

**STUDIES IN THE FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN**

**W M HENRY**

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## **STUDIES IN THE FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN**

- No 1 : Introduction to the epistle
- 2 : That Eternal Life : 1:1-4
- 3 : Three Errors and their Correction : 1:5 - 2:2
- 4 : Tests of true discipleship : 2:3-11 ; 18-27
- 5 : The Christian in the world : 2:12-17
- 6 : Children of God : 2:28 - 3:10
- 7 : Love one another : 3:11-24
- 8 : Discerning the spirits : 4:1-6
- 9 : Reasons to be loving : 4:7-12
- 10 : Assurance for the believer : 4:13-21
- 11 : Love for God and His children : 5:1-5
- 12 : The Testimony : 5:6-12
- 13 : That we may know : 5:13-21

## NO 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE EPISTLE

### Who was the author?

The three epistles of John are anonymous, although the writer of 2 and 3 John describes himself as "The elder", without naming himself. 1 John and Hebrews are the only two books in the New Testament which give no indication of the author.

### How does it compare with the Fourth Gospel ?

When we compare 1 John with the Fourth Gospel, however, we find that there is a great similarity in style and content. Both set out God's message by contrasts. For example there is a link between light and truth, set in contrast to darkness and the lie. In John's Gospel, chapter 3 verses 19-21 we read:

*Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.*

Similarly, in 1 John 1:6 the writer says:

*If we claim to have fellowship with him (God) yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*

John Stott, in the Tyndale New Testament Commentary on the Epistles of John, points out that

*When we compare the occurrence of precise phrases in both Gospel and First Epistle, we find that in fact the same divine purpose or scheme of salvation is set forth in almost identical terms (p17)*

Stott then goes on to summarise this scheme and to give other parallels between the Fourth Gospel and the First Epistle. He concludes:

*In view of this remarkably close parallel, Alford does not seem to be expressing himself too strongly when he attributes an obstinate "perverseness" to those who maintain a different authorship. (p19)*

### Who are the readers ?

The first epistle is not addressed to any particular readers, although the second and third epistles are written to "the chosen lady and her children" and "my dear friend Gaius" respectively. However, 1 John is not an abstract theological discourse for general consumption. It is a pastoral letter, obviously written with a particular group of people in mind. John addresses his readers in a very personal way throughout as "you" (e g 1:5) ; as "my dear children" (e g 2:1) ; as "dear friends" (e g 4:1) .

It is difficult to tell whether John is primarily addressing Jews or Gentiles. In Galatians Paul tells us that:

*James, Peter and John....agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. (Galatians 2:9)*

When we examine the opening verses of the epistles of Peter and James we can see that they had a very definite readership in mind:

*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations : Greetings (James 1:1)*

*Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, Bithynia..(1 Peter 1:1)*

In his first epistle John sees the Christian message as having world-wide implications. Nevertheless he does distinguish between "us" and "the world". In 1 John 2:2 he says:

*He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. Also in 2:22 we have the emphasis on the Messiahship of Jesus.*

*Who is the liar ? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist - he denies the Father and the Son.*

This is similar to the closing verses of the fourth gospel where John states the purpose of writing his work:

*These (miraculous signs) are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:31)*

It does therefore seem reasonable to conclude that John had Jewish believers in mind - probably those of the dispersion, who were addressed by Peter and James also. However, there is no doubt that his message had a more universal application to all believers at the time it was written.

### **When was the epistle written?**

Much of John's message is relevant to Christians in every dispensation - for example his description of the believer's relationship with his Lord and Master and his responsibility to love his fellow believer. But other passages indicate that John was writing during the period of the book of Acts, when the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to Israel was imminent. The warnings and exhortations given by John are similar to those of Paul in his early epistles and those uttered by the Lord Jesus, when teaching His disciples concerning the events preceding His coming.

John warns:

*Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. (1 John 2:18)*

This echoes the words of the Lord Jesus Christ:

*At that time if anyone says to you "Look, here is the Christ !" or, "There he is !" Do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect - if that were possible. (Matthew 24:23-24)*

The name "antichrist" occurs only in John's epistles, but the Lord in Matthew 24 describes his rise in terms of Daniel's prophecy concerning Israel and Paul, in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 speaks of his appearance at the time of the end, in a similar vein:

*That day will not come (the day of the Lord) until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God and is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.*

Both Paul and the Lord Jesus warn that this lawless one will display deceptive powers and wonders, and John, in his first epistle tells his readers how to prove whether a spirit utterance is from God or from Satan:

*Every Spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world. (1 John 4:2-3)*

John, then, was writing at the time when the hope of Israel was in the forefront of God's purposes. Nevertheless there is much in the epistle which is of application today and is helpful for us in seeking to "walk in the light as he is in the light." (1 John 1:7)

## **NO 2 THAT ETERNAL LIFE - 1 John 1:1-4**

John introduces his subject to us in similar terms to those with which he opens his gospel - speaking of "the beginning" "the life," "the Word" and the coming of Christ into the world. But when we examine what he is saying more closely we can see that, while there are similarities, the material is by no means identical.

### **The subject of the proclamation.**

Three times John indicates that he is proclaiming a message or a person in the first three verses. The subject of his proclamation is:

1. That which was from the beginning, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched (verse 1)
2. The eternal life which was with the Father and has appeared to us. (Verse 2)
3. What we have seen and heard (Verse 3)

We are also told in verse 1 that this proclamation is "concerning the Word of life".

When we examine verses 1 and 2 we can see that John is conveying the same information twice. The message of verse 1 is summed up in verse 2 :

*The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it,*

What can be gathered about "the life" from verse 1 ?

- It was from the beginning
- We have heard, seen, looked at and handled it

This is repeated in verse 2

- It was with the Father
- It has appeared to us.

The presence of this One with the Father refers back to eternity before the incarnation and it is likely that "the beginning" refers also to this period. The subject of the proclamation, then, is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, Who is described in verse 2 as "the life". As He said of Himself in John 11:25

*I am the resurrection and the life.*

### **What does John tell us of the Lord Jesus Christ ?**

#### **1. He was from eternity past**

The Lord Jesus Christ was "with the Father" before His incarnation. This claim was made by Christ when He walked the earth. On a number of occasions He aroused the anger of the Jews by referring to His previous existence. In John 8:58, Jesus proclaimed His existence before Abraham :

*Before Abraham was born, I am !*

In John 17, we are given an insight into the communication between the Son of God and His Father. There we can trace the existence and the glory of the Lord Jesus from before time :

*Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you.....I have brought you glory by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began. (John 17:1,4-5)*

## **2. He appeared on earth**

John stresses the fact that the same one who was with the Father in the beginning, came to earth in reality. John, of course, has one eye on the heretics who were suggesting that this had not been the case. It is interesting that the decision as to whether a spirit was from God or not hinged on this very point:

*This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God : Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. (1 John 4:2-3)*

From the first three verses of the epistle we can see John's emphasis on this : and it is the emphasis of personal testimony.

- We have heard (verse 1 and 3)
- We have seen (verses 1, 2 and 3)
- We have studied closely ("looked at" - verse 1)
- We have handled ("touched" - verse 1)

The last two verbs are in the aorist tense which denotes a particular occasion when the disciples saw the Lord and handled Him. John could mean after the resurrection or perhaps on the mount of transfiguration.

John states that he and his colleagues are testifying to the Lord Jesus. This idea of being a witness was very important. After the death of Judas, the disciples had to replace him with someone who had been a witness of all the events leading to His death and resurrection (Acts 1:21-22). After the resurrection the Lord told the disciples that this would be their responsibility:

*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)*

John was partly discharging his responsibility in his writings.

## **That eternal life**

The Lord Jesus is here described as "the life" and "that eternal life which was with the Father." (verse 2) Jesus came to show life and to reveal the Father. As He prayed in John 17.

*And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent. (John 17:3)*

Knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ meant knowledge of the Father (see John 14:9-10) and such knowledge led to eternal life. The Lord Jesus Christ was the Life and the message concerning Him was the "Word of life" (1 John 1:1) God the Father is the possessor of "life in himself" and has granted the Son to share in this (John 6:26). Now the Lord was offering this same eternal life to all who believe, at the behest of the Father (John 6:40, 57). No wonder John can describe this glorious message as "The Word of life".

### **John's purpose - fellowship and joy.**

John has a twofold purpose, given in verses 3 and 4:

*We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.*

The primary aim is to include his readers in the fellowship of other believers. But beyond this they are brought into a fellowship with their Lord and His Father. In his gospel, John records the Lord Jesus' explanation of this process:

*I pray also for those who will believe in me through their (the disciples') message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. (John 17:20-23)*

Such a statement is almost beyond our comprehension, but God has no less a purpose for us than this, in Christ. Thus John can end the introduction to his epistle by saying that this would make our (or perhaps "your") joy complete. (1 John 1:4).

### **NO 3 THREE ERRORS AND THEIR CORRECTION - 1 John 1:5-2:2**

John now turns to his message, which he has described in verse 2 as the "Word of Life." He introduces it with a short statement in verse 5. The words are brief but the meaning is profound.

*This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him is no darkness at all. (1 John 1:5)*

Light in John's writings has the primary meaning of moral goodness and darkness, moral evil. In the fourth gospel Jesus declares that He is "the light of the world" (John 8:12) but nowhere does He teach this about His Father. However, since He came to show us the Father, it is not a big step to infer this. But although Jesus calls Himself "the light", John here describes God as "light", without the definite article - He is light absolutely. His nature is moral purity and in Him there is no trace of any evil at all. This is the One with Whom we have fellowship through Christ.

Since that is so, does this mean that we are also morally perfect? As we consider our thoughts, words and actions from day to day, the answer should be obvious, but as John wrote, there were those in the Christian community who were making claims such as this. John now deals with three errors in connection with sin in the believer. He follows a similar formula each time:

- (i) The error is introduced by the words "If we claim" (verses 6,8,10)
- (ii) The consequences of the error are then stated (verses 6,8,10)
- (iii) The positive truth in opposition to the error is given (verses 7,9 and 2:1-2).

The positive teaching with which each section ends emphasises the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross.

#### **1. The claim that our conduct does not affect our relationship with God**

*If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin. (verses 6 and 7)*

If we live in a careless way, yet still claim to share the life of God, we are living a contradiction in terms since God is perfect purity. But if we seek to live pure lives, we share in this life of fellowship with other believers and the Lord Himself, of which John has spoken in verses 3 and 4, because we have a continuous cleansing by the blood of Christ.

Our attitude is all important in this. John here in verse 7 is evoking the language of the Jewish sacrifices. The blood of the animal shed in sacrifice made atonement for sin. This, of course, was only a type, but the Lord Jesus was the real sacrifice for sins. Since He was the spotless Lamb of God, His blood was able to take away the sin of the world. (John 1:29)

#### **2. The claim that there is no sin in our nature**

*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. (verse 8)*

In this verse the heresy is slightly different. The claim is being made that there is no need for Christians to strive for improvement in their lives. The union that they have with God in Christ has rendered them without spot or blemish like Him.

This, of course, is a distortion of the truth and is a deception to those who profess it, since it flies in the face of reality. Instead:

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

Our situation before God is one where the remedy for our sins is provided, not by pretending that they are not there, but by facing up to them and confessing them before God, and by confession seek to turn from them. God's action has a double benefit. The acts of sin themselves are forgiven and the polluted environment that they have created is cleansed.

It is interesting that John appeals to the faithfulness and justice of God as the basis on which our sins are forgiven and we are cleansed. One would have thought that these attributes of God would have resulted in our condemnation. But, as Paul points out in Romans 3, the whole plan of our salvation in Christ hinges on the fact of God's justice:

*God presented him (Christ Jesus) as a sacrifice of atonement...He did this to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just, and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus (Romans 3:25-26).*

Paul's words here are about to be echoed by John in 2:2, where the Lord Jesus is described as an "atoning sacrifice for our sins". The death of Christ was the means by which God could justify us, while still remaining just Himself and we can approach Him in confidence because He is faithful to His promises:

*If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself. (2 Timothy 2:13)*

### **3. The claim that there is no sin in our behaviour.**

If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives. (verse 10)

John's summing up of the heretics in the previous two sections was that they were liars and that they were deceived. Here the accusation is much more serious. If we say that we do not sin we attribute lies to God and demonstrate the fact that His Word is not in us. What is the true position? Here John deviates from the formula that he has used earlier because the points he wishes to make are not easily expressed.

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

John writes affectionately to his readers and wants them to be sure of his meaning. His argument is basically in three stages:

- (i) It is not possible to say that we do not sin (1:10)
- (ii) This, however, does not mean that we have a licence to sin. We must not give ourselves up to sinful behaviour (2:1)
- (iii) If we do fall into acts of sin, the remedy is there (2:2)

In John's writings, as in Paul's, there is a distinction between isolated acts of sin and the practice of deliberate living in sin. The former is a sad fact of our lives in a fallen universe, with an old nature still within us. The latter is a contradiction in terms for the Christian:

*What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may abound? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? (Romans 6:1-2)*

The remedy for the problem of sin in the believer, again, is the work of Christ on the cross. John here paradoxically describes the Lord Jesus in terms of being both the intercessor or advocate (**parakletos**), pleading our case and championing our cause, and the victim (**hilasmos**), dying as a sacrifice for the sins of man. In Hebrews the same combination of ideas is expressed:

*For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again...But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself (Hebrews 9:24-26)*

How is it possible for Him to fulfil both roles? Because He is the "Righteous One". Only a Being with the righteousness of God could stand before Him to plead our cause. And only a Being with the righteousness of God could be a valid sacrifice for the sins of the world.

## **NO 4 THE SIGNS OF A REAL DISCIPLE - 1 John 2:3-11 ; 18-27**

### **The problem in the church**

A split had occurred among the people to whom John was writing. It appears that certain of those in the fellowship had left it, claiming superior knowledge for themselves - knowledge of God and His purposes - and therefore a greater closeness to the Lord. In addition to these claims, the dissenters had introduced new teaching concerning the person of Christ. This situation had upset the believers and caused confusion. Were the dissenters correct in their view? The problem seems to have been further complicated by the fact that the conduct of these people was not of the standard that the believers had been taught. Who was correct?

John had already spoken in the first chapter of the spurious claims made by these heretics in relation to sin. In dealing with this problem, John identifies 3 signs that mark out true believers from false.

### **The first distinguishing mark: obedience and imitation (3-6)**

The knowledge of God, which the heretics claimed to have attained can be regarded as the highest human goal. Paul insisted that the only true knowledge of God is in Christ, and declares this as a goal for himself in Philippians 3:10 and as a wish for all believers in Colossians 2:2. But for Christians, knowledge of God is not an intellectual achievement or a philosophical concept. It is a personal acknowledgement of Him in their every day conduct and a setting of the heart on the "things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of the God." (Colossians 3:1).

So, John abruptly states the principle, first in the positive and then in the negative:

*We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. (verses 3 and 4)*

In his Gospel, also, John insists that the mark of genuine love for the Lord is obedience to His commands. In John 15:10, the Lord Himself says:

*If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.*

In verses 5 and 6 John restates the proper relationship of Christians to their Lord not only in terms of "obeying Him" but of living "in Him". This is a concept that he also introduced in his Gospel, especially in the Lord's discourse on the vine and the branches in John 15. He uses it a great deal in this epistle. The idea is not simply that of being in Him but of abiding or remaining in Him. The heretics who had left the group had failed to do this. In verse 5 there is the beautiful statement that if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him.

The love of God can grow to maturity and develop fruit in the heart and mind of the person who not only believes, but who obeys the Lord's instruction. John then ends the section with an abrupt summing up of the position:

*This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus*

*did.(verses 5-6)*

### **The second distinguishing mark: Love for other Christians (7-11)**

Moving on from conduct in general, John focuses on one particular command and example of the Lord Jesus - love for one another. As He Himself said:

*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:34-35)*

So John here, remembering the Lord's words, says that this is not, now a new command, yet at the same time, it is a new command:

*I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining. (verses 7-8)*

In what sense is it an old command, and yet a new one? It is old in the sense that it had been taught them at the beginning of their Christian experience. Love for God and our neighbour is described by the Lord in Matthew 22:40 as the commandments on which all the Law and the prophets hang. Jesus transformed love for God into a mutual indwelling through His work and love for our neighbour into a mutual caring among members of one body or branches on one vine, in His analogy in John 15.

The command is a new one in the sense that it relates to the dawning of the new age. In verse 8 John seems to be linking the newness of the command with the gradual dissipation of the "darkness" and the shining of the "true light". There is no doubt that John envisaged that history did not have long to run at the time he wrote his epistle and he sees the dawning of a new age as being imminent. The contrast between darkness and light had already been set out in the first chapter and in his Gospel and John now goes on to apply the concepts of darkness and light to conduct.

*Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him (verses 9-11)*

In considering the first mark of the true believer John showed that the claim to know God was demonstrated to be false by lack of obedience to Christ's command. Here the claim to "be enlightened" is demonstrated to be false by hatred of other believers, perhaps those who were not among the dissenters. Lack of love for other believers shows that we are still in darkness and this can cause other problems. Hatred has the effect of distorting our outlook which will render true Christian service impossible. Hatred for others is not only a sign that we are in darkness, but an outlook which leads us into darkness.

### **The third distinguishing mark : Purity of doctrine (18-27)**

John describes the dissenting group as "antichrists" in verse 18. This is the only place in the New Testament where this word is used, though the idea of evil heading up at the end time in one or more personalities is developed by other writers. The particular point of heresy is in connection with the coming and person of Christ.

*Who is the liar ? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist - he denies that Jesus is the Christ. (verse 22)*

This denial that Jesus is the Christ must mean more than denying that Jesus is the Messiah (as the Jewish leaders did) since it is unlikely that anyone taking this position would be in the Christian church in the first place. More light is shed on the possible meaning when John advises his readers on how to distinguish the Spirit of God from the spirit of Antichrist.

*This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God : every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which...is already in the world. (1 John 4:2-3)*

The Gnostics taught that Jesus was not truly human. He was God in human likeness but His earthly body was not real flesh and blood. Since flesh is corrupt and God is holy, the two could not meet if Jesus was God. The heresy described here appears to be that same error in embryo form. In fact it is a dangerous distortion of the truth. The deity and manhood of the Lord Jesus Christ are inseparable. He needed to be God and man to accomplish salvation for us.

Throughout his Gospel John showed that access to God was only through Christ. A false view of the person of the Lord would destroy this channel of access. Jesus stated that no one could come to the Father except by Him (John 14:6) and in John 12:44 He says:

*When a man believes in me he does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me.*

In this epistle, too, John shows the inseparable link between the two:

No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also. (1 John 2:23)

Confession of Christ involves acceptance of and by the Father. Denial of Christ denies us access to the Father also. How were the believers to avoid being contaminated by such heresy? Basically there were two ways:

#### **1. Do not deviate from fundamental truth already taught**

*See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. (verse 24)*

Christian truth is not speculative. It is grounded in historical fact, faithfully witnessed and recorded in the Scriptures. Deviation from that will ultimately destroy our faith.

## **2. Allow the Holy Spirit to teach**

In verses 20 and 27 John speaks of an "Anointing" which all of his readers had. He does not explain the nature of this anointing but from his description it is apparent that it reaches them truth (or even all truth) directly.

In the days when John wrote, no Christian Scriptures were available apart from the epistles and gospels currently being written. How were believers to distinguish the true from the false? It was for this purpose that God gave the gift of discernment, and, on occasion, knowledge, to guide them through this minefield. The Christians to whom John was writing had a gift from the Holy Spirit which would enable them to identify doctrinal error and to know the truth. John was calling on them to exercise that gift.

Today the Holy Spirit does not operate that way. The inspired canon of New and Old Testament Scriptures are the means of God's revelation of Himself to us. But our understanding is still dependent on that same Spirit, who "breathes upon the Word and brings the truth to sight."

## NO 5 THE CHRISTIAN IN THE WORLD - 1 John 2:12-17

### The standing of believers in the world

This brief section forms a parenthesis in the middle of the second chapter. John has been saying harsh words about the situation of the one who hates his brother - namely that he is in darkness. But he wants to emphasise the position of the true believers as opposed to the dissenters. He does this in 2:12-14 by a series of six declarations about true Christians, addressing his readers as "children", "fathers" and "young men". The declarations explain the reasons why John is writing to each group. John writes to:

(i) Children

because their sins have been forgiven on account of his name (12) and  
because they have known the Father (13)

(ii) Fathers

because they have known him who is from the beginning (13 and 14)

(iii) Young men

because they have overcome the evil one (13 and 14) and  
because they are strong, and the word of God lives in  
them (14)

Some have suggested that John has in mind readers who are literally in those groups, or who are new converts (children), believers of long standing (fathers), or those somewhere in the middle (young men). However it is difficult to see that the statements made about each group could not be applied to members of the other groups; for example, older Christians also have overcome the evil one and know God as Father.

Elsewhere in the epistle (for example in 2:18), John addresses all his readers as "dear children" and it is more likely that here in this passage John is saying that certain Christians to whom he is writing are like children in that they have a relationship to God as Father; certain of them are like young men because in their strength and the power of the Word they have overcome; others are like fathers in that they can look back to the beginning of the Christian movement. In other words the groups are not mutually exclusive and there may be some believers who fall into more than one of these camps.

But all of them have been placed into this privileged position by the work of Christ and by the development of Christian character by the power of His Spirit within them.

### The relationship of believers to the world

John now moves away from considering the standing of Christians in the world to warning them about the way they should conduct themselves in the world. The instruction is plain:

*Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him (verse 15).*

It is important to understand what John means by "the world". In John 3:16, we are told that "God so loved the world", in the sense of the people in it. Here, however, as C H Dodd observes, it is "used not for the created universe, nor for the human race as such, but for human society as organised under the power of evil as it is described in 5:19". We must make a conscious decision not to set our affection on the pleasures, goals and values of the corrupt society around us. If we do it is inconsistent with love for the Father.

There are 2 reasons that John gives for the mutual exclusivity of love for the world and love for the Father.

### **1. The world's sense of values does not come from the Father**

*For everything in the world - the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does - comes not from the Father but from the world (verse 16).*

In a few phrases John paints a picture of the lifestyle of man independent of God - the sensual desires prompted by our fallen human nature: our infatuation with wealth, luxury or physical desire, awakened in us by what we see and touch: the pride and security that we have from power and possessions. All these are contrary to the mind of God and to the new nature that we have been given in Christ.

### **2. The world and its values are transient**

*The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives for ever (verse 17).*

The outlook described in verse 16 is self destructive in the long run as it sets man against man in a competition to acquire and exercise power for self-glorification. A society built on such principles cannot survive for long. The constant rise and fall of civilisation after civilisation through the ages proves this. Christians on the other hand belong to a different environment. Because of the position that we have been raised to in Christ, we must set our hearts, not on this world and its values, but on the things which are eternal.

*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. (Colossians 3:12)*

There is another sense, however, in which the world and its desires will pass away. John was envisaging a day when God would step into human affairs and bring down the curtain on evil activity. At the time John wrote, the return of the Lord Jesus Christ was viewed as an imminent event. In verse 18 of this chapter John declares that it is "the last hour". This may not be the situation for us today but nonetheless we still look for the day when the Lord Jesus Christ will step into human history again. The manifestation of our Lord Jesus in glory is the only hope for this fallen world and it is a hope that will one day become a reality.

## **NO 6 CHILDREN OF GOD - 1 John 2:28-3:10**

### **Identifying God's children**

In this section John encourages Christians to appreciate the wonder of their position and to respond to the challenge it presents. We are the children of God, not just in name but in reality. We may doubt this at times and the world certainly does not recognise us as such. That, however, is not surprising because it did not recognise the Lord Jesus Christ either (3:1).

If we are to be true children of God, however, we must "continue" in the Lord Jesus. This instruction is presented to us in the context of His return to the earth.

*And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming (2:28).*

The world may not recognise God's children, but they can be identified, not by the purity of their doctrine or their religious observances, but by their conduct. This is the litmus test. If anyone claims to be God's child and is careless about his behaviour, that claim has no value. John, as usual, sees these matters very much in black and white terms. He who does right is born of God; he who does evil is born of the devil.

### **Like father like son**

The importance of conduct lies in the fact that if we are to be true children of God we must be like Him. He is righteous and we must strive for the same because when the Lord Jesus Christ appears we will be like Him for we shall see Him as He is (3:2). The reason why this should be so is not given. Matthew 5:8 says that it is the pure in heart who shall see God. John turns the idea round and declares that when we see Him we shall be pure.

When the Lord Jesus walked the earth His identity was hidden to the world. When He returns again every eye will see Him and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Philippians 2:11). At present our sonship is also veiled ( 1 John 3:1) but when He appears we will appear with Him and be like Him - true sons and daughters of God.

Paul also teaches similar truth in Colossians, expressing it not in terms of our being born of God, but as having died and been raised with Christ:

*Since then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things. For you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God (Col.3:1-3).*

Paul, like John, sees that what God has done for us in Christ has serious implications for our conduct. We now belong in heaven and we must behave accordingly. And Paul, again like John, immediately goes on to see the reality of our position being manifested when the Lord Jesus Christ is manifested:

*For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to*

*your earthly nature (Colossians 3:3-5)*

In Romans 8:29 Paul shows that our conformity to Christ is one of the main features of God's purposes, with a view to His being "the firstborn among many brothers".

Since all this is true, how should it affect our attitude towards sin? John is in no doubt.

*Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure (1 John 3:3)*

When the Lord Jesus returns and we are manifested with Him we shall be like Him, but if our conduct has been inappropriate we will be ashamed (1 John 2:28)

### **The mission of the Lord**

In verses 5 and 8 John makes two statements about the reasons for the first advent of the Lord Jesus Christ. He came:

- that he might take away our sins      and
- to destroy the devil's work.

#### **(i) The taking away of our sins**

Since this is the case, John continues, if we claim to be children of God, our conduct must be set in the same mould. If we have a tolerant attitude towards sin, we are denying the very purpose of Christ's coming.

He, in Whom is no sin, came into the world to take away our sins. The sinlessness of the Lord Jesus is expressed in verse 5 in the present tense. It is one of His eternal attributes. This emphasises the contradiction of the Christian who nurtures sinful habits. Such an attitude is a denial of both the purpose for which Christ came and His very nature. John concludes:

*No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him (verse 6).*

#### **(ii) The destruction of the devil's work**

In verse 7 John addresses his readers as "dear children". His tenderness is because of the seriousness of the implications of the situation for the believers. It is not possible to be righteous in God's eyes unless we seek to practise righteousness. To practise sin makes us children of the devil.

*He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work (verses 7 and 8).*

Christ and Satan are diametrically opposed to one another. If we practise righteousness we are standing with God and proving that we are His children. If we do not pursue righteousness we are siding with Satan and proving that we are his children. No amount of spurious reasoning can

change this fact.

### **The incompatibility of sin with Christian convictions**

*No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him ; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God (verse 9).*

Is John suggesting that a Christian will never sin? Obviously he cannot mean such a thing because in verse 8 of the first chapter of this epistle he showed that to argue that we do not sin is sheer self-delusion. The sad fact is that the believer is susceptible not only to sin through weakness or ignorance, but at times deliberately. In this chapter John is really speaking about a way of life. The Christian's life should be directed towards the pursuit of righteousness. He may stumble and fall at times but there should be no doubt about the way he is facing. The reason why this is the case is clearly stated: God's seed remains in him.

When we believed in Christ, we were given a new nature by Him - one which encourages us in holy living. Thus we now have a new orientation towards God's way. If this is not the case, the reality of our conversion experience must be questioned.

*This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are : Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; neither is anyone who does not love his brother (verse 10).*

The issues are extremely clear cut. Christian "faith" which does not affect our conduct is not true faith at all. To be tolerant of sin in our lives is the work of the devil, which the Lord Jesus came to destroy. No child of God would have such an outlook.

## **NO 7 LOVE ONE ANOTHER - 1 John 3:11-24**

### **Love for the brothers and hatred from the world**

John now renews his plea for Christians to love one another. This command was a fundamental one, dating back to the start of the Christian era (as John has explained in 2:7). But now he introduces a further idea: our transition from death to life, demonstrated by our love for the brothers may result in hatred from the world.

*Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you (verse 13).*

And why should the world hate Christians? Because their actions are righteous. To demonstrate this truth John follows his favourite practice of setting out the facts by the use of comparisons and contrasts. In verse 12 he urges us not to be like Cain, who hated his brother and finally murdered him for the simple reason that Abel's actions were righteous and Cain's were evil. Cain is set out as a representative of the world which hates good and destroys. This world is characterised by hatred, darkness and death. But we are not a part of this world. As redeemed people our environment is characterised by love, light and life, and the unregenerate world sets itself in opposition to the Lord and His people. As the Lord Jesus Himself said:

*This is my command: Love each other. If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you (John 15:17-19).*

### **Our actions reveal our master**

The Lord Jesus was under no illusions about the attitude of the world to God and His purposes. In John 8 we read of a dialogue between the Lord and the Pharisees which has many parallels with the ideas being brought out by John in his first epistle. Jesus tells the Pharisees that their actions betray their pedigree: their unbelief, their hatred of Him and their desire to murder Him all stem from a common source - the devil.

*Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth....The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God (John 8:43,44,47).*

It is striking that Jesus declares that their unbelief does not prevent them from belonging to God, but it demonstrates that they do not belong to God. So in his epistle John says that if we do not love one another, this demonstrates that we are remaining in death.

### **A better example**

Our example is not Cain who hated and murdered his brother; our example is the Lord Jesus Christ who, by contrast, laid down His own life for others. He is the pattern for His followers just as Cain set the pattern for the children of the evil one.

*This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers (verse 16)*

### **Love in action**

Since love for the brothers is so fundamental, John goes as far as to say that if we do not demonstrate this love the love of God is not in us.

*If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? (verse 17).*

Here John's thought is parallel to that of James.

*Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead (James 2:14-17).*

Since we cannot see God, our profession of love for Him is proved by our practical love for His children. The Lord Jesus said that all men would know that we are His disciples if we love one another. In this epistle John says that this same love shows to ourselves that we are His disciples:

*We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers...let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth (verses 14,18-19)*

### **A special form of love**

It is important to be clear on the kind of love that John has in mind here. Many non-Christians are extremely loving people and, sad to say, can put many Christians to shame in this respect. But surely this cannot mean that they have passed from death to life? John is thinking here of the love that one Christian has for another - the feeling of a bond between believers which transcends race, generation and culture. It is the recognition of Christ in another which draws us towards him. If we do not feel this way towards other believers, John says, there is a danger that we are remaining in death (verse 14).

### **The means of setting our hearts at rest**

The most cursory self-examination can reveal our shortcomings in the extent to which we show love to our fellow-believers. And our consciences may trouble us. John offers a solution to the problem. Unfortunately, what he says is not at all clear.

*Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This, then, is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we may set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything. Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God (3:18-21).*

Normally, when John uses the formula, "This is ..." (for example in 3:11 or 4:2) he is referring forward to what he is about to say. Here he seems to be referring back to what he has just said. We know that we belong to the truth and can set our hearts at rest if we love with actions rather than with words.

But what does he mean when he says that God is greater than our hearts? There are 2 possibilities:

1. God knows everything, including the fact that we are frail and weak, and therefore makes allowances for our weakness. In this case our consciences are worrying us unnecessarily.
2. God knows everything, so if our consciences condemn us, it is unlikely that God will take a more lenient view. In this case our consciences are right to condemn us.

Many Christian writers take the view that the first of these is the more likely but it hardly seems possible that God's expectations for our conduct are less stringent than our own. Further, by arguing in this way John has fallen into the trap of the dissidents - namely claiming fellowship with God in the face of inappropriate behaviour.

On the other hand, it has been said, if our consciences are right and God is not pleased with us in this situation, does the same apply when our consciences trouble us about whether past sins have been forgiven, or whether God really loves us or other such similar doubts that can prey on our minds? The answer, of course is that this is not correct. Satan can destroy our peace of mind by sowing the seeds of doubt in our thinking.

The subject matter here is very specific. John is dealing with whether or not we are showing sufficient love to our brothers and sisters in Christ. If our conscience says that we are not, then it is likely to be right in this judgment. The only way to set our consciences right is to love more.

### **A clear conscience before God**

The only way that we can approach the Lord with a clear conscience is if we have been obedient to Him. In verse 23 we read the two commands that He has given us:

*And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.*

If we obey Him fully in this, we can approach Him in confidence and live in the consciousness of His indwelling power (verse 24).

## **NO 8 DISCERNING THE SPIRITS - 1 John 4:1-6**

### **The problem of false prophets**

In the years following the resurrection and ascension of the Lord, as groups of believers were becoming established, the gift of prophecy was extremely important. Paul commends the gift of prophecy, especially in contrast to the gift of tongues. In 1 Corinthians 14 he says:

*Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy...Everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort...he who prophesies edifies the church (verses 1, 3, 4)*

Paul also puts prophets alongside apostles and teachers as people who are specifically gifted for the task of building up the life of the church. In Ephesians 4:11-12 we read:

*It was he (Christ) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.*

We tend to think of prophecy as foretelling the future, but really it consists more of "forthtelling" the word of God. It is an authoritative message from God speaking directly through the prophet. It therefore is not open to doubt or contradiction. It is a clear statement of God's opinion on the matter in hand. For a church in its infancy such a gift was a great benefit as these young Christians often had no reservoir of theological understanding to draw on when faced with new problems. Such a gift enabled the growing church to be kept on the right path.

Unfortunately the Lord's prophets were not the only ones who were speaking authoritatively. Other men (perhaps those John had mentioned in the second chapter who had left the church) were speaking under a spiritual inspiration as real as that of the Holy Spirit. How were the believers to distinguish the true from the false prophets?

### **The distinguishing mark**

In verses 2 and 3 of the passage before us John identifies a sure way of differentiating between them:

This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist.

Much has been written about the exact meaning of John's "litmus test". What seems clear is that the recognition of the incarnation of the Lord Jesus is of fundamental importance. He was not God in the likeness of a man; nor was He merely man. The truth is that

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).*

If this had not been the case the salvation of mankind would have been impossible. God in the

likeness of man could not have been a second Adam succeeding where the first failed. On the other hand if the Lord Jesus had been like any other human being, He would have been contaminated by the sin inherited from that first Adam and would have been unworthy to redeem us. This is why a true understanding of the incarnation is so fundamental.

No evil spirit could acknowledge the truth concerning Christ's coming to earth.

Paul also indicates a way of differentiating between the spirits in 1 Corinthians 12:3. There the test is whether "Jesus is Lord". Here the criterion is different but no evil spirit could confess the Lordship of Christ nor the reality of His incarnation.

### **The false and the true**

There are two further distinctions between the true and the false prophets: the viewpoint from which they speak and the audience which they receive.

*They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us (verses 5-6).*

At first sight this appears to be an extremely bold statement to make, even bordering on the arrogant, but John was speaking in a situation where he and his fellow apostles had a specific authority given to them by God. Jesus Himself explained that His true sheep would be able to discern His voice.

*The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep... He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger...because they do not recognise his voice. (John 10:2-5)*

How does this happen? In verse 4 of 1 John 4 we read that it is through God's Spirit which indwells the believer. A life lived in tune with the voice of the Lord would enable Christians to identify His Word and to reject false teaching. However, the danger was always there that Christians would be persuaded by the high-sounding arguments of the antichrists and that is why John condemns them so fiercely.

### **Is this situation applicable today?**

In answering this question we have to decide whether God still speaks directly through the mouth of individuals in a manner that supplements Scripture or gives authoritative application of general Scriptural teaching to a specific situation.

Many, of course would say that He does and there is no doubt that even in Paul's later writings prophecy is still evident in the life of the Body of Christ. In Ephesians 2:20 he states that the church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets - the apostles being the first hand witnesses to the events of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord and the coming of the Holy Spirit with all the following historic events and the prophets being the revelation by

the Spirit of the full implications of these events.

Nevertheless historically speaking it seems that there was a decline in the importance of prophecy in the late first and the second centuries. The existence of the New Testament Scriptures constitute the total of God's revelation of Himself and His purposes for this dispensation. The teaching of preachers claiming special authority today must be judged, as in John's time, by their adherence to the truths revealed by the Lord and His apostles and given to us in the Word of truth - the Scriptures.

## NO 9 REASONS TO BE LOVING - 1 John 4:7-12

In the first six verses of this chapter John has demonstrated that the Spirit which dwells in believers is different from that which is in the world and that the community of believers is distinct from the world. Now he turns to concentrate on the Christian community and re-emphasises the need for love within it.

This is the third time in the epistle that he has considered the need for love within the Christian church (see also 2:7-11 and 3:11-18).

Each time he explores the subject from a slightly different angle. In this passage Christians are urged three times to love one another, for different reasons.

### 1. Because love comes from God (verse 7)

*Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God (verse 7)*

In the early part of his epistle John has laid down the principle that the reality of any profession of love for God and being children of God are demonstrated by wholehearted obedience to His commands. For example, in 2:3 he tells us:

*We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands.*

In the following verses John goes on to show that the chief command is to love one another.

Here in the fourth chapter, however, he goes much further. We do not merely love one another in obedience to God's command, however praiseworthy such a response would be, but because love is the very essence of the nature of God. Therefore it must be evidenced in our natures if our claim to be related to Him has any foundation.

*Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love (verse 8).*

Clearly, by saying that God **is** love, John intends to convey much more than merely "God loves". What does he mean?

Although John is making a statement about God's absolute nature we must remember that we cannot know God except insofar as He reveals Himself to us. He does this in His actions in the world that we can observe and read of in Scripture and also in His work of teaching and revelation in our hearts. And all His contacts with mankind are activated through a "filter" of love. Every aspect of His purpose unfolded; every act committed by Him; every event permitted by Him; all are done through love. God does not just love, as one of His many activities. Everything He does is characterised by love. C H Dodd sums it up by saying:

*To say "God is love" implies that **all** His activity is loving activity. If He creates, He creates in love; if He rules, He rules in love; if He judges, He judges in love. All that He does is the expression of His nature, which is - to love (The Johannine Epistles p110).*

Verses 9 and 10, which follow, set before us the supreme example of this love in action : the sending of the Lord Jesus into the world to die for us.

*This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (verses 9 and 10)*

And this leads on to the second reason for us to love one another.

## **2. Because God loved us first (verse 11)**

*Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another (verse 11)*

These three verses echo the famous words of the same writer in John 3:16: God **so** loved us to send His only Son to die for our sins. Such love is beyond measure and if we are truly born of God, similar love must be evident in our lives. Our love for one another may only be a pale imitation of the love that God has showed us, but the spark of it must be there, or we are no children of God.

But here also John is showing to us that love for one another is the only proper response to such love shown us. Earlier in this epistle John has already established the link between the love shown to us by the death of Christ, and the need for self-sacrificing love for our brothers:

*This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers (1 John 3:16)*

Our love for one another may be imperfect, when compared with God's love for us but there is a third reason why we should love one another. And it is the most astonishing of all.

## **3. Because if we love, God's love is made perfect in us (verse 12)**

*No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us (verse 12).*

Why does John begin this verse by saying that God has not been seen? Because he is about to explain that the invisible God can be made visible in His people if they love one another, and furthermore, by this process, God's love is brought to completion. How can this be?

At one time we were far from God and utterly uncaring about His love. This was the time it first showed itself to us. As Paul says:

*God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8)*

Throughout Romans 5 and also in Ephesians 2 Paul explains the wonder of God's love for us and His reconciling work in Christ while we were still lost in sin and alienated from Him. This love

for the unlovely is far beyond all "natural" love but the experience of coming to put our faith in Christ is more than just an act of our mind and heart. Something happens to us. We are born of God: He comes to live in us by His Spirit and we have a new nature in the image of its Creator. This same self-sacrificing love which seeks only the good of others will therefore grow in us and show itself in our conduct. It may be imperfect; it may be weak; it may be faltering, but it should be there. And it is our responsibility as believers to allow God to nourish it and encourage it to grow to full maturity. The Father has brought this love into our hearts through Christ. We bring it to completion by extending it to our Christian brothers and sisters.

### **Why should we love?**

John is clear that this love must be evident in our behaviour, not in order for the Lord to come to live in us, but as a confirmation that He is doing so. If we are uncaring for our fellow Christians, doubt is cast on the reality of our Christian experience.

But, also, we love in response to what He has done for us. If He could love us to such an extent, surely we should react in a similar way towards others.

## **NO 10            ASSURANCE FOR THE BELIEVER - 1 John 4:13-21**

A recurring theme throughout the epistle has been that of union with God and in this passage John brings together the ideas he has touched on earlier. The Christian life is one of mutual indwelling between God and the believer. But how may the Christian be assured of the reality of all this, that it is not wishful thinking, or a figment of his imagination?

### **Assurance for the present (verses 13-16)**

In these verses John gives us 3 bases for knowing that we dwell in God and He in us. It is important to realise that John is not suggesting ways for us to attain this, but is giving us a means of confirming to ourselves that this has been accomplished.

#### ***1. The presence of the Holy Spirit***

*We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit (verse 13)*

The presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts is an assurance to us that God lives in us. John has already said this in 3:24. The indwelling Spirit is the means of communion at the deepest level between us and God, as Paul explains in Romans 8:16 and 26-27.

But the presence of the Spirit is linked with testimony concerning the person of Christ and the second basis for knowing that God dwells in us follows on from that:

#### ***2. The fact that we acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God***

*If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us (verses 15-16).*

In the first part of the fourth chapter, John has shown us how to distinguish between the Spirit of God and false spirits:

*Every Spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God (4:2-3)*

Such a testimony is made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit. Paul also points out that confession of Christ is impossible without the work of that Spirit.

*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 Corinthians 12:3).*

In these passages John and Paul identify different aspects of the person of Jesus which are to be acknowledged:

- His coming in the flesh (1 John 4:2)
- His deity (1 John 4:15)
- His Lordship (1 Corinthians 12:3)

But these must all be considered together. A true understanding of His earthly ministry ending with His death and resurrection, His deity and His manhood and an acknowledgement of His Lordship in our lives can only come through the direct work of God in our hearts. This is a tremendous assurance for us. We must never forget that the enlightenment of our minds to the Lord Jesus is the work of God, not a decision of our intellect.

But there is a third basis for knowing that we dwell in God and He in us.

### **3. Our love for one another**

*God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him (verse 16)*

Throughout the epistle John has stressed the importance of loving one another. Here he is summing up what he has already said in verses 7-12 of this chapter. To live the life of God is to live a life of love towards God and man. Whoever lives in this way shows that he is united with his God.

These bases must be considered together. A great deal of error has resulted from teaching that unity with God is love and nothing else and that people can be "saved" by loving irrespective of their beliefs. The love of God cannot be separated from the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ and the witness of the indwelling Spirit of God. That is how He has demonstrated His love to us; the work of the Lord Jesus Christ in history observed and faithfully documented by John and his fellow-witnesses; the truth of this record and the present work of the living Christ confirmed to our hearts by the Holy Spirit and the outworking of these truths in a life of love in unity with God.

This outworking in love, as John says in verse 12, is the means by which "his love is made complete in us" and is a final assurance to our hearts that God is in us and we are in Him.

### **2. Assurance for the future (verses 17-21)**

The bringing of God's love to completeness in our hearts also has implications for the day of judgment.

*In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment because in this world we are like him (verse 17)*

John's meaning is difficult to comprehend here. Who is the "him" that we are to be like? From the grammatical setting it would appear to refer to God but all other uses of this structure in 1 John refer it to Jesus (e.g. 2:6; 3:3). Elsewhere in Scripture likeness to Christ is set out as the goal of the Christian, so this is most likely to be the meaning.

But in what way does our likeness to Christ (imperfect as it is) give us confidence on the day of judgment? It is obviously connected with the bringing of God's love to a state of completeness in us, as John says at the start of the verse. In John's writing there is a mutual indwelling of Father, Son and the believer. It is a life of love and obedience. In John 15:9-10 Jesus says:

*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.*

And what does He command? He tells us in 15:17

*This is my command: love each other.*

Jesus walked this earth living in His Father's love and was obedient to His commands, demonstrating that love by word and action. He thus remained in His love. We are exactly in the same position. Our lives must be characterised by obedience to our Lord's commands. And His command is to love each other. If we do this we are like Him.

Such a life of love in union with God cannot result in fear on the day of judgment. Love and fear of punishment are inconsistent. When we have appreciated the love of God in Christ we approach Him as our loving Father. If we feel fear it is a sign that His love has not been fully developed in us.

*There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love (verse 18)*

But John is careful to make sure that his readers do not think that the love of God is purely a mystical experience. It is rooted in the reality of love for our fellow believers. So again he repeats the statement he has already made that a profession of love for God only has a reality if we love our brothers:

*We love because he first loved us. If anyone says "I love God" yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen (verses 19-20)*

A life of love is a life of confidence because we have nothing to fear. By the taking of God's love into our hearts we are linked with Him and His Son in an unbreakable relationship. But we demonstrate the reality of the love, and bring it to its full maturity, by the extent to which we love one another.

## **NO 11 LOVE FOR GOD AND HIS CHILDREN 1 John 5:1-5**

At the end of the fourth chapter John gave a clear instruction from the Lord:

*Whoever loves God must also love his children (4:21)*

Now at the start of chapter 5 he continues the theme of the unity of love for God and love for His children.

*Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well (5:1).*

It could be inferred from the NIV rendering that the phenomenon of being born of God is the result of belief in Christ, but the tense of the verbs used in the Greek indicates that this is not the case. "Is born of God" is actually in the perfect tense, indicating a past event, while our believing is continuing in the present. The faith is a sign of and not the cause of the new birth. This order is stressed by the Lord Jesus in His debate with the Pharisees in John 8:42:

*If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here.*

The fact that they did not believe in Him proved that they were not God's children, rather than prevented them from becoming so.

### **A switch of emphasis**

In the first verse of chapter 5 John introduces a universal principle - loving a parent means loving his child also. The two are inseparable. In other words loving God is synonymous with loving our fellow believers. Here, however, John switches his emphasis. Previously (for example in 4:12) he has said that love for one another was proof of love for God, and conversely a failure to love one another gave the lie to our claims to love God (4:20). In chapter 5, however, he says that we can be sure that we love God's children if we love and obey Him.

*This is how we know that we love the children of God, by loving God and carrying out his commands (verse 2)*

The two aspects of this common love are mutually reinforcing. We cannot have the one without the other. Claims to love God which are not backed up by practical love for His children are a sham. Claims to love our fellow human beings is no proof of our divine parentage. Many non-Christians put us to shame by their love for one another. Love for God and love for our neighbour are inseparable. In Matthew 22:40 Jesus said that all the Law and the Prophets hang on the two commandments to love God with all our hearts and our neighbour as ourselves. But the key is not our professions of love: the key is obedience.

### **The key - obedience**

At the end of verse 2 John points out that love for God necessarily involves obedience to His commandments. In fact, as he goes on to say in verse, 3, they are not only complementary, they

are the same thing:

*This is love for God, to obey His commands (verse 3)*

Just as we measure the love of individuals to us not by what they say about the strength of their feeling, but by what they do to please and help us, so it is with the Lord. If we love Him, we will obey Him. In Matthew 21:28-32 Jesus told the parable of the two sons who were asked to work in their father's vineyard. One refused but later changed his mind and went. His brother agreed to go but did not do so. Jesus commended the first rather than the second.

In His address to His disciples in John 14, Jesus set out the same truth plainly:

*If you love me, you will obey what I command (John 14:15)*

This is echoed by John earlier in this epistle:

*The man who says "I know him" but does not do what he commands is a liar and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him (1 John 2:4)*

If we love God, His commands to us are not irksome. Our attitude towards Him will be such that obedience is a delight. Paul paints a beautiful picture of the renewed mind in Romans 12:2

*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

Love for God and our fellow believers is His will for us and when our minds are in tune with His our desire is to follow His wishes and, indeed, by following them we confirm to ourselves that they are best for us.

### **Overcoming the world by faith**

In verses 4 and 5 John gives the reason why God's commands are not burdensome - because obedience leads to overcoming the world.

*For everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he that believes that Jesus is the Son of God (verses 4 and 5)*

Three times in these two verses John repeats the phrase "overcomes the world". And it is clear that the key to victory is faith. In what sense is faith the means of victory? The conviction that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God who came to give us life as an expression of God's love towards us gives us victory over all the forces of evil which attack us in the world. They do so because they give us a vision of eternity and of what is important in the final analysis. We can therefore see that the ways of the world and the things of this life are temporary and impure whereas the things of eternity are permanent and shine with the glory of God Himself. This is the idea of faith which is developed in Hebrews 11, leading to the wonderful conclusion in Hebrews

12:1.

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders, and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.*

### **Full circle**

By his conclusion in verse 5 John has brought his argument round full circle. Those who believe that Jesus is the Christ are born from God and are His children (verse 1). All who love God will love His children also (verse 1). The way that we know we love God's children is if we love God and keep His commandments (verse 2). In fact, loving God **is** keeping His commandments (verse 3). These commandments are not burdensome to keep because the faith that is in God's children enables them to overcome the world (verse 4). And they overcome the world because they believe that Jesus is the Son of God (verse 5).

## **NO 12 THE TESTIMONY 1 John 5:6-12**

### **By water and by blood**

In the fifth verse of this chapter John has declared that the key to victorious living is belief that Jesus is the Son of God. Now in verse 6 he describes the Lord in these terms:

*This is the one who came by water and blood - Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood.*

It is not clear what he means by this, and a number of alternatives have been suggested. However, in trying to decipher his intention, we must bear in mind two things:

1. The meaning of "by water and by blood" is crucial to a proper understanding of Jesus as Son of God (verses 9 and 10)
2. The main point of contention seems to be "blood" since verse 6 suggests that it was possible (and erroneous) to teach that Jesus came by water only.

Three main possibilities have been suggested:

(i) A reference to the sacraments of baptism and communion. It is extremely unlikely that such a meaning could rightly be inferred from the passage. There is no other such sacramentalism in the writings of John (or indeed any other New Testament writer). Besides, "blood" alone is nowhere else used as a symbol for the Lord's Supper.

(ii) A reference to the spear thrust into Jesus' side as He hung on the cross, described in John 19:34. There John observed blood and water issuing from the Lord's side and speaks emphatically of his own testimony as a witness to these events. However, if that is what John had in mind it is difficult to see how false teachers could have the "water" without the "blood". It is also difficult to see how Jesus "came by" these things, since they "came from" Him.

(iii) The water refers to Jesus' baptism and the blood to His death. These events marked the start and finish of Jesus' earthly ministry. At His baptism, John records:

*I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him...I have seen and testify that this is the Son of God (John 1:32, 34).*

This was the time when the Holy Spirit came upon the Lord, anointing and empowering Him for the work that lay ahead. Jesus' death was the culmination of that work. He Himself declared "It is finished" at the point at which He "gave up His spirit" (John 19:30).

These two events mark the boundary points in the Lord's ministry. Their identification is extremely important for a proper understanding of the nature of Christ's redemptive work.

### **The teaching of the heretics**

The Christians to whom John wrote were faced with opponents who taught that the "Spirit of

Messiah" came upon Jesus at the time of His baptism and anointed Him for His teaching ministry. However, since it was "impossible" that God could die, that Spirit must have left Him again before that time - perhaps in the Garden of Gethsemane, or on the cross itself when He cried out to the God who had "forsaken" Him (Matthew 27:46). John had no doubt that this was not true. Jesus was Messiah, Son of God, all the way through. If it was mere man who died on the cross, we are lost as we cannot be reconciled to God. But the wonderful truth is that God took upon Himself the form of man, and the holy, spotless Lamb of God suffered death for us. As Paul says of the Lord Jesus in Philippians 2:

*He being in very nature God...made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6-8)*

### **The testimony of the Spirit**

*It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth (verse 6)*

The function of the Spirit here is to confirm the truth of the events described as "water" and "blood". The testimony of the Spirit lay behind the declaration of John the Baptist at the time of Jesus' baptism that He was the Son of God. The Roman centurion and the others who witnessed the moment of Jesus' death had no doubt of the significance of what they had seen:

*When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified and exclaimed "Surely he was the Son of God." (Matthew 27:54)*

### **The testimony of the three**

In verses 7 and 8 John changes tack. Earlier, we had the witness of the Spirit to the coming of Christ by water and by blood. Now John says that these three are all witnesses.

*For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.*

The Lord's earthly ministry took place between the two great events of His baptism and death. The Spirit is the means by which these events and the implications of them, become living realities in our hearts and minds.

### **The testimony behind the testimonies**

Ultimately, however, the testimony is that of God Himself and John leads on to this in his closing verses. The testimony of the Spirit is trustworthy because the Spirit is truth (verse 6). But behind the testimony of the three witnesses in verse 7 we have the testimony of God Himself. If we reject that testimony we have no hope left since we are accusing God of lies. John states this truth in a stark couplet in verse 10:

*Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made Him out to be a liar.*

It is interesting to see the contrasts here. Believing in the Son of God is contrasted with not believing God. There is no other way to Him than through the Son. Having the testimony in our hearts is contrasted with making God out to be a liar. If we refuse to take God's testimony on board we are accusing Him of the unthinkable - falsehood.

### **What is the testimony?**

Throughout this passage John has spoken of the testimonies of water, blood, Spirit and God Himself. We know that the testimony relates to the deity and Messiahship of the Lord Jesus, but what exactly is the testimony? John tells us plainly in verses 11 and 12.

*And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.*

The emphasis in these powerful verses is on life. It is eternal life that God has given us in His Son. There is no other way to life. There is no escape from the choice of verse 12. If we have the Son, we have life. If we do not have Him we are dead.

## **NO 13            THAT WE MAY KNOW - 1 John 5:13-21**

### **The purpose of the epistle**

In verse 13 John spells out his purpose in writing the epistle.

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

John had finished his gospel in a similar way. There he said that Jesus had performed far more signs and wonders than could ever be recorded, but added:

*But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:31).*

John wrote his gospel to introduce unbelievers to the Lord Jesus, in the hope that they would believe on Him and thus have life through His name. His first epistle on the other hand, is written to Christians in order that they may have assurance of eternal life.

As he draws his epistle to a close, John emphasises some certainties that Christians possess. The word "know" occurs seven times in these verses. Many of the facts that John here recounts refer back to themes developed earlier in the epistle.

There are four facts of which we can have assurance:

#### **1. Knowledge of answered prayer (verses 14-17)**

Since God is our Father, we can be bold in our approach to Him because we know that He hears us and will listen to us. John says that we have whatever we ask of Him, but here, as elsewhere in the New Testament where other such statements are made, there are qualifying conditions. The condition here is conformity of our requests to His will.

*If we ask anything according to His will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us...we know that we have what we have asked of him (verses 14-15).*

Although Christian believers have confidence in approaching God they cannot be certain that He will answer their prayers as they would necessarily wish. Paul in Romans 8 explains that although we do not know how to pray, the Spirit helps us and brings our prayer requests before the throne of grace with "groans that words cannot express" (Romans 8:26). So we can have assurance that our prayers are answered, though this may not be in the way we might have wanted. Perhaps the greatest example of this is the Lord Jesus Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, praying for deliverance. Nevertheless He subjected His will to that of His Father and in Hebrews we read that His prayer was heard.

*During the days' of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission (Hebrews 5:7)*

The Lord's prayer to His Father was heard and answered, not by the granting of deliverance (for

that was not His Father's will) but by the sending of an angel to strengthen Him and enable Him to fulfil His Father's will (Luke 22:43).

## **2. Knowledge that we are protected from sin (verses 16-18)**

*We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe and the evil one does not touch him (verse 18)*

Earlier in the epistle (3:6, 9) John has made a similar statement. It is important to realise that he is speaking in both places about the continuing practice of deliberate and defiant sin rather than the unwilling (and at times willing) lapses to which we are all subject. In chapter 5 John deals with the protection that is available to the Christian. The means of protection are twofold:

### ***(i) The efficacious prayer of a fellow-believer***

*If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life (verse 16)*

One of the wonderful features of the true Christian community, as John has repeatedly emphasised, is the members' care and protection for one another. We are urged to pray for one another when we see sin among us. It should be a spontaneous reaction, not out of a sense of superiority or interference, but from a genuine concern and care for one another. And, John says, prayers like this will be answered.

But John here distinguishes between sins which lead to death and those which do not. For the former he does not advocate prayer at all. What sins "lead to death"? There have been many suggestions including:

- "Serious" sins such as murder or adultery
- Deliberate sin, as in Hebrews 10:26
- Apostasy : the abandonment of the faith
- Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, as in Matthew 12:28.

Whatever the explanation, John says it in such a way that it is clear that his readers would have understood his meaning. Since he was writing at a time when God's judgment against certain sin in the Christian community was instantaneous, as in the case of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), it is likely that this is what sins leading to death refer to. Paul also wrote of the deaths and illness of those who misused the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:30).

If that is the case there is no immediate parallel in this dispensation where men are not immediately accountable to God for their sins. In this situation we should pray at all times for one another.

But something more comprehensive is needed to protect us fully. This comes from God's own care.

### ***(ii) The safekeeping of Christ***

*The one who was born of God keeps him safe and the evil one does not touch him (verse 18)*

The Christian can only follow God's ways if the Son of God "keeps" him. If we are kept by Him we cannot fall into a life of sin. This statement that believers are protected from Satan is the wonderful fulfilment of the Lord's prayer for His disciples in John 17:

*My prayer is not that you take them out of this world but that you protect them from the evil one (John 17:15)*

That protection is granted to us by Christ Himself, the One born of God and is all the more important because of the situation of the believer, in contrast to the world in which he is placed. The world lies in the control of the evil one. We, in contrast, have the assurance that we are God's children.

### **3. Knowledge that we are the children of God (verse 19)**

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

There is a complete contrast between the Church and the world. Christians are born of God. Again John is echoing truths he has expounded earlier (in chapter 3). There, in verses 9-10 he distinguishes the children of God from the children of the devil by the fact that the former, as a result of their new birth, do not continue in sin. Here in chapter 5 he has already shown that because of the protection granted to us in Christ we cannot live in sin. The whole structure of human society, in contrast, although not born of the evil one, is under his control. When Satan tempted the Lord Jesus, he offered Him all the kingdoms of the earth, claiming that it was his right to do as he would with them: the Lord did not contradict him (Luke 4:6).

A Christian's confidence lies in the security of the knowledge that he is God's child.

### **4. Knowledge that we have understanding through Christ (verses 20-21)**

*We know also that the Son of God has come and given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true (verse 20).*

John has already made the distinction between the Christians and the world and he now make a distinction between the Christian and the dissident groups. Their claim to know God in truth was without foundation since they did not acknowledge Jesus Christ as His Son.

Only through Christ can man know God in reality. This is the sense of "truth" in verse 20 and it is a concept often used by John in his Gospel. For example in John 6:32, Jesus declares Himself to be the "true bread from heaven" meaning the "real" rather than the "false" bread.

The search for the ultimate reality was the quest of all religious and philosophical thought at that time. John, in contrast to the contemporary philosophers was stating that the way to reality was not through a personal quest to detach the mind from the visible world, but by the manifestation

in the visible world of Him who is invisible.

*The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth....No one has ever seen God, but God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made him known (John 1:14,18).*

## **Conclusion**

So John ends his epistle. It has warnings for the Christian and also much encouragement and assurance. On the one hand he warns that the reality of our profession of faith lies in our behaviour towards one another, If we do not love one another our claims to love God are meaningless. Similarly to love the world and the things of the world is proof that the love of God is not in us.

On the other hand if we truly believe that Jesus is the Christ, we are God's children and we have the Lord's protection from the power of Satan. At the same time, the advocating work of the Lord Jesus Christ and the prayers of His people will cleanse us if we do fall into sin.

One thing shines out above all others in John's writings. The only way to God is through Christ. And, as he says at the end of this epistle:

*We are in him who is true - even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life (verse 20).*

It appears that John is not here saying that Jesus Christ is "the true God". It is more likely that he means that our union is with God through Christ, and this position is eternal life. Again he is echoing the words of the Lord Jesus Himself:

*Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent (John 17:3)*

May that be our goal also.