has offended us.

However, what did the apostle John say in verse 7?

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another....

If we are conforming our lives to God's truth, and putting the teachings of God's Word into practice, *then* we are walking in the light. Moreover, if we are walking in the light, *then* we have fellowship with one another. In addition, if we have fellowship with one another, *then* (says the apostle),

(7c) ...the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all¹ sin. (NIV)

Notice the progression of thought in this verse:

- Regulating our lives according to the teaching of God's Word means that we are *walking* (or living) in the light of that Word: i.e., according to the truths of that Word.
- When we are living in the light of God's Word—i.e., walking in the light—*then* we have fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ.
- When we are living in harmony with God and with our brothers and sisters in the Lord, *then* the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin.

¹ or every sin [NIV footnote to 1 John 1:7]

Confessing Our Sin

1 John 1:8-10

John had said that the blood of Jesus, God's Son, purifies (or cleanses) us from all sin. However, in case there should be any who imagined that sin was no longer a reality in their lives, the apostle writes in verse 8:

1 John 1:8

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.
(NIV)

If we assert that—because we have been born again, therefore we no longer sin—we deceive ourselves. We have indeed been born again. We have indeed been delivered from sin's dominating power over our lives: i.e., from our commitment to sinful ways and from our slavery to sinful practices and habits. However, this does *not* mean that we are now totally free from sin. In God's sight we have been justified and are considered to be without sin, because our sins have been imputed to Christ's account and his righteousness has been imputed to our account. This imputed righteousness (or justification) has been reckoned to our account once-for-all.

However, there is another form of righteousness that is necessary in the believer's life: imparted righteousness. Imparted righteousness is not given to us once-for-all, but rather is worked out daily and hourly in our lives by the Holy Spirit. It is this form of righteousness that is necessary to purify or cleanse us from the sinful nature still within us, and from the works of that sinful nature. Throughout our lives on earth, the Holy Spirit will continue to impart righteousness to us—through the Word of God. Only when we have been glorified and received into the Father's presence faultless and blameless, will imparted righteousness no longer be necessary.

So then, asserts the apostle John, *If we claim to be without sin we deceive ourselves....*

We deceive ourselves because we are denying the fact that sin is still a present reality in our lives. We deceive ourselves because we are denying that it is necessary for us to read the Word of God daily, in order to be cleansed from continuing sin and sinful attitudes. We deceive ourselves if we deny that it is necessary for the Holy Spirit to sanctify us from day to day. For sanctification is not needed where there is no sin. Moreover, where there is no sanctification, there is no Holy Spirit.

This, infers the apostle, is the truth concerning these things; the truth spoken of by the Lord Jesus when he declared that we are sanctified or cleansed by God's Word, because God's Word is truth. (John 17:17) Also, the truths written throughout God's Word concerning sanctification, and the nature and work of the Holy Spirit—particularly in connection with the application of sanctification to our daily lives. (1 Thess. 4:3ff)

Admitting, then, that sin is still a present day reality in the life of every child of God, the apostle continues with these reassuring words:

1 John 1:9

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (NIV)

Immediately, the apostle anticipates the question that must arise: Since sin is still a present reality—although not a dominating principle—where does this place us in relation to

our Father in heaven? Since God has forgiven all our past sin, what does he do about sins we still commit?

Of course, this situation may have taken some believers by surprise. However, in the work of redemption, this very situation had been taken into account. When Christ died for our sins, he died not only for past sins, but also for every sin we would ever commit—whether in the past, present or future. Christ's righteousness achieved for us a perfect righteousness, imputed to us in the form of justification. Christ's substitutionary atonement paid in full the price of all our sins. Therefore, when God's children sin, they are guaranteed forgiveness on the grounds of Christ's perfect work. This perfect work comprehends his righteous life, vicarious sufferings and atonement. So then, because of Christ's righteousness and shed blood, and of his continuing intercession at the throne of grace in heaven, the people of God can approach their heavenly Father at the blood-sprinkled mercy seat.

If, through the Lord Jesus Christ, we freely acknowledge our sins to God—and renounce them—then we will experience God's forgiveness. In addition, if we experience God's forgiveness, then God also restores us to full fellowship with himself—and with other believers. We enjoy not only communion with God and with his Son Jesus Christ, but also peace with God and the joy of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Without such open and full confession to God, however—together with the renunciation of our sin—these great spiritual blessings and benefits cannot exist in our lives.

Our heavenly Father does not limit his blessings. If, with an honest, humble and open heart, we confess our sin to God, he will forgive that particular sin and restore us to full fellowship with himself and with others. In addition, however, he will purify or cleanse our lives from the effects of that sin. The inward pollution will be completely removed. The shame and dishonour we have brought upon the temple of God (our bodies) will be taken away. That temple will be purified and made a fit vessel once more for the Master's use. Where we need to seek reconciliation with others, and where we are ready to set aside our heart of stubborn pride, the Lord will give us a willing heart. Such a heart will earnestly desire to seek peace with our brother or sister in Christ, or with our neighbour.

On top of all this, God will forgive us of, and cleanse us from, all *associated sin*: That is, from all sin connected with the sin that we confessed to God, but which we did not specifically mention. We may have omitted to mention this associated sin because of oversight, forgetfulness or because we were not aware that we had committed that sin.

For example, God forgives us when we confess to him that we have spoken unkindly to a brother or sister in Christ, and when we apologise to that brother or sister. However, God also forgives us for defiling his holy temple (*associated sin*). God's temple is our body—but we had used the parts of our bodies for evil purposes. We used our hearts or minds to engineer sinful thoughts against our brother or sister in Christ. Then, we used our tongue to express these unkind thoughts in words. We told them what we thought. However, by our thoughts and by our words, we contaminated or defiled God's holy dwelling place—our bodies: bodies that have been redeemed and consecrated to God. Although, however, we may not have confessed to God these associated sins—involving the defilement of our body, (but taken to include our whole person and personality)—yet God forgives us. As his own Word says:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins, and purify us from all unrighteousness.

The apostle continues with this solemn reminder:

1 John 1:10

Apparently, there were those among the people of God who could not accept that born-again believers could still be guilty of sin. Surely, if they were filled with the Spirit, and were walking in the light of God's Word, then the Lord would give them victory over all sin in their lives!

Certainly, when we are wholly committed to God and are allowing the Holy Spirit to govern every aspect of our lives, then sin is that much less likely. Moreover, when we are daily walking with the Lord, then we can expect to experience victory over sin's dominion. However, this is not the same thing as achieving complete victory over all sin throughout our lives. Repeatedly, we are told in God's Word that the Christian life involves spiritual warfare. We are told that our enemy the devil prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking for someone to devour. We are told that Satan will do all in his power to tempt us, to lead us astray and to cause us to sin—in thought, word and deed. (1 Pet. 5:8)

Clearly, then, the people of God cannot expect to be entirely free from sin in this present life. What the Lord has delivered us from is the *shackles* of sin, the *bondage* of sin and the *practice* of sin—the kind of lifestyle that was ruining us spiritually and physically.

The Lord paid sin's *penalty* on our behalf—but we still have to battle against sin in our daily lives. Granted, the Lord does promise us victory when we are totally committed to him and when we are wholly consecrated in all manner of life. However, this victory does not come to us without real effort. It requires daily consecration to God; daily prayerful reading and meditation of his Word; daily communing with God and putting into practice all that his Word teaches us—in a spirit of love, trust and obedience toward our heavenly Father.

However, the more we learn of God's Word, the more sinful we see ourselves to be. The further advanced we become in our spiritual lives, the greater our appreciation of our own unworthiness and of God's abundant and never-ending mercy toward us. God's Word is like a mirror. It reveals to us what our lives are really like. Often, the more we grow in the Christian faith, the more sinful we feel ourselves to be.

Of course, we have not really become more sinful. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit has been progressively sanctifying us each day. However, because we possess an increasingly greater knowledge of God's Word, we come to realise much more fully just how sinful our hearts actually are. When we first became Christians, these truths were not so apparent to us. Therefore, in the first flush of our new life in Christ, we felt that in no time we would be able to live a life that was virtually sin-free. However, in this present life, such a state is not possible.

Why should claiming to be without sin, make God out to be a liar? Because it implies that God is not telling the truth when his Word says that we will still sin after conversion. It implies that God is mistaken when he makes provision for such sin by inviting his own children to confess their sins. It implies that God is mistaken when he promises to forgive his people's sins upon their repentance and acknowledgement of those sins. All these things and more are contained in God's Word—but those who deny the possibility of sin in a believer's life are denying the very truths that God has spoken. However, such a denial would effectively nullify, or make redundant, the promises of forgiveness that God has made to his people—if that were possible, which of course it is not.

If a person denies the integrity of God's Word, then clearly he is denying the place of that Word in his life. Why? Because he is denying its teaching. He is saying that he is right and God is wrong. However, this in itself is a sinful attitude—the very thing that that person is seeking to deny! God's Word cannot prove false. It must stand true to every word that God has uttered—for God cannot prove false. By denying some aspect of God's Word, however, it shows a person to be a sinner—a sinner who has never accepted the truth of

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God's Word, and who consequently remains at enmity with God. Therefore, declares John,

If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

Such of course is not the position of those who know and love the Lord. They are very well aware of their sins and failings. However, they know, too, that they have a loving heavenly Father who understands their weaknesses. Although God never condones or overlooks sin, yet he has made provision for our sin—past, present and future sin. This provision is found at the mercy seat of God in heaven, where Jesus—God's Son—has gone with the blood of the atonement.

On the throne of grace, God waits to be gracious to his redeemed people. Our loving heavenly Father is ever willing to hear the intercessions of his own Son on our behalf. The risen and glorified Lord Jesus Christ has accomplished eternal justification and redemption for his people by the shedding of his own blood. Since his once-for-all sacrifice of atonement is effectual forever, the Father is pleased to forgive his children's sins upon repentance and confession to him. In addition, God is more than willing to restore them to full fellowship with himself and with his Son. So great is the love that the Father has for each of his redeemed children.

1 John Chapter 2

Christ, the Atoning Sacrifice

1 John 2:1-2

Lest the believers should feel a little discouraged when John told them that they could not claim to be completely free from sin, the apostle begins the next chapter by writing:

1 John 2:1

Clearly, John is not intent on causing grief or anxiety to God's people, or to cause them to become despondent when they realise that they are still susceptible of sin. His only intention was to correct their erroneous views about regeneration, justification and sanctification. This he has done, and will continue to do. At the same time, however, the apostle wants God's redeemed children to know that—when they sin—they need not fear losing their close fellowship with their Father in heaven. This is because their heavenly Father has already made provision for such events in the lives of all his beloved children.

Therefore, the apostle writes in words of warmth, sympathy and understanding:

(1b) ...I write this to you so that you will not sin.... (NIV)

By saying that the born-again believer is not free from sin, John is not inferring that the believer is therefore free to practise sin. On the contrary, it is from the practice of sin that he was redeemed through the atoning blood of Christ. Therefore, the apostle declares, *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin*—thereby reminding them of their high and holy calling, and exhorting them to practical holiness of life.

Having said this, however, John immediately adds these words:

(1c) ...But if anybody does sin.... (NIV)

In this short phrase, the apostle reminds the believers of what he has already said, and of what God's Word teaches in many places elsewhere. This Word declares: *But if anybody does sin... God provides for that sin. ...If anybody does sin... God invites that person to confess his sin to him, and to experience forgiveness. On what grounds do we experience God's forgiveness? We experience it on the grounds of redemption. On the grounds of the price that the Lord Jesus Christ paid to redeem us to his Father. We experience forgiveness on the grounds of our Saviour's intercession and mediation with the Father. At this very moment, the Son engages in this priestly ministry, and he will continue to engage in it throughout our lives.*

Therefore, says the apostle John:

(1d) ...we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.² (NIV)

Here is God's provision for the sins of his redeemed people: Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. His life of perfect righteousness is reckoned as our life of perfect righteousness. The

² KJV, *we have an advocate with the Father*

penalty of our sin is reckoned as though it were the penalty of his sin—although utterly spotless and sinless in himself. Our sins were the very sins for which Christ died at Calvary, and for which his precious blood became accepted by God as a propitiatory or atoning sacrifice—a sacrifice offered vicariously for us.

Because of this finished work of redemption, it pleases our Father in heaven to hear and accept the intercession of his Son for us. He, the Righteous One, therefore, is the *one who speaks to the Father in our defence*. As a defending advocate, or counsel for the defence, the Lord Jesus presents the facts of the case in our mitigation. ‘Yes,’ our advocate concedes, ‘the believer *has indeed* sinned—but this sin has already been punished in my own Person when I suffered and died as that believer’s substitute. Punishment, therefore, cannot be required again, in the person of the believer himself.’

This is the basis of the substitutionary atonement. This rock-solid foundation guarantees ongoing forgiveness for God’s redeemed children. At the same time, however, it gives no encouragement to the practice of wilful sin.

Therefore, in the second verse of chapter 2, the apostle writes:

1 John 2:2

Because the Lord Jesus lived a perfect life for us, and because he laid down this life for us at Calvary, God acquitted us of all charges against us (justification). Our acquittal, however, does not come because God overlooked our sin. A holy and righteous God cannot overlook sin, nor will he acquit the guilty. (Ex. 34:7; Hab. 1:13) One way or another, the penalty for sin required payment. This payment had to be met in full—either by the sinner himself, or by the sinner’s substitute.

The Son of God lived and died as our substitute. He bore the death penalty due to us. This is why God cannot punish us for the sins that we commit. God punished his only Son for these sins. This is what the apostle means when he says of the Lord Jesus, *He is the atoning sacrifice* [or propitiation] *for our sins*.... That is, because, in appalling agony, Jesus bore God’s wrath for us—dying on the cross as our substitute—the Lord Jesus is the one who turns aside the wrath of God from us.

Now, declares the apostle, what is true in your case and in your local fellowships is true for the people of God wherever they dwell, and in whatever age they live. Formerly, God set his love upon one nation—the Israelites—and he confined his salvation blessings to that nation alone. Outside the camp of Israel and outside the covenant with Abraham, there was no possibility of salvation for anyone. If a non-Israelite person desired to find God’s salvation, it was necessary for him to seek God through the Israelite, or later, the Jewish faith. This entailed his acceptance into the Jewish community as a proselyte or convert to Judaism. It also implied acceptance of, and conformity to, the Abrahamic covenant. In other words, this converted heathen, together with all his male children, had to be circumcised. Circumcision was the sign of the covenant that God had given to Abraham. It was the sign indicating that the children born to these parents were children of God’s covenant with Abraham. As such, they were privileged in the sight of God.

Now, however, implies the apostle, a New Covenant is in effect: a covenant established and ratified by the blood of Jesus. Because of this new covenant, God no longer confines his salvation to the physical descendants of Abraham, and to converts to the Jewish faith. Rather, the children of God are the *spiritual* seed of Abraham; i.e., all believers—all those who, by the grace of God, believe in the Word or promises of God; as did Abraham.

By implication, then, continues the apostle John, Christ died not only for the Jewish people, but also for people from every nation. Therefore, people from any nation under heaven may be included in the work of redemption. This work is world-wide in the sense that—universally—any person without distinction may become the subject of the Holy

Spirit's gracious and regenerating operations. Regardless of their nationality, race, creed, or colour, every single person in whom the Spirit of God thus operates willingly embraces the Lord Jesus Christ through repentance and faith in him. Therefore, says the apostle John,

He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

Anyone who seeks the Lord will find the Lord. Anyone who—by the effectual calling of the Holy Spirit—repents of his or her sin and believes on the Lord Jesus Christ will find salvation. (Rom. 10:9,13)

Through the preaching of the Word, God's salvation reaches to the ends of the earth. Through this Word, the Holy Spirit brings men and women under conviction of sin—men and women out of every tongue, tribe, people and nation. When regenerated by the Spirit and truly convicted and convinced of their sin, the Holy Spirit draws them to Christ. By the work of sovereign grace in his life, a sinner's understanding is opened to the truth of the gospel. This grace generates the seeds of faith in his heart. Freely and willingly, he reaches out to Christ for salvation. At this point, he is truly repentant for all his sins. Thus is fulfilled the words of the Lord Jesus:

"But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." (John 12:32 NIV)

Obeying the Lord's Commands

1 John 2:3-6

Like the readers of John's epistle, and by the sovereign grace of God, those of us who belong to Christ have experienced this very salvation in our lives. Looking back to the time of our conversion, we knew the convicting power of the Holy Spirit bearing upon us and bringing home to us our need of salvation. Through God's Holy Spirit, we came to understand and believe the gospel. The Holy Spirit energised us from within, convicted us of our great need, and drew us to faith in Christ. Recognising our need, we freely and willingly cast ourselves upon the Saviour, seeking his mercy. We found that mercy—abundant mercy extended to us in love and compassion. We experienced forgiveness of sins. Furthermore, God made us his own sons and daughters by adoption, and joint heirs of glory with his beloved Son.

However, in his letter, John cautions his readers to make sure that they are indeed walking in the light. Thus, the apostle warns against those individuals who profess the *name* of Christ, but who have not experienced the *grace* of Christ in their lives. In effect, the apostle declares, Let no-one claim that they know him, if indeed that person has not received cleansing in his atoning blood: i.e., if they have never been redeemed through regeneration, repentance and faith in Christ and in his perfect, atoning and substitutionary sacrifice.

What, however, is the evidence that a person knows the Lord? What practical demonstration tells a professing believer that he is a child of God—that he really has experienced cleansing from his sins?

The apostle John gives the answer in verse 3 of chapter 2:

1 John 2:3

This is our assurance. We know—i.e., we become firmly and confidently assured—that we have come to know him savingly and eternally, *if we obey his commands*. Provided,

then, that we are obeying the Lord's commands, this is certain evidence that we really do know the Lord Jesus as our Saviour, and that he knows and acknowledges us as his beloved people.

We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands, says the apostle.

However, to what commands is John referring? Salvation is by grace, through faith. Surely, we are not under the law?

Certainly, salvation is by grace and by sovereign grace alone. It does not depend on works of the law in any sense, or on the performance of religious rites, ceremonies and duties. These things may have a place—but certainly not in connection with salvation which is an outright gift. No, John is not talking about works of the law. He is talking about the commands of faith, love and obedience—i.e., heeding and practising—the teachings of the Lord Jesus.

(Granted, it is obligatory upon us to heed and practise every word of God pertaining to a believer's character and conduct—whether in the Old Testament or the New. However, we must distinguish between what God now requires of his people, and what God once—but no longer—requires of his people.)

Principally, then, the apostle is referring to those teachings that the Lord gave to the disciples while he was on earth. John is referring also to those teachings conveyed to us through the ministry of the Lord's Spirit-filled and inspired servants and apostles.

All of these teachings—or 'commands'—are now recorded for us on the pages of God's holy Word. The commands of the Lord Jesus and his apostles were never intended to become a heavy yolk upon the necks of God's people. On the contrary, the Lord Jesus invited those who were weary and heavy-laden to take his yolk upon themselves. Tenderly, the Shepherd of the flock called upon them to learn from him; i.e., to hear and to heed his teachings or his commands—teachings or commands that revolved around faith, love and obedience.

Thus, in calling for a response from those to whom the Father had revealed the truth concerning his Son, the Lord Jesus declared:

(27) "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

(28) "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. (29) Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (30) For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matt. 11:27-30 NIV; see also vv.25-26)

And again, the apostle John says,

...And his [the Lord's] commands are not burdensome. (1 John 5:3b NIV)

So, then, implies John, since the Lord has given us commands that are no great burden to our souls—indeed, which bring rest to the soul—we should find no great difficulty in heeding what the Lord Jesus says. We should be experiencing no problems with the Lord's loving injunctions—unless, of course, we are unwilling to do what the Lord requires of us. However, providing we are endeavouring to apply the Lord's teachings to our lives, and to live consistently by that teaching, we remain confident of our secure standing in Christ. Or, in the words of the apostle, We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands.

Of course, from this it follows that when a person professes to know the Lord—and yet is not willing to do what God’s Word teaches—then something is very far wrong.

Therefore, the apostle John pens these solemn words:

1 John 2:4

Very many people profess to know the Lord—yet their lives are not consistent with their profession. These are the people who speak of the faith, and do not live the faith. These are the people who claim to belong to Christ, and yet who are not willing to yield their lives to Christ. They resist the Word of God. They refuse to heed the teachings of the Lord when that teaching is contrary to their personal beliefs, desires or aspirations. They find all sorts of excuses for not doing the very things that the Lord says they ought to do. Yet, they say they know him.

Of course, they know *of* him—i.e., they know *about* him. They may even engage in works of service or works of charity in his name. For all their profession, however, they do not *know* the Lord; i.e., they do not know him as their personal Lord and Saviour.

How can we be sure of this? Because we recognise a tree by the fruit it bears. When a supposedly good tree *consistently* brings forth bad fruit—or no fruit at all—then clearly that tree is either dead or dying. (Matt. 12:33)

Such a person’s profession of faith in Christ is contradicted by his works—or by the lack of them. Not works unto salvation, but works that are the fruit or evidence of salvation in a person’s life. If a person who professes faith in Christ does not apply the teachings of Christ to his life—but instead, lives as he pleases—then that person cannot belong to Christ. For those who belong to Christ must depart from iniquity. (Rom. 8:9; 2 Tim. 2:19)

If, however, the truth is not in him, then this only shows beyond all doubt that this person is not a born-again believer. This is true even although the person may act like a Christian in the presence of other believers. In saying that the truth is not in him, John is not alluding to the sin of untruthfulness—a sin that, unfortunately, Christians may commit. Rather, the apostle is alluding to a complete absence of God’s truth from that person’s life. This is a moral and spiritual condition that results in a hypocritical—although perhaps hidden—lifestyle. (John 15:2,6; cf. John 8:44; 1 Tim. 6:3-5)

To illustrate the meaning of this, we need only consider the example of the Pharisees. The Pharisees professed faith in the one true God, and the majority of the people believed that these religious leaders belonged to God, and understood them as being specially consecrated to God’s service. However, with the exception of men like Nicodemus, most of these religious leaders had no personal experience of salvation. For all their outward appearance of piety and religion, the Lord had occasion to proclaim to the scribes and Pharisees:

(27) “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean” [i.e., inwardly rotten and corrupt]. (Matt. 23:27 NIV)

However, continues the apostle John in verse 5:

1 John 2:5

Whoever is prepared to keep God’s Word.... Whoever is willing to submit himself to the teachings of the Lord Jesus and of his divinely inspired apostles.... This is what we ought to be aiming at—obedience or commitment to the Word of God and to everything it

teaches. This is the principle of sanctification. It is by this means that the Holy Spirit effects inward cleansing in our lives, and makes us increasingly more like our Lord and Saviour.

Some of the fruits produced by the inward work of the Spirit are greater love for God and for one another. (Mark 12:30-31) Other fruits include a greater joy in our hearts in the knowledge of sins forgiven, and an indescribable sense of peace with God. This inward joy and peace results from our reconciliation with our Father in heaven. (Rom. 5:1; 8:6; 14:17) Besides these fruits, there are others such as a greater degree of patience in adversity. (Rom. 5:3-4; 2 Thess. 1:4; James 1:3-4) Toward our brothers and sisters in the Lord, there is a greater willingness to exhibit a spirit of humility instead of a spirit of pride. (1 Pet. 5:5) Again, there is an abundance of gentleness in all our dealings with other people—and especially toward those who are of the household of faith. (Gal. 5:22-23; 6:10) These are just some of the results produced by obedience to the Word of God, and which are being worked out in our lives by the Holy Spirit.

That the believer submits himself willingly to the Lord, is evidence of his love for God. That the child of God desires to do what the Lord requires, is proof that that person's life has experienced in rich measure something of God's abundant love for him. Out of humility and gratitude to God for all he has done, the believer surrenders his life, his soul, his all to the Lord's sovereign control, and to his teaching. Very often, these dear saints are little noticed and least esteemed in the church. As a rule, they do not draw attention to themselves. Frequently, however, their unassuming and gentle nature causes others to look not upon them, but upon their Saviour. It is these believers who are greatest in the kingdom of God. These are among the most precious of the jewels that will make up his crown. Therefore, John says

...God's love is truly made complete in him...

However, the apostle continues:

1 John 2:5c-6

(5c) ...This is how we know we are in him: (6) Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did. (NIV)

How do we know that we are in Christ?

Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

This is the answer from the Word of God. If we claim to be in Christ, then we must walk as Jesus walked. We must live as he lived. We must do what he did. In every respect, we must be like Jesus.

We may pose the question, however, how can we be like Jesus? The Lord Jesus was perfectly sinless. We are sinful people. How then can we live as our Saviour lived?

John is not suggesting for one moment that God's children can become sinless in this life. In this very letter the apostle teaches that because we are sinful we therefore have need of someone to speak to the Father in our defence—Jesus Christ the Righteous. When John says we must walk as Jesus walked, he means we must endeavour to live the kind of life our Saviour lived: A holy life—a life set apart to God. We must live an upright or righteous life. We must remember that Christ's righteousness has been imputed to us, and that the Holy Spirit is imparting to us daily ever-increasing practical righteousness. Therefore, we must live a pure life—for the Holy Spirit who indwells us is sanctifying us unto God. He has made our bodies the sacred dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

Besides these moral and spiritual qualities, God's Word exhorts us to live a life that demonstrates heart-felt and loving concern for others. Our faith must be practical. Just as the Lord Jesus went about doing good to others, so his people must do likewise. Just as the Lord Jesus ministered to those in need, so too we must serve those in need. Just as the Lord Jesus visited the sick, the heartbroken and the lonely, so too we must minister to those who become ill or incapacitated. So too we must comfort those who grieve and mourn. So too we must visit those who are lonely or cut off from fellowship with the Lord and his people.

These illustrate just a few examples of what John means when he says,

Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

A New Command

1 John 2:7-8

In verse 7, notice John's tender appeal to these dear saints of God:

1 John 2:7

(7a) Dear friends.... (NIV)

The Greek for the above expression is αγαπητοι,³ meaning *beloved*—and this is the word used in the vast majority of the available manuscripts. However, some older translations use instead the Greek word αδελφοι, meaning *brethren* (or *brothers*).

As used by John in his epistles, the expression *dear friends* (or *beloved*) conveys a wealth of warmth, sincerity and love from himself to the churches—as these believers well knew. It indicated John's deep love for the churches, and his sense of responsibility toward these dear saints of God. We should remember, of course, that the apostle John was an elder in the Ephesian church. As such, he possessed and exhibited a tenderly pastoral interest in every member of his flock. John's interest did not end with the Ephesian church, but extended to many other churches as well. Indeed, it is probable that the church had appointed the apostle to the oversight (or 'bishopric') of a number of different local fellowships in that region. So then, when the apostle says, *Dear friends...*, he is expressing genuine love, sympathy and understanding toward his fellow believers in Christ.

At this time—as in many subsequent times—it was very necessary for John to state the origin of his teaching. The teaching that John and the other apostles had been giving to the churches over the years, was the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. They were the Lord's commands and teachings. They were not some recently introduced teachings to which—even now—the churches found themselves exposed. These new teachings (so-called) assumed the form of error, false doctrine, or outright heresy. No, says John, *I am not writing you a new command [or a new teaching] but an old one.*

John was referring to the commands and teachings of the Lord Jesus himself: Commands and teachings conveyed to the churches orally by the Lord's Spirit-inspired apostles, and also by their epistles. By these means, the churches possessed all the teachings and commands necessary for them to practise their Christian faith, to avoid error and false teaching, and to live consistently holy and godly lives.

³ αγαπητοι (*beloved*): pertaining to one who is dearly loved, *dear, beloved, prized, valued* (BDAG)

John reaffirms that these teachings and commands were not new (unlike the novel doctrines of the false apostles). In verse 7, John writes, ...*which you have had since the beginning*. The word '*beginning*' refers to the origin of their Christian faith. These believers had been aware of these teachings and commands ever since being brought to faith in Christ. This old command—this teaching which was the foundation of these believers' faith—was nothing less than *the message you have heard*. It was the message of the Gospel, the message of eternal salvation through repentance and faith in Christ.

These redeemed saints of God were well aware of the truths of the Gospel and of the Lord's teachings. Therefore, they ought to have had nothing whatever to do with those who were trying to introduce new teachings into their midst. These new teachings not only contained errors respecting the truth—which was serious enough—but they also contained flagrant misrepresentations of the truth.

Such teaching was of no value to the soul. This kind of teaching amounted to nothing less than destructive heresies. These believers' faith had been founded on the Rock of Christ Jesus and upon his commands; i.e., his teachings. Therefore, the members of the church should look only to this Rock for their salvation and for instructions in godly living. They should build upon the solid rock of the Lord's teachings alone.

The apostles—including John—had repeated orally and by their letters to these believers, the teachings of the Lord Jesus.

Then, in verse 8, the apostle continues:

1 John 2:8

This is not a contradiction, as will be seen shortly. John is insisting that the believers hold fast to the teaching or doctrine as originally delivered to them. They are not to waver from the teachings of the Lord Jesus or from the inspired teachings of the Lord's apostles. Yet, says John, although you must hold fast to the original truths—the truths of the Lord Jesus himself—there are certain elements of that truth that were new when the Lord delivered them. Many of the Old Testament teachings assumed new significance in the light of the Lord's teachings. The underlying meanings did not change. They simply became much clearer and much farther reaching than before.

Yet, there is another and far more specific sense in which the apostle John says,

Yet I am writing you a new command....

Before leaving them, the Lord Jesus had said to his disciples,

A new command I give you: Love one another.... (John 13:34a)

John was one of these disciples. He had been present with the Lord when this command had come from his lips. Now, the ageing apostle desired that the Lord's people would learn to apply the same command to their own lives. Apparently, there had been some dissension among certain of God's people. However, implies the apostle, these things ought not to be.

John will say more about this later, but firstly he hints at something that he had said previously:

(8b) ...its truth is seen in him and in you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining. (NIV)

The darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.

The darkness of these believers' former manner of life was already passing away. The true light of the Gospel had shone into their hearts and lives, dispelling that darkness. Even now, at the time John was writing, the Word of God was expelling the remaining vestiges of this darkness. The Holy Spirit was effecting this inward transformation by applying the illuminating truths of God's Word to their souls. Therefore, John can say,

the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.

To this end, infers the apostle, we ought to live lives that are appropriate to the light—holy, righteous and good. Our godly lives should be as a city set on a hilltop for everyone to see. They should be lives that are faultless in the eyes of the world, and which give no offence to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Against Hating a Brother

1 John 2:9-11

Now, implies the apostle, we have experienced the light of Christ's teachings and the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. These glorious truths ought to transform our character and conduct. One of these transformations is a complete change in our thinking and attitudes. We ought to abandon old carnal ways of thinking and behaving. Instead, such evil characteristics should give way to that spiritual frame of mind engendered by the Holy Ghost.

Therefore, says the apostle John:

1 John 2:9

Light and darkness cannot co-exist. If we are in the light as Christ is in the light, we cannot walk in darkness. We cannot ignore the teachings of God's Word and continue to cherish sinful attitudes or exhibit sinful behaviour. If we are abiding in the truths of God's Word, we cannot live a lie. When filled with the love of God, we cannot fail to love others.

Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness.

There can be no escaping this truth. If we do not love our brothers and sisters in Christ, we are presently walking in spiritual darkness.

Someone may object, however, that it is not always possible to love our brother or sister.

The Lord never requires of us those things that are impossible to perform. In our own strength, many things are extremely difficult or seemingly impossible. However, in the power of the Holy Spirit, nothing is impossible. Yet, before we can experience that power in our lives, we must be abiding in the secret place of prayer. We must be walking with the Lord and dwelling on his Word. Above all, full submission to him and his Word is essential. There can be no place in our hearts and lives for *pride, stubbornness, self-will or self-assertiveness*. These are typical of the works of the flesh. Humility and sincerity are paramount. Without these, a close walk with God is impossible.

When, however, we are seeking humbly to honour God in our lives, then we will indeed experience the power of his Holy Spirit. Our lives will be filled to overflowing with the mighty love of God. Out of heartfelt gratitude for his love toward us, we will do all those things that we know he requires of us. Where a brother or sister has given us offence, we will seek reconciliation with them. Where we have offended a brother or sister or caused them grief, we will seek their forgiveness. (Matt. 5:23-24)

Expository Notes

On no account, however, can we continue to harbour a grudge against our neighbour or against a brother or sister in Christ. To harbour a grudge is exactly the same thing as hating a brother or sister. However, does not God's Word say,

Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness?

Again, we must remember the teaching of the Lord Jesus in this regard when he declared:

(21) "You have heard that it was said to people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' (22) But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother⁴ will be subject to judgment." (Matt. 5:21-22 NIV)

These are solemn words. However, we cannot afford to ignore them, because they are the words of the Lord Jesus himself.

The apostle John continues, however, in verse 10:

1 John 2:10

Whoever has a genuine concern for his brother's welfare and who is willing to help his brother, lives in the light. He is dwelling in the light—i.e., he is applying to his own life the truths of God's Word. He is putting into practice what that Word teaches. He is demonstrating the reality of his faith by the caring way in which he treats his brother or sister in Christ. Therefore, says the apostle John,

Whoever loves his brother lives in the light...

He is constantly abiding in the secret place and walking daily with his God. (Ps. 91:1ff)

Since he is thus living in the light of God's Word, he must necessarily love his brother. Of course, there may be occasions when a person takes or gives offence. However, because we are living in the light, we are ready and willing immediately to put right the wrongs we have done. We desire to seek reconciliation with the one who has offended us. When, however, we fail to do this, we slip ever so gradually into the darkness—and sometimes into a spiritual wilderness. Yet, so long as we are living in the light, we are living in communion with God and with our brothers and sisters in the Lord.

While we are living in accord with God's Word, and while we are dwelling in the secret place of prayer, there can be nothing in us that causes others to stumble. In the Greek, the phrase *to make [him] stumble* (Gk., σκανδαλον, *skandalon*) means that there is *no [cause of] scandal*: There is nothing in our lives that may cause offence to others. Such is the result of living daily in the light—of heeding and obeying the teachings of God's Word.

Again, John finds it necessary to repeat what he has already said—although in a slightly different form. If, in spite of everything just said—if in disregard of the Lord's clear teaching on this subject—a person continues to hate his brother, the Scripture says:

⁴ some mss. *without cause* [NIV footnote to Matt. 5:22]

1 John 2:11

Not, he will *end up* in the darkness, but rather he is in the darkness *at present*. Even at this very moment, he is in a state of spiritual darkness; he is in a 'wilderness state', as was experienced by the children of Israel.

Not only does spiritual darkness cover his understanding, but also he attempts to walk around in that darkened condition. He attempts to live a normal Christian life while all the time his heart is not right with God. Instead of living in accord with God's Word and finding clear direction from that Word, he is unable to see the Lord's directions for his life because he is dwelling in spiritual darkness. In consequence, he loses his sense of direction. Instead of following the ways of the Lord, he ends up going off in other directions. He finds himself up blind alleys. Alternatively, like Israel before him, he ends up wandering around in circles, with no real sense of spiritual direction, purpose or progress. This is what happens to those who walk around in the darkness: the darkness that has come over them because of their attitude to God's Word and to their brother or sister in the Lord.

It is a sad state indeed for a believer to come to this condition. It is sad that he is unable to see the way ahead because his mind has become spiritually darkened—or insensitive and unresponsive to the Spirit's sanctifying operations—because of his sin. Like a blind person, he stumbles around in the darkness—unable to see which way the Lord is leading him. Indeed, while in this state of spiritual darkness, he may find himself making decisions and following paths that are contrary to the will and purposes of the Almighty Sovereign God.

Yet, the Lord is compassionate. Just as he restored sight to the physically blind, so he is able to restore sight to the spiritually blind, or to his beloved but backslidden children. The Lord is able and willing to heal those believers who have subjected themselves to temporary darkness and misery because of some sin. He need not remain in the darkness. He can experience anew the light of God's Word shining upon his soul and the abundance of God's grace and love in his life. The Lord is willing to dispel the darkness in a believer's life whenever he acknowledges and renounces his sin and whenever he seeks reconciliation with God and with his brother or sister in Christ. (Cf. Isa. 44:21-22; Micah 7:18; 1 John 1:9; Matt. 5:23-24; cf. 18:15)

Children, Young Men & Fathers**1 John 2:12-14**

In verse 1 of this chapter, the apostle had used the expression *My dear children* [KJV, *My little children*] when addressing the believers generally. Now, however, in the following verses, the apostle distinguishes between children, young men and fathers.

Thus, in verse 12, he says:

1 John 2:12

Clearly, then, John was not addressing his letter to the leadership of the church alone. The apostle intended that every believer in the church should read his letter (or hear it read). Therefore, he says, *I write to you, dear children....* The expression, *dear children*, may not have referred to children as such (or, at least, not to believing children alone). Probably, it referred to all those of whatever age who had recently been born again. These were the new-born children of God—the babes in Christ within the church. These new believers needed to learn the very first elements of the Christian faith. They needed feeding on the milk of God's Word.

Therefore, says the apostle John:

(12b) ...because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name. (NIV)

This is what these newly born-again believers needed to hear from the apostle—especially considering what he had been saying to the more mature Christians. John was writing to assure these ‘dear children’ of this fact: *...your sins have been forgiven on account of his name*. They need have no doubt about this. The debt of sin that they owed, they owed no longer. That debt had been discharged—once-for-all—by the atoning sacrifice of the Lamb of God on their behalf. If, on occasions, they did sin, they had to remember what the apostle had written earlier in this letter:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins, and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

Then, in verse 13, the apostle says:

1 John 2:13

John addresses the remarks in this letter also to those who are fathers—either in the literal sense, or in the spiritual sense; i.e., as overseers of the church. Because of their years as a Christian, they had reached greater spiritual maturity than the children or babes in Christ. They knew much better than children or spiritual babes what the Lord required, and what his Word taught. It was, therefore, the responsibility of these more mature Christians to set a good example to others by their life and conduct, and to teach others the first principles of God's everlasting Word.

From their fuller spiritual comprehension of God and of his Word, they had come to know the truths concerning the eternity of God—the One who is from the beginning—and of his Son, Jesus Christ. They knew him because they had learned of him. Since they had learned of him, it was incumbent upon them as ‘fathers’ to instruct others in the faith and in godly and holy living. Just as loving parents care for their children—nurturing and admonishing them in the ways of the Lord—so they, as fathers, must care for the children of God.

Next, the apostle addresses his remarks to young men and women within the church. In certain respects, they were stronger and more able than others. Each one of these young people possessed natural talents or abilities, or spiritual gifts, that the Lord could use—provided they were walking in accord with the teachings of God's Word. They were to use their gifts or abilities (natural, acquired or spiritual) to the glory of God's name—for it was he who had so endowed them. They were to help those who needed assistance. They were to minister to, or serve, those in need. They were to do those things that needed doing in the church. And they were to perform even the most humble and lowly of tasks as unto the Lord and for his glory. Above all, these young believers were to press ahead in their faith. They were to learn the Word of God. They were to spend time with God in prayer. And, very importantly, they were not to neglect the fellowship of believers or the place of prayer. (Cf. 1 Tim. 4:12-16; 6:11-14,20-21; 2 Tim. 1:6-7,13-14; 2:15-26)

By their faithfulness to God and by their commitment to the Lord, these young men and women had experienced victory in their lives over the evil one. Nevertheless, they were to remain ever on their guard. The evil one would do all in his power to bring them down—especially after a particular victory. Thus, they needed to ensure that they were clad at all times with the full armour of God. (1 Cor. 10:12-13; Eph. 6:10-18)

As with all of God's children, these young believers were never to turn their back on the evil one, thinking that he could not entice them to sin. Nor were they to place themselves in a compromising situation, which made temptation to sin the more likely. These young

people were the Lord's. He had redeemed them from sin, and for holy service to him. Therefore, while recognising the reality and power of the evil one, they were not to let Satan take advantage of them. For the one who was in them (the Holy Spirit) was greater by far than the one who was in the world (the devil). Therefore, they ought to submit their lives—body and soul—to the one who had redeemed them and had made them his own. (1 Pet. 5:8-11; 1 John 4:4)

In verse 12, the apostle had assured the children or babes in Christ of the forgiveness of their sins. Now, with a change of emphasis, John declares that they too have known the Father; i.e., they know him as their Father in heaven, since they are his children by regeneration and by adoption. Furthermore, they have known him in the sense that he knows them; i.e., that he formally acknowledges them as his own beloved children. They are children who are precious in his sight, and whom he considers to be as the apple of his eye.

Then, in verse 14, John says:

1 John 2:14

This is a repetition of the phrase in verse 13. It reiterates that those who are as fathers or leaders in the church have come to know God as the one who is from all eternity. Since they possess a greater knowledge of spiritual things, they have a greater responsibility to guide others in the faith. This guidance is exemplified both by their example and by their instructions.

In the next phrase of verse 14, the apostle says:

(14b) ...I write to you, young men, because you are strong and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one. (NIV)

This is a partial repetition of verse 13. However, on this occasion, the apostle speaks specifically of the strength of youth, and of their commitment to God's Word. Thus, John says,

I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you....

Not only were they strong physically. They were also strong spiritually, and eager to grow in the things of God. They were strong in the faith because the Word of God was living in them. In other words, they became spiritually strong by feeding regularly on the meat of God's Word and by obeying the teachings of that Word. Youthful dedication and commitment were proving their worth. Like athletes in training, these young men and women disciplined their bodies and minds to achieve their goal. The goal of their lives was to honour their Lord and Master in everything they did. It was because of this degree of commitment that the apostle was able to say of them, *...you have overcome the evil one.*

Yet, they were not to become complacent. Rather, they were to remember that, throughout their lives, they would face an ongoing struggle against temptation, sin and the evil one. They were to fight the good fight of the faith, but they were to remember constantly that it would be by the grace of God that they would stand, and that it would be by the grace of God that they would persevere in the faith. (1 Tim. 6:12; Heb. 12:1-4; James 1:2-4)

Against Loving the World

1 John 2:15-17

Speaking of dedication to Christ leads John on to the next theme of his letter.

1 John 2:15

Do not hold dear the things that the people of this world hold dear.

John admonishes these dear believers against cherishing in their hearts those things that would consume their time and talents—to the detriment of their Christian faith. To love the things of the world is idolatry. It is setting up in our hearts something—or someone—*other* than the Lord our God; or something *besides* the Lord our God. Idolatry, however, is spiritual unfaithfulness or spiritual adultery. It is committing ourselves to something or someone other than he who has bound us to himself in the covenant of redemption.

We belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. His blood ransomed us from sin and from our bondage to worldly commitments; i.e., any commitments that stood opposed to the teaching or principles of God's Holy Word. How then, suggests the apostle, can we set our hearts on those things from which the Lord has delivered us? Should not we set our hearts on those things that are above—where Christ sits at the right hand of God? (Col. 3:1-4)

Therefore, says John, *Do not love the world or anything in the world....*

If anyone sets his heart on those things which the world holds dear —

(15d) ...the love of the Father is not in him. (NIV)

We cannot cherish worldly attitudes or hold worldly viewpoints without conforming ourselves to the world's standards of behaviour. However, the apostle Paul appeals to believers not to be conformed to this world, but rather to be transformed by the renewing of their minds. (Rom. 12:1-2) Where, though, a professing Christian sets his heart on the world's standards, or on doing what unconverted people do, then, according to God's Word, *the love of the Father is not in him.*

Therefore, implies John, the believer must shun the world. God's children should have nothing to do with worldly standards or worldly ideals. They no longer belong to this world. Their citizenship is now in heaven, from where they await the return of their Lord. Therefore, they ought to live sober and upright lives in this world—while they anticipate his coming, or his calling them home to their glorious heavenly inheritance. (Phil. 3:20)

This, of course, furnishes no reason or excuse for failing to make Christ known throughout the world, or for caring for the needs of people in the world. The Lord Jesus associated with all kinds of unconverted people, ranging from the poor and humble to the vilest offenders on earth. Yet, never at any time did the holy Son of God adopt their standards of behaviour. Rather, by his perfect sinless example and by his teaching, he lifted their souls up to a much higher standard, that could be found only through faith in him. Thus, we too, must set before the world the eternal Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. We must do so with much prayer, with deep humility and with genuine love for the lost; yet—at the same time—we must never compromise our godly way of life.

In verse 16, the apostle expands on what he had said previously:

1 John 2:16

This includes everything that springs from that old sinful nature, and that is common to the whole of fallen mankind. It includes everything that places a person at enmity with God and under the wrath of God. It includes everything that will result in unrepentant mankind being committed finally to hell.

(16b) —*the cravings*⁵ *of sinful man....* (NIV) or *the lust of the flesh...* (KJV).

The inordinate desire for material things; the uncontrolled longings of the sinful nature, the heart filled with covetousness or greed.

The apostle continues with another example:

(16c) *...the lust of his eyes....* (NIV)

The impassioned and dishonourable gaze; the impure look or thought; the earnest longing to possess that which does not belong to him.

(16d) *...and the boasting of what he has and does....*⁶ (NIV)

Self-exaltation; an arrogant and often domineering attitude; a total lack of humility, and careless about giving offence to those who have little or nothing by comparison. Such disdainful pride is detestable in God's sight.

Therefore, concludes the apostle (last phrase):

(16e) [all this] *...comes not from the Father but from the world.* (NIV)

All these sinful attitudes are typical of the fallen nature—the unregenerate heart and life. They should never appear among the redeemed and holy children of God.

Moving on to verse 17, the apostle says:

1 John 2:17

This world—this present age—will one day pass into oblivion. That day will see the final elimination of every one of these sinful attitudes and standards of behaviour. Those who have continued to practise them and who have remained unrepentant, face banishment to the lake of fire. This is how God looks upon the kind of behaviour of which John has been speaking. It is behaviour that justifies eternal punishment, together with all other forms of sinful behaviour and attitudes. If deserving of eternal torments, however, how ought the Christian to shun such evil standards!

The person who seeks diligently to learn the truths of God's Word, learns from that Word what God's will is. He discovers God's intentions for his life. He finds out how God sanctifies his life through the inward working of the Holy Spirit. He realises that he must put off the works of the sinful nature. Those who continually put God's Word into practice, are—very often—those most blessed by the Lord, and mightily used of him.

Therefore, says the apostle,

...the man who does the will of God lives for ever.

⁵ The word translated in this verse as 'cravings' or 'lust' is *επιθυμία*, *epithumia*, meaning, [intense] longing or desire. This is a word that can be used in either a good or a bad sense. For example, in a good sense, the Lord said, *With desire (επιθυμία) I have desired to eat this Passover with you.* (Luke 22:15). However, in the majority of cases, the word refers to a sinful longing or desire, such as concupiscence (inordinate or inappropriate desire for sexual intimacy) or lust (any kind of craving).

⁶ KJV, *and the pride of life*

He is the one who experiences not only the gift of eternal life, but also the present daily experience of abundant life. He experiences life in the Spirit; life in harmony with God and at complete peace with God—because wholly committed to doing the will of God. This person experiences peace in his heart, and joy in all its fullness. This is a fullness of joy that the world cannot take away, and that no sorrows of earth can finally overcome.

This does not mean that he has attained a state of perfection. Rather, it means that he is striving to honour God in his daily life by casting aside the attitudes and desires of the old sinful nature and endeavouring by God's grace to practise a holy and godly life.

Antichrists

1 John 2:18-19

The apostle John continues:

1 John 2:18

(18a) Dear children... (NIV)

Repeating his tender form of address to these beloved saints of God.

The apostle reminds his readers that the day is far spent. The time of Christ's coming is drawing ever nearer. It is now *the last hour*—the 'day' or final period of God's grace. However, this day of grace—this eleventh hour—will all too soon reach its consummation.

John reminds his readers also of what they had been taught previously: That, at the end of this age—at the climax of the last hour—the antichrist would come. This is the 'Wicked One'—the one

...whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendour of his coming. (2 Thess. 2:8b)

Indeed, *the* Antichrist has yet to make his appearance. However, even at the time John was writing, there were many within the ranks of the church who were of an antichristian spirit. They had many of the hallmarks of the Antichrist himself—although lacking in his power to inflict immense evil universally.

Those antichrists who were present in the church in the apostle's day were seducing believers away from Christ, and into the paths of sin. These evil men denied that Jesus was the Christ—the Son of God. They called into question both his true humanity and his true deity. Antichrists they were indeed!

This is how we can tell that God's day of grace will shortly come to its end: In these last days, God has spoken to us by his Son, or in his Son (Heb. 1:2), and he has revealed his truth to us in his Holy Word, the Bible. As far as the revelation of his will or of the way of salvation is concerned, God will not speak again by any other means before the fulfilment of this age and the Day of Judgment. Even now, the perilous times portending the last days have already begun. Except for God's abundant mercy and patience toward the lost, God's day of grace would have reached a conclusion long ago by the Lord's Second Coming.

With his mind still thinking of the antichristian people who had been in the very midst of the church, the apostle continues:

1 John 2:19

In other words, we once counted them among our number. They once met with us in God's house and worshipped with us in the place of prayer. They may even have professed faith in Christ—but they did not remain faithful to Christ. *They went out from us...* They left our midst and they forsook our fellowship.

Why did they forsake the fellowship of the Lord's people? Says the apostle:

(19b) ...but they did not really belong to us... (NIV)

Yes, they professed to belong to Christ. Yes, they associated with us and claimed to be our brothers and sisters in the Lord. However, they were not God's children. Therefore, they were not our brothers or sisters in Christ.

How can we be sure of this, however? The apostle continues:

(19c) ...For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us...
(NIV)

They would have stayed in our fellowship. They would have continued to worship with the Lord's people. What happened to them, though? They forsook our fellowship. Some of them have since tried to gather followers around them, inducing them to believe and accept their false teachings. Others have turned against the things of God and the people of God. These are not backsliders. These are apostates.

Apostates are those who make a profession of faith, only to renounce that profession later and then turn completely against Christ, against his church and against his people. Unlike backsliding believers, apostates have never experienced the saving grace of God in their lives. Their element is the world, and—eventually and inevitably—to the world they must return.

They were not of our number. They may have enrolled as members of our local church, but not one of them was a member of Christ's body—the true church.

Denying Jesus is the Christ**1 John 2:20-23**

Lest, however, the believers should become disheartened or discouraged, and to prevent them from thinking that they too might not really belong to Christ, the apostle John continues:

1 John 2:20

The apostle reassures these believers, encouraging them not to worry about where *they* stand. They were not to imagine that they might fall into the same category as these anti-christian apostates. Those evil individuals were devoid of the grace of God. They knew about God and about the way of salvation, but they had never experienced the regenerating or sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. This became all the more apparent from their lifestyles. Far from pursuing the holiness of life that is the hallmark of God's redeemed children, they denied the Son of God, and they approved of or condoned all kinds of immoral or perverted practices. (Titus 1:16; 1 John 2:22-23)

However, in complete contrast to these men, God had anointed his own redeemed children with his Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit had regenerated each of these believers, and had

sealed them eternally unto God the Father. By this same indwelling Holy Spirit, they were now being sanctified unto holiness of life.

The apostle says that these believers knew the truth (in contradistinction to that which was false and not from God). They were able to distinguish the truth of God because the Spirit whom God had poured into their hearts was the Spirit of truth. While he remained on earth, the Lord Jesus himself had said that he would send his Holy Spirit to remain with his followers forever, and to guide them into all truth. He, therefore—the Spirit of God—takes the teachings of God's Word and explains or correctly interprets these truths to the believer. This is why the believer in Christ can understand aright the truths of God's Word: because, day by day, the Holy Spirit continues to reveal the significance of these truths to him or her. (John 15:26; 16:7, 13-15)

Those false professors, however, who—in this instance—forsook the fellowship of believers, and who returned to the world, had no experience of the Holy Spirit in salvation. They did not know the Spirit's influence in leading the believer into all truth necessary to life and godliness.

Likewise, those who insisted that a person must come to a special or higher 'knowledge' of God to secure their salvation, were themselves completely without that knowledge. They failed to understand the truth that comes only from the Holy Spirit himself. Therefore, infers John, have nothing to do with such professors, or with their false teaching and libertine practices.

John continues to reassure and encourage the true children of God. They were not of that company. On the contrary, they had firmly believed everything that had been taught them by the Lord's apostles. The reason that they believed the apostles' teaching, was that these believers

...have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth, writes John. (Cf. Acts 2:42)

Without the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit it is impossible to comprehend the truth of God aright. Such is the position of everyone who does not belong to Christ, and yet who attempts to teach the things of Christ. (1 Cor. 2:11,14) Such teaching is purely unspiritual, unsound and ungodly. This was the characteristic hallmark of the false teachers. These were (and are) men without the Spirit, who seek only glory, honour and a following for themselves through their persuasive, but carnal and pernicious, doctrines. (Cf. 2 Cor. 11:13-15; 2 Pet. 2:1-2)

Therefore, continues the apostle:

1 John 2:21

The apostle declares that he was not saying these things to the believers because they are unaware of spiritual truths. Again, John was not saying them because it was necessary for the children of God to learn further truths in order to inherit salvation and eternal life. On the contrary, these believers already possessed all the truths necessary to salvation. By God's grace, they had been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, and they had embraced all these truths willingly. As a full and equal Person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit was the one who granted true knowledge and understanding to God's redeemed people. This was in contradistinction to the natural and often misleading 'knowledge' of men, and especially of the mendacious teaching of the false apostles. The Holy Spirit—*not the spirit of man*—instructs God's people in all spiritual matters.

You *do* know the truths of salvation, asserts the apostle. Each day you are learning further truths from the Word of God, as the Holy Spirit reveals more of its teachings to you. He is doing this to accomplish your sanctification and to equip you for daily Christian living.

However, John points out to his readers, that—from what they already knew of God and his Word—they realised, without anyone telling them, that *...no lie comes from the truth*. A person cannot claim to believe the truths of God's Word, if—at the same time—he denies these truths in practise. However, were not those denying the truth of God's Word, when they denied that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God? Again, were not those denying the truth of God's Word when they denied that Jesus became truly Man (sin apart)—as well as remaining truly God? (Phil. 2:6-7)

Those who denied these essential truths were denying the truth of God's Word. This is a lie; and this is why the apostle said, *...no lie comes from the truth*.

In verse 22, the apostle continues:

1 John 2:22

Who is it that distorts the truth of God's Word, and denies what God has said concerning the Saviour of the world? Who is it that would make God out to be a liar—but who instead stands before God accused and condemned by his own blatant falsehood?

Says the apostle:

(22b) ...It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ.... (NIV)

Deny that Jesus is the Christ, and we deny that God became incarnate in the flesh. Deny that Jesus is the Christ, and we deny that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. Deny that Jesus is the Christ, the Lamb of God, and we deny the very possibility of salvation: for by means of that perfect atoning sacrifice, men and women are redeemed to God. Without the shedding of that blood, however, there is no forgiveness of sin. (Heb. 9:22)

This was why the apostle John inferred in this passage that the one who denied these things was railing against Christ: For, in denying the Son, he had denied the Father also. In failing to honour the Son, he had failed to honour the Father who sent him. (John 5:23)

Continuing this last thought in verse 23, the apostle says:

1 John 2:23

(23a) No-one who denies the Son has the Father.... (NIV)

No one who refuses to acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God can possibly belong to the Father. They are not his children, and therefore have no rights of inheritance in the kingdom of God. That they are able to deny the Sonship of the Lord Jesus, is proof positive that they do not possess the Spirit of God. The reason for this is that the Spirit of truth cannot give credence to a flagrant denial of the truth. It is as the Lord himself said,

He who hates me hates my Father as well. (John 15:23; see also Rom. 8:9)

John had said,

No-one who denies the Son has the Father....

But, continues John:

(23b) ...whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also. (NIV)

Those who believe on Christ believe also on the one who sent him. They acknowledge Christ as their Saviour and Lord, for they have believed on him unto eternal life. In acknowledging Jesus as God's Son, God acknowledges the believer as his child. The believer has been born again by the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of adoption and of sanctification—whom none can receive but those who believe on the Father and the Son. Therefore, says John,

...whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

Abiding in The Truth

1 John 2:24-25

Now, then, writes the apostle:

1 John 2:24

The apostle exhorts the believers to hold fast to those truths that they had received originally. God's redeemed children were to maintain steadfastly those truths that were first delivered by the Lord Jesus himself, and which his apostles had handed down to them. This is what they had heard from the beginning. They were not to depart from these truths. They were not to let those who denied the blessed Lord Jesus Christ lead them into their pernicious way of thinking. The believers were not to let anyone introduce to them any other truth than the ones that they had received already. On the contrary, says John,

See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you....

Provided these believers held fast to the words or teaching of the Lord Jesus, they would abide in him and in the Father—just as the Lord Jesus himself had said:

(4) Remain in me, and I will remain in you...(7) If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. (John 15:4,7 NIV)

If the Lord's followers abode in him, and if they permitted his words or teaching to abide in them—i.e., if they heard (or read), apprehended and applied the Lord's teachings to their lives—then they would bring forth much fruit. In these ways the Lord encourages his people to abide or remain in him. Then, they would find their prayers being answered in accordance with their heavenly Father's will and purposes for them. Then, their joy in the Lord would surely be complete.

Moving on to verse 25, the apostle John writes:

1 John 2:25

The God who cannot lie has promised to all his redeemed children the gift of eternal life. This was the promise that these believers had received when they had heard the message of eternal life and salvation through faith in Christ. (The message, word or teaching that they had heard from the beginning, v.24.) This message expressed the Word of God—the infallible and inerrant Word containing God's solemn and unchanging promises. (John 3:15-16; 10:28; 2 Cor. 1:20)

This was why it was essential for these believers—and for all of God’s children—to abide constantly in that Word. No other word—no other message or teaching—could build them up in their most holy faith, or lead them into a fuller, deeper and richer knowledge of God and of his Son, Jesus Christ. Through that Word—and through that Word alone—the Holy Spirit leads the believer into the paths of righteousness, and quenches his or her thirst for spiritual things with the springing waters of eternal life. (Jude 1:20-21; Rom. 8:4-6; Isa. 12:3; John 6:37-39)

This, says John, is why I say to you, And this is what he has promised us—even eternal life.

Taught by the Holy Spirit

1 John 2:26-27

In verse 26, the apostle continues:

1 John 2:26

It was imperative that John made these things known to these believers. It was essential that they be reminded of the first truths of the gospel, and of the absolute supremacy of God’s Word as declared by the Lord Jesus. John—together with the other apostles—had relayed these essential truths to the churches. The days in which these saints of God were now living were evil days. Even within the church of God itself, the evil one had been trying to gain a foothold.

Thus, John warned the believers that these were evil people—the very servants of Satan himself. Therefore, the church was not to be deceived and seduced by these antichrists. Rather, by holding firmly to the trustworthy message, they were to refute and repudiate all the errors that these evildoers propounded. By their seductive and distorted teachings, they had shown that they did not belong to the church of God. Therefore, the church was to prohibit these false teachers from influencing its members by their perverse and evil doctrines. (Cf. 2 Cor. 11:13-15; 2 Pet. 2:1-2, 12-13, 17-20)

This, therefore, is the reason, explains the apostle, [that] I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray.

In verse 27, the apostle continues:

1 John 2:27

As for you—[unlike these apostates]—the anointing you received from him remains in you....

By his grace, God had given to his true people the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit anoints and seals the believer eternally unto God. Again, the Holy Spirit within the believer leads them into all spiritual truths—provided that they submit themselves humbly to the teaching of God’s Word, and are prepared to follow the Lord’s every instruction. (Eph. 1:13-14; John 16:13-14; James 1:21-22)

The apostle continues:

(27c) ...But as his anointing teaches you about all things.... (NIV)

The anointing that these believers had received from God was the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit would teach them everything that was necessary to life and godliness; everything

concerning the revealed truths of God's Word; everything that was essential to their faith and to the practice of their Christian life.

Everything required of them was contained in the Word of God, and it was being revealed to them—and to true believers everywhere—by the Spirit of God. There was absolutely nothing additional that they (or we) needed to know or do.

...his anointing—[his Holy Spirit]—teaches you about all things....

There can be no question that the anointing that God had given to these believers (and to his true church worldwide) was, and continues to be, a real anointing. These believers had been born again of the Spirit of God. This was a reality. The Spirit of God had baptised them into the body of Christ—the church. This, too, was a reality. Again, the Holy Spirit had anointed and sealed them as belonging to God for all eternity. This also was a reality. Furthermore, at the time John was writing, their lives were being transformed from one degree of glory to another. This was being achieved through the ongoing process of sanctification. This was a work of the Holy Spirit, and this, too, was a reality.

Of course, what was true concerning the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of these believers in John's day, was true also of every child of God throughout the subsequent ages of the church—and it continues to be true at the present time.

So, then, concludes the apostle,

...that anointing is real, not counterfeit....

Since they had experienced the real indwelling presence and power of God, the Holy Spirit—the One who alone could guide them into a correct apprehension of divine truth—then this was all the more reason that these believers heeded only what the Holy Spirit taught them from God's Word. Thus, they were to pay no attention to the unspiritual teachings or opinions of men.

Therefore, continues John,

...just as it has taught you, remain in him.

The Holy Spirit never draws attention to himself. His aim is to magnify and glorify the Lord Jesus, therefore, all his teachings direct us to Christ. For this reason, we ought to heed the Spirit of God and remain wholly true to him and to his commands. (John 16:14-15)

Unashamed at His Coming

1 John 2:28

Moving on to verse 28, and from a heart full of love and encouragement, the apostle writes:

1 John 2:28

Out of a heart of tender love for these dear children of God, John exhorts them to abide in, or hold steadfastly to, the teaching that they had received from the Lord Jesus through his Spirit-inspired apostles and through their letters. The apostle encourages them to continue in the truth and to shun the paths of error and false teaching.

If they held steadfastly to the pure Word of truth, as John and the other apostles had taught it, then, writes John,

...when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.

We may be confident at the Lord's return that we taught you properly, and that we warned you against those who would peddle false doctrine in the name of Christ. We will have no cause for disappointment in you, because we believe that you will heed what we write to you in our epistles. We believe that you will remain true and faithful to the teachings of the Lord Jesus and to the Word of God.

Walking in Righteousness

In verse 29, the apostle writes:

1 John 2:29

These believers had been taught the first principles of the faith. They were fully aware that the Son of God was righteous in every aspect of his being; i.e., that he was (and remains) absolutely sinless or perfect; that in everything he upholds the principles of justice and equity. As the Father is perfect righteousness, so also is the Son. This being so, he who is righteous cannot dwell in the presence of sin.

As surely as the Lord demonstrated his righteousness by his holy, humble, and obedient manner of life, so surely do the Lord's people demonstrate their righteousness by their holy, humble, and obedient manner of life.

Granted, the Lord Jesus lived a perfectly holy and righteous life. In him was no sin. However, although the believer is by no means sinless, Christ's righteousness is credited (or imputed) to him or her. The believer now stands clothed with the righteousness of Christ—the perfect holy character of our Lord Jesus. In addition, the Holy Spirit is sanctifying the believer. God has planted within the believer's soul the seeds of righteousness. The Holy Spirit causes him to earnestly desire to grow in grace from day to day. Consequently, he becomes ever more conformed to the pattern of the Lord Jesus.

So then, although still very far from perfect in this life, the child of God aims at the mark of the high calling of God: the prize of inward perfect righteousness⁷ in Christ yet awaiting him in glory. Meanwhile, he earnestly desires to live a life that honours his Lord and Master. The hallmark of such a life is honest, upright living, and a heartfelt yearning to shun the very appearance of evil. That is why the apostle can say,

...you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him.

Everyone who seeks after God's righteousness is God's child.

⁷ *Perfect righteousness*: At present, the believer possesses *imputed* righteousness (reckoned to his account when God justified him) and is receiving *imparted* righteousness from the Holy Spirit in his work of sanctification. Therefore, the believer stands before God clothed with the perfect righteousness of Christ (not his own personal righteousness). This is a legal or forensic standing. The believer will not become perfectly righteous in himself (i.e., inwardly) until the day that he is translated, called into the Lord's presence, and glorified. For a more detailed description of this topic, see the doctrinal series: *Bible Truths Explained: Sanctification*, by the same author.

1 John Chapter 3

Beloved Children of God

1 John 3:1-3

Realising afresh the immensity of God's love for sinners in giving his one and only Son to be their Redeemer, the apostle exclaims:

1 John 3:1

Unbounded love, immeasurable love, and undeserved love: this is the nature of the love bestowed upon us as those who are closest and dearest to our heavenly Father's heart. So great—so infinitely great—is God's love toward us: a love based upon what his Son has done for us, and *on what he sees in us of his only Son*.

Once, we were sinners at enmity with God, and abiding under the wrath of God. Yet, now, we who deserved no mercy have found mercy. (Col. 1:21-22)

More than this, however, God has not only been merciful to us in drawing us to himself by his Holy Spirit, he has also given us his Holy Spirit to indwell our hearts and lives. Through his indwelling and sanctifying presence and power, the Holy Spirit sheds abroad the unbounded love of God in our hearts. How great is *the love the Father has lavished on us!*

Even more than this—we are now God's children! We—who once despised the name of Jesus, or ignored the work of Christ—are now the children of God and joint-heirs *with* Christ! Great beyond measure is the Father's love for such as we! (Rom. 8:16-17)

This is what the Father, in his grace, has made us: not strangers, not friends, but children! What closer relationship can we bear to our heavenly Father than this?

The apostle John tells these believers (and us) not to be surprised that they are no friends of the world. The reason that the world of sinful men and women does not know the believer—i.e., does not acknowledge God's children or desire to associate closely with them—is that it did not know him (i.e., it refused to acknowledge Jesus and his claims on their lives).

Just as the world despised and rejected the holy Son of God, so too the world will despise and reject the redeemed and adopted children of God. Just as the world humiliated the Lord Jesus and treated him with contempt, so too the world will shamefully treat and wrongfully accuse his followers. The world did not know him because it did not *want* to know him. The very presence of the holy and sinless Son of God brought to fallen mankind a tremendous realisation of sin and guilt. Of these things, however, they did not desire to be reminded. In like manner—because, as believers, we represent the name of Christ—we too are making the world feel uncomfortable in our presence. Therefore, the world does not want to know us.

In verse 2, the apostle continues:

1 John 3:2

Sonship is not something that awaits us in the future. It is not something laid up for us in glory. No, at this very moment, ...*we are children of God*—and have been since our new birth.

As yet, the Lord has not revealed to us what we will become finally. However, as the apostle Paul says (quoting Isa. 64:4):

No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him. (1 Cor. 2:9 NIV)

One day, all those things that now cause us sorrow, suffering, grief, pain and anguish—together with all those things that allure us and tempt us to sin—will affect us no more.

Whatever else may escape us; whatever things we cannot now comprehend—this much we do know:

...when he appears, we shall be like him....

Our struggles with sin and temptation will be over for ever. When the Lord delivers us from this earthly tabernacle, he shall free us forever from the remaining shackles of sin and from the effects of sin. At his appearing, he shall transform us. He shall change or transfigure us into his likeness. He shall make this mortal body immortal; and he shall clothe this corruptible body with incorruption. Then, with great glory, he shall present us faultless and blameless before the throne of God, with rejoicing. (1 Cor. 15:35-58)

In verse 3, the apostle continues this train of thought:

1 John 3:3

Everyone who looks forward eagerly to the final redemption of the children of God, purifies himself. The sanctifying effect of God's Word and God's promises, together with the atoning work of Christ, cleanses the soul from sin, doubt, fear and uncertainty. The daily application of these spiritual truths creates a life that is being purified for God by his Holy Spirit.

We Cannot Practise Sin

1 John 3:4-6

The apostle continues:

1 John 3:4

Everyone who sins, breaks the law of God. Sin is the breaking of God's standards.

Strong gives the following possible meanings of the word translated sin (Gk., αμαρτια, *hamartia*)

- a. to be without a share in;
- b. to miss the mark;
- c. to err, be mistaken;
- d. to miss or wander from the path of uprightness and honour, to do or go wrong;

e. to wander from the law of God, violate God's law, sin;

That which is done wrong, sin, an offence, a violation of the divine law in thought or in act.

Strong's Greek Lexicon

Sin is a falling short of the moral, ethical and spiritual laws set down by God in his Word. That is why the Scripture says:

(22)...There is no difference, (23) for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Rom. 3:22b-23 NIV)

Apart from the Lord Jesus, everyone without exception has failed to reach God's righteous standard.

Concerning this passage, Alfred Barnes says:

- a. All sin is a violation of the law of God, (1 John 3:4);
- b. The very object of the coming of Christ was to deliver people from sin, (1 John 3:5);
- c. Those who are true Christians do not habitually sin, (1 John 3:6);
- d. Those who sin cannot be true Christians, but are of the devil, (1 John 3:8); and,
- e. He who is born of God has a germ or principle of true piety in him, and cannot sin, (1 John 3:9).

Barnes Notes on the New Testament

The apostle John writes:

(4a) Everyone who sins breaks the law....

Then he adds:

(4b)...in fact, sin is lawlessness. (NIV)

...sin is lawlessness. Lawlessness is living as though God's law did not exist. It is living without reference to the standards of behaviour set forth in God's Word. Transgression of the law [KJV] is overstepping the mark that God has set. It is breaking the bounds and doing what God's Word expressly or implicitly forbids. Thus, says John,

Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness.

However, none of God's children should ever be guilty of living without regard to God's standards of behaviour.

In verse 5, the apostle writes:

1 John 3:5

But you know...

The apostle concedes that these believers were fully aware of the reason why the Lord Jesus came into this world: namely, that he might bear their sins in his own body on the tree. (1 Pet. 2:24)

The Lord Jesus died on that tree, bearing the penalty for our sins—our falling short of God's standard, our sins of omission, our transgressions, our lawlessness. In dying for our sins, however, he took away our sins. Not only did he cancel the debt of our sin by his atoning sacrifice, but also he gave to us newness of life. This 'newness of life' is incompatible with the continued practice of sin. It represents a life that Christ has redeemed by his atoning blood. By that atoning blood, this life has been cleansed and sanctified. The Lord has separated this person from the world, and set him apart to God—and to the practice of holy and godly conduct. Therefore, writes the apostle,

...you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins.

The apostle adds:

(5b)....And in him is no sin. (NIV)

We know, of course, infers John, that there is no hint or taint of sin in the Lord Jesus Christ. Although tempted to sin in every way—just as we are—yet the Lord Jesus did not yield to temptation. He remained sinless. (Heb. 4:15) His was—and is—a perfect, holy spotless life. He could not contemplate sin. Far from attracting him or bringing him any degree of pleasure, sin was utterly abhorrent to his soul. On every occasion, he repelled the temptation to sin—winning the victory over temptation with the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. (Heb. 4:12)

Thus, concludes the apostle,

...in him is no sin.

We may infer from John's remarks that—just as our Lord and Saviour detested the very semblance of sin—so we too must detest and shun sin; in all its manifestations. This is not to say that we will be able to live a perfect life. Nevertheless, we must set our hearts on repelling temptation through the power of the Spirit and through the Word of God. We must determine to hate sin and to shun it. Similarly, we must steadfastly avoid those situations that are likely to lead us into temptation.

As God's redeemed children, we must resolve to practise holy and righteous living. We achieve this kind of living, however, only through wholehearted surrender to the Lord and to his Word. We achieve it through a sincere, humble and submissive desire to know the Lord's will, and to obey that will with all our heart and soul.

Now, implies the apostle, since we know these things, we know that any person who consistently practises a sinful lifestyle cannot belong to Christ. Therefore, writes John in verse 6:

1 John 3:6

We should note at this point that the phrase translated in the NIV as *'keeps on sinning'* (implying the continued practise of sin) is not in the Greek text. The Greek text uses a phrase (αμαρτανων ουχ) which means *'sins not'*. Therefore, in this verse, the KJV translation is closer to the original by saying:

(6a) Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not... (KJV)

Nevertheless, John is probably referring to the practise of sin, rather than implying that believers should be characterised by sinless perfection. Although this should be our aim, this state is not attainable in this life. Furthermore, John has already declared that when we sin, we receive forgiveness upon confession of our sin to God, and we have an Advocate with the Father who speaks in our defence. (1 John 1:8 – 2:2)

Having said this, however, no one who is seeking to learn and live by God's Word can practise sin. No one who is abiding in Christ Jesus and is endeavouring to obey his commands can continue wilfully to indulge sin. Holiness and sin are antithetical. Our lives become dominated either by the practice of sin or by the practice of righteousness. They cannot be dominated by both. Thus, says the apostle,

No-one who lives in him keeps on sinning.... (NIV)

No one who continues to practise the deeds of the old sinful nature has either seen Christ—in the sense that he has believed upon him—or known him. Whatever he may profess to the contrary, if his lifestyle is characterised and dominated by sinful behaviour, then that person cannot possibly have experienced God's salvation. This is because God's salvation involves deliverance from sin. Certainly, the believer is still capable of sinning—and God has made provision for the believer's forgiveness upon repentance and confession to him. However, the believer can never—happily, or with a clear conscience—engage in the ongoing daily practice of sin.

God's Children and the Devil's

1 John 3:7-10

So, writes the apostle in verse 7:

1 John 3:7

John warns these believers not to be deceived in this matter. Respecting sin and righteousness, they were not to let anyone mislead them. There were those who would tell them that—since God forgives sin—therefore they were free to practise sin. These believers (and we) must shun such antinomian principles.

Again, there were those who would infer—by their manner of life—that a degree of sinful behaviour is acceptable among God's people. 'After all,' they contended, 'we are only human.' (Cf. 1 Cor. 6:12-13, 19-20)

Expository Notes

These things, however, ought not to be. Therefore, the apostle appeals to God's people,

...Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray....

If a person is truly a born-again believer, he must aim to live a life that honours his Lord, and which reflects the fact that he is God's redeemed child. As such, God has set him apart. No longer can he practise sin. Rather, he must practise righteousness. (Rom. 8:13-14; 1 Pet. 3:12; 1 John 2:29)

The person who is endeavouring to live his life according to God's standards, and who is seeking to honour the Lord in everything, is righteous in God's sight. He is not righteous, however, merely because of his own good deeds or righteous behaviour. Rather, his good conduct flows from the righteousness that he has received as a gift from God, and is the fruit of the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration and sanctification.

The person who is bringing forth such fruit, however, is putting into practice the kind of righteousness which God requires. This is the righteousness that shows itself in honest, upright and sincere living, and which demonstrates love, mercy, justice, kindness, compassion and humility toward others. This is the righteousness that God seeks in his redeemed people. It is not the observance of rules and regulations—but the application of spiritual truths: God's eternal truths in our hearts, lived out in our daily lives. (Gal. 5:22-25)

That person is righteous—just as the Lord is righteous—in the sense that he seeks firstly and always to honour God, and that his life is characterised by the fruit of the Spirit, of which the foremost is love.

On the other hand, continues the apostle in verse 8:

1 John 3:8

If a person remains bent on the *practice* of sin, then this demonstrates that this person is still under the control of the evil one. He has had no experience of salvation or of God's saving grace. To him, the practice of sin is more pleasurable than the practice of righteousness. Only a genuine experience of God's grace in his life can bring him to true repentance for his sin and to genuine faith in Christ for deliverance.

For as long as we have had any record of Satan's activities after his fall, we know that he has been continually practising sin in rebellion against God; among the chief of which is his deceitful or lying nature. Those, therefore, who continually live a sinful lifestyle—in rebellion against God—indicate by their character and conduct that they are the children of the devil; i.e., they are the devil's imitators.

It is just as the Lord Jesus himself said concerning those who claimed falsely that God was their Father:

You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire.... (John 8:44a NIV)

John continues:

(8c) ...The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.
(NIV)

Previously, John had said that the reason the Son of God appeared was to take away our sins (v.5). He did this by the sacrifice of himself. Now, asserts the apostle, another reason why God's Son came into the world was to destroy—or bring to nought—the works of the devil; i.e., universal evil including sin and its repercussions.

Ever since God banished Satan from his presence, the devil has been seeking to attack God. This, of course, is impossible in the direct sense. However, in attacking mankind and keeping them in captivity to sin, Satan is indirectly attacking their Creator. By directing his attacks against mankind, the evil one is attempting to prevent fallen humanity from ever finding their way back to God. Satan is intent on preventing them from ever having the desire to seek God.

Men and women would have remained in their bondage to Satan and sin—without any real knowledge of salvation—if the Son of God had not appeared in the world. During his ministry on earth, the Lord Jesus demonstrated his divine power over Satan. This had the effect of revealing the utter terror which Satan's minions—the demons—experience in the presence of God's Son, or in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, by the work that Jesus accomplished at Calvary, the Son of God effectively destroyed Satan's power; i.e., in relation to mankind, the Lord Jesus severely curtailed Satan's evil influence. (Col. 2:15; cf. Rom. 16:20; Rev. 20:10)

Therefore, says John,

...the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.

Certainly, the Word of God warns us that the devil is still an extremely powerful being. It remains true, however, that the Lord Jesus has stripped the devil of the full extent of his power. Nevertheless, the evil one can still tempt mankind to sin. He can still blind their minds to the truths of the gospel. At the moment, Satan is being restrained by the continued proclamation of the gospel and by the operations of the Holy Spirit. If, however, God withdrew his Word or his Spirit, Satan would vent his unbridled hostility and malice on mankind—and especially on the church of God. (2 Thess. 2:6-7; 1 Pet. 5:8)

In verse 9, the apostle continues:

1 John 3:9

The person who has received the Holy Spirit, and who therefore has been born of God, has—in effect—received God's 'seed' within him. He has become God's 'offspring' by regeneration or spiritual rebirth. Of course, God is Spirit. He does not impart *physical* seed in any sense. The seed spoken of is that *spiritual* seed which God's Holy Spirit implants within a person's soul, effecting his regeneration. It is the seed of new life; seed fed and nourished on, and by, the Word of God.

However, another interpretation is possible here. In the Scriptures, the word 'seed' can be used in connection with the Word of God. For example, the seed sown on good ground is the Word of God which has fallen on a receptive mind and heart and has found a ready response. If John is using the word 'seed' (Gk., σπέρμα, *sperma*) in this sense, then—by saying that God's seed remains in him—he means that God's Word remains in him: i.e., he lives by and obeys the teachings of the Bible.

The person in whom this seed has sprouted—and in whom God's Word remains—is, therefore, his Father's child. As such, he has inherited the traits or characteristics of his heavenly Father. These traits include the desire to seek righteousness and to grow up nourished by his heavenly Father on the milk of the Word; and, later, on the meat of the Word. This, therefore, is the reason—implies John—why a believer cannot go on living according to the patterns of his old way of life. He cannot continue in the deliberate practice of sin, simply because he has experienced the new birth. He is a new creation. Old things have passed away. All things have become new.

Then, in verse 10, the apostle writes:

1 John 3:10

This is how we are able to distinguish between God's children; i.e., genuinely born-again believers—and the children of the devil. They are known by their fruits. They are known by their manner of life. They are known by the way they act toward God and toward other people. They are known by what they do.

By the grace of God, the believer does all in his power to apply the teaching of his heavenly Father to his heart and life. He learns of his Father, and he does what he says. This is the essence of obedience to our loving heavenly Father. However, where a person has no such desires or ambitions, but on the contrary, consistently does those things that are not right in God's sight, then clearly that person is not God's child. Thus declares the apostle,

...Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God...

Again, those who do not love their brother cannot possibly love God—according to the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. When a person refuses to associate with other believers, or when he neglects to help other believers, this is proof that that person's heart and life is not right with God. Those who consistently refuse to hold out the right hand of fellowship to other members of Christ's body—without Scriptural cause—are thereby denying that they themselves are functioning members of that body.

Love involves caring; it involves helping; it involves sharing other's burdens. Love also involves doing all in our power to support our brother or sister in the Lord, and to look after their spiritual, moral and physical welfare. Love never seeks to harm. It never seeks to inflict injury or distress. It is always ready to forgive, and never willing to blame. Love always remembers that far greater love shown to us by the Father. It remembers that—when we deserved no love—the Father loved us and gave his Son to die for us. When we deserved no mercy, the Father looked upon us in our sin and had pity on us. When we deserved no compassion and no forgiveness, the Father embraced us in his loving arms, and forgave us of every sin that we had ever committed. (1 Cor. 13:1-13)

How great is the love that the Father has bestowed upon us! How great is the debt that we owe—and how great should be our willingness to forgive! Let us ever remember the parable of the wicked servant: forgiven by his master, he refused to forgive one who was indebted to him. We know how the Lord punished him. (Matt. 18:32-35)

Loving Our Brother

1 John 3:11-15

Developing the theme of brotherly love still farther, the apostle writes:

1 John 3:11

From the very outset—from the very first time they had heard the gospel and were instructed in the faith—this was the teaching that John had given to these believers. The message that they had received at the beginning was essentially a message of love. It was a message of the eternal love of God toward fallen humanity: a love that constrained the Father to give his only begotten Son for the redemption of lost men and women.

Besides this, however, it was—and is—a message of love among the redeemed people of God. In the invisible church of Christ, we are all God's children. We are all brothers and sisters in the Lord. By the grace of God, we are what we are, and we stand where we now stand. Not one of us is either inferior or superior to another brother or sister in Christ. As people, we are all equal in God's sight—and equally beloved of the Father. God so loved

us, and he demonstrated that love for us by yielding up his only begotten Son. Should not we, therefore, love our fellow-believers? If God could forgive our wrongs, how much more should we forgive our brother's wrongs?

Then, in verse 12, the apostle continues:

1 John 3:12

The saints to whom John was writing were the redeemed and beloved children of God. Therefore, the apostle exhorts them to show real love to one another and not to emulate Cain who displayed malice, envy and hatred against Abel, his brother. None of these evil traits should ever characterise God's children. Characteristics like malice, envy and hatred are the marks of an unregenerate heart and life: a life that is still abiding under the wrath and condemnation of God.

Cain manifested these evil characteristics in his life because he knew nothing of the grace of God in redemption. Although he was Abel's brother, and Abel was a child of God, Cain was not. Therefore, says the apostle,

Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one....

Like everyone who is not a child of God, Cain's life and behaviour was dominated by the evil one. Consequently, he allowed his sinful nature to govern his life. In his uncontrolled passion and hatred, Cain determined in his heart to kill his brother—which ultimately he did, with premeditation and deliberate malice. Therefore Cain was guilty of wilful murder; i.e., the sinful *attitude* of the heart (hatred) expressed in the sinful *action* (murder). (Gen. 4:3-8)

These are sins of the utmost magnitude in God's sight. God created mankind in his own image and likeness; i.e., as spiritual, rational and eternal beings. The LORD created mankind with a conscience, with an awareness of God, and with an inherent sense of moral values. Even in his earliest state, therefore, mankind was aware of the difference between right and wrong. An assault, therefore, against another person is an assault against God in whose image God created that person.

Cain's brother Abel had presented to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain himself had offered. When God rejected Cain's offering, he became filled with anger, disappointment and bitterness.

Why did God accept Abel's animal offering, and not Cain's crop offering? After all, Cain had offered the best of the fruit of the ground to God.

Interpretations vary—but some interpreters believe that the LORD had revealed to Adam and to his sons that the only way of forgiveness was through the shedding of blood. Therefore, according to this principle, Abel offered to God both a fat offering and a blood sacrifice or sin offering—which it pleased God to accept. Cain, on the other hand, ignored God's command and offered to God the fruit of the ground. As an offering intended to typify an atoning sacrifice, the fruit of the ground was totally unacceptable to God. It had no blood element.

Another interpretation is that the reason for Cain's rejection arose from his motive in making the offering. Abel had given the best of a *carefully considered* offering to God—the fat portions of the flock. Cain, however, had given that which he considered *might* be acceptable, without due regard to God's requirements or to God's majestic holiness.

If, however, as remarked below, Cain's rejection stood related to the fact that he was not God's child, then clearly only a blood sacrifice could have been acceptable to God. The

offering for atonement and reconciliation—the sin offering—always takes precedence over an offering of any other kind.

Whatever the true reason, God rejected Cain's offering. Hence, Cain's anger, bitterness and resentment against God and against his brother whose offering God had accepted willingly.

As has been remarked already, Cain was not a child of God. He was a child of the devil. For this reason he hated and despised God's redeemed children—including his own brother. Cain's attitude is typical of the world in which we live. When the world feels threatened by the righteous and godly character and conduct of God's children, it very often expresses its fear of God through malice or hatred against God's children.

Therefore, continues the apostle in verse 13:

1 John 3:13

Do not be surprised....

Do not think it strange if the world treats us as Cain treated Abel. Do not be amazed that the world expresses its low esteem of the believer by malice, bitterness and hatred. These attitudes are typical of the works of the flesh, and are to be expected from those who are still in bondage to Satan—the god of this age. (2 Cor. 4:4)

Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you.

We must remember that the world hated and despised our Lord and Master before it ever hated us. If it rejected him and despised his teachings, it will reject us and despise our teachings. Yet, let us not despair. It is not the people *as such* who are rejecting Christ and despising us, but rather the evil one who is dominating their lives and controlling their way of thinking and acting. Granted, God holds them fully responsible for submitting to the evil one—for they carry out his desires willingly. (John 8:44a) Nevertheless, as those whom the *prince of the power of the air* is holding captive, they are very much under his perverse and perverting influence. (Eph. 2:2)

Certainly, the world may hate the children of God. Even so, we must love them. We must show to them something of the love of God for sinful men and women. We must show to them something of the love that God has expressed to us. We must demonstrate to them something of the grace and mercy that we have experienced in our lives. Once, we were spiritually dead. While we were at enmity with God, we remained dead in trespasses and sins. Now, however, God has made us spiritually alive by his Holy Spirit, and through repentance and faith in Christ Jesus.

Therefore, continues John:

1 John 3:14

This is the proof that we have indeed passed out of the state of spiritual death and into the state of spiritual and eternal life: *...because we love our brothers*. Previously, we were like Cain. We may not have murdered anyone, but we harboured anger, bitterness and resentment against one another. We held grudges and refused to forgive one another. The more we refused to forgive, the more resentful we became. Akin to a deadly spreading cancer, the anger and bitterness within us ate away at our very soul. It changed our attitudes. It changed our way of thinking. It changed our relationships with other people. In our hearts, we harboured hatred. And if lust in the heart is tantamount to adultery, then, on the same principle, hatred in the heart is tantamount to murder. (See v.15 below; see also Matt. 5:27-28; 1 John 4:20)

However, implies the apostle, these things are no longer true of us—or they should not be. The very reason that *we know that we have passed from death to life, [is] because we love our brothers....* The former evil attitudes have gone. Now, by the grace of God—and out of our debt of love to him—we feel constrained to forgive our brother, and to love him as God has loved us.

Lest, however, anyone should imagine that it is still possible to harbour grudges or entertain hatred against a brother, the apostle writes:

1 John 3:15

Anyone who professes the name of Christ—and yet cherishes hatred against a brother—has denied his profession. It is impossible to belong to Christ, and yet to harbour hatred against a fellow-believer. For that believer is a member of the same body with us—the body of Christ.

The apostle continues:

(15) Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him. (NIV)

No one who has been guilty of murder—and who remains alienated from God—has eternal life in him. This much we know. Since we know these things, however, then we know that a person cannot claim to belong to Christ, if he is harbouring hatred in his heart against a brother. To maintain such an attitude would place that person outside the pale of God's salvation.

Nevertheless, having said this, it is recognised that differences of opinion will arise, and that brothers and sisters in Christ will disagree at times. Of itself, however, disagreement is not necessarily sinful—although it can, and often does, lead to sin. Where sinful differences arise, we must seek reconciliation. Where there has been a clash of interests or of personalities, we must seek forgiveness and restoration. Where a brother or sister has given (or taken) offence, there must be confession of sin and reconciliation of the offended parties. (Matt. 5:22-23; 18:21-22,35; Luke 17:3; Eph. 4:31-32)

In all our dealings with one another, love must predominate. Granted, clashes will occur. Yet, love must take the upper hand. Love overlooks offences. Love does not harbour grudges, nor does it become bitter or resentful against a fellow-believer. Love is willing not only to forgive, but also to forget—*permanently*. Rather than seeking to inflict harm or injury—verbally or otherwise—love seeks the good of others. Love never grows weary of putting up with a recalcitrant or difficult brother or sister—for, in God's sight, all of us can be stubbornly difficult children at times. (Rom. 13:10; Gal. 5:14)

Love in Action

1 John 3:16-20

In verse 16, the apostle continues on the theme of love:

1 John 3:16

This is how we understand the meaning of love, as exemplified in the Word of God. This is how that Word demonstrates the length, depth, height and breadth of God's love and the love of his Son, Jesus Christ—a love that each of his children should reflect in their lives.

Jesus, the holy Son of God, laid down his life for sinful men and women. He laid it down because of the immeasurable love the Father had for this lost world. Yet, although he loved the world, there was no other way of securing redemption for sinners but through the sacrifice of God's one and only Son. God yielded up the *Son* whom he loved for *sinners* whom he loved. Yet, the Son was a willing party to this demonstration of God's love, for Jesus laid down his life voluntarily. No one took it from him. Thus, says John,

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us....

Far from finding fault with them, or harbouring grudges against them, we ought so to love our brothers and sisters in Christ that we would willingly give our life for them. This is not merely a figure of speech. Rather, it is a literal truth. Just as Christ's love compelled him to lay down his life for us, so we—out of our deep love for our fellow-believer—ought to be willing to protect them with our life. This is the kind and degree of love that we ought to have toward our brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Of course, it may never be necessary for us to sacrifice our life for a brother or sister. Nevertheless, the principle of willing and ready sacrifice remains. There are other ways in which we can make sacrifices that will assist our fellow-believers.

Therefore, in verse 17, the apostle writes:

1 John 3:17

Not necessarily riches or wealth—although these are certainly included—but basic material objects such as food, clothes and shelter.

We may be fortunate enough to possess ample provisions of food and clothes, together with more than adequate shelter. If, therefore, we see that our brother or sister in Christ lacks some of these things, then we have a responsibility toward this one who is beloved of the Lord. Our responsibility is to help meet our brother or sister's immediate needs.

If—seeing his or her need, and being able to alleviate that need—we do not assist our fellow-believer, then we lack the first fruit of the Spirit. The first fruit of the Spirit is love. Where there is no love, there can be no understanding of a person's need. Without love, there can be no sympathy with that person's distress, no compassion toward him or her, and no desire to help them in their necessity. Such an uncaring attitude is the complete opposite of that which characterises the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, it should never reveal itself among us, his children. (Gal. 5:22-23; James 2:14-17)

Such indifference toward a brother or sister in need calls into question the reality of a person's regeneration or sanctification.

Desiring to exhort these believers to greater faith—a faith exemplified by their works—the apostle appeals to them (v.18):

1 John 3:18

Tenderly, the apostle encourages his fellow-believers to put into practice the faith they profess. They must not merely say that they believe on Christ. They must not utter these words with their tongues, unless their lives bear witness to the truth that they profess. They claimed that Christ was their Lord. Then, if Christ is indeed their Lord, they—his servants—must minister in his name to those in need. If Christ ministered to a person's physical needs how much more should they (and we)—his servants? Therefore, declares John,

...let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

Then, in verses 19 and 20, the apostle writes:

1 John 3:19-20

John had been speaking to these dear saints about learning the truth, about walking in the truth, and about putting the truth into action. If they practised these things, they would make their calling and election sure. These believers would be showing by their daily progress in the things of God that they really were born again of his Spirit. They would be demonstrating that God's Holy Spirit was indeed sanctifying their lives and causing them to bring forth spiritual fruit in abundance. Such fruit—such works of service and mercy—would redound to the glory of God, and to the benefit of their neighbour.

Because of their sin, and because of an ever-accusing conscience, the Scripture says there is no peace for the wicked. These redeemed believers, however, have had their sins forgiven. They no longer had an accusing conscience—unless they were failing to do what God required of them. However, if these believers were walking in the truth and putting the truth into practice, then—by their attitude and actions—they would be bringing peace to their souls. They would inherit the blessings following on from obedience to God, and with these blessings come rest and tranquillity of mind and soul.

What was true of those to whom John was writing, is true also of us. Regardless of how we may feel, God knows the truth about us. He—the omniscient God—knows our hearts. When we are walking in the truth, and when we are showing love to our brothers and sisters in the Lord, there can be nothing in our hearts or lives to accuse us. Satan may try to find fault. We may find fault with ourselves. However, we must not become discouraged by Satan's false accusations or by our own imagined guilt. God has cleared us of all sin and guilt. By following the teaching of God's Word, and by applying the truths that Word to our everyday lives, we are demonstrating our walk with God.

Therefore, infers the apostle, be encouraged in heart—

For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

God knows the motives behind every thought and action. He sees the sincerity and humility of our hearts. So long as these attributes abound, we cannot ultimately stray from the paths of righteousness—the way of life that pleases God. Just let us remember that righteousness includes love, humility, fairness, justice, mercy, compassion and forgiveness toward one another. These are what God considers as acceptable offerings.

Obeying His Commands

1 John 3:21-24

In verses 21 and 22, the apostle continues this note of reassurance:

1 John 3:21-22

So long as there is nothing in our hearts to justifiably accuse or condemn us, we can abide in close fellowship with our Father in heaven. So long as no barriers exist between God and ourselves, or between other believers and ourselves, we can enjoy all the blessings that God has promised to bestow upon us. These blessings include peace, harmony, joy, freedom from guilt and fear, freedom from an accusing conscience and genuine love for one another in Christ—together with every other spiritual and material blessing in Christ.

Expository Notes

When nothing exists in our hearts and lives to accuse us, then we can have that peace of God in our hearts that transcends all understanding. And, when there is nothing to accuse us—

(21b) ...we have confidence before God (22) and receive from him anything we ask....

This is God's promise to his beloved children—and God cannot prove false to his Word: Anything that we ask according to his will, will be provided. Of this, there can be no doubt. The Lord will provide—according to his Word.

True, there are many occasions on which God may not *appear* to provide what we ask. If we have asked for something that is not appropriate at present, the Lord may defer his answer to our prayers. Similarly, if we have asked for something that seems good, right and proper—but which the Lord knows would not be ultimately for the best—he may not grant such a request. Nevertheless, he will do whatever is for the best. Again, if we were to ask for something that was contrary to his will and purposes for our lives, then he may refuse such a request. On every occasion, God *hears* our prayers—but he *answers* our prayers *according to the purposes of his own will*, and for the ultimate best outcome. This, though, may not seem apparent at the time. (Rom. 8:27; 1 John 5:14-15)

There is, however, another reason why God may not answer our prayers. This is because we have not dealt with something in our lives. Something exists which we know God requires us to remedy, but which we have so far failed to put right. Because of this, God may suspend his promise to answer our specific prayers. It is certain that we cannot claim God's promise to provide whatever we ask if there is something in our hearts that condemns us before God.

God's promise to give us anything we ask is based on the condition of obedience to his commands. When, willingly and humbly, we submit ourselves to the teaching of God's Word then the blessings and answers to prayers will follow. When we are living a life that is pleasing to the Lord, then the Lord will grant us our desired requests—and more besides. When there is nothing in our hearts to accuse us or to come between the Lord and ourselves, then we will know what it is to have specific prayer requests answered beyond all our expectations.

Are there any specific commands that God requires us to observe? In verse 23, the apostle writes:

1 John 3:23

Of course, God never promises to answer the specific prayers of anyone who has not believed on his Son (except the prayer of repentance and faith). God's promise to answer prayer applies primarily to his redeemed children. However, declares John, for everyone who is a child of God—everyone, that is, who has obeyed God's command to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ—then this promise is theirs. Just as we once placed our faith and trust in Christ for salvation, so now we must continue to place our faith and trust in God's Son for working out our ongoing sanctification and redemption. Those who have begun to believe must continue to believe. We must continue to exercise faith in God—as did Abraham. We must continue to trust him in everything—for he will never disappoint us if we are seeking to honour him. Yet, we must believe on him with all our heart and soul. Then, he will not fail to lead us in the way we should go.

John exhorts these believers to call to mind the teaching that they had received from the apostles. They were to remember how John, and perhaps others, had told them of the Lord's command—that his followers should love one another. As Jesus and his apostles taught, the world would hate the Lord's followers. The world would despise them. The

world would shamefully abuse some of them and put others to death because of their faith in Christ. Yes, the world would demonstrate hatred for Christ's followers. Thus, they were to love one another—regardless of what the world thought, said or did.

Like these believers, we too should remember that we are the redeemed children of God. God has brought each one of us into his family; not, however, because of any worthiness in us, but because of God's grace and mercy toward us. God loved us when we deserved no love. How much more should we love our fellow-believers?

This, then, is the kind of commands that the Lord requires us to observe. This is the kind of faith and obedience that pleases God and which ensures that he both hears and answers our prayers—whatever we ask, according to his will.

In verse 24, John continues:

1 John 3:24

Those who are putting the teaching of God's Word into practice, and in whose life there is nothing to accuse or condemn them before God, are living in him. They are walking in close fellowship with their heavenly Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. Since this is so, the Lord is manifesting his presence to them in everything that they do. He is guiding their steps, granting them wisdom in making decisions, keeping them from sin and error, and upholding them and protecting them in every situation. Indeed, the Lord walks closely beside his faithful people. He also fills them with a real and powerful sense of his presence.

The Lord has not given us a spirit of fear, or of bondage. On the contrary, he has given us the Spirit who brings freedom. The Spirit of God releases us from captivity to sin and sinful attitudes. He releases us from the fear of a burdened and accusing conscience. He releases us from everything that would come between our God and us.

This Spirit—the Holy Spirit—is the one who is sanctifying us. He takes the teachings of God's Word, helps us to understand these teachings, and enables us to apply them to our daily lives. While, then, we yield our lives to the Spirit's control, and obey God's Word, we remain assured that the Lord Jesus is living within us—in the person of his Spirit.

1 John Chapter 4

Testing the Spirits

1 John 4:1-3

Moving on to chapter 4, the apostle writes:

1 John 4:1

(1a) Dear friends, do not believe every spirit... (NIV)

The apostle cautions his readers not to accept as truth everything that they hear. They were not to believe everything that people told them concerning spiritual things. The Lord had given each of them his Holy Spirit; and the Spirit of God would lead them into all truth. Furthermore, they had, or would have, appointed pastors and teachers to explain God's Word to them and to feed them on that Word. However, they must not allow anyone to add further truths (so-called) than what the Spirit had already revealed to them by the apostles of the Lord Jesus as they taught and proclaimed God's Word.

Even in their own short experience as local Christian churches, certain people had tried to claim that they were in possession of deeper truths of God's Word than had previously been revealed. They had gone on to tell the believers that—unless they too acquired this enlightened or higher knowledge of God's truth—then they could not know God fully.

Thus, John says, *do not believe every spirit*.

The apostle warns these children of God to have absolutely nothing to do with this kind of teaching, or with any other of a similar spirit. Far from providing further enlightenment, this kind of schooling would only lead God's people ever farther away from the truth, and into the paths of spiritual darkness.

Therefore, writes the apostle:

(1b)...do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.... (NIV)

Those who belong to the Lord must put the spirits to the test: That is, with the illuminating power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, they must scrutinise diligently everything that they are being taught—just as the Berean believers did. (Acts 17:11)

In the same way, all believers must examine the teaching that they receive, comparing it with the teaching of God's infallible Word. In all essential matters, God's people must scrutinise their teacher's message to see whether it agrees with the Word of Truth.

If it does not agree with God's Word (correctly understood and interpreted), then clearly the teaching must be wrong. God's Word certainly cannot be wrong. However, if the teaching is wrong, then it is not from God. Consequently, if it is not from God, then it can be of no spiritual value to our soul. Rather than edifying us in the faith, it will succeed only in damaging and impoverishing our faith.

Therefore, continues the apostle:

(1c)...do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from

God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. (NIV)

We must not be surprised if we come across false teachers from time to time, infers John. There were—and always will be—many who hold a high opinion of themselves and of their own ideas. These egotistical souls are intent only in making known their ideas to all who are willing and eager to listen. They take some of the truths of God's Word and mix into it a generous helping of subtle errors and beguiling false teachings. Then they assert that these teachings are truths about which the believer in Christ must know, and which he or she must receive.

If we allowed them to beguile us with their persuasive and deceptive arguments, they would have us believe that these 'truths' (so-called) are necessary for us to observe to gain a better knowledge and understanding of God and his ways. Alternatively, they would have us believe that salvation consists essentially in deliverance from the material body—a deliverance that, allegedly, one achieves through the pursuit of superior knowledge.

John's instructions are uncompromising: The saints of the Lord Jesus were to have nothing to do with these spirits—the lying or deceiving spirits of these false prophets. Their teaching does not come from God, but from the evil one. God's people must remember that Satan, too, uses the Word of God. The evil one, however, distorts and misuses that Word to suit his own ends and to accomplish his own purposes. It is hardly surprising if his servants do likewise. (Matt. 7:15; 24:24; 2 Cor. 11:13-15; 2 Pet. 2:1-3)

These evil men were typical of the false prophets about whom John and the other apostles had warned God's people often. This was (and is) why God's children must test the spirits (examine the teaching) to see whether the teaching is from God. That teaching alone which is in full agreement with God's Word, and which the testimony of God's Spirit confirms as true, is the teaching that is genuine and necessary to our faith.

Therefore, writes John:

(1) Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. (NIV)

However, when someone comes to us professing to teach God's Word, how can we discern the Spirit of truth from the spirit of error?

1 John 4:2

This is the sure and certain way of determining whether someone is speaking by the Spirit of God, or whether he is speaking by his own spirit and under the delusion of Satan.

Everyone who confesses that Jesus is both Lord and Christ, has the Spirit of God. Everyone whose teaching makes it plain that Jesus, the Son of God, has come in the flesh, has the Spirit of God. Everyone who confesses and teaches that the eternal God took upon himself true humanity and came into this world as a human being (sin apart), has the Spirit of God. Everyone who confesses and teaches that Jesus is truly God and truly man, has the Spirit of God. For no one can confess or teach these truths except by the Holy Spirit working within him. No one can become convinced of these spiritual verities, except by the inward illumination of God's Spirit revealing the truth to him through God's Word.

As the apostle Paul declared to the Corinthian believers:

(3) Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit. (1 Cor. 12:3 NIV)

Therefore, concludes the apostle John:

(2) ...Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus has come in the flesh is from God.... (NIV)

In verse 3, John continues:

1 John 4:3

(3a) ...but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God.... (NIV)

Anyone who denied the truths as John had just related them, and who refused to acknowledge the Messiahship of the Lord Jesus or his true deity and true humanity, was not from God. By refusing to accept and teach the truths of God's Word, that person had shown himself as one who was alienated from God's truth, and devoid of the Spirit of truth—the blessed Holy Spirit. If, however, this person was devoid of the Spirit, he could not be the Christian's spiritual teacher. Regardless of any claims to the contrary, this person was not from God. As such, believers must not listen to his teaching, nor must God's children allow themselves to be influenced by the misleading, distorted and erroneous points of view propounded by such false prophets.

In the next part of verse 3, the apostle declares:

(3b)...This is the spirit of the antichrist.... (NIV)

Not the Antichrist himself, who is yet to come, but the [lying] *spirit* of the Antichrist. The same kind of lying or deceiving spirit that will characterise the Antichrist, and by which he will lead astray a vast multitude of deluded people. These people, however, will be deceived by the Antichrist only because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore—by rejecting God's truth—they become deluded into believing the lie. (1 Kings 22-23; 2 Thess. 2:9-12)

This, then, is the type of deceptive and insidious false spirit that characterises these anti-christian teachers. These teachers who—after having heard God's truth—yet reject it, and then go out to propagate their own distortions of the truth. On their first appearance, they may put forward to believers what *seems* to be the truth of God. Before long, however, and with great subtlety, they distort that truth by removing certain essential elements from it, and by adding to it the cleverly veiled lies of the devil.

The very fact that these false teachers arise in our midst demonstrates the reality of the spirit of Antichrist. This, says John, is that Antichrist—

...which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

Not that the Antichrist himself is already in the world—but that the *spirit* of the Antichrist is already in the world. This is that spirit which deceives men and women concerning God's truth, and which—by cunning, craft and outright lies—endeavours to keep people from knowing the truth as it is in Jesus, enslaves them to the bondage of sin, and permits the evil one to gain an ever-increasing influence over their hearts and minds.

For these reasons, the apostle John exhorts his readers to remain alert. They must be careful to keep themselves from error. They must guard the truth as it was delivered to them originally. They must never accept what people taught them, unless that teaching was in full agreement with God's Word—the Word of Truth. On every occasion, they must test the spirits.

Just as John exhorted his readers to test the spirits, so too we must test the teaching we received to see whether it is from God, or from the evil one. Let us follow the example of these believers who heard the preaching of the apostle Paul:

(11) Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. (Acts 17:11 NIV)

Greater is He that is in You

1 John 4:4-6

In verse 4, John writes:

1 John 4:4

You—in distinction from others.... You—in distinction from the false prophets and their followers....

Addressing his readers directly, John says,

You, dear children, are from God...

Unlike the false teachers, these believers had been born again of God's Holy Spirit, and were God's redeemed children. Because, therefore, they were the children of God, and because the Spirit of God indwelt them, they had been able to overcome the false apostles. By means of the Holy Spirit guiding them into all truth, they had learned to distinguish truth from error. By storing up God's Word of truth in their hearts, they had been able to apply it against false teaching. Through using the sword of the Spirit—the Word of God—the believers had *...overcome them*. They had exposed these false prophets for what they were—the emissaries of Satan. By upholding the unchanging truths of God's Word, they had uncovered the deceitful and lying words of these false teachers, and had protected God's people from error. (2 Cor. 11:3-4,13-15; cf. Eph. 4:14)

Why, however, was it possible for these believers to distinguish clearly between the truth of God's Word, and the distortions of God's Word that the false teachers were proclaiming?

The apostle provides the answer:

...Because the one who is in you is greater...

The one who controls the believers' hearts and lives is greater by far than the one who controls the hearts and lives of unregenerate men and women. By the grace of God, the Holy Spirit indwells believers. The Holy Spirit is God: He possesses all the same qualities or attributes as Almighty God himself: for he *is* Almighty God—in the person of the Spirit. Since, therefore, the Spirit of Almighty God dwells within each of God's children, then it follows that each child is being protected by God's almighty and sovereign power.

This is something that the unbeliever does not have. This is something that these false prophets do not have. For all their confident and powerful arguments, they have no ex-

perience of the indwelling Holy Spirit. On the contrary, their lives are still under the control of the evil one.

However, although Satan is a very powerful being, his power nevertheless is finite. It is that of a *created*, but *fallen* and limited, angelic spirit. On the other hand, God is *uncreated, eternal, righteous, holy and pure* Spirit. He is omnipotent: i.e., he is all-powerful; and he exercises his infinite or unlimited power everywhere throughout the entire universe. For this reason, the power of the Holy Spirit who indwells God's children, is infinitely greater than the power of the evil one who dominates the lives of unregenerate men and women.

In verse 5, the apostle continues:

1 John 4:5

These people who distort the truths of God's Word; who attempt to seduce people away from these truths; or who speak against the God of truth, are obviously not from God. *They are from the world....*

At one time, they may have associated with God's people—but they were not God's children. They may have come under the sound of the Gospel and under the truth of God's Word, but they did not respond positively to the Word of truth or to the Gospel of eternal salvation. On the contrary, they rejected God's truth, and they refused to accept the infallible and unchanging standard of God's Word. Their standpoint and their teaching is neither spiritual nor Christian. Rather, it is unspiritual and worldly. Thus, says the apostle, *They are from the world....*

Everything they say is coloured by their association with the world. Everything they teach is influenced by their earthly view of things. Not having God's Holy Spirit within them to dispel the darkness of their minds and to illuminate their understanding to spiritual realities, they are unable to comprehend spiritual truths. For this reason, their attempts at explaining spiritually related matters are no more than the application of philosophy or worldly wisdom. Bearing no relation to the spiritual wisdom that comes from God, man's wisdom is very often no more than an accumulation of his opinions and speculative ideas, or acquired empirical knowledge. According to the Scriptures, however, the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. (1 Cor. 2:5,14-16; cf. 2 Tim. 3:5-8)

This, then, is the reason why God's children must not heed the teaching of such people. Their arguments may sound plausible. They may sound utterly convincing. They may present their arguments with a display of great learning, oratory and dialogue—but their teaching does not come from God. And, if not from God, it is not fit instruction for God's children. It is nothing more than the principles of worldly learning adorned with a 'religious' dress—the type of undemanding 'religion' that is acceptable in the eyes of the world. It is religion without commitment to God; religion without the requirements to acknowledge God's will or obey his Word.

Because their message suits the hearts and minds of unspiritual individuals, the world is more than willing to listen to what these false teachers have to say. This, however, is sufficient evidence in itself that their message is not from God—for it permits people to carry on with their normal sinful lifestyles while at the same time professing belief in God. However, whereas the world is more than willing to listen to the message of these false instructors, it is not at all willing to listen to the true message of God's Word. The true message of God's Word is being presented only by his own Spirit-filled servants.

However, continues the apostle in verse 6:

1 John 4:6

We are God's children. By the work of the Holy Spirit, we have been born from above—created spiritually anew. Again, through personal faith in God's Son—a faith granted us by the grace of God—we have received adoption into the family and household of God.

Those who, like us, are God's children, listen to us; i.e., they hear the teaching that we give them, and they obey that teaching because they know that it comes from God. They know this because they search the Scriptures daily to verify our teaching. In addition, the Holy Spirit confirms God's truth to their hearts. (Acts 17:11; see also Luke 24:27; contrast John 5:39)

Everyone, then, who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit listens to and obeys our teachings. They obey because they know that these teachings come—not from us—but from the living God. We, the apostles, are merely the heralds of God's Word. The teaching itself, however, comes from God. It is his inspired, infallible and inerrant Word. (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20-21; cf. Heb. 4:12)

Those who do not belong to God do not listen to the truths of God's Word. The particular truths to which we are referring are not so much the truths of the Gospel—which a person may listen to for a while—but the truths that are relevant to the Christian faith. These include the truths of sanctification. They include the truths of holy and godly living. They include the truths concerning love, joy, peace, compassion, kindness, patience and many more. These are moral and spiritual truths. The vast majority of those who do not belong to Christ, however, have little or no interest in moral and spiritual truths. Thus, says the apostle—

...but whoever is not from God does not listen to us...

This is how we distinguish true teachers of God's Word from false teachers. The true teacher of God's Word always teaches from the Word of God. Everything he teaches derives from, and can be proved from, the Bible. He adds nothing to God's Word and he subtracts nothing from God's Word. He proclaims the full counsel of God; i.e., everything contained in the Word of God, including everything that is relevant to faith and practical Christian living or godliness. (Deut. 4:2; Rev. 22:18-19; Acts 20:27)

Again, the true teacher makes known God's Word in the power of the Holy Spirit. In all his teaching, he seeks to know the mind and will of the Spirit before he makes God's truth known to others. He is entirely dependent upon the Spirit of God and upon the Word of God. Commitment to God, and to a life of prayer, are just two of the characteristics that mark a man as being a true preacher or teacher of God's Word. It is to such teachers that God's people listen. (Isa. 59:21; Ezek. 11:5; 1 Cor. 2:13)

The opposite, of course, is true of false teachers. Their teaching is unspiritual, unchristian, ungodly and not at all edifying to the people of God. Overall therefore, God's people do not listen to them.

Summarising, then, God's people listen to God's Word of truth as presented to them by those who have the Holy Spirit. They reject the teaching of those who do not have the Spirit of God, and who are not teaching the truth as revealed in God's Word.

Love One Another

1 John 4:7-12

In verse 7, the apostle returns to a theme that he had written about earlier, and around which he had based his whole letter:

1 John 4:7

The apostle exhorts these believers to demonstrate their love for one another as those who have been united to Christ and to one another. Unlike the false teachers who remained separated from Christ and from the family of God, these believers were brothers and sisters in the Lord and members of God's family.

John infers that they show the reality of their union with Christ by the way they treat their brothers and sisters. As Christ cares for every member of his body—the individual members of the invisible Church—so these believers ought to care for and minister to one another. For, unless each part of Christ's body is working effectively and in harmony with every other part, the Church cannot function to its full potential. Thus, exhorts the apostle, ... *let us love one another, for love comes from God...* (1 Cor. 12:4-31; 13:1-13; Eph. 4:16)

Everyone who expresses genuine caring concern for his brothers and sisters in Christ—and who matches that concern by his deeds—has truly been born of God. For only those who have been bonded together by the Holy Spirit, and who share in the regeneration of the Spirit, exhibit true concern for the welfare and needs of other Christian believers. Their genuine, sincere and practical love toward fellow-believers is a proof that they have experienced the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, and that they know—and are known of—the Father.

On the other hand, writes the apostle in verse 8:

1 John 4:8

John is speaking of anyone who exhibits no compassion in his heart toward those in need, or who shows no concern for the welfare of their brother or sister in the Lord. The apostle is speaking of anyone who demonstrates little or no concern for perishing men and women, or who shows complete indifference toward other people. He is speaking of those whose only experience of love is self-love. Such a person is in a miserable state indeed. As has been noted previously, the first fruit of the Spirit is love. Where love is absent, one might ask what place—if any—the Spirit occupies in that person's life. (John 13:34-35; Rom. 13:8-10; cf. also James 2:14-17)

Clearly, if the Spirit of God is absent, then God himself is absent from the life of that person. Alternatively, the knowledge of God is largely lacking in his life. This, however, would point to a person who has little or no fellowship with God in private prayer or in the reading of his Word. It would indicate someone who benefits little—if at all—from the fellowship of believers and from the public ministry of God's Word.

Possibly, this person does not know God because he has never experienced the new birth. Alternatively, he does not know God—in the sense that he does not *want* to know God—because he is a believer who is living in a backslidden state. Either way, there is no spiritual and practical love in his life. That is why John says—

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

In what way, however, did God demonstrate his love? This question is answered in verse 9:

1 John 4:9

This is the way in which God demonstrated the fullness of his love toward those who deserved no love. This is the way in which the Almighty Sovereign of the universe displayed immeasurable love, mercy and compassion upon fallen and sinful humanity.

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Such is the extent of God's love toward those who deserved only condemnation. God's love for us, therefore, should compel us to ask ourselves whether we are exemplifying this kind of love in our dealings with others. In other words—although other people may have an abundance of faults and failings, and although they may have wronged us or offended us, do we still love them? Do we care for them as God cared for us, while we remained lost in sin and enemies of God?

How far, though, did God's love extend toward us—his former enemies?

The apostle continues:

(9a,b) This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son⁸ into the world.... (NIV)

Or as this apostle records in his Gospel:

(16) For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,⁹ that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16 NIV)

How did God demonstrate his love toward those who were at enmity with him?

...He sent his one and only Son into the world... or, ...he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

So great was the love of God toward those of us who formerly were lost in our sins, that he yielded up the one who was dearest to his heart—his beloved Son. Such was the magnitude of God's love for sinners, that he sacrificed his only begotten Son for their redemption and reconciliation with himself.

We receive life through the Redeemer's perfect sinless life, sufferings, death and resurrection. We inherit the gift of eternal life through his substitutionary and atoning sacrifice. Out of God's love for us, and by his grace, we have received life through repentance and faith in Christ. We have experienced deliverance from death to life. Just as Christ rose from physical death never to die again, so the believer rises from spiritual death to inherit life eternal. Now, effectively, the believer sits in the heavenly realms with the risen, exalted and glorified Lord Jesus. (Rom. 6:4-10; Eph. 1:20-22; 2:4-6)

In verse 10, John expands on this theme:

1 John 4:10

Let us be under no misapprehension. God did not set his love upon us because of something desirable in us. Again, before our conversion, we did not possess or exhibit any heartfelt desire to love God. On the contrary, in our sinful state, the things of God were of little or no interest to us.

God, therefore, did not love us because we were better than others; or more righteous—or even because we were less sinful than others. Again, the Lord did not show his love toward us because we attempted to practise a better lifestyle than others.

None of these things—or any other things—could have commended us to God. Before our conversion, we stood alienated from God—alienated because of our sins, iniquities or

⁸ Or, *only begotten Son* [NIV footnote to 1 John 4:9]

⁹ or, *only begotten Son* [NIV footnote to John 3:16]

wicked deeds. Before our conversion, we remained at enmity with God. This enmity existed because of our unconfessed sins and sinful practices. Then, we were abiding under the wrath and condemnation of the most holy and righteous God. (Rom. 8:6-8; Eph. 4:17-18; Col. 1:20-21; John 3:36)

Therefore, it becomes evident that there was absolutely nothing in us that could have caused God to love us, and nothing in us that would have caused us to love God. Far from being desirable in God's sight, we were offensive—because of our sin. Nevertheless, although in a state of sin, alienation and enmity from God, God—in his mercy—had determined, from the eternal ages, to redeem us. Although we deserved no mercy, God nevertheless had compassion on us. Out of his immense love for us—even while we were dead in sin—God gave up his one and only Son to become our Saviour.

At every turn, therefore, the love that God had for us was unearned or unmerited love. God's love did not derive from anything that he saw in us, foresaw in us, or found in us. Rather, it derived from his inherent goodness and from his sovereign will and pleasure. Of his own perfect and holy free will, he wanted to love us. Therefore, he did love us—regardless of our sinful condition, but without in any way condoning our sin.

Thus, the apostle says:

(10b) This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for ¹⁰ our sins. (NIV)

Clearly, God could not love that which was sinful. Although setting his love upon the sinner as a person, he needed to deal with that person's sin. This he did by sending his only Son as an atoning sacrifice for sin. Since it was a vicarious offering—i.e., a substitutionary offering (made on behalf of sinners)—the sacrifice of God's holy, perfect and sinless Son turns aside the wrath of God from the sinner.

The Lord Jesus Christ satisfied fully the righteous demands of God's law as follows:

1. By his perfect and sinless life, the Lord Jesus fulfilled all the demands of the law on the sinner's behalf. He did this by keeping completely and faultlessly all the requirements of the law, including all those that the sinner himself had failed to keep, in inclination, attitude, thought, word and deed. Consequently, and when conjoined with the second item, God now credits this perfect righteousness of Christ to the believing sinner's account.
2. By his substitutionary and atoning death, the Lord Jesus bore the righteous wrath and condemnation of God on the sinner's behalf. By the shedding of his blood—i.e., by the yielding up of his pure and sinless life as a sacrifice of atonement for sin—Jesus removed fully, finally and forever God's enduring wrath against the sinner. The spotless, holy Lamb of God paid the price once-for-all, by bearing sin's penalty in his own body on the cross. He endured God's wrath against sin for every offence committed by the sinner—past, present and future. Thus, by means of this substitutionary and atoning sacrifice, the redeemed sinner is reconciled to God, and God is reconciled to his now redeemed child.

Therefore, through the work of effectual calling and regeneration, and through repentance and faith in Christ, God justifies the believing sinner—or pronounces him righteous. All this has become possible only because of God's everlasting love for sinners, and of his provision of his only Son for their redemption.

In verse 11, the apostle writes:

¹⁰ Or as the one who would turn aside his wrath, taking away... [NIV footnote to 1 John 4:10]

1 John 4:11

Since God showed his love to us even when we were his enemies, we ought all the more to show our love to others—even if they be our enemies. If, however, God requires that we love our enemies, how much more does God require that we love our friends? Farther, if we ought to love our friends, with what degree of love ought we to love our brothers and sisters in the Lord? (Matt. 5:43-45; John 13:34; 1 Pet. 1:22)

In practice, this can be the most difficult thing to do at times. All of us are still to some extent influenced by our old sinful nature. We choose the friends with whom we want to associate, and often we fail to associate fully with other believers. These things happen—but they ought not to be. In Christ, we are all one. We are all brothers and sisters of the same Lord Jesus, and sons and daughters of the same heavenly Father. (Rom. 12:5)

Instead of being selective, we ought to emulate our Father in heaven. When he gave his only begotten Son to die for sinners, God gave him to die for all kinds of sinners; for every kind of transgressors. He gave up his only begotten Son for the most despised, and also for the most honoured. God yielded his own Son for the most contemptible, and also for the most respected—and for very many more. (Cf. James 2:1-10)

All were sinners, destined to perish. Yet, the love of God reached out to every one of them—without excluding any—and brought them to repentance and faith in his Son. Should not we, then, be willing to love *all* our brothers and sisters in Christ?

Then, in verse 12, the apostle declares:

1 John 4:12

No one, at any time, has ever seen God. It is impossible to look upon God in all his glory, and live. The very radiance of his majestic glory would destroy any human being who sought to behold the living God. Even Moses, when he asked to behold God, did not see God in all his glory. Rather, the LORD showed Moses his goodness—the sum of all his attributes. However, the ‘face’ of God himself (i.e., the full majesty and magnificence of God’s effulgent glory), Moses could not behold. (Ex. 33:18-20)

Therefore, writes John—

No-one has ever seen God...

Elsewhere (in his Gospel) John writes that although no one has ever seen the Father, the Son has made him known. (John 1:18) God reveals his glory in and through his only Son. (John 6:45-46; see also Matt. 11:27; Luke 10:21-23)

So, although no one has ever seen God, we know from what the Son has revealed of the Father what kind of God he is. We learn from the Lord Jesus that God is a God of grace, love, mercy, compassion, kindness and patience. We learn also that he is a God of light, truth, justice, holiness, righteousness and wrath.

If we love one another, we are proving by our love that the kind of qualities or attributes that belong to God our heavenly Father belong also to us, his redeemed children. We are proving that God himself indwells us in the person of his Holy Spirit. We are demonstrating that we are walking in the Spirit when we are walking in love—for we are bringing forth the fruit of the Spirit, the first of which is love. (Gal. 5:22-23)

If above all gifts and all other graces, we possess love in abundance, then there is no greater quality we could possess, or to which we could aspire. When we walk in the Spirit, all our thoughts, words and actions are governed by the steadfast and enduring love of God that fills and overflows our soul.

This, however, is not merely an emotional type of love, valid and necessary as this is in its place. Rather, the love of which John is speaking is a practical and caring love: a love that responds to those in need, and does something to help meet those needs. It is a love that shares in and with the concerns and griefs of others. It is a love that is willing to sacrifice our cherished interests on behalf of others, or even to lay down our lives for others. It is the kind of deep, practical, caring love that the Lord Jesus exemplified in his life for all those around him, and demonstrated in his actions toward them.

Sealed by God's Spirit

1 John 4:13-16a

1 John 4:13

We know—i.e., we are fully assured beyond all doubt—*that we live in him....* We know that we live and walk in Christ Jesus; that we are abiding in him; that we remain united to him as branches remain united to the vine. (John 15:4-8)

How do we know these things?

...because he has given us of his Spirit.

We are assured of Christ's presence in our lives, because of the fact that his Holy Spirit indwells us. The Holy Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are the children of God. Again, the Holy Spirit confirms the truths of God's Word to our hearts and souls, so that the Bible is to us the living and abiding Word of God. Such is the testimony of the Holy Spirit to all those who are born again, and who have received the Spirit of adoption. (Rom. 8:14-16)

It follows, of course, that Christ lives in us in the person of the Holy Spirit. (Cf. John 14:16-17 with John 14:18,20)

In verse 14, John writes:

1 John 4:14

We have seen and testify...

That is, what the apostle John was writing to these believers about these things did not derive from hearsay or second-hand information. On the contrary, it came to them at first hand. The apostles were present with the Lord Jesus while he ministered on earth, and they continued with him until his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. Everything, therefore, that these apostles had written to the churches, including the saints to whom John was writing, derived from the first-hand teachings that these apostles had received from the Lord Jesus himself.

Again, the apostles had been present when the Father had declared from heaven that Jesus was his beloved Son, in whom he was well pleased. Again, from the words of the Father and the Son, these apostles knew that Jesus had appeared to redeem men and women from every nation under heaven.

In verse 15, the apostle continues:

1 John 4:15

If anyone acknowledges—i.e., if anyone confesses openly and publicly—*that Jesus is the Son of God...*

The sense seems to be, that if anyone acknowledges unashamedly that the Man Jesus is in fact God's Son—truly man and yet truly God, then ... *God lives in him and he in God.*

No one can confess that Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit working within him. Similarly, no one can acknowledge that Jesus is God's Son, unless the Holy Spirit reveals this truth to him. The Spirit makes known such truths through the application of God's Word to the understanding. (1 Cor. 12:3) Since the presence of the Holy Spirit is essential for such a confession of faith, this is evidence that the person making the confession possesses the Spirit and is therefore a child of God.

It is, of course, implicit in this statement that the person confessing Christ's deity would also be willing to acknowledge Christ before men and angels—even under the most adverse circumstances.

In the first part of verse 16, the apostle writes:

1 John 4:16a

Thus we become and remain assured beyond all doubt of the love that God has for us. God's love for us is so immense that he withheld not his only begotten Son for our sake, but yielded him up for us all.

Since we know—since we have become fully assured—of God's immeasurable love toward us, then we know that we can rely on God, our heavenly Father. We can rely on everything that he has said in his Word—for God's Word cannot be broken. We can rely on every promise that he has made, and which is relevant to the redeemed children of God—for God cannot fail to honour his promises. We can rely on him to guide us in the way that we should go. We can rely on him also to chastise us when we go astray.

A loving heavenly Father cannot fail to direct his children's steps, nor can he allow them to continue indefinitely in a careless or wayward condition. In his everlasting love and mercy, he will correct them and draw them back to himself. Therefore, writes John—

And so we know and rely on the love God has for us....

No Fear in Love

1 John 4:16b-18

Continuing the theme of love in verse 16b, the apostle writes:

1 John 4:16b

What is love? What—or Who—is the real expression of *love*?

God is love.... The sum of all God's attributes is his goodness; and his goodness comprehends his everlasting love. Although God is light, and hence a God of righteousness, justice, holiness and truth, he is also a God of love, mercy, kindness and compassion. The God of perfect light is also the God of endless love.

To say that *God is love* is to say that all he thinks, says and does is based not only on his holiness and righteousness but also on his wisdom and love. In righteousness, God could have left mankind to perish in their sin. That would have been just: for death is the penalty of sin. However, in love he sought to give the sinner a way of escape. God himself provided this way of escape when he yielded up his Son to the cross. Therefore, God fully demonstrated his love for sinners—and, at the same time, upheld his righteousness—

when he yielded up his only Son. Jesus offered himself as an atoning sacrifice on the sinner's behalf.

Whoever lives in the love that God has for him—and practices that kind of love toward others—lives in God. Such a person abides in close fellowship with his Father in heaven, and his heavenly Father abides in close fellowship with him.

When a believer is truly aware of the magnitude of God's love for him, then—out of the gratitude of his heart—he desires above all else to walk closely with his heavenly Father. This involves adapting our lives to the teachings of God's Word, or conforming our lives to the truths of that Word. It also involves walking in the love of God, which in turn involves loving God with all our heart and soul and loving others as a token of the love that God has for us.

This is the first fruit of the Spirit. This spiritual fruit is what the apostle Paul commends to the Corinthian church, and which he exhorts them to demonstrate above the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, writes the apostle John—

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.

In verse 17, the apostle continues:

1 John 4:17

In this way—i.e., by living in the love of God. The sense is, by dwelling in God's love, and by extending this kind of love to others, etc.

In this way, love is made complete among us....

When we are living in God's love, then it is not possible for us to find fault—or to expose faults—in our fellow believers. All too aware of our own sins, and of God's willingness to forgive our sins, we do not seek to accuse others, but rather to see in them all those things that are good. We seek to remember that—in Christ Jesus—they are just as beloved of the Father as we are.

Therefore, when God's love is reigning in our hearts and lives, and we are living in harmony with our brothers and sisters in the Lord, then our love tends toward perfection. It becomes matured or fully developed. No longer is it being tarnished and spoiled by the thoughts and attitudes of our old sinful nature.

On the last day, when we stand before the Lord to be judged, he will not condemn us along with the world. On the contrary, he has already justified us. Therefore, at the judgment seat of Christ, he will acquit us of all charges against us.

However, the Lord will judge the believer for the deeds done in the body; i.e., for the way in which he has lived his life on earth, and for his degree of faithfulness to God. Following this assessment, the believer will receive an appropriate reward; or, in the case of continued unfaithfulness, will forfeit his reward. (However, if he has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, he will not forfeit his salvation.) If we have lived in the love of God, and have expressed something of God's love toward others by our actions, then the Lord will grant us greater reward in heaven.

So long as we serve God faithfully, and so long as we continue steadfastly in his love, our consciences will remain cleared of all guilt and blame. They will remain cleared of offences against God, and of offences against other people.

When we are thus free from offence, we can have complete confidence before God. We possess this confidence—not because we have become sin-free—but because God has

forgiven our sins. We possess such confidence because our heavenly Father has reconciled us to himself. For this reason, we ought to become reconciled to our neighbour, and to our brothers or sisters in the Lord.

In this world—in this present age—we are like the Lord Jesus. We are not, of course, like him regarding his eternal and divine attributes, but regarding his true human attributes. We have received the gift of the divine Holy Spirit, and by that Spirit, we are bringing forth fruit to the glory of God. Included in this fruit are love, joy, peace, kindness, patience and compassion.

Again, the Lord Jesus told his followers that they were to be the light of the world—or as a city set on a hill for all to see. If, however, our lives are to shine for Christ, and if they are to illuminate all around like a hilltop city, then we must ensure that the light that is shining is an unsullied light. A light that is dim or indistinct does not attract people in search of truth. Only those whose deeds are evil seek to abide in darkness. (Matt. 5:14-16)

Those, however, who are searching for truth, search for light that is crystal-clear. They seek for light that shines with a power to illuminate their darkened mind and to expel doubt, fear and uncertainty. They seek for a light that draws them to the truth. At the time, perhaps, they fail to appreciate that the only such light is the shining light that points them to him who is the Light of the world. He who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. (John 8:12; 9:5; 14:6)

Where, however, shall seeking souls find such light, if not in the purity or cleanliness of the lives of God's people? Where shall they see the light of God's truth, if not in the character and conduct of the Christian believer? Therefore we can see how important it is for the believer to keep his life unblemished in the world, and to live in this age as his Lord and Master would have lived. Thus, writes the apostle John—

...because in this world we are like him.

In verse 18, John continues:

1 John 4:18

When abiding in the love of God, and practising loving attitudes and deeds toward others, there can be nothing but confidence before God. We are doing what our heavenly Father requires of us: namely, loving him with all our heart and soul and loving our neighbour—or caring for our neighbour—as ourselves.

When we are demonstrating the reality of our love by our actions, there can be no fear associated with that love. On the contrary, when we are experiencing the fullness of God's love in our lives, we experience also the expulsion of all inordinate fear. The love of God filling our hearts through the Holy Spirit, overflows in abundance into our lives and this warm and abundant love touches the lives of all those with whom we come in contact. Therefore, far from inducing apprehension, anxiety, alarm, doubt, uncertainty or any other kind of fear, God's abundant love in our souls banishes every one of these worries and cares. Therefore, writes John—

There is no fear in love....

But perfect love drives out fear...

Love that has reached full growth or maturity overcomes all those things that weigh on our minds and that cause us to doubt God's Word. God's love overcomes everything that induces alarm or apprehension, or that engages our minds on the cares of this age.

When we are abiding in Christ and dwelling in the presence of our Father in heaven, then his love continues to flow into our souls. So long as nothing in our lives hinders us in our fellowship with God, or with other believers, the Spirit of God will continue to shed abroad God's love in our hearts.

It is this love that expels all fear; all anxieties; all unnecessary worries; all undue disturbances; and every sense of disquiet or uneasiness. Therefore, writes the apostle John,

...But perfect love drives out fear...

Granted, many of God's people never fully achieve such an ideal state of mind. This, however, is because of certain hindrances in our lives—not because such a state is not attainable.

...fear has to do with punishment...

Fear relates to punishment—punishment for sin. If we fear, it is usually because of some unconfessed sin in our lives for which we rightly feel a sense of guilt. So long as sin and guilt remain, we cannot experience the abundance of God's love—although God has not ceased to love us. Nevertheless, we feel cut off from our heavenly Father. We feel we have done something—or failed to do something—which has offended God. We have not sought forgiveness for that sin; or, at least, we have not renounced completely that sin. Therefore the sense of guilt remains. Alternatively, we have sought God's forgiveness, but we have not sought the forgiveness of a brother or sister in the Lord—and for this reason, we feel guilty.

When induced by God's Holy Spirit, a sense of guilt means that there is still something in our lives that we have failed to put right. Either we are still at a distance from God or we are still at a distance from a fellow-believer. Indeed, it is not possible to be guilty of the latter without also being guilty of the former.

When, therefore, there is unconfessed or unresolved sin in our lives, the sense of guilt for that sin induces fear—fear of eventual punishment or discipline. Had God's love truly filled our lives, however, such a situation could not have prevailed. We would have confessed and renounced our sin immediately, and would have sought immediate reconciliation with an offended brother or sister.

When, however, we fail to do this, we lose something of the sense of God's abundant love for us and of the sense of his nearness to us. Again, when we are not walking so closely with our heavenly Father, doubts and fears begin to enter our lives. These doubts and fears lead to the idea of punishment.

Whenever we confess our sin to God, and seek reconciliation with God and with our neighbour, the sense of fear and guilt no longer exists. At this point, God restores his love to us fully and unconditionally.

If a person is burdened by unnecessary fears, doubts or anxieties in his mind, or if he is suffering from an accusing conscience or a sense of guilt, then that person has not experienced perfection in love. He is not living in the full experience of God's love, as the Holy Spirit sheds that love abroad in his heart.

As has already been suggested, a person who lacks this experience of God's love may do so because of some sin in his life. This sin may be interrupting his fellowship with God or with his brother or sister in Christ. Until the believer takes steps to remedy this situation, he will continue to lack the full measure of God's love.

This, in its turn, will adversely affect that person's faith. It was also adversely influence his attitude toward—and relationship with—other people. This produces a life characterised

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by needless anxiety, apprehension, undue solicitude or concern for the future, and many other kinds of unnecessary doubts and fears. Thus writes the apostle,

...The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

Of course, when God's love is fully restored to that person's life, then the abundance of God's love will pervade the believer's life, and flood into the hearts and lives of others. Where such an abundance of warm, genuine, caring love exists, this is a clear indication that that person is walking closely with the Lord his God. It is evidence that he is abiding constantly in Christ and in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Brotherly Love Essential

1 John 4:19-21

In verse 19 of chapter 4, the apostle John pens these words:

1 John 4:19

The reason why we have the love of God in our hearts is not that we loved him and therefore were acceptable to him, but that he loved us. Even when we were dead in trespasses and sins, God had determined to set his love upon us.

We love him because of what he means to us, and because of what he has done for us. We had never known the true meaning of love—real spiritual and emotional love—had it not been for God's love for us. In justice and righteousness, we deserved only condemnation. Yet, in love and compassion, God sent his only Son to pay the debt for our sin.

Yes, we love him—but he first loved us. Yes, we love our brothers and sisters in Christ—but we are constrained to love our own family: those whom the Lord has loved and has made eternally his own. Therefore, writes the apostle,

We love because he first loved us.

In the following verse (v.20), the apostle John writes:

1 John 4:20

John returns to a subject about which he had spoken earlier. If we have truly experienced the love of God toward us, then—from our own lives—there must be a reflection of this love toward others. The Lord Jesus declared that we were to love not only our family, friends or neighbours, but also our enemies—and we were to seek their wellbeing. (Luke 6:27,35)

Writing to the churches, the apostle John says that we must love one another in Christ, and put that love into practice by helping to meet our fellow-believers' needs. The apostle, however, expresses himself in language that we cannot mistake or misunderstand:

If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar....

If a person says he loves God, yet ignores the needs of his brother or sister in the Lord, then this is tantamount to hating his brother or sister. Again, if a person is harbouring bitterness, resentment, malice or envy against a brother, or if he is harbouring a grudge against a brother, then he is living a lie. The profession he makes with his mouth—"I love God"—is nullified by the actions of his heart and life.

In view of the solemnity of these words, it is well for every one of us to ensure that we are living in complete harmony with our brothers and sisters in Christ. This is not to say that we may not disagree with them in certain matters, or hold different opinions. There is room for diversity in the church of God and among the people of God, so long as that diversity is consistent with our faith and with holiness of life. However, there is no room for strife, dissension, or disunity among the saints of the Lord. Again, there is no place for bearing grudges, for being spiteful, or for failing to associate with a fellow-believer without Scriptural warrant.

If indeed we have experienced the love of God in our hearts, this love must overflow to others—especially to those who are of the household of faith. Therefore, it is essential that we seek forgiveness and reconciliation for wrongs committed. God covered over the multitude of our sins—indeed, he removed them out of his sight and cast them into the depths of the sea. Should not our love for a fellow-believer cause us to overlook his offences?

Granted, there may be occasions when it will be necessary to rebuke a brother or sister in the Lord in the spirit of the Lord's teaching. Even this, however, should not cause us to become alienated from one for whom Christ died. If we are to love our enemies, how much more ought we to love our brothers and sisters in Christ? (Luke 17:3; Matt. 18:21, 35; Eph. 4:32)

Whether we seek reconciliation with a fellow-believer or not, is a measure of whether we truly love God or not.

Then, in verse 21, the apostle writes:

1 John 4:21

Not only does God's love for us constrain us to love one another, but we also have the teaching of the Lord Jesus himself on this very subject. Speaking to his disciples, the Lord commanded them to love one another—just as he had loved them. In other words, it was to be a selfless love; a giving love; a protecting love; a providing love. It was to be a caring love; a sincere love; an abundant love. It was to be an endless love, a longsuffering love and a sacrificial love. (John 13:34-35; 15:12,17)

This is the kind of love that we are to show to one another—love which is the complete opposite of that which often passes for 'love' today. Our love for one another should be modelled on God's love for us.

Probably, there is not one among us who does not desire to love God with all of our being and to honour him by our daily living. However, is not part of our daily living to care for our brother and sisters, and to be reconciled to those who have caused or given offence? If God's love reigns supremely in our hearts, then we will seek forgiveness and reconciliation. This, though, will mean setting aside pride, stubbornness, resentment and every other sinful attitude or inclination that is hindering our walk with God.

It is not easy to practise the Christian faith—but, by the grace of God, it is possible. The more we obey the commands of the Lord—however hard in the first instance—the more we will experience the love of God and the deeper will be our love for one another. In Christ Jesus, love conquers all.

1 John Chapter 5

Faith is the Victory

1 John 5:1-5

1 John 5:1

(1a) Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.... (NIV)

Not everyone who *assents* to the truth, but everyone who *believes* the truth: That is, everyone who is utterly convinced in his heart that the Man Jesus is truly the Son of God—the promised Messiah or Christ.

It was necessary for John to say this, because many people acknowledged that Jesus was a great and good *man*. They confessed that he was a prophet sent from God. However, they denied that Jesus was the Christ, the promised Messiah or the Anointed One (which is the meaning of the term, Christ). Alternatively, they denied that the Son of God had assumed a real human body. However, in denying that Jesus was the Christ, or in denying his incarnation in a real human body, these people in effect were denying the truth concerning God's Son.

Clearly, no one could confess that Jesus was the Christ—unless revealed to him from above; i.e., by the divine power and illumination of the Holy Spirit. Everyone, however, who had been born of the Spirit of God had received this illumination of the Spirit. The Spirit convinced these people of the truth that Jesus was indeed the Christ of God, the only Saviour of sinful men and women.

This, then, is yet another evidence that the Holy Spirit has truly regenerated a person: the fact that that person has become convinced that Jesus is the Christ. Therefore, John is able to write—

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God....

(Which, of course, means that he has been born from above—born again or born anew spiritually).

Everyone who loves the parent, loves the parent's child. If a person truly loves God, then it follows that he must also love God's one and only Son. However, in John's day, many people professed to love God—but they had no love for God's Son. Indeed, they rejected the Son of God and refused to acknowledge that he was his Father's Son.

Evidently, then, their profession of love for God proved to be false. It turned out to be a hollow profession that was totally worthless in the sight of God. On the other hand, everyone who had come to know and to trust Jesus as their Saviour and Lord had also come to love him. By loving him with all their hearts, they were showing that they were the ones who truly loved the Father.

In verse 2 of chapter 5, the apostle writes:

1 John 5:2

This is how we are fully assured that we really do love our brothers and sisters in the Lord; i.e., *the children of God*.... Our love for our brothers and sisters in Christ is a consequence of our love for God. If we truly love God with all our heart and soul, then we will seek to live by his Word, and to honour him in our lives. We will try our utmost to do those things that are in agreement with his plan and purposes for us.

As we learn more of his holy Word, we will seek to apply the truths that we learn and to put into practice each of the commands or teachings that we find in God's Word. In doing this, we are allowing the Holy Spirit to continue the work of sanctification in our lives. This ongoing work of the Spirit produces an abundance of good fruit, including love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and many more.

If, out of our love for God, we submit humbly to the teachings of his Word, then it follows that our attitudes toward others will be governed by the Spirit of love within our hearts. The more God's love fills our hearts, the greater will be our love for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

In verses 3 and 4, the apostle writes:

1 John 5:3-4a

How do we express our love and gratitude to God? By obeying him; i.e., by putting into practice all the commands contained in the Word of God.

We should note, however—as the next phrase will make clear—that the commands referred to are not specifically the commandments of the Old Testament. Apart from the moral law (enshrined in the Ten Commandments), Jesus has abolished the law relating to ceremonial and ritual laws and ordinances, which formerly God had enjoined upon Israel. When John speaks of obeying God's commands, he is (on the whole) referring to the *entire* teaching of God's Word—the whole counsel of God—not just to individual or specific commandments. Included, therefore, are the commands of the Lord Jesus when he instructed his disciples and gave to them the pattern for Christian character and conduct.

One such command was the command to love one another—just as he had loved them. Included, also, is the teaching of the Lord's apostles, who—by direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit—taught and wrote further instructions from the Lord Jesus. All of these teachings, commands or instructions have since been committed to the pages of the New Testament. When, therefore, a believer is submitting himself humbly to the instructions set down in God's Word, he is obeying God's commands.

God's commands are not a burden to the weary soul. On the contrary, the Lord Jesus told his followers to take his yoke upon them and learn of him—that is, to absorb and practise his teachings. The Lord added that his yoke was easy and his burden was light. It was an easy yoke to carry and would impose no undue weight on the hungering, thirsting soul. (Matt. 11:27-30)

This was true because the teachings of the Lord Jesus brought light and life to the searching soul. It released those who were captives to sin and to the misery of sin. It brought healing to the sick mind and to the diseased body, and it refreshed and invigorated the soul.

Obeying commands that resulted in faith, trust, confidence, hope, assurance, deliverance or salvation could hardly be described as grievous or burdensome to the soul.

Everyone who has been born again has received the Holy Spirit of God. By means of the Holy Spirit, each child of God learns—from the teachings of God's Word—how to put off the old sinful nature and how to put on the new nature. By the Word of God, he learns that the things that please the world are very often the things that displease God. The sins which once he enjoyed—and which the world enjoys—the believer now enjoys no longer. He has been washed in the blood of the Lamb.

Those things that stain a man's character and that tarnish his daily life, are things that no longer have any lasting attraction for the child of God. Instead, he endeavours to remain in close communion with the Spirit of God, and to bring forth the fruit of the Spirit.

Although by no means perfect, it is his heart's desire to show love, compassion, understanding and kindness to his neighbour and to his fellow-believer—and to do so in a spirit of sincerity and humility. In following this way of love, the child of God is demonstrating his obedience to his heavenly Father's commands. By submitting to the Word and Spirit of God, the believer learns how to gain the victory over temptations to sin, and over the sinful tendencies, attitudes and behaviour that are commonplace in the world.

Then the apostle declares:

1 John 5:4b

(4b) ...This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. (NIV)

Do we believe God's Word is true? Do we believe God will fulfil his promises? Of course we do! We believe in the truth of every word that God has spoken, and of every promise that he has made. His Word *is* truth, and by this truth, we seek to conform our lives. We trust in the Lord with all our heart. We believe on the Son of God and we believe all that he says to us in his Word.

Since we believe God's Word is true, then we act upon it. By acting upon it, we gain the victory over the world; i.e., over the standards of behaviour prevalent in this age, and over the world's lack of trust and faith in God.

Faith, then—faith in God and in his Son Jesus Christ, and faith in the Word of God—provides us with the victory. Through faith, we gain the victory over temptation, sin, the devil, and everything else associated with the world. By God's grace, we are able to stand apart from the evil standards of behaviour commonly accepted in this present age. Faith in Christ and in his teachings elevates the believer above the corruption of the flesh and the lax standards of this age.

Insofar as we practise what we believe, we gain the victory. Total victory, however, awaits the saints in glory.

Concerning the spiritual warfare in which we now engage, the apostle John writes:

(4b) ...This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. (NIV)

Then, in verse 5, the apostle writes:

1 John 5:5

Lest there be any doubt about the kind of person who achieves victory by faith, the apostle inquires,

(5a) Who is it that overcomes the world?... (NIV)

John himself replies:

(5b) ...Only, he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. (NIV)

Previously, John had said:

(1a) Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God... (NIV)

Now, the apostle is saying the same thing in a different way: The person who overcomes the world, does so only as a result of faith—faith granted to him by God. If, however, that person has received faith to believe in God, in his Son, and in the Word of God, then clearly he must have been born again by the Spirit of God. Since he has been born of the Spirit, then he will be convinced with all his heart that Jesus is the Son of God. Likewise, he will be convinced that Jesus is the Christ, or the Messiah or Saviour, whom God promised to send into the world.

Only the Holy Spirit can reveal to the believer spiritual truths such as these. This, however, proves his regeneration by the Spirit. Since regenerated by the Spirit, then he is able to live in the power of the Spirit—overcoming by his faith the sinful tendencies of the world and of the flesh.

Therefore, John asks rhetorically:

(5) Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. (NIV)

Only he who remains convinced in his heart that Jesus is whom he says he is: i.e. the Son of God, and the Saviour of sinners.

The Testimony of God

1 John 5:6-12

1 John 5:6

The next few verses form a somewhat obscure passage, and commentators remain divided as to the true sense of the words. However, at the time the apostle John was writing, Docetism (an early variant of Gnosticism) and Cerinthianism (the forerunner of full-blown Gnosticism), and other heresies akin to these, had begun to infiltrate the church. Among other things, these teachers denied the true teaching concerning the incarnate Son of God. They grossly distorted the truth, and they also added many other elements to their teaching not found in the Word of God. This is not the place to examine these heresies, but we will provide a very brief outline below and show a few of their harmful effects on sound doctrine.

The Docetic Heresy

The Docetists claimed that Jesus only appeared to be human, and only appeared to suffer on the cross. However, by denying the Son's true humanity and by asserting that his life and sufferings were only apparent, these false teachers were denying that Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, lived as a sinless, perfect, and real Man. However, on the reality of Jesus' perfect life and death as a true Man, all the essential doctrines of the Christian faith depend. In order to live the perfectly righteous life that God's holy law required of mankind, Jesus had to live as a real, true and perfectly sinless Man on behalf of sinners. In order to make atonement for their sins, Jesus had to suffer and die as a real, true and perfectly sinless Man on their behalf. In order to achieve their justification before God, Jesus had to rise again from death, as a real, true and perfectly sinless Man; then to ascend to his Father where he would be highly exalted and given the name that is above every name.

Thus, by their teaching, the Docetists of John's time were denying all these fundamental truths. Not only did they deny the doctrines of the incarnation and the substitutionary atonement, but they also denied the doctrine of Jesus' resurrection: For, if Jesus had the appearance only of a human body, there would be no need for a physical resurrection of that body.

Essentially, therefore—by their teaching—the Docetists denied the real atoning sacrifice of Jesus on behalf of sinners. Furthermore, by their denial of the Lord's actual bodily resurrection, they denied that God had approved of his Son's perfect, substitutionary and atoning sacrifice. Consequently, by denying the actual bodily resurrection of the One who had lived, suffered and died as a holy, sinless and perfect Man, the Docetists were denying that sinners could now be justified in God's sight. Clearly, therefore, the Docetists denied the faith.

The Cerinthian Heresy

Concerning the very early Gnostics—or rather their forerunners, the Cerinthians—these false teachers claimed that the divine Christ united with the man Jesus at his baptism, and that this divine nature left him again before his sufferings on the cross.

Apparently, this sect derived its name from a heretical Jewish teacher named Cerinthus. Cerinthus tried to combine Jewish beliefs, including secret or esoteric Jewish doctrines, with those of the Christian faith. However, in addition to this heresy, he also tried to incorporate the teaching of various philosophers into his teaching. Consequently, this produced an entirely erroneous set of doctrines concerning Christ and his work.

As this heresy developed (ultimately, into full-blown Gnosticism), other heretical elements were added to these false teachings. This included the claim that one needed to become initiated into the knowledge of certain hidden truths (so-called). It also included more dependence upon philosophical teachings, together with certain teachings drawn from Eastern mysticism. Clearly, then, this form of teaching—with all its variants—was heretical and contrary to the unchanging and inerrant Word of God.

Evil Effects of Heresy

Even in its early stages, the effects of these evil doctrines were throwing some members of the church into doubt and confusion. If these teaching were true, the church might reckon, then no child of God could be sure of their salvation unless they became enlightened or initiated into a knowledge of these higher truths (so-called). Again, how could believers know that the apostles' doctrine was the true word of God if the apostles did not mention or teach similar higher 'truths' themselves?

Since, at this stage in their Christian experience, many of God's people were learning as yet only the first principles of their faith, they could very easily be led astray. These evil and wicked distortions of, and additions to, God's holy and unchangeable Word, implied that God's Word, or the teaching given to the believers by the Lord Jesus and his apostles, had been incomplete. And, if so, then this teaching needed to be augmented by additional teaching or enlightenment regarding certain truths.

Therefore, we can see why it was essential that the apostles—including Peter, Paul and John—had to deal very swiftly and firmly with such pernicious and potentially extremely harmful and divisive forms of false teaching. It was because of the intrusion of these and other evil doctrines into the Church that John—and the other apostles—issued some very strong warnings against those who propounded such false teachings.

Heresy Refuted

To refute these and other false doctrines, the apostle John has been emphasising throughout his letter that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God—and therefore truly God as well as truly man. It was essential to repeat and emphasise this fundamental truth, because unless the Son of God was also truly man he could not have offered himself as an atoning sacrifice for sinners. Again, he could not have ascended into heaven after his resurrection to impart the Holy Spirit to the children of God, nor to mediate for us in the presence of his Father, had not he first died as a perfect Man to atone for our sins.

Water and Blood

Possible Interpretations

1. Jesus was conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit, and was born into this world as the holy Son of God. (Luke 1:34-35) At his baptism, the Spirit of God alighted upon Jesus, and his Father declared him publicly to be his Son in whom he was well pleased. (Luke 3:21-22) In this respect, Jesus may be said to have 'come by water'— i.e., by the baptism of John. Similarly, Jesus had come into the world to offer his life as an atoning sacrifice for sin and for the redemption of sinners. Thus, it may be said that the Son of God 'came by blood.'
2. Alternatively, the water and blood may both be associated with the idea of sacrifice. Under the Old Testament arrangement, both water (typifying outward cleansing) and blood (typifying atonement and inward purification) were essential elements of the sacrificial system.
3. A third interpretation says that John was alluding to the water and blood that flowed from Jesus side, when—on the cross—a Roman soldier pierced his side with a spear. (John 19:34) However, if this interpretation be correct, it is difficult to see why John says in this epistle before us that, *This is the one who came by water and blood...* (Lit., *this is the [one] coming through water and blood...*) (bold emphasis added)
4. There is yet a fourth possible interpretation: John was writing to emphasise that Jesus was truly and really Man (while remaining truly and really God) and to refute those who denied the Son's real incarnation as a man. Thus, in order to emphasise that Jesus was a truly physical (and perfect) Man, the apostle may have been alluding to Jesus' physical birth. Although conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary, Jesus' birth itself was a natural birth. The blood and water associated with natural birth would demonstrate that Jesus had been born a true, physical, and real human being (sin apart). Thus, in opposition to those who denied the Lord's physical reality as a man, and who asserted that Jesus had assumed only

the appearance of a man, John was showing that Jesus had indeed been born as a true, real and physical infant. Consequently, this real physical child must have grown to become a full, true and real Man (forever sinless and perfect in every respect).

For the purposes of this exposition, we will assume the first interpretation to be the most likely one.

John writes:

(6a) This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ.... (NIV)

The apostle is refuting the teaching of the Docetists, Cerinthians or early Gnostics, or their forerunners, and emphasising the full and actual deity and the full and actual humanity of Jesus, the eternal Son of God.

In the next phrase of verse 6, the apostle expresses the same truth in another way:

(6b)...He did not come by water only, but by water and blood.... (NIV)

The divine Christ or divine nature did not unite with Jesus only at his baptism. He was already the eternal Son of God before his incarnation. As such, he possessed all the attributes of the divine nature from eternity. In his Gospel, John tells us that the Word—the Son or eternal Logos—became flesh. (John 1:1-3) Hence, at his incarnation, the already divine Son took upon himself true, perfect, and sinless human nature.

About thirty years later, at the beginning of his public ministry, the Spirit of God descended upon Jesus, thereby identifying him publicly as God's Anointed One—the promised Messiah or Saviour. The Father's testimony at this time confirmed Jesus to be his one and only Son in whom he delighted.

Therefore, infers John, *He did not come by water only...* that is, the divine nature did not come upon the Son of God only at his baptism. Again, Jesus did not receive the Spirit at his baptism merely to accomplish a temporary mission—a mission that would end before his sufferings on the cross. Rather—

...He did not come by water only, but by water and blood....

To fulfil all righteousness, Jesus' baptism was necessary (although, in his case, not as a baptism of repentance—but rather as a baptism that indicated inward cleanliness and total purity).

Once baptised by John, it was then necessary for the Lord Jesus to complete his mission on earth. This involved his entire earthly life and ministry, *and* all his sufferings during that earthly life and ministry—including his sufferings and subsequent death on the cross. Without his life and ministry on earth, his substitutionary and atoning death on the cross, and his subsequent resurrection and ascension, there would be no forgiveness of sins, and no salvation for anyone. For—

...without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness [of sin] (Heb. 9:22b NIV).

Therefore, declares John,

...He did not come by water only, but by water and blood.

If we adopt the second interpretation, the apostle would mean that the Son of God did not come only to complete a work that did not involve suffering or substitutionary atonement. On the contrary, the Lord Jesus—truly God and truly Man—came into this world to live his

perfect life on behalf of sinners. He came also to endure God's righteous judgment and wrath in the sinner's room and stead. The water, then, would represent the absolute cleanliness, purity and perfect sinlessness of the life that he was offering up to God. The blood would represent the outpoured life offered as a substitutionary and atoning sacrifice for sin and for sinners.

Whichever view we adopt, John is putting great stress on the divine and human natures of Christ and on the absolute necessity of his sufferings for us.

The very fact that there is such a person as the indwelling Holy Spirit is evidence in itself of the divinity of Jesus. For, if Jesus had not been God, he would not have had the power to fulfil his word to send the promised Holy Spirit. Since, however, the Holy Spirit lives in the hearts and lives of every child of God, then this in itself testifies to the fact that Jesus is truly God, as well as truly man.

Again, it is by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit that we receive and believe the truth of these matters. To the child of God, these things are as clear as the mid-day sun. However, they do not become clear to him simply because he has worked them out by reason and common sense alone. Rather, they have become clear because the Holy Spirit has convinced him of the truth of God's Word. Then, of course, both reason and common sense concur humbly with the testimony of the Holy Spirit and the Word.

This Word repeatedly affirms the true deity and the true humanity of Christ. This is in fulfilment of the promise that the Spirit of God would lead the believer into all truth; i.e., into a correct understanding of all things necessary to faith and godliness.

Someone may object that reliance upon the Holy Spirit's inward testimony is reliance upon a subjective experience, instead of upon objective evidence. To this, we may answer: No greater or more reliable objective evidence could be provided than the evident testimony of God's written Word—the Bible. No human compilation of facts can compare with the revealed facts of the Bible. It is not subjective experiences but the inerrant and infallible Word of God that the Holy Spirit uses to convince the believer of the truth.

In verses 7 and 8, the apostle writes:

1 John 5:7-8

At this point, we should point out that parts of verses 7 and 8 do not occur in the majority of Greek manuscripts. The text of the KJV translation reads:

(7) For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. (8) And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.
(1 John 5:7-8 KJV)

However, in keeping with the majority of Greek manuscripts, the NIV translation reads:

(7) For there are three that testify: (8) the ¹¹ Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. (1 John 5:7-8 NIV)

Other modern translations provide a similar corrected rendering of this text.

¹¹ parts of verses 7,8: Late manuscripts of the Vulgate: (7) ...testify in heaven: the Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit, and these three are one. (8) And there are three that testify on earth: the... (not found in any Greek manuscript before the sixteenth century) [NIV footnote to 1 John 5:7-8]

However, to continue with our exposition of this passage: The evidence of two reliable, trustworthy and competent witnesses is sufficient to support and establish a case in law. In this instance, however, there are three such witnesses. Not fallible human witnesses, but—in effect—the witness of God. These three witnesses concur to support the assertion that Jesus is the divine Son of God. Together, they agree that he came into this world to suffer and die for sinful men and women.

The Holy Spirit attests to this truth—for the Spirit of God manifested himself in the life and death of the Lord Jesus, and in his resurrection. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit takes of the things of Christ and reveals them to the believer. Again, the water is a witness to the truth of Jesus' divinity—for water symbolises absolute cleanliness or inward purification: and the Son of God was in every respect perfect. The blood, too, is a witness to the deity of the Lord Jesus—for no one can lay down his life as a vicarious and atoning sacrifice for sin unless he himself is sinless.

If—as the false teachers claimed—Jesus was not truly man and truly God, then he had no power to lay down his life sacrificially. If he had not been truly God and truly man, then his blood could not have provided an acceptable and substitutionary atonement for sin. Indeed, if Jesus had not been a real and true man, then he would have had no blood to shed—no sinless perfect life to yield up as a sacrifice of atonement to God. It was, therefore, essential that Jesus be the God-Man—the *Theanthropos*.

The apostle is bringing this great truth home to the minds of his readers, and to which the three 'witnesses' agree.

In verse 9, the apostle continues:

1 John 5:9

If we accept the sworn testimony of reliable, trustworthy and competent men and women, how much more should we accept the testimony of God? God is the one who cannot lie. He cannot break his Word. He is the one who has promised on oath to provide rest for all those who commit themselves to his Son. It is he who testifies that Jesus Christ is his only begotten Son. This is the testimony of the Father concerning Jesus; and if Jesus is the only begotten Son of God, then clearly he must have come from God.

This is a clear refutation of the false teacher's view that Jesus became the divine Christ—the Anointed of God—only at his baptism. Similarly, it refutes their teaching that this divine anointing left him before his sufferings on the cross. The teaching of the Scriptures is that the Son is the incarnate Word of God, and that this Word—or Logos—has existed eternally with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. In opposition to Gnostic (or Cerinthian) views and assertions, this view gives full support to the doctrine of the Trinity or Godhead. (See also the Gospel of John, chapter 1.)

Then, in verse 10, the apostle writes:

1 John 5:10

Anyone who has been born again of the Holy Spirit is convinced by that same Spirit that these things are true. He is fully persuaded that Jesus is indeed the Son of God, and that he was with God from the beginning. Again, he is certain that Jesus was (and is) God, and that he is therefore equal with the Father in eternity, power and glory. The believer may not be able to *explain* these great truths. He becomes *convinced* of them, however, on the evidence of God's inerrant Word, and through the Holy Spirit's witness to his soul.

Being spiritual truths, natural man cannot comprehend their full meaning or significance. Without the Spirit of God, a person is incapable of understanding spiritual truths. These divine truths remain a mystery to him—*unless the Holy Spirit illuminates his mind*.

This is precisely what has happened with the believer. The Spirit of Truth has written the truths of God's Word on the minds or hearts of his people. The Holy Spirit convinces God's people of their veracity and accuracy.

Anyone who refuses to accept—or who neglects—what God has said about his Son makes God out to be a liar. Why? Because refusing to believe what God has said in his Word, is tantamount to saying that we cannot trust God's Word. It is to claim that God's Word is unreliable and not worthy of belief. It is to assert that God was not telling the truth when he said certain things, or when he declared that the Lord Jesus was his only begotten Son.

Such an attitude, however, shows only the great folly of a person in vainly imagining that he is wiser than God is, or that he can sit in judgment upon the Word of God. God has spoken—in his Word—and no person in heaven or on earth has the authority, right or power to despise or set aside the Word of God. Those who do, accuse God and his Word (the Bible) of falsehood, misrepresentation and gross distortion of the truth.

Such people stand self-condemned and will meet their due end. This is inevitable, unless the Holy Spirit convicts them of their sin, bringing them to repentance and faith in the one whom they now despise and deny. We must remember that one of the greatest sins of which a person can be guilty is the sin of unbelief.

Turning his attention back again to the child of God, John says in verse 11:

1 John 5:11

(11a,b) And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life.... (NIV)

Apart from the testimony of God himself, what other evidence testifies to the *truth* of God's Word if not the *fulfilment* of God's Word? Repeatedly, God has fulfilled his Word. Therefore, we can remain assured that God will continue to fulfil his Word in the future.

Even at present, the truths of God's Word are being fulfilled. In his Word, God promises the believer the gift of eternal life. This is not a gift that the believer has yet to receive. He receives this gift automatically and immediately whenever he accepts Jesus Christ as his Lord and Saviour. He knows he possesses this gift because the Word of God expressly declares that the Father grants eternal life to all who believe on his Son.

However, the apostle continues:

(11b,c) ...God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. (NIV)

Lest there be any misunderstanding concerning the way of salvation or the way in which God bestows eternal life, John writes quite explicitly, *...this life is in his Son*. There is absolutely no other way to God; no other way of obtaining eternal life; no other person who can bring us to God or who can impart to us the gift of life. The Scripture says quite categorically and unequivocally,

...this life is in his Son.

To the total exclusion of all others, Christ is *the Way, the Truth and the Life*. Acceptance of him—and of him alone—is acceptance of the abundant and eternal life promised in the Word of God.

In John's day, just as today, many people disputed that Jesus was the only way to God. Therefore, in verse 12, the apostle writes:

1 John 5:12

(12) He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. (NIV)

Nothing could be clearer than this. Those—and those alone—who had believed on the Lord Jesus Christ had received the gift of eternal life. Everyone who had been born again of the Holy Spirit, who had repented of their sins, and who by faith had accepted the Son of God into their lives, had received abundant and eternal life.

On the other hand, if a person had not believed on Christ, or had not accepted Christ into his life, then that person could not have inherited eternal life. Those who have never received God's Son have never received eternal life.

Be they ever so religious; ever so sincere; ever so devout; ever so charitable—if they have not believed in Christ, then they do not belong to Christ. If they do not belong to Christ, they do not possess Christ's Spirit nor do they possess the promised gift of eternal life. A person receives this gift and this life only through faith in the Son of God. (Rom. 8:9; John 3:18,36)

These are solemn words. Even so, they show to us that the only way of salvation and life is through repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no other way. Today, this is not a popular view, where multi-faith opinions receive considerable encouragement. However, it is the truth: Not man's truth, or even man's opinion. Rather, it is the divinely stated truth of the Lord Jesus Christ himself who said:

"...I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6 NIV)

Again, God's Word declares:

"Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12 NIV)

Therefore concludes the apostle John rightly:

(12) He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. (NIV)

Asking According to God's Will

1 John 5:13-15

Lest any believer should become concerned about his position in Christ, the apostle John says:

1 John 5:13

John was not writing to those who did not know the Lord and who did not belong to the Lord. Rather, the apostle was writing this letter to those who had been born again by the Spirit of God and who were God's children by regeneration and by adoption. They had believed on the name of the only begotten Son of God. Therefore, in accepting the Son, they had accepted the Father also—and he had accepted them.

...so that you may know—i.e., so that you may become fully assured, or know of an absolute certainty.

Since they believed on the Son of God, and since they were now the children of their heavenly Father, then it follows that they had received the gift of eternal life. The authority given by the Father to the Son was that the Son should grant eternal life to as many as the Father had given him. (John 17:2)

Eternal life comes through knowing God. It is that knowledge of God that comes exclusively through regeneration, faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the knowledge of his Word, the Bible.

Contrary to what the false teachers were asserting, the knowledge of God did not come through an enlightening process (confined to the elite), but through the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Through his Holy Spirit, God had granted these saints the grace to repent and to believe on the Lord Jesus. Now, they knew him as their Saviour and Lord, and now they could be certain of their salvation in Christ.

This, of course, has been true of every child of God since. As believers, we have received from the Father the gift of eternal life. This being so, then—as our heavenly Father's child—we can approach him to make our requests known to him.

Thus writes John in verse 14:

1 John 5:14

This is the assurance—the right or privilege that we have received in Christ Jesus—in coming to our Father in heaven. Indeed, we can come right into our heavenly Father's immediate presence. We can come boldly—yet with reverence and awe—before the throne of grace because the Lord Jesus has opened up a new and living way of approach to God. (Heb. 4:16)

No longer do God's people need a mediator on earth through whom to approach their heavenly Father. The children of God now have a Mediator in heaven who intercedes for them before God's throne. Because of the merits of his perfect and completed work, it pleases the Father to hear his Son and to accept the prayers, petitions and thanksgivings of his people on earth. (1 Tim. 2:5; Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25)

It is beyond all doubt that God is willing to hear the prayers of his people—and he delights to hear them pray. However, John makes it abundantly clear that—whereas we may ask for *anything*—it must be for *anything according to his will*. Our requests must accord with the plan and purposes of God for our lives, or for the lives of those for whom we are praying.

Sometimes, we may imagine that we are praying exactly as God requires; and that our requests must be in line with God's will and purposes. Even so, there may be good reason for God to refuse our requests on occasions. He does so, however, only because he intends to fulfil his purposes for us in a different way or at a different time.

We may not always understand why God chooses another way or time. Let us remember that—whatever happens—God's way and God's time is the right way and the right time. Let us remember also that our Father in heaven always acts out of his infinite wisdom. He deals with us out of his everlasting love and tender compassion. Always, God acts with perfect wisdom and understanding in his heart toward his beloved children and toward their families.

In all things, God encourages us to make known our requests to him in prayer. We have the confidence that God will certainly hear and answer our prayers—so long as they are according to God's will.

Continuing this thought, the apostle says in verse 15:

1 John 5:15

If—i.e., *since*—we remain fully persuaded that God hears our prayers, whenever we present them according to his will and purposes....

God hears the prayers of his beloved children; and, since he hears, then he will certainly answer their prayers. However, as has been intimated already, God may not always answer our prayers at the time or in the manner that we had anticipated. Sometimes, the Lord has a far better way of doing things—even although this may not be apparent at the time.

Just as a father or mother does not grant every wish or desire of their children, so our Father in heaven does not always grant our desires. In such cases, of course, they are not according to his will. Out of his eternal wisdom, grace, love and mercy, God will always grant everything needful to his children, but not necessarily everything desirable. He will always respond to the requests of his children, but perhaps not until after he has proved their faith in him, and their faithfulness in prayer.

Nevertheless, God will never mock his children. He will never provide a stone instead of bread or a snake instead of fish. Rather, in response to their continued asking or perseverance in prayer, he will provide them with every good and necessary gift. He will respond to their requests in the best possible way—the way that he knows is for his own greater glory and for the best of his people in the end.

This is something about which the world knows very little. Granted, God sends his rain upon the just and unjust. In this world, good and bad alike experience many gifts of God's common grace. However, to know a Father in heaven who hears each of their prayers individually, and who answers each prayer specifically, is completely foreign to unregenerate men and women. Great indeed is the God whom we adore, and whom we have come to know as our own heavenly Father!

Pray for a Sinning Brother**1 John 5:16-17**

In the next section of this passage, the apostle speaks about praying to God on behalf of a brother who commits a particular sin publicly. Thus, in verse 16, John writes:

1 John 5:16

Clearly, as those who love one another, and as those who have been united to one another in Christ, believers ought to have a special concern for each other's spiritual welfare. While in no way encouraging prying into another person's private life, the apostle reminds us that—in a sense—we are responsible for one another's spiritual and moral welfare. If someone sees a brother committing sin, then the person who saw him ought to take steps to help his brother. This applies to every kind of sin, except the sin that leads to death.

Out of our love for one another, we ought not to condemn or to pass judgment but to pray for the brother or sister who has sinned. (Let us remember that God will judge us all, and judgment will be without mercy to those who have shown no mercy.) Whatever sins that this brother or sister may have committed, we are to bring them before the Lord in prayer—beseeching the Lord for their forgiveness.

Sin Leading to Death

The apostle was referring to all those who might become guilty of any kind of sin. However, John has stated also that there is a certain sin for which we are *not* to pray; i.e., the sin that leads to death.

The term 'death' may refer to physical death in the form of judicial punishment (as was inflicted upon some of the Corinthian believers). Death may refer also to spiritual and eternal death. This form of death is the result of all those who have never experienced spiritual regeneration.

Which particular sin John had in mind is not certain. All unconfessed and unforgiven sins lead to death—but clearly, the apostle had a specific sin in mind. At the beginning of his letter, John had made it abundantly plain that everyone was guilty of sin. He added, however, that the believer had an Advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ the Righteous—through whom he could obtain forgiveness.

Unfaithfulness or Sacrilege May Result in Physical Death

It is possible that John was thinking about the kind of judgment that fell upon the professing people of God in the Old Testament. There, they forfeited their physical lives because of their repeated unbelief and unfaithfulness to God.

Alternatively, as intimated above, the apostle may have been thinking about what had happened to some of the Corinthian believers. Some members of the Corinthian church had consistently desecrated the Lord's Table through gluttony and drunkenness. (1 Cor. 11:27-32)

In view of the seriousness of their sin, God had judged the Corinthian offenders severely. They had 'fallen asleep'— i.e., God had taken their (physical) lives from them because of their sin. God had cut short their lives on earth, and therefore had deprived them of the opportunity of performing good deeds. This would seem to imply the possibility of a very substantial loss of reward in heaven. (1 Cor. 3:14-17; cf. 1 Cor. 6:18-20)

Assuming, firstly that these offenders were indeed born-again believers who had 'fallen asleep,' their salvation would be unaffected. This gift of God's grace is totally unrelated to, or dependent on, deeds.

Unforgivable Sin Results in Physical and Eternal Death

Yet again, the apostle may have been thinking of the solemn words that Jesus pronounced against the religious leaders of his day. The Lord Jesus warned these spiritual leaders to beware of blaspheming—or speaking evil of—God's Holy Spirit. This is *the* unforgivable or unpardonable sin. However, there are only two classes of people who can commit this sin:

1. Those who, like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, have a formal or intellectual knowledge of God, and who are fully aware of the Holy Spirit's power, personality, and operations (although never having been regenerated by the Spirit). Since they are aware of the almighty power of God's Holy Spirit, they are in a position to blaspheme the Holy Spirit by attributing to Satan or the demons the divine and miraculous works of the Lord Jesus. This constitutes wilful and inexcusable blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.
2. Again, this sin may be committed by someone who has been instructed thoroughly in the Word of God and the way of salvation, but who—like Judas, and other false professors and apostates—has renounced that way. Repudiating the truth in the light of better knowledge renders such a person wholly inexcusable.

Just as there was no excuse, and no means of repentance, for Judas Iscariot, so there can be no excuse, and no means of repentance, for those who trample underfoot the blood of Christ and who despise the Spirit of grace (thereby blaspheming the Holy Spirit). By their wilful rejection of the truth, they have hardened their hearts against understanding further truth. At this stage, God hardens their heart so that they become insensitive to all such truth and unable to repent of their evil deeds. This is their temporal judgment from God, and this judgement will be followed by their eternal punishment in that place prepared for the devil and his angels: For they have committed the unforgivable or unpardonable sin.

Clearly, then, any person who is capable of reviling the Holy Spirit cannot have the Holy Spirit indwelling him.

Majority of Unregenerate Cannot Blaspheme Holy Spirit

We should note also that the average unregenerate person could not be guilty of this sin. This is because most unregenerate people do not possess a substantial and sufficient knowledge of God's Holy Spirit. Only those with a degree of formal instruction (but lacking the regenerating life of the Spirit) could thus speak against the Holy Spirit. Such would be those like the Pharisees (with their theological background), and those who have been thoroughly informed concerning the way of salvation, although not unto regeneration or justification, and who have repudiated and despised that way.

In Jesus' day, many—but not all—of the scribes and Pharisees came very near to being guilty of the unforgivable sin. A person cannot commit this sin in ignorance or unwittingly. He can commit it only wilfully, and in the light of better knowledge.

Could Believers Commit the Sin Leading to Death?

At this point, we should observe that a born-again believer cannot commit this sin. This is because the indwelling Holy Spirit causes the believer to testify to the truth concerning himself. Even if the believer were in a backslidden state, and had become guilty of some very serious sins (like King David), the indwelling Holy Spirit could not permit the believer to say anything that bore testimony against himself. Should a believer reach such a state of potential sacrilege in regard to that which was most holy—as did some of the Corinthian believers—the Lord could intervene directly to take that person's physical life from him. This would prevent further desecration of the temple of the Holy Spirit (the person's body) and would save that person from eternal death.

In verse 17, the apostle continues with this theme:

1 John 5:17

Here, the apostle makes it clear that all kind of wrongdoing—or wrong thinking, or attitudes—is sin. No one is free from wrongdoing in one form or another. We all need to seek the Lord's forgiveness. God provides forgiveness for us as believers, because the Lamb of God made atonement for our sins.

The vast majority of sin does not lead to death (in the judicial sense). This is because the Son of God has borne the death penalty for sin on our behalf.

Therefore:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9 NIV)

On every occasion, then, the believer needs to confess his sins to God through his Son the Lord Jesus Christ. Through Jesus, God promises the believer forgiveness and cleansing—from *all* sin. When a believer seeks the guidance of God's Word and God's Spirit, then God will keep the believer's steps from the paths of evil. Yet, if we discover some sin in a brother or sister, let us remember that—but for God's grace—this sin may yet be found in us.

Let us not accuse. Let us not condemn. It is for the church officers—not private individuals—to deal with public sins. Rather, let us pray for that brother or sister, that God may restore him or her to fullness of life and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Again let us remember: 'He who overcomes today, may tomorrow be overcome.' (GL)

Knowing the True God

1 John 5:18-20

1 John 5:18

We are fully persuaded that no one who has been born again of God's Holy Spirit continues in the deliberate practice of sin. Sinful attitudes, inclinations and practices may have dominated his former manner of life. However, since Christ has given him new life, the believer has put off these sinful states and conditions—or he is in the process of putting them off.

Day by day, and in ever-increasing measure, the Holy Spirit is sanctifying the believer's life. Therefore, although not perfect, the child of God is living under the dominating personal influence of the Spirit of God—the Spirit of holiness. Consequently, the believer can no longer practise the sins of the old nature—nor does he have the desire to do so.

This is not to say that, occasionally, he will not fall into sin—sometimes, serious sin. What John is saying is that the person who has been born again cannot go on *practising* a sinful lifestyle—the same kind of lifestyle from which Christ has delivered him.

Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, keeps the believer safe. It is he who has sent his Holy Spirit to indwell the believer. The Holy Spirit sanctifies the believer and prompts him to produce fruit leading to ever-increasing holiness of life.

In the person of the Holy Spirit, the Lord Jesus himself is ever with the believer. He creates within the believer's heart and life the desires to seek after righteousness, and to live a godly and honourable life. Of course, the child of God could never manage this by himself. By the working of God's Spirit within him, however, he receives grace and power to practise righteousness and to avoid the deliberate practice of sin.

Because the believer has been born of God's Holy Spirit, Satan no longer has any claim over him. Before his conversion, the believer's life was influenced by the malevolent power of Satan (as are the lives of all those who are outside of Christ (v.19)). Then, the devil was using the believer's sinful nature as a channel for his evil deeds. Consequently, everything that the person did was contaminated by evil and to a greater or lesser extent indicated his bondage to the evil one himself. Never, however, did this bondage to sin or to Satan absolve the person of his responsibility to, or of his accountability before, God.

Now, however, the person who formerly was in bondage to sin and Satan has been born again. He has received the Spirit of God. Consequently, the evil one cannot harm him. Granted, Satan can tempt the believer—but he cannot exercise the same degree of control over him as formerly. Because that person is now a child of God, he is continually being protected by his heavenly Father's almighty power. Because that person is now a brother or sister of the Lord Jesus, he experiences the Lord's intercessory and mediatory

prayers on his or her behalf. Because that person has been regenerated, he has been created anew by the Spirit of God—and by that Spirit of God he is being shielded and sanctified.

Just as Satan and the demons stand terrified in the presence of God's Son, so they stand terrified in the presence of God's Holy Spirit. It is for this reason that the devil and his minions cannot ultimately harm the child of God.

Then, in verse 19, John writes:

1 John 5:19

Because of the testimony of God's Word, and because of the testimony of the Holy Spirit, we can be fully assured that we are God's children by regeneration and by adoption. Furthermore, we know that—as his own redeemed children—our heavenly Father will never cease to care for us or to provide for us. He watches over us as those who are precious in his sight, and it is therefore inconceivable that he would allow the evil one to harm us. This is only one of the great assurances that are ours as the beloved of the Father.

Therefore, writes John:

(19a) We know that we are children of God.... (NIV)

However, the apostle continues:

(19b) We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. (NIV)

Outside of Christ Jesus, all humanity is living in the realm that is dominated or controlled by the evil one. In consequence, they remain constantly exposed to the power and malevolence of Satan, and to his evil works.

Again, all humanity is born with a fallen sinful nature. Satan makes use of this sinful nature to accomplish his evil designs through individuals, or in the lives of individuals. The person does not lose his responsibility or accountability before God. However, the more he yields himself as a tool to Satan the more Satan makes use of him, and the greater his involvement in evil—in the form of thoughts, speech and actions.

It is in this sense that the apostle can say:

(19b) ...the whole world is under the control of the evil one. (NIV)

In the King James Version, it says, *...the whole world lieth in wickedness*, but this amounts to the same thing in the end. The wickedness that embraces the whole world—i.e., the whole world of mankind outside of Christ—emanates from the source of wickedness: namely, the devil. This extremely powerful and exceedingly evil being exercises that power over the entire world of mankind. Hence, this is one reason for the very considerable and serious level of sin and crime throughout the world.

There is, of course, an answer for such a potentially depressing state of affairs. This answer, however, is to be found only in God himself and in his Son, Jesus Christ. He alone has power over Satan and the powers of evil.

God expelled Satan from his presence because of his sin and rebellion. God alone—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—possesses the power to expel Satan from the lives of men and women, and to deliver them from his dominating and evil influence. The evil one is still able to tempt and harass the people of God—sometimes, very severely. Nevertheless, under no circumstances can he exert a continuous controlling influence over believ-

ers' lives. As can be seen from Job's life and circumstances, the evil one can act only insofar as God permits him to act—and no further.

In verse 20, the apostle writes:

1 John 5:20

We know that we are God's children. We know also that God sent his only begotten Son into this world to deliver us from sin and from Satan, and to reveal the Father to us in a way that we could understand.

Before our conversion, we may have known very little—if anything—about God. We certainly did not know him as our heavenly Father. However, since the Lord Jesus came into the world to reveal these truths to us by his Spirit, we have come to realise that God is our heavenly Father. We have also come to realise that it is through knowing him personally that we receive the gift of eternal life.

However, we could not have come to know the Father except the Son had revealed these things to us. Again, we could not have believed these truths except the Holy Spirit had convinced us of them. If, however, the Holy Spirit has convinced us of these truths, then clearly we have been born again of God's Spirit. By the grace of God, we have received that gift of eternal life that the Father gave to his Son to bestow upon all those who were given to him. (John 17:2)

By grace, we have come to know the only true and living God. By his grace, we have been united to the one who is the Way and the Truth and the Life—Jesus Christ, the Son of God. We are in him as a branch remains joined to the tree. We are in him as a member of his body, the church. We are in him as those who have been made his brothers and sisters, and joint-heirs of the Father's inheritance.

What the Son is to the Father *by nature*, we are to the Father *by grace*. By nature, Jesus is the Father's only begotten Son. By grace, we are the Father's redeemed children through regeneration and adoption. We all belong to the same family and to the same Father.

He—and no other—is the true God. There is no other way of salvation but through the salvation that he has made available in his Son. There is no other way of receiving eternal life but to receive it as a gift of the Father. However, to receive this gift presupposes that a person has come to know and believe the truths of the gospel, as revealed in the Word by the Spirit.

Therefore, writes John:

(20c) ...He is the true God and eternal life. (NIV)

In writing this statement, however, it is possible that John intended to say that *the Son* is the true God and eternal life. This, too, would be true and completely in accord with the teaching of the Scriptures. Elsewhere, the Lord Jesus himself declares that he had come from God. He declared that he was the Son of God (and therefore equal with the Father). He declared that he was in the Father, and that the Father was in him. The Lord Jesus also declared that he who had seen him had seen the Father. (John 14:9-11)

Again, the Lord Jesus is himself the source of eternal life. This becomes evident in the incident concerning the woman at the well, where she was promised the water of eternal life through repentance and faith. Again, it can be seen in the very many occasions where the Lord promised eternal life to all those who believed on him.

Similarly, it is expressed in his own words when he said:

...I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6 NIV)

In this case, too, it would be true for John to write:

(20c) ...He is the true God and eternal life. (NIV)

Avoiding Idolatry

The apostle John has now reached the end of his letter. The desire of his heart is that these believers should remain steadfast in the faith. He wants them to become wholly committed to God and to his Son Jesus Christ, and not in any way influenced or led astray by false teachers or false teaching.

Thus, the apostle closes his letter with this tender appeal:

1 John 5:21

To those who are the beloved children of God, avoid idolatry.

In the past, these believers probably became involved in superstitious and idolatrous forms of worship. Now that they were in Christ Jesus, however, this kind of worship ought to hold no interest for them—for now they knew that they must worship the Lord their God, and him only must they serve.

However, there are other more subtle forms of idolatry of which they must be aware. One of these, was the very form of idolatry into which the false teachers were trying to lead the believers. By their perversions and misrepresentations of the truth, the false apostles were attempting to seduce the children of God. Their desire was that the church should listen to their teaching (that of the false teachers), and become attached to them as their leaders.

By heeding the voice of man, however, the believers would be forsaking the command of God. In heeding their distorted doctrine, God's people would be forsaking the true doctrine. To forsake the truth concerning God is tantamount to forsaking God himself—or, at least, to establishing other sources of truth in their hearts and lives. This, however, is idolatry. Anything that *comes between* God and ourselves, or *stands alongside* God and ourselves—be it adherence to false teaching, false teachers, or adherence to anything or anyone else—is idolatry.

Therefore, the apostle closes his epistle with this exhortation:

(21) Dear children, keep yourselves from idols. (NIV)

Let us, too, hold fast to the true God and to Jesus Christ his one and only Son. Let us hold fast to the teaching of God's Word alone, bearing in mind that the Holy Spirit alone is the one who can and will guide us into all truth. And, such being the case, no additional 'truth' can ever be appropriate or necessary for our faith in the Son of God.