

A Commentary on the First Epistle of John

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Chapter 1:1-4

John is trying to express what is inexpressible - that which is the life force which lies behind all of creation. The true mystic, he is aware of a reality which is unseen but which he has experienced. He knows its truth deep within himself. If he is wrong, if it is simply his imagination or if he is misinterpreting longings and feelings within himself, then nothing has any meaning. He knows with the whole of his being that there is a reality which he has touched in his spirit, or which has touched him. It is so intense that it is more real than anything that can be experienced through the natural human senses. This is what life is for, this is the purpose that lies behind creation. Indeed it was there before creation and would be there even if there was no creation. Perhaps it can be summed up in the three words, "THIS IS IT!" But, in themselves, out of context, those words mean nothing and it is difficult to put them into context because that context is not of this world.

What he is claiming, however, is that this life force, which eternally exists in another realm, has burst through into the time-space dimension in which we human beings live out our lives. John is overwhelmed by this fact:- he has actually heard with his ears, seen (more than that, carefully observed) with his eyes and touched with his hands the personification of this eternal, otherworldly reality. He is here referring, of course, to the person, Jesus. While Jesus was with his disciples in his earthly ministry, John had not fully appreciated who and what Jesus was. He may well have believed that he was the Messiah, but that may have meant no more than that he was a man sent by God to represent him in a special way. Now John sees that the Messiah existed long before he took human form. The man with whom he had laughed and shared, walked and talked and probably whom he had hugged, this was the eternal life force which is the power and the purpose which lies behind everything. He can hardly take it in - that he has been in such intimate contact with THAT!

This introduction is similar to the prologue of John's gospel, but it is not identical. There he puts rather more stress on the separate identity of the Word - he existed from the beginning and, although he was himself God, he was with God. He had an important role in creation because God created everything through him. Here John reveals a slightly different aspect of the Word; he was a revelation of the life force which is the source of all life. He was the Word of LIFE! As such he was an expression of that life and, therefore, an impartor of it. Nevertheless, John does not forget or dismiss the reality of his experience of being with Jesus, a full human being. It wasn't that the man Jesus became the Messiah; he was not a man upon whom Messiahship was imposed and then departed. He was the eternal expression of the life of God, anointed and appointed, who then became fully man and has taken his human, but transformed, body back to heaven.

Only when we reach v.3 do we come to the main verb 'proclaim' or 'declare'. John is so taken up with what it is he desires to share, that he describes it as fully as possible first of all. He has already claimed that he is a personal witness to the revelation he is talking about; he can testify to it as an eyewitness, and the experience is so vital that obviously he longs to share it. However, John was personally commissioned by Christ to go into all the world and preach the gospel. This is what he is doing here. Surely everyone who has seen the truth is in a similar position - longing to share with others what is so wonderful, and also commanded by Christ to do so.

John says that his purpose in proclaiming this truth is that his readers may have fellowship with him and all other believers. So often the gospel is presented as that which gives salvation, and that is true, but what is meant by 'salvation'? The underlying thought is that salvation is little more than a continuation of life - a believer will live for ever. But

what is the point of that? Of course, this is simply to ask what is the purpose of creation? Whether life is short or everlasting, what is its purpose? There is no point in offering someone everlasting life unless we know what it is for. Many people seem never to come to any understanding of what this life is for; it simply compounds the problem if it is to go on for ever. The secret of life is relationship. Our times of greatest joy are when we are at one with creation. When we are able to rejoice and rest (not strive) in the beauty and order of all that is; to know our place in it and to take that place. That joy is increased when we are able to share it with at least one other person: not necessarily in words; just to be with someone else, knowing that they are also experiencing that joy. We are at one with them also. The joy is at its height when we appreciate that the deepest 'at-one-ment' is not simply to be at one with creation but with its creator. This is what John is about. He is declaring that the eternal Life, which is that which was from the beginning and which brought everything else into being, has been revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. The expression of that Life, that Word, was itself a life of relationship; three persons yet one in perfect harmony. All creation is an expression of that relationship, that harmony, and mankind has been created in that image and, therefore, is made for relationship. We know that this harmony has been broken, but John's message is that it can be restored; there is a way of entering again into that at-one-ment with everything. That is salvation!

So John writes of having fellowship with those he is addressing, but qualifies that by explaining that it all depends on the relationship we have with the source of all life, that Life which the Father is and which has been revealed on earth by his Son, the person Jesus who is the Messiah. It is this alone which can make joy complete.

1:5-10

So far, John has spoken of having relationship with the source of Life, but he has given very little information about the quality of that source. He has explained that it is personal, the Father and Son, but has made no reference to their moral qualities. God may be the creator but he may be evil or, at least, amoral. Now he states that he has had a divine revelation that God is light. He says that he has heard that message from Jesus. There is no direct record of Jesus stating that in the Gospels; perhaps he did say it but no evangelist has reported it. However, the whole of Christ's teaching witnesses to this truth. John's point is that this is not his own theory about God; it is God's revelation of himself. It is possible to list many aspects of light, what it is and what it does. Scientifically, all life depends upon it. We need it to see the way ahead and to make right judgements, and so on. However, John is probably not seeking to imply all that here. More likely he is simply utilising the general and innate understanding we all have that light is somehow good, true and pure, whereas darkness represents what is bad, wrong and evil. The sun, the source of light in the material universe, is self-giving, self-expressive and lights up everything else. God is similarly self-giving and self-expressive and "in your light we see light" (Ps. 36:9).

Something must have prompted John to write this letter. He is addressing people who already profess a faith in Jesus; probably they were brought to faith through his own ministry for he calls them his dear children (2:1). Obviously he is concerned about them. It seems that someone has got in amongst them and is teaching some heresy. Almost certainly this is gnosticism, which basically claims that it is possible to attain such a special degree of knowledge of the spiritual that the body and what it does is unimportant. In that state of spiritual knowledge a person cannot be contaminated by sin, it is irrelevant. John insists that this is not so. What we believe about the nature of God, must affect our behaviour.

At v.6 there is a change of use in the word 'we'. Until now he has been using it in the sense of the royal 'we', meaning himself, as an apostle who has had a revelation of God, as

distinct from those to whom he is writing:- e.g. "we proclaim to you" (3). Now he is using 'we' as identifying himself with his readers and meaning we who are believers.

He details three conditions of humanity - our current behaviour, our nature and our past. Our behaviour will be affected by what we believe about the God we worship. If God is light - pure and holy without any contamination of evil - then we cannot behave in an evil manner. Just as darkness cannot exist where there is light, so it is impossible to be walking in evil (darkness) yet claim that we have fellowship with this God who is light. If we do claim that, we are living a lie not the truth. John uses a very telling phrase here, he speaks of not doing the truth. Christianity is not theorising about reality, it is living it out; we are involved in it. As Paul says, "to live is Christ." Just as John has carefully differentiated between fellowship with God and with other believers in v.3, so he does the same in vv.6 & 7. If we walk in the light, which is his light, we have fellowship with everyone else walking in that same light. He makes a jump in his argument here, transposing the point he will make in v.10 (that we can none of us claim that we have never walked in darkness and therefore sinned) and rushes in with the good news that we are purified from all or every sin by the blood of Christ, which is a sort of shorthand for his death with all its benefits.

John then goes on to refer to our nature, what we are. If anyone thinks he is sinless and therefore totally pure and uncontaminated, he is deceiving himself (he won't be deceiving anyone else). Phillips translates, "then we live in world of illusion." That is a happy way of putting it because it highlights the fact that truth is reality and to deny that we are sinners by nature is unreal. However, John sets out the right way to be able to live with the fact of our failure; it is not to deny it and thus hide it deep in our unconscious (where it will fester unseen), but to bring it into the light by facing it and confessing it. When we do that God will forgive us, which will restore the relationship between himself and us. This is always the point of forgiveness - it restores relationship and thus cannot be complete until it is both offered by the offended party and received by the offender. The offender may offer forgiveness and not nurture resentment at the sin so that he or she is not bound to it by memory or by nursing the hurt it caused; but the forgiveness is only effected when the offender recognises the offence, takes responsibility for it, apologises, intends not to repeat it and accepts the reconciliation offered.

More than forgiving the sin, God will also purify us from it. We are cleaned up; we can go into society again with our head held high. Remember, in this section John is dealing with what we are. We were born of the flesh with a sinful nature. When we are born again of the Spirit we gain a new nature. Of course, we can sin, but that is to go against our new nature. However, to speak of that is to run ahead of John; he will come to that later. It is in his understanding and colours his reasoning, but he has not yet explained it.

John says that God is both faithful and just in forgiving us. The obvious meaning is that God is faithful to his promises, set out in various places in the Old Testament, that he will forgive the sins of his people. However, there is a deeper reasoning here. God is faithful to himself, his nature; he is merciful. However, he is also just. He cannot overlook sin; it has to be recognised and dealt with. Once again John is using shorthand. God's justice was shown at the cross when he laid our sin on Christ. It is the death of Christ that enables the two aspects of God's nature to be revealed and to function together: mercy and truth or justice.

Finally, John deals with our past. Maybe we walk in the light now, but we are all born with a sinful nature and so we have all sinned. To deny that is to fly in the face of Scripture. The Old Testament, in many places, declares that we are all sinners, e.g. "We all

like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way." (Is.53:6) To deny that we have sinned is, therefore, to set up a barrier between ourselves and God's word so that it will not penetrate our hearts and convict us. It is like the ostrich burying its head in the sand, assuming that if it cannot see, it cannot be seen.

Chapter 2:1-2

In dealing with the other two aspects of our sinful condition - our present walk and our inherited sinful nature - John has immediately set out the way of forgiveness and salvation. This might encourage us to regard sin lightly, as though we are writing only in pencil and we have an eraser nearby which will easily rub out anything we do that is wrong. So this time he does not immediately offer the antidote. He states clearly that his purpose in writing is to ensure that they do not sin in the first place.

He calls them his little children. At once we see that this is not some impersonal treatise setting out the Christian faith and its doctrine; this is a letter from a man with a father's heart seeking the welfare of those near and dear to him. It has been prompted by concern over news that has reached him which could cause serious problems for people he knows and loves. It probably reveals also that John was an old man when he wrote it.

Having stressed the fact that they must avoid sin, only then does he explain that all is not lost if they do. There is one who stands in the very presence of God on their behalf, and advocate, one who will plead their cause. This is the same word used of the Holy Spirit in John's Gospel (14:16) but the nuance is different. There it means someone called to be at our side and offer us counsel; here it means someone to represent us and our cause. John has already referred to Jesus as God's Son (1:3 & 7), he is the advocate we have before the Father. He refers to him as Jesus (the man who walked this earth), Christ (the one appointed and anointed by God), and the righteous (the one who is without sin and who is therefore free of all condemnation, and thus a perfect advocate).

John describes Jesus as the 'propitiation' for our sins, which is translated variously as 'expiation' (RSV), 'who made personal atonement' (Phillips), 'himself the remedy for the defilement' (NEB), 'the atoning sacrifice' (NIV). The reason for the various translations is the desire to avoid the idea that God is a vengeful deity who needs to be placated by some sacrificial offering. The point being that it is not God whose feelings have to be changed, but it is us and our contamination by our sins, needing to be cleansed or covered. It is true that, unlike us when we are offended, God does not lose his temper or reason. However, we need to guard against the view that God is an impersonal force, programmed to reject evil. Because God is offended, because he can be grieved, there is a sense in which he has to be propitiated. His sense of righteousness, of justice, demands it. The fact that it is he, himself, who provides the propitiation reveals his true attitude to us - one of mercy and love, even while we are still sinners - but it reveals also that the need for an expiation is his need, it springs from him; he requires it. It is in that sense that Christ is a propitiation.

In saying that it is he himself who provides the propitiation, we do not go far enough. In the case of Abraham offering Isaac, it is God who 'provides' a ram as a substitute and strictly, therefore, it could be said that he is the propitiator. Jesus is not described as the propitiator, because he does not only provide the propitiation, he is it.

John completes this description of the work of Christ by saying that his act of atonement is not for our sins only but for those of the whole world. He does not mean that everyone will be saved (the claim of the universalist school), but that the benefit is made available to all. As with forgiveness (see above on 1:8) it is only effective when it is not only offered by the offended party but accepted by the offender.

2:3-6

John now turns to the three themes which will dominate the rest of his letter: obedience, love and true doctrine. We have already seen that the purpose of the letter is to keep the believers from falling into heresy, almost certainly the heresy of gnosticism - a special knowledge or degree of knowledge. John will use the word 'know' frequently, showing that true Christians also have a knowledge. He begins by giving a practical dimension to our knowledge of God rather than the rarefied knowledge which the heretics claim. He says that the fact that a person obeys what God commands is a very good indication that he knows him or, at least, is coming to know him. Whereas a person who claims some special knowledge of God yet who does not keep his commands is a liar; the truth he claims to experience is not reality at all. However, anyone who obeys God's word, that is, responds positively to the revelation or expression of God, then God's love is perfected in him. This could mean his love for God, God's love for him or, and this underlies both of these, the love which God is being expressed in and through the obedient believer. Is it really true to say that God's love is perfected or made complete? Perhaps the answer to that is that the more complete the obedience, the more complete the love.

John adds a different term to amplify his description of our relationship with Christ; to be 'in' him. It is very difficult to convey to someone outside the experience just what it means to belong to Christ. Christianity, at heart, is not a philosophy of life or a belief in certain doctrines; those things are involved but they are not the esse of our faith. It has been rightly said that Christianity is Christ. The believer knows that beyond the visible creation there is another realm where God is. Of course, he is in the created order also, but the source of our present experience of him lies beyond this realm. The Christ who walked this earth and who died, returned to life in this order before going forward into the next. For the rest of us, we do not return to this life after death, but move forward into that realm where God is. But this God can be known while we live this life. We know he is real because we experience him, we have a relationship with him. That relationship is effected through our relationship with the Christ, the Jesus who walked this earth; the one John heard, saw and handled (1:1). This relationship cannot be scientifically proved. Sceptics will say that we are deluded and may attempt to point to various psychological needs we all have, coloured by experiences when we were growing up, which cause us to project from our own beings the security figure we desire. The believer can say only that the experience of the relationship is totally real to him and her. For the very reason that it cannot be proved in the terms of the physical realm of matter in which we live at present it is, in some way, even more real than the experiences of our present existence. We can say only that we know what we know; there is a reality which we trust and which holds us, it is personal and we love it (him) and are in it (him). Although, by its very nature, this experience is mystical, it is so real that it affects how we live this life; more than affects, it dominates this life; more yet, it is this life. Paul tried to describe it by saying "For me to live is Christ." Therefore, this relationship with the unseen Christ, will inevitably be revealed by the way the believer lives out his or her life in this world. For the purpose of his argument John states the inevitability in terms of a duty:- the one who claims such a relationship ought to, or must, live as Christ lived.

2:7-8

John is about to speak of the Christian way of love. It is this which has come to dominate his understanding of the faith and has become part of his own life. It is revealed in the way he addresses his readers which, in turn, springs from the way he thinks of them; "My little children" (2:1) and "Beloved" or "Dear friends," here. Although he does not specifically state what the commandment is, in the light of the verses which follow (9-11) it must be to love. He says it is not a new commandment, they will have heard it before. If they are

Gentiles it would have been taught to them from the time of their conversion and it existed long before that because it was in the Jewish Scriptures - Deuteronomy 6:5, love towards God, and Leviticus 19:18, love towards our neighbour. Yet it is new, as Jesus called it new (John 13:34), because in himself he revealed what it means to love. He extended both its measure and its embrace. For most of us love is drawn from us by the object of our love; we find someone attractive or they act towards us in a kind or helpful manner. In Jesus the love was not drawn from him but it was his self-expression. That is to say his love did not depend upon the quality of the person he loved but on the person he is; and because the person he is is totally self-giving, there is no limit to the measure of that love. As it is said of him in his dealings with the disciples, "He showed them the full extent of that love" or, "He loved them to the end or uttermost" (John 13:1). He also taught, in both word and example (the parable of the Good Samaritan) that our love is to embrace all, even our enemies.

Truth, ultimately, is that which is real. That is so anyway, but it is particularly the view of Scripture. Because Jesus lived out his 'new' commandment of love, making it a reality, John can say it was 'true' in him ("its truth is seen in him" NIV). He goes even further to say that it is also true or revealed in his readers. In other words, they are already demonstrating the love which he reminds them Christ commands. This leads him to speak of something else. John has obviously spent hours and hours in contemplation. He, more than the other evangelists, has weighed the significance and meaning of the coming of Christ into the world. He is so aware of the unseen realm; it is this which is eternal, not the world in which we live at present, where there is so much which is wrong. Indeed, John can see that much of it is evil because it is dominated by the powers of darkness. He will end this letter by actually stating that the world lies in the power of the evil one (5:19). However, that is not pessimism but realism because he is convinced that the coming of Christ was but the beginning of the kingdom breaking through into this world. "The darkness is beginning to lift" (Phillips), and the true light which Christ brought and is, is already shining.

2:9-11

Again John stresses the practicality of what we believe. Love, like knowledge is not a rarefied ideal, it is to do with how we treat the person we see every day. This love which Christ showed and commands us to practise, cannot be confined to making charitable donations for good causes, although that will, no doubt, be involved. It is to do with our daily walk. By speaking of living and walking in the light or the darkness, John is stating that we can actually create that light or darkness; it is how we behave that creates this environment. He sees so clearly that a person who hates his brother is still living in that state where the light of Christ and his kingdom has not yet penetrated. What about the 'whoever' of verse 10? Does that mean anyone or only the Christian? Surely it is anyone. John is not here talking of eternal salvation, he speaks from his understanding of God's eternal purpose and the way life ought to be lived. Anyone who lives in that way is aligned with the way of the kingdom, whether or not he has entered that kingdom by accepting Jesus Christ as its King. While we live in this light there is nothing in either it (the environment of light we create) or ourselves (the Greek could mean either) to make us stumble. We all know that if we are angry we can make foolish judgements and decisions. Hatred, also, clouds our minds for it overrules our reason. John describes it as not knowing where we are going because the darkness which we create by our hatred has blinded us.

2:12-14

John is concerned about how his readers will take this letter. He has set out very clearly his criticism of those who claim to follow Christ but whose conduct reveals the opposite. It

is the strangers who have come amongst his flock he is attacking, not those he has already addressed as his dear children. So now he inserts an almost poetic section, encouraging the true believers.

There are two technical matters to mention before we look at the content. The first is not made clear in some translations; there are six statements in these verses, the first three of which begin "I am writing" and the last three begin "I have written." Some commentators and translations take the view that there is no significance in this and they all mean "I write" - just as we might say in a letter today either, "I am writing this to let you know," or "I have written this to let you know." On the other hand, we are not likely to mix the two forms next to each other, we would use one or the other. One commentator suggests John was interrupted after the first three and, on returning, looked at what he had just written, decided to repeat it for emphasis and adopted the form "I have said what I have just said..." Whatever the truth of it, it has little effect on the meaning.

The second matter is John's reference to children, fathers and young men - a rather strange order because we would expect it to progress upwards or downwards with the 'young men' in the middle. There is little doubt that John is thinking of their spiritual rather than their physical age; their maturity in the faith. Some suggest that John regards all of his readers as his little children, illustrated by the opening phrase of this chapter, for he would be a very old man by now. He then divides them into just two groups - fathers and young men. Others take it as it stands, as three groups. With regard to those whom he calls 'children' he uses two words, *teknia* in v.12 and *paidia* in v.13. The former is a diminutive implying relationship and affection, as John has used it in v.1, where it obviously refers to all his readers. The latter implies dependence and the need for discipline. John reminds them that their sins have been forgiven (1:9). When first we become Christians there is a glorious new sense of freedom from the burden of sin. Often we do not realise the burden of sins until that burden is lifted. We are forgiven for his name's sake (it could mean 'because you bear his name'). The name represents the whole person and so here it is a form of shorthand for the work and person of Christ. He goes on (v.13) to say that they have come to know the Father. Again John stresses this matter of knowing God (see on vv. 3-6). The point is, of course, that they know him as Father. The Christian is not frightened by his Creator; in awe, yes, but not cringing. We are children who happily and confidently spend time in his presence.

John speaks of the fathers, the ones who have been Christians for years and who have won others to the Lord and nurtured them. Those of us who have been Christians for a long time may chastise ourselves that we no longer feel the joy and wonder of our salvation with the same intensity as when we first believed. Of course, we need to guard against complacency and to renew our love for Christ daily, but we should not be surprised if our understanding of God changes. This is part of the maturing process. The knowledge that we walk with God should lead us on from the wonder of sins forgiven to deeper truths. Perhaps it is only a nuance of meaning but whereas the new Christians, the children, have come to know God as Father, the more mature believers, whilst never losing that sense of the Fatherhood of God, have developed a more cosmic understanding. As we look out on creation and think more deeply about that personal life force, that ultimate reality which lies behind everything, and from which everything has come, and in and for which everything exists, and towards which everything is moving, we gain a new wonder that we actually have a relationship with that - with him! With the other two groups, the children and the young men, John adds to his first statement when he writes the second; to the fathers he says the same thing each time - "You have known him who is from the beginning." He is, in fact, referring to the opening verses of this epistle.

The young men are those who are maturing. When first we become believers we often experience a 'honeymoon', where our joy and wonder carry us through life on a cloud. Very soon, however, we come down to earth; we meet problems and temptations. Satan will not allow us unhindered progress in the Christian life, and the Lord allows us to be tempted so that we may grow. We need to develop a discipline. With the assurance of past sins forgiven, the young men are learning how to resist sin in the present. John encourages them by stating that they have already mastered the evil one. It would be unwise to boast that Satan can no longer tempt us, but we have the encouragement of experiencing victory; it is possible to overcome Satan, we do not have to fall into the despair of inevitable defeat and each victory gives us confidence for the next. In the second statement to the young men, John gives one of the reasons for their conquest - 'the word of God lives in them.' The Scriptures are unlike any other book; there is life there. Somehow the word of God is a form of sacrament; the outward form of words actually conveys life and power.

2:15-17

Having affirmed the three groups of believers, John now gives a warning; believers are not to love the world. He uses the term 'world' in different ways, sometimes it simply means the created universe in which we live, but most often he gives it a special meaning - human society organised without God. In fact, we must take it further than that. If God is not brought into the reckoning that does not simply leave a vacuum; the world lies under the power of the evil one (5:19). It is not simply that there is an absence of good but the active presence of evil. Satan is described as 'the prince of this world.' There is, according to Scripture, a personal being active in promoting evil in the world. Because it was created by God, it was and is intrinsically good and beautiful and much of that beauty can still be seen. However, the whole created order has been contaminated by the sin of the society that inhabits it.

John warns against loving the world yet, in his Gospel, tells us that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son to save it. The contexts are different. We are not to love the world in the sense that we are drawn into it and its ways, but we are to love it in the sense that we long to draw it to where we are, in the kingdom of God; so that the kingdoms of this world become the Kingdom of our God and of his Christ. Jesus did not pray that we should be taken out of this world but that we should be kept from the evil one. We are to live out the life of the Kingdom while we are here in this world.

This, of course, is the problem; we are very much in the world and so we are tempted by it. There are some who take vows of poverty and chastity. It takes courage and discipline to do that but, having done it, it is easier to resist some temptations although, no doubt, there are other temptations which the rest of us know nothing about. For most of us, however, not having made such vows, it is an almost constant battle to ensure that our right enjoyment of God's gifts - good food, clothes, the opposite sex, etc. do not dominate our lives. How much money may we spend on ourselves when others starve? May we buy CD's or visit the theatre while others have no homes? We have to face such matters frankly and make our decisions in the light of Christ and our fellowship with him, for all these things can draw us away from God. Love of the world and love of God are incompatible. We are only travellers or pilgrims through this world and need to travel light because our permanent home is heaven, not here. Indeed, the world is running down; the physical universe, certainly, slow as that may be. But, whilst we must recognise that every generation moans and despairs about the state of everything compared with the past, it does seem that many things today conspire to accelerate the break up of society. There are the speed of communication where instant responses are demanded without time for consideration; the powers of destruction available to mankind - Chernobyl is a particularly

vivid example and, above all, the godlessness of nations where the scientist has replaced the prophet and man has assumed the place of God. John gives the warning that "the world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives for ever." Each of us must decide whether we believe that; because our life will be shaped by our decision.

John mentions three areas in particular as a summary of the source of all temptation. The lust of the flesh; this refers to perverted desires which arise from within us - greed, immoral sexual lusts and self-indulgence. The lust of the eyes; this is the temptation which comes from outside (although, of course, it is what we then do with that outward temptation that creates the lust). This is illustrated in particular in the love of possessions. Thirdly, John speaks of the pride of life. Phillips and the NEB call it glamour. The words John uses relate to the braggart. This is the person who stakes everything on worldly success, on gaining the praise of men. He must have the largest office and desk, the biggest house, the fastest car. But we can all fall into this trap of seeking to impress other people. It is when we seek to meet our legitimate and God-given need for self-worth through wrong channels.

2:18-19

His reference to the fact that the world is passing away leads John to the thought that this is the last hour. It is easy for us to say that John was wrong, that almost 2000 years have passed since he wrote that and we are all still here. But the writers of Bible times had a different outlook from us. They had a very clear understanding that whilst we live in this world in the current age, there was a new age to come. That age would be brought in by the judgement of God, an event which they sometimes referred to as 'the day of the Lord' or 'that day'. In the New Testament, although there were different nuances of meaning, 'the last days' and 'the last hour' cover the time between the two comings of Christ. The day of judgement will be a terrifying event, the old order will pass away and the new order will be established, and only the righteous will enter the new order. There would, in fact, be no hope for anyone because all have sinned and fallen short of God's standard. However, after God's act of creation and years of mankind's existence, God had provided a Saviour - Jesus Christ. The opportunity to be 'made righteous' was now available; the next event in God's timetable is the day of judgement, and so, however long they may be, the last days are here. Of course, within these last days, various things will happen; the gospel has to be preached throughout the world, there will be wars and rumours of wars, false Christs and false prophets will arise and, as John Stott puts it, 'the last days' will themselves have 'last days' ("There will be terrible times in the last days." [2 Tim. 3:1]) and "In the last days scoffers will come scoffing and following their own evil desires... but do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day." [2 Pet. 3:3 & 8]).

John refers to the fact that, as he readers know, before the end, the man of lawlessness (2 Thes. 2:3-4) or the antichrist will come. 'Anti' can be taken in the sense either of 'against' or 'in the place of' as we use the term 'vice-chairman'. In this latter sense it would refer to 'false' Christs. In the present context, of course, the two meanings are similar; a false Christ would be against the true Christ. John goes on to say that a number of antichrists have already come. Obviously he must be referring to human beings and, no doubt he is thinking of the heretical teachers whose activities have caused him to write this letter. The principle he sets forward here is manifested time and again all through history. There are men and women who seem driven by a particular evil and egomania. It is interesting that many of them seem to exhibit a particular hatred towards the Jews - Hitler and Saddam Hussein to name but two. To John, what lies behind them is not just an influence but a personal power of evil, Satan the supreme antichrist.

Apparently these many 'little' antichrists to whom John refers, have left the church fellowship - presumably because they did not gain sufficient support. He comments that they did not really belong to the rest of the fellowship; if they had they would still be with them. It was the fact that they went that proves their true allegiance is elsewhere. We need to be careful in applying this test today. In John's time there was only the one Church, without different denominations. We can no longer claim that those who leave a church are heretics, for that would include Martin Luther and others after him who, out of their true devotion to Christ, believe that the Church to which they belong is in error. It is not always easy to discern the motives of others.

2:20-23

John implies that his readers, those who have remained true to the faith and within the fellowship, have an inner witness to the truth. They may not be learned scholars, certainly they would not claim the special 'gnosis' or knowledge which the heretics claim and which is the object of John's attack in this letter, nevertheless they all have an anointing bestowed by the Holy One (either God or Jesus and, because God is one, both). Obviously that with which they have been anointed is the Holy Spirit; the same Spirit who indwelt Jesus and whom he promised would lead his disciples into all truth (John 16:13). The better translation is not 'ye know all things' (AV) but 'all of you know'. The Christian has a sense of unease when he hears heresy. He may not be able to reason out just where the argument is faulty, but he will sense within his spirit that the Holy Spirit is stirring him to reject it.

This letter is not written because the believers do not know the truth but because they do. It is to confirm them in their decision not to follow the heretical teachers and to encourage them to continue to resist error. Truth is truth because it is reality; consequently it is impossible that it can produce any lie because a lie is by its nature what is not real. The ultimate lie is to deny the ultimate truth and the ultimate truth is, of course, God himself from whom everything else comes. John spoke of this at the very beginning of the letter when he told of the Word of life which was with the Father from all eternity. So the liar is the person who denies that Jesus is the Christ. In fact John implies more than that because it is possible to admit that Jesus is the chosen and the promised anointed one of God, without admitting his deity. One of the claims of some Gnostics was that Jesus was only a man, anointed by God at his baptism and that the anointing departed from him before he was crucified. Very likely that was the teaching of the heretics John is currently attacking. But John's point is that the Father and the Son are one, the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father. Jesus claimed that "He who has seen me has seen the Father," so anyone who denies that Jesus is the Son is denying the Father also. Conversely, anyone who acknowledges Jesus to be who he is, is acknowledging the truth about the Father also. To deny that Jesus is the Christ, the ultimate lie, comes from the ultimate liar, the antichrist (the 'a' liar of the AV should read 'the' liar). So any man who holds that position is an expression of the antichrist.

2:24-27

The Christian, in understanding his faith, can fall into two errors; he may never dare to doubt, and if he does not ever doubt anything he will never have to reason just what he believes and why, so he will never mature; he will be a hot-house plant, unable to stand the challenge of the world. Alternatively he may always run after the latest 'experience', always looking for something new; and he may fall into heresy. John tells his readers to ensure that the basics of the faith which they received at the beginning of their Christian life remain with them. That does not mean that he wants them to remain babes in the faith (he obviously wants them to become the young men and then the fathers of vv. 12-14) but they

are to add to the truth they know, not depart from it. The Christian faith is not simply a correct understanding of facts, of doctrine, it is a relationship with God himself; that relationship is part of the ultimate truth or reality. So if they allow the truth they learned from the start to be the rock on which they build then they will remain in that relationship with the Son and with the Father. It is that relationship which is the eternal life he has promised. Eternal life is not a 'thing' which exists of itself, it has to be lived and can only be lived and experienced in relationship.

John now states clearly what has prompted him to write this letter. He has spoken of the danger of false doctrine and that there are antichrists about and that some people have left the Christian fellowship because they never really belonged to it. Now he refers directly to the fact that he is aware that there is a specific group who have tried to lead his readers astray. He speaks again of the anointing to which he referred in v.20. As well as the objective truth of the word, which is to be the rock of truth on which they build, each of them has the subjective experience of the indwelling Holy Spirit who, of course, is the Spirit of truth. So the two, word and Spirit, go together and, because they are both of or from the same eternal source of ultimate reality, they must witness to the same truth. Because that anointing of the Spirit which they have received remains with them, they do not need anyone to teach them; he will lead them into all truth. As an ideal this is a fact. However, it is a fact that needs further explanation. It is because there is the possibility of falling into error that John has written this letter. He is positive in tone, recognising that his readers have resisted the false teaching, but he still feels he must write to encourage them to continue to resist it. It is possible to quench the Spirit, to ignore the Spirit and also to fool ourselves that we are following the Spirit when really it is our own desires which prompt us. If we really are guided by the Holy Spirit, then we will be protected from error, but we still have our free will and we must ensure that we continue to abide in him, the anointer, Jesus Christ.

2:28-29

John repeats his concern that they should continue in Jesus because he will return to take them with him into heaven. The fact of the second coming of Christ is a basic doctrine of the faith and John's concern is that they should be ready for this, whenever it may be. Barclay rightly makes much of the fact that the best way to prepare for his coming is to walk with him now. Everyone must face his or her Creator and he will be either a friend or a stranger, so we shall all be either used to his presence and free in it or ashamed.

John now brings in a concept he has not specifically mentioned before - the Christian has been born of God. In his gospel he refers to Christ's conversation with Nicodemus about the need to be born again of the Holy Spirit. His mind has jumped here because he so associates Jesus with the Father that he does not notice that the 'him' in v. 28 refers to Christ but in v. 29 it refers to God. His argument is that if we know that we belong to a righteous God and if we know that one day we must face him, then obviously we will live righteously. In fact, he goes further than that and reverses an argument which cannot necessarily be reversed. (e.g. all cats are animals but not all animals are cats.) Believers will behave righteously, but is everyone who behaves righteously a believer? Taken absolutely literally surely we must say 'no'; some unbelievers appear to live more upright lives than some Christians. But here John is making a general comment in a personal letter rather than formulating a creed. If we see someone living an upright life then we may very well expect to find he is a believer. His fundamental point is clear, our faith must influence our living.

Chapter 3: 1-3

John is overwhelmed, as we all ought to be, that we should be called the children of God. He entrusts his reputation to us. A soldier who wears his regimental badge carries the reputation of his regiment. God will be judged by unbelievers on the behaviour of those who claim to belong to him, and he is willing to allow that! How much he must love us! It isn't only that we are called the children of God, we are indeed just that. Having referred to the fact that we have been born of him, John spells out what that means. We are children of God, we are related to him, we have been begotten by him. It is much more than the creature - Creator relationship; more even than family relationship because, as John will mention later, God's nature has been imparted to us - because we have been begotten by him.

Although this is a fact and not a theory, it is a spiritual truth; we do not look any different physically; we do not literally have an indelible cross on our foreheads for all to see. Therefore the world does not recognise our new status, but this is because the world did not recognise Jesus (the 'him' must refer to Christ) when he came. They saw only another human being. They were not sufficiently spiritual to see that he was the Son of God so, no wonder, they cannot recognise that we are children of God. Barclay makes a helpful comparison between paternity and fatherhood. The former means no more than that a man is physically responsible for the physical existence of his son; the latter implies a relationship. Everyone is a child of God in the sense that he is responsible for their existence but it is only those who accept Christ who become children of God (John 1:12) in the sense of the Father-son relationship. But usually this can be recognised only by those who experience the relationship.

Of all the New Testament writers John is the one who is able to convey the deepest mystical truths of faith in Christ. He is aware of the new relationship he already has with God through Jesus but he is aware also that it is by no means complete. Just what it is leading to he does not know. Indeed, who can know what heaven is really like? If he is the John who wrote the book of Revelations, then he has glimpsed something of the future, but even that is highly figurative and symbolic. However, he knows it is there; heaven exists and he and all his fellow believers have a place in it. John is probably expressing the same basic thought that Paul puts in a different form:- "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn amongst many brothers." (Rom.8:29) Already we are children of God, just as Christ is the Son of God, but we have to be made like him - conformed to his likeness. Originally mankind was created in that image, the image of God, but that image has been marred through sin. If we keep our eyes on Christ throughout this life, we shall become more and more like him. This life is to be a means of our maturing. In the final state we shall be fully conformed to his likeness. That will be when Christ is revealed, when he comes again. In the original, this phrase can mean "when it is revealed" (i.e. when what we shall be is revealed). However, that will not be until Christ returns so the meaning is the same. If keeping our eyes on him while we live this life is the way in which we grow to be like him, then when we see actually see him, reasons John, we shall finally be like him.

If our belief is that there is a heaven, that we have a place reserved for us there and that we shall share its life with Christ, then that belief must inevitably shape the way we live now. Everyone who truly believes in Christ and his promises, that is who has this hope in Christ ('him' refers to Jesus not to the believer), will endeavour to live a pure and holy life because the Lord with whom he identifies is pure. 'Hope', of course, is used in the Christian sense of something which is certain and sure, but which has not yet happened. The degree of our determination to become pure depends, of course, on how sincere our hope is. John stresses this matter of purity of living because the heretics against whom he is warning his readers claimed that the important thing was the special 'knowledge' which they claimed

they had; how they actually lived their lives was on a lower level altogether, so sin was not a matter of great importance.

3:4-6

John contradicts this thinking and states unequivocally that everyone who sins breaks the law. That, in essence, is exactly what sin is - lawlessness. He is, of course, referring to God's law not man's. Strictly, to break man's law is a crime; sin is to break God's law. Where the two laws coincide then to break that is both a sin and a crime. It may be argued that to reason in this way is a backward step because the Christian believer is not under law but under grace. We live the way God wants us to live because it is our delight to please the Lord, not under legal compulsion. That is true and John has already been reasoning along these lines; but it is only a step away from the teaching of the very heretics he is seeking to expose: "We live on a higher plain and are above talking about legalistic attitudes to sin." Whether we take the line that God lays down laws for us to live by (and there is no doubt that under the Old Covenant he did) or invites us to live lives that will please him because we love him, the two ways are not mutually exclusive, both have the same goal. Jesus said, "If you love me you will obey what I command." (John 14:15) and Paul explained, "Love is the fulfilment of the law." (Rom. 13:10). If we do not live the way God has created us to live then we go against his will (whether or not we call his will his 'law') and that is sin.

John now reminds his readers of what they know already about Jesus and his work. In verses 1-3 he has been looking forward to Christ's second coming, here he looks back to the first. He refers to two purposes which Jesus accomplished then and the two are closely linked. First, he appeared to take away sin. He does not here go into detail, although he is obviously referring to Christ's offering of himself on the cross. In order to do this he had to be perfect. The people were prepared for this understanding by the practice of selecting only unblemished lambs for the sacrifice, particularly at Passover. However, it is more than simply the law of God that the offering must be perfect, there is a reason for it. Jesus came to bear the consequence of our sin, to take our place. If two criminals are sentenced for a crime, one cannot ask the judge to allow him to go to prison in place of the other because he is himself guilty and is going to prison anyway. Only someone completely innocent could offer to go to prison in place of someone else for the offer to have any meaning. So John reminds his readers not simply that Jesus was sinless during his earthly life, but that he is sinless. That is, it is of his esse, his nature.

If that is so, if Christ in his essential being is sinless, then anyone who is abiding in him, that is to say is sharing in his life, will not continue his previous life of sin. This is not an argument about whether or not the Christian still has his free will; about whether or not it is physically impossible for him or her to sin. What John is saying is that if Christ is sinless then anyone who sins will not, at the same time, be abiding in Christ. If we are really partaking of the life which flows in and from Christ - that Word of life which John is speaking about (cf.1:1) - then we will not continue to sin. Indeed if anyone does continue to sin that clearly shows that he has had no personal experience of Jesus Christ. Christianity is not a system of belief or doctrine; it is personal knowledge of a personal Saviour.

3:7-10

John now turns to the second purpose Jesus accomplished, he appeared to destroy the devil's work. He appeals to his readers in great tenderness. We can sense his deep concern for them; they must not be deceived by these heretics. It is wonderfully true that we do not have to earn our salvation by trying to do enough righteous deeds to warrant God's favour; we are saved by the finished work of Christ and appropriate it by our faith in him. We are

accounted righteous, but there is only one way to be righteous and that is to live righteously. The first is a theological truth; that does not make it any less than the truth, God does account us righteous, therefore there is no condemnation against us. The second is a moral truth; we must become what we are accounted to be. The account shows a credit balance, the cash needs to be there. That is a graphic illustration but we need to remember that not only does God balance the account, he provides the cash also. That is to say, we have no power in ourselves to live righteously, it is only as his life flows into us and through us that we can do this; we need to live in him (6) and allow his life, the life and nature of God to live in us (9). We are to be righteous just as he, Jesus, is righteous.

If the person who does right is sharing in the life of Christ, then the corollary of this is that the person who does what is sinful is of the devil because the devil is, by nature, a sinner. This was not originally so because he is a created being, created by God, and everything that God made he pronounced to be good (Gen.1:31). Admittedly Genesis gives no account of the creation of the angels, cherubim and seraphim etc. but nothing exists that was not created by God (John 1:3) and he could not create anything that was not good. John says that the devil has been sinning from the beginning; presumably he is thinking of the beginning or creation of the world, because by then the angel of light we know as the devil had already rebelled against God. From the first time he is mentioned in Scripture Satan, the devil, is by nature evil.

The problem of evil, where it comes from, is difficult. Once it exists, it is comparatively easy to account for it. In speaking of the evil in mankind we can trace it back to the devil who tempted man and man fell. But that only pushes the problem back one step. What caused the evil in the devil? We may argue that as a created being, like us Satan had free will, and he used that to rebel against his creator. But in a perfect environment what was there to tempt him, who had a perfect and sinless nature, to rebel? Scripture implies that it was pride but pride is itself sin, so what caused the pride to form? Man fell because he was tempted by an evil being outside himself; why did Satan fall? John does not attempt to offer any explanation, nor is it necessary because, whatever the reason, we know that evil exists; he simply states the fact that by the time mankind was created the devil was already sinning.

He then goes on to encourage his readers with the reminder, as we have seen, that the reason Jesus came (his first coming) was to destroy the works of the devil. That statement might lead us to look at the issue on a lower level than John has in mind. We think of the devil seeking to cause havoc to God's creation and Christ coming to undo that evil work. Of course, that is true, but John is coming at it from a deeper level. He sees it as a conflict between what the devil is in himself (sin) and what Jesus is in himself (righteous). He is careful not to say that Jesus came to destroy the devil, but rather the devil's works. At his first coming Jesus defeated but did not destroy the devil; the lake of fire still lies in the future. How true is it, however, to say that the devil's works are destroyed? We still see hatred, rebellion, lust, greed etc. with their consequences of sickness, poverty, homelessness, hunger and the like. The word translated 'destroy', literally means to render inactive or inoperative. What Jesus has done is to provide an alternative way of living, actually life itself, which overcomes the way of death of the devil. The devil is still exuding his evil, but its effect is being nullified because of the greater power of the truth of Christ. Although John does not here expound his understanding further, his reasoning springs from his understanding of that which was from the beginning (1:1). The reality which lies behind everything is God; he is the true life-force. Anything which does not conform to that is therefore finally unreal and untrue. That is not to say it does not exist at present, indeed the devil's work is all too real. However, because God is not dead but continues to express himself in his inexorable purpose and because he and not the devil is the source of

everything, finally everything which does not conform to that purpose will cease to exist. In our human way of thinking we have to express it as deliberate acts of God in judging, condemning, sentencing etc. - a series of actions, and perhaps something of that is involved. It seems, however, that John has grasped a deeper understanding of the ways of God. LIFE, which was revealed to us as 'the Word of life' (1:1), is all-powerful, all-fulfilling and finally only that which is aligned with it is and will be part of it; abiding, dwelling in it. This is what salvation means; not so much being saved from anything, but into the only reality.

In v.6 John has stated that no one who believes in Christ keeps on sinning; in v.9 he goes further, he states that anyone who is born of God cannot sin. We have to set that statement alongside what he has said previously (2:1-2) about believers who sin having Jesus as an advocate and atoning sacrifice for our sins. So in saying that a believer cannot sin he does not mean that it is an impossibility. He reveals what lies behind his thinking in explaining that anyone who has been born of God has a new nature - God's seed has been implanted in him. Commentators differ as to what John means by 'God's seed'. In Scripture seed is used on occasions to refer to the word of God, the Gospel. If that is the case here, it would mean that the Christian is prevented from sinning by the truth of the Gospel, the Good News. There is a truth in that as we have seen already (cf. note on 3:3); a person lives by what he believes and the more firmly he believes it the more his life will reflect it. However, that relates to our mind, our understanding of the Gospel. It seems that John is speaking of something deeper. He is convinced that when a person is born again of the Holy Spirit, something actually happens within him. His own spirit comes alive and the Holy Spirit takes up residence within him. In his gospel John refers almost interchangeably to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and that of Christ and his Father. He seems to hold that although the three are separate persons it is the Holy Spirit who 'brings' the Father and the Son to live within the Christian. So is 'God's seed' the presence of the Holy Spirit? Or is it, as many translations have it, God's nature? After all, if the Godhead dwells in us, so must his nature. Perhaps it isn't important that we do not know exactly what John meant. What we know from experience however, is that something has happened to us which has a stronger effect than our natural conscience; although it may work through our conscience, enhancing and instructing it in some way. It is the direct presence of God in our spirit which will not allow us to continue in sin. It is not that sin is an impossibility. We all do commit acts of sin but, when we do, we are convicted and cannot live with ourselves until we have confessed it and determined not to do it again, and done all we can to set things right. Our nature has changed, and this will not allow us to continue in sin. The tense of the verb which John uses implies not a one off act of sin but an action which is on-going. The Christian cannot continue like that; something has happened within him which will not allow it. That something within him is what John calls 'God's seed'.

John now sums up his argument. The specious reasoning of the Gnostic heretics will not do. There is no place for sophistry. He brings the matter down from lofty arguments to practical reality. If you belong to God that will be seen by the way you live your daily life. Either you are basically righteous or you are not. No one is perfect but the child of God does not pretend to be; he confesses his sin and turns from it. If you are not a child of God then, whether you know it or not, you are a child of the devil and you will either seek to hide your sin or try to make out that it isn't sin. Scripture is clear, a person either belongs to God or he does not. In a general sense God is the Father of all because he is the Creator of all, and it is true that he loves and has a purpose for everyone: Jesus died for all. However, not everyone finds or fulfils that purpose and, to his grief, they spurn his love. Each of us has to choose to belong to him; choose to respond to his offer to enter into relationship with him. Only those who make that choice by receiving Jesus (John 1:12)

become children of God in the true and eternal sense that John is using here. Because this world lies under the control of the evil one (5:19), until we make that choice we are also subject to him and, in the general sense mentioned above, we are children of the devil.

John puts it starkly and simply; anyone who does not do right is not a child of God. He ends this section and prepares us for the next by linking righteousness with love. The two are inter-related.

3:11-15

The Christian Faith is not a matter of secret knowledge; its message has been proclaimed from the outset by the Lord himself - We must love one another. John's readers had heard it and must follow it. Perhaps it is the use of the word 'beginning' that takes John's thoughts back beyond Christ to the very beginning and he recalls how quickly mankind fell away from the plan of God. The first child born to the first human beings rebelled against God and manifested hatred instead of love. It is not God's will that men and women should kill each other but, because of sin and rebellion, he authorised the death penalty as a final punishment and deterrent. In certain circumstances the state (or its Old Testament equivalent), on behalf of the righteous, might execute a person who committed evil. Cain, on the other hand, was evil and he murdered his brother who was righteous. The reason was that he was jealous of that very righteousness. This lays bare the horror of evil. Cain murdered Abel not in order to obtain something his brother had, but simply to stop him enjoying it because it highlighted his own failure.

This attitude, first manifested in Cain, is typical of the way of the world - human society organised with no submission to God. If Abel was hated by his brother because he was righteous then, if we are righteous, we should not be surprised if the world hates us. Without God the world lies in death and promotes hatred. The proof that we have moved across from this death to life is that instead of hatred we love our brothers. The way of the world is self centred; the way of the Lord is self-sacrificing. John has already claimed that to love is a sign that we are in the light (2:10) now he says it is also a sign of life, eternal life. This is not optional, as though love is only one indication of life amongst others. In several places in Scripture, love is stressed as the greatest of the signs of true faith. It is the first mentioned fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22, the greatest of the three graces mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:13 and is the content of Christ's 'new commandment' (John 13:34).

We may question why John confines his statement to love of 'the brethren' - other believers. Christ loved the world, ought we not to do the same? Indeed, but in its context John is speaking about the hatred which the world shows towards Christians; it is the hatred which evil has for righteousness. The opposite of that is, of course, to love righteousness and, because we are called to be righteous, that means to love believers - the brethren.

In Matthew 5:21ff. Jesus refers to the commandment not to commit murder but goes on to explain that anyone who is angry with his brother is equally subject to judgement. The point is that if we hate someone, we would prefer that they were not around, we would like to deny them the right to exist. It is that which lies at the heart of murder. Anyone who does not love obviously does not have the life of Christ flowing through him and therefore is still in death.

3:16-18

John develops the point that the way of Christ, and therefore of love, is self-sacrifice. Jesus gave all that he had, all that he was. John obviously had in mind what he heard

Christ say to him and to the other disciples on the way to Gethsemane, that no one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friend (John 15:13). The words, 'lay down' are very descriptive; they are the ones used of Jesus laying aside his garment and washing his disciples' feet. Here is a paradox, to take a person's life is the most evil of acts; to give your own for someone else is the greatest manifestation of love.

Jesus did this throughout his life and finally gave even life itself. That is the criterion by which we are to judge what love means. It might, indeed, involve our dying for someone else but John sees it as wider than that. Just as Christ gave himself to others every moment of his earthly life so it must be with us. If we know that one of our brethren is in need and we can do something about it but do nothing, how can the love of God, which Christ showed and which Christ is, be in us? There is no need to try to distinguish between the love which God is or the love which we have for God in this instance; John could mean either but both are involved. John uses the singular 'brother' here instead of the plural of verse 16. Lewis rightly points out that loving everybody in general may be an excuse for loving nobody in particular.

Whatever the Gnostic heretics might claim by way of special knowledge, it is not enough to 'know' the truth, we must do it. John's words have been strong for there can be no compromise, but once again he calls them his 'dear children'.

3:19-24

Because the heart of our faith is a relationship with a person rather than a set of rules to follow it is easy for doubts to arise in our hearts. With a series of laws it is fairly simple to assess whether or not we are keeping them; without such laws it is not so easy to know whether we please God; our failures are all too obvious. The words may mean simply, "If our hearts condemn us," but "whenever" is probably correct - we all experience such doubts from time to time. Sometimes we may wonder if we are right in what we believe - perhaps others do have the truth (do the Gnostics have something after all?). What is so lovely here is that John understands and addresses these feelings; and they are feelings. Religions which depend on laws have little room for feelings, whereas Christ, in his earthly ministry, was always concerned about how people were feeling. Think of the woman caught in adultery, Zacchaeus up the tree, the woman who washed his feet, Mary sitting at his feet, and his concern for Peter - "It is true, the Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." (Luke 24:34).

Having said that, we must recognise that the wording of vv.19 and 20 is difficult. To what does the opening of v.19 refer? John usually looks forward to statements he is about to make but it seems that here he looks back. It is the fact that we love (as he has just explained) that enables us to be sure that we have the truth. Perhaps we are sometimes too rigid in our interpretation of Scripture and read into it more than the writer intended but, as a general principle, if we can look at ourselves and say honestly, "Whatever my faults, I am a better person now than I was before I believed, and I am continuing to make progress," then that is a powerful indication that we have found the truth - that on which and for which everything was created. Notice however, that John is careful to say that it sets our consciences or hearts at rest in his presence. Our standard is God himself as exemplified in Christ. We do not compare ourselves with other people - we may appear better than them if we select the comparatives carefully. The issue is, are we at peace before him?

Because of the confusion in the original, some commentators believe that the sense of these verses is to present a greater challenge to us, along the lines, "If our consciences condemn us, that is because God is greater than our consciences which are simply

expressing his condemnation." However, that does not fit the sense of the passage as a whole, where John is seeking to encourage his readers. Conscience is a strange thing; it is like the switch on an alarm-clock which can be set to go off at a certain time - it can be reset. Sometimes it may be set too early (it may be over-sensitive), sometimes too late (not sensitive enough). There may be times when we are churned up because we swing between feeling we have done something wrong and yet believing that we had to act as we did. All we can do then is throw ourselves on God and say, "Oh Lord, you know my motives better than I know them myself. I want to be your man, your woman." And then leave it with him.

John is one of the most deeply spiritual writers of the New Testament, yet he is intensely practical. There are some super-spiritual people who do not speak to the situation of us more earthy strugglers. It would be easy to argue that there is no difference in God's eyes between those whose hearts condemn them (but unnecessarily, as John has just reasoned) and those whose hearts do not condemn them; both are equally close to him. Whether or not that is true, we do not feel it is. In practical experience, if we have a niggle about our attitude or behaviour which we have to leave with God, it takes time for us to regain our confidence in his presence. Perhaps it shouldn't, but it does. However, John turns now to our situation, hopefully the more frequent, when we have a clear conscience and know that we may come boldly to our God and may ask him for whatever is right and needful (although that qualification is not mentioned here). John says that our prayers are answered. Here we have an insight into his own walk with God. He is an old man now, and obviously he has become used to having his own prayers answered. The majority of Christians today do not operate at the same faith level as the early disciples. Admittedly they had had the benefit of watching Christ at work and he had built up their faith, but surely God has not changed. If they saw God answer their prayers more frequently than we see him answer ours, is it because God has altered the conditions or because we do not have their faith? John links answered prayer to obedience. It isn't that our obedience 'buys' God's response, but it creates the conditions which allow God's grace to flow to us.

Having firmly linked answered prayer to our obedience in keeping his commands, John states clearly the basic command (the word is now in the singular) which underlies all others. It is similar to Christ's summary of the law - "Love God and love your neighbour," All the other laws spring from this. Although this command has two parts they are inseparable as John has already explained (verse 17). To have faith in Jesus Christ and to love one another reflects God's purpose in creation; this is what life, true life, is.

John now introduces a further truth which, in fact, he has spoken of before using different terminology - the indwelling Holy Spirit. In 2:20 he speaks of 'an anointing'. It is not easy, but nor is it necessary, always to differentiate between the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and that of the Father and the Son. In broad terms it is the Spirit who brings the Father and the Son. We are involved again in the great mystery of the Faith; God is three yet one. This verse (24) echoes the passage in John's gospel (John 14:15 ff.) where Jesus says, "If you love me you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever - the Spirit of truth... You will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me and I am in you... If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." John is utterly consistent. Love, faith and obedience are all bound up together. If we love God and have faith in him, which involves us in that most intimate relationship of dwelling or abiding in him, then we will obey him. That creates the conditions whereby he can come and live in us. Can we really be sure that that is so? God actually lives in us? Yes, we know it because he has given us his Spirit.

4:1-3

It is difficult for us to imagine the setting in which John was writing. In those days external signs accompanied preaching and teaching much more than is the case today. 1 Corinthians 14 illustrates the sort of thing that was happening amongst true believers. False prophets also generated similar manifestations. Today, those who operate in the more charismatic wing of the Christian Church use these verses of John to 'test' the spirits in cases of deliverance or exorcism; seeking to make the spirit involved deny (or confess) that Jesus is the Christ who came in the flesh. It may be that this is indeed valid, although it is usually obvious in cases of demonisation that the spirit is evil without such a test. However, it needs to be born in mind that there are instances in the Gospels where evil spirits clearly recognised and confessed who Jesus was but still refused to submit to his rule.

It is doubtful whether John had 'deliverance' in mind when he wrote this passage, and almost certainly he was not envisaging a conversation with some spirit speaking directly from a person. He had a broader view. He did not doubt that there were evil spirits; he had seen Christ cast out many in the course of his ministry. But those were simply lesser spirits under the authority of the great adversary, Satan. Jesus told some Jews who questioned him that they were of their father, the devil, (John 8:44) and in this letter John has already referred to the 'evil one' and to the antichrist, and he will state (5:19) that the whole world lies under the control of the evil one. Thus behind all preaching and teaching there is a spiritual power exerting influence over the minds of men and women. If a person is not serving the true God then, whether or not he or she recognises the fact, they are serving a false one, the god of this world, Satan.

So, says John, however persuasive the words of a preacher may be, and whatever manifestations may accompany them, do not be misled; what spirit lies behind it all? Is the teaching that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ and that he came in the flesh? Part of the teaching of the Gnostics was that Jesus was simply a human being but the 'Christ' came upon him at his baptism and departed from him before the crucifixion. In this teaching, the 'Christ' did not possess a human body of his own - certainly he did not take a human body (transformed into a resurrection body) back into heaven; he simply used the body of a man named Jesus, for a short period. This is a denial of the incarnation and of the true nature of Jesus as both God and man. It also denies the atonement because the 'Christ' left Jesus before the crucifixion. John is urging his readers to test what these heretics (and any future teachers who may come amongst them) really believe about Jesus. If they deny the truth of the incarnation then they are not speaking under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and are false prophets. They are being directed by the spirit of the antichrist who, as he has stated (2:18) is already at work in the world.

4:4-6

In both his gospel and his letters John, following the teaching of Christ, makes a clear differentiation between the way of God and the way of the world. (The 'world' being human society organised apart from God.) Perhaps this difference can be most clearly illustrated by recognising that the way of God is self-sacrificial, the way of the world is self-centred. It is interesting that in a fallen world one of the most successful ways of ordering society, certainly in the west, is capitalism which relies on exploiting this self-centred desire of mankind in competition - "what can I get?" whereas the way of Christ was, "what can I give?" And systems which, perhaps, have higher ideals of fairness and justice for all, such as Communism, fail because those in power very soon revert to the basic self-centred instinct of fallen human nature to preserve yourself above others.

John's point is that at their conversion, the believers were transferred from the world to the kingdom. Talk of the 'new birth' is not simply an allegory; something real happened. They are now 'of God'. Something has come alive within them that was not alive before. Remember how John opened this letter - talking about the Word of life. It is this Word of life which is now pulsating through his readers; Christ is in them through the working of his Holy Spirit who was the one who brought them alive and now has taken up residence within them. It may well be that because the one who is in us believers is greater than the one who is in the world (the devil), we have the victory in every realm, e.g. sickness, morality etc. However, in context John seems to be thinking of the battle for the mind. The believers have not fallen for the specious arguments of the heretical teachers, who speak from the viewpoint of the world. Naturally, the world listens to them because they do not have the dimension of the Spirit - that is a realm totally unknown to them, teacher and follower alike. To live according to the laws of an unseen kingdom and its unseen king is to them foolishness. But those who teach what the world wants to hear are, of course, welcomed by the world.

In the same way, those who are 'of God' recognise the truth of God. The Spirit who inspires the truth in the teachers (in v.6 the 'we' must refer to John and his fellow apostles, in contrast to the 'they', the false teachers of the previous verse) is the same Spirit who indwells the believers, and thus recognises and confirms that truth. Of course, to non-believers this is a circular argument (I am right because you recognise I am right) and is not conclusive. They do not recognise the existence of the Holy Spirit and so discount the validity of his independent witness. John is re-iterating what he heard Jesus teach, "He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God." (John 8:47) That is the criterion for recognising the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

4:7-12

John is known as 'the apostle of love' and here he returns for the third time to this theme. In 2:7-11 he speaks of love as a test as to whether someone is walking in the light or not; in 3:11-18 it is the evidence as to whether a person has eternal life; now he goes even deeper, although, in fact, the previous two depend on this. It is not simply a command to love, it is not simply that the life of God flows through us, it is that God himself lives in us. He has already spoken of this with regard to the impossibility of the Christian continuing to sin (3:9) now it is in the more positive aspect of being driven to love.

God is the source of love because he is love. It is important to grasp that fact. It is not that he has love nor that he does love; he is love. He can never 'not love' anymore that he can not be God, because that is not simply his nature, it is him. We must understand that John is speaking of true love as it is revealed in Jesus Christ - self-sacrificial love, and not what is often called love by the world. To say that because a man and woman 'fall in love' John would claim that they have been born of God and know God, is to misrepresent his argument. However, anyone who does demonstrate the sacrificial love of Christ, has indeed been born of God and knows him. Conversely, anyone who does not cannot know him because God is love and if God were truly living in him or her then that divine love would have to express itself (in John's argument, himself) through them.

John hammers home this self-sacrificial quality of true love by reminding his readers how God demonstrated his love not only to us, as though it were a display to be watched by spectators, but in our midst where we ourselves are the recipients of that love. He did it by sending his Son. Here John describes him as 'his only begotten Son'. It is difficult for our minds to understand just what this means; it is easier to grasp what it denies. It denies that Jesus was created. Had he been created that would mean that there was a time,

however brief, when God the Father existed but the Son did not (although it is better not to speak of 'time' in this connection and say simply "there was when"). The Son has always existed - the fact that God 'sent' him implies that, he was already there to be sent - but, while he is equally God with the Father, he is from the Father and in that sense is his 'Son' and subject to him. "His only begotten Son" is a way of expressing this mystery.

John says that the reason God sent his Son was that we might live through him. Other translations say, "to bring us life" or "to give us life". He is speaking here of the difference between life and existence. For many people life is little more than a trip on a roller coaster; it has its highs and lows, they experience excitement and boredom, but they go nowhere and get off where they got on. When we are united with Christ we discover who we are and why we are; we have a purpose and that purpose is outside ourselves, we are part of greater purpose. Jesus becomes our reason for living - we live through him.

However, the fact that Jesus came to earth, whilst it may demonstrate a concern for us humans, is hardly a full revelation of self-sacrificial love. So John spells it out - the source of true love is not in ourselves, not in any love we may feel arising from us towards God; it is his sending Jesus to die for our sins as a propitiation or atoning sacrifice. The full depth of love is not the incarnation, great as that is, but the atonement. Here we see that the love John is speaking about is not drawn from God by anything that may be attractive in us because we are sinners and therefore in enmity against all that God has planned and requires. It depends solely upon the fact that God is always expressing himself and what he expresses is love because he is love.

In this letter John seems to alternate between spiritual imperative and duty. If God dwells in us then his love will inevitably be expressed through us, this is part of the proof that we do know him and belong to him. Yet there is still an obligation on us as human beings with free will to align our wills with his will. Thus the Holy Spirit will be driving us, impelling us to love yet there is also an 'ought'; we ought to love one another. When we contemplate the depth of love God has shown us by the extent he was willing to go to in order to redeem us, surely we must respond in loving not only him but each other, for we were all made by him and designed to live for him.

However closely individuals in the Old Testament walked with God, no one actually saw him. Indeed how can anyone 'see' him who is Spirit? He was revealed most clearly to human understanding in the person of Jesus who said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). For the world to understand who God is the incarnation must happen again and go on happening, and the medium for that is us. God has to be seen in us who claim to belong to him. If we love one another that is when he is revealed to those with eyes to see, because then he is living, expressing himself, in us.

John goes even further, he says that in this way his love is perfected or made complete in us. The word translated 'made complete' occurs frequently in the New Testament and refers to something achieving its purpose. It has the same root as the one word Jesus shouted from the cross immediately before he died, "It is finished;" meaning, "I have completed it, I have done it." He had fulfilled the purpose for which he came to earth. God, who is love, never intended that that love should be confined to himself. He created a universe which would both reveal and itself express that love, and the height of his creation was mankind - "Let us make man in our own image." It is when that image reflects his own being that his purpose in creating us is fulfilled or made complete; and his own being is love.

Having said that God lives in us, John goes on to explain that the proof of this is that we have the Holy Spirit. But how do we know that? Because we can recognise the truth (cf. 4:1-3). The 'we' of v.14 must refer to John and the apostles who saw Jesus, and this verse echoes 1:2-3. But he immediately widens the application of the 'we' of the apostles to 'anyone' who acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, as proof of the fact that that person has been led to the truth by the Holy Spirit and so lives in God and God lives in him. Here John has extended the fact that God lives in us (v. 12) to the reciprocal truth that we live in God (vv. 13, 15 and 16). Stott draws attention to the double witness provided by the objective testimony of the apostles and the subjective testimony of the indwelling Holy Spirit, and he refers to Christ's words to his disciples, "When the Counsellor comes... the Spirit of truth... he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning." (John 15:26-7) and also "We are also witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." (Acts 5:32)

Verse 16 serves as a summary of what John has been explaining. The Father sent the Son to save us and it cost him his life. That is a clear illustration of how much God must love us; it is a rock on which we may stand. His love is not an attribute which he has, but is part of who he is; he is love. The fact that we know or recognise this as the truth and rely on it is proof that God has given us of his Spirit. However, it is not only that the Spirit leads us to recognise the truth, he drives us to love others and it is this love which is further proof that, through the Spirit, we are living in God and he in us.

4:17-18

John has already said that God's love is perfected or completed in us (v. 12) and now states that this gives us confidence to face the day of judgement. He has already referred to this (2:28) but here he gives a new reason for this confidence - even now, while we are in this world, we are like him. Jesus walked this world as the Son of God; we also are God's children (John 1:12-13). Jesus was totally confident in his relationship with the Father and we may be also. God loves us, the fruition of that love in us means that we need have no fear of facing him. Today few people seem to believe in a day of judgement, in John's time such belief would have been taken for granted. The thought of punishment for their wrongs is what makes people fear judgement; but we who believe, have faced our sins, confessed them and believe God has forgiven us because in his love he sent Jesus to die for us. If we know we are loved like that how can we fear meeting such a Father? The more perfect or complete our love the less will we fear; indeed, complete love is completely fearless.

In stating that in this world we are like Christ, John is thinking of the day of judgement and not the wider implications of that statement. However, it is encouraging to think that, if God does love us so deeply and intends that love to be perfected in us so that we, in turn, express that love to others (v. 12) then, surely, the ministry of Christ is to be continued in us. As he overcame the world and destroyed the works of the devil, so we are to do the same in the power of his victory. With Christ himself in us there is a very real sense in which we are to be Christ in the world.

4:19-21

In verse 7 John has encouraged or ordered us to love one another; here he says that we do love (there is no object, so it may be God or our brethren; in fact, of course, the two go together as he now points out). The reason we love is that God first loved us; it is both our response to his love and also his love working itself out through us. It is so easy to deceive ourselves about our love of God. We may genuinely believe that we do but we may have stepped out of reality into some rarefied compartment of the mind which we mistake for

the spiritual. John earths it in practicalities. If we are not loving our fellow Christians who are flesh and blood in front of us, and helping them in their material need (3:17), it is a deceit to claim that we love God, because the God we are loving is no more than some vague shadow created by our imagination.

The command "Whoever loves God must also love his brother," condenses Christ's teaching. "If you love me you will keep my commandments," (John 14:15) and "Love one another" (John 13:34). It is also contained in his summary of the law to love God and our neighbour.

5:1-5

Stott points out that throughout this letter John constantly refers to three tests which reveal the Christian - faith, obedience and love. He has shown how these are inter-related and now, as he draws to a close, he brings all three together again. The fact that someone believes that Jesus is the Christ is proof that he or she has been born of God. Current faith indicates the past event. Sooner or later every Christian wrestles with the problem, "did I choose God or did he choose me?" In fact, both are true. Because we have free will we can choose whether to respond to God or to reject him. However, it is important to understand that our choice is a response; God moved first. He chose us in Christ, before the foundation of the world (Eph.1:4): that is, before we actually existed. Barclay translates the opening sentence, "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has experienced the birth which comes from God". It goes without saying, of course, that John is speaking of true belief which deeply affects our living. Something which may be better expressed as believing 'on' or 'into' Christ.

There is a possible problem of interpretation regarding the second part of v.1. The authorised version has, "every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him." Who is "him that is begotten of him"? Phillips follows Augustine in holding that this is a reference to Jesus and translates, "The man who loves the Father cannot help loving the Father's own Son." However, in the context of what follows immediately, most scholars see it as referring to other believers who, like the believer mentioned in the opening sentence, have been born of God. What John is saying, therefore, is that as children of God we have been born into a family. It is natural for members of a family to love one another (whatever childish quarrels may arise). John applies that truth to the Family of the Church; we love the same the heavenly Father and so other believers are our brothers and sisters whom we love also. The test that we do love our brothers and sisters lies in obedience. A man may profess that he loves his wife but she may object, "Then why do you do things which you know hurt me? If you really love me, you will want to please me." If our love for God is genuine we will do as he asks; we will keep his commands, and in keeping them we will so walk with him that we will love the other members of our family.

John claims that God's commands are not burdensome. At first sight that statement is open to question because it is immensely difficult to keep them. But that is not what John is saying. They may be difficult but they are not a burden. To recognise that we have only to think of the laws of the Scribes and Pharisees, they were a burden and seemed never ending and infinitely detailed. It was often difficult to understand the reason for them. Whereas God's commands are utterly reasonable; they may be difficult to keep but in our hearts we know that they are right: we ought to forgive, we ought to love. What is more, once we grasp who Christ is (and here we are back again to the basic theme of the letter that Christ is the revelation of the ultimate reality which is the power or force which lies behind all that is) and align ourselves with him and the purposes of God, we desire to live our lives in that way. We want to be part of that eternal reality. Of course, the old nature is

still there, we still feel the pull of the world, but we have a new power within us (3:20-25) to enable us to overcome the world. Most modern translations personalise this statement and say 'whoever' is born of God overcomes the world. This is correct in that it rightly interprets the consequence, but the original has 'whatever'. It isn't the person but the power of the Holy Spirit in the person which enables him or her to overcome. Phillips has a brilliant paraphrase, "*for God's 'heredity' within us will always conquer the world outside us.*"

In other words, we have the victory. John says that that victory has overcome the world, it is an accomplished fact. We gained that victory when we were born again of the Holy Spirit, for then we passed from death to life (v.12); then we were transferred from the world to the Kingdom of God; and all that happened when we believed in Christ. So it was our faith that gave us the victory. What is more, it is our faith which continues to give us this victory over the world. It is the person who persists in believing that Jesus is the Son of God, who experiences the victory. In saying this, John is condensing all that is implied in believing that Jesus is the Son of God which, once again, takes us back to the opening statement of this letter. Jesus has revealed the Word of life that lies behind all creation. He has shown that it does exist, this world is not all. He has shown by his own example that it is possible to live the righteous life in this world. What is more, he has promised us who believe, a new power which will enable us to live that life also - the power of the Holy Spirit in us, who will lead us into all truth and strengthen us in adversity. That is what we believe when we 'believe that Jesus is the Son of God.'

John's readers have already illustrated the power to overcome the world in the fact that they have perceived the error of the false teachers who are of the world. They will continue to illustrate it as they obey God's commands and give to the brethren in need (3.17) at cost to themselves. The Christian will stand true even under persecution. All this is because he has already entered the unseen reality hidden from this world, and that reality is eternal life (1.2 and 5.13).

5:6-13

It is important to remember that the New Testament epistles were written for a specific purpose, they were not simply chatty letters to maintain contact; they were written to explain, correct or resolve situations which had arisen in a particular church or area. Therefore, whilst they contain matters of general doctrine, the arguments were selected or directed to meet specific circumstances, and other arguments which might balance these were not set out because they had no relevance to the particular problems under discussion. This passage is particularly difficult to understand and probably arose out of a current situation amongst John's readers of which he was aware. We cannot be certain what that situation was and so it is difficult to put the passage in its context. However, we do know that John wrote this letter to strengthen his readers' faith against the teaching of heretics who were almost certainly Gnostics. A particular belief of the Gnostics was that Jesus was the natural child of Joseph and Mary but that 'The Christ' descended upon him at his baptism and departed from him before the cross. Such teaching totally undermines the work of Jesus and deprives us of a Saviour.

If Jesus was not eternally God then God has not fully identified himself with mankind; Jesus is simply one more man who has died like everyone else - although the manner of his death was particularly cruel and violent. Nothing has been accomplished by it. It has to be human nature that is reconciled to God and the truth is that both the human and the divine nature meet in Jesus. He is fully God and fully man. 'The Christ' did not depart from him before the cross because "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19).

Although there are alternative suggestions as to what 'water and blood' refer to, such as the two sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper, or the water and blood which came from the spear thrust when Christ was hanging dead upon the cross, it is most generally accepted that they relate to the baptism of Jesus and to his death. Of course, it would be easier for us if John had actually said this instead of using such symbolism, and we do not know the background of why he did not. Nevertheless this refutes the teaching of the Gnostics. At his baptism the existing Jesus was declared to be the Son of God; he passed through water and he passed through blood. John emphasises that he is referring to specific events by repeating the assertion using the definite article - the water (his baptism) and the blood (his crucifixion). And the Christ came not only through and in the baptism only (because the Gnostics admitted that Jesus was the Christ from his baptism) but also in the crucifixion; it was 'the Christ' who died.

John says that the Holy Spirit testifies to the truth that Jesus was eternally the Christ. Just what was in his mind? For John the Baptist, the coming of the Holy Spirit on Jesus at his baptism was proof this was the Son of God (John 1:32-34). That is to say, Jesus was the Son already and the Spirit came upon him, he was not just another human being selected to bear the Christ for a period. However, John here is probably thinking of the Holy Spirit bearing inner witness to us of the truth of Jesus as the Christ. This is a role which Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would fulfil – “When the Spirit of truth comes... he will testify about me (John 15:26) and When he, the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth... he will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you” (John 16:13-14).

So, says John, there are three witnesses, the Spirit, whom he has already referred to as a witness, but also the water and the blood are witnesses. We have already seen how these three bear witness and refute the teaching of the Gnostics, and it may well be that John meant no more than that. However, it is possible that he had in mind also the fact that our baptism in water and our participation in the death of Christ (the blood) in Holy Communion, together with the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, continue to bear witness to him. By stressing the fact that these three agree John may have in mind the law which says that no one may be convicted without the testimony of three or at least two witnesses (Deut.19:15). (Note: the Authorised Version has an insert to verses 7 and 8 which refers to a triple witness in heaven. It is certain that this is not in the original letter written by John.)

The testimony of three independent human witnesses is enough to convince us of the truth of an event or a matter. If we are willing to accept such human testimony, John argues, then the testimony of God himself to Jesus as his Son (which he has just pointed out is threefold) is surely greater. There is a spiritual dimension which begins to operate when a person believes in Jesus as the Son of God. He has a witness within himself which assures him that this is the truth. Jesus refers to this spiritual dimension when he says, “If any man's will is to do his (the Father's) will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority” (John 7:17 RSV). Paul refers to it in a different way, The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit... (Rom. 8:15). So here John speaks of a truth which is real to us who believe but which is unknown to those who do not, because they have never experienced it; we have an additional witness in our heart (by which he means our spirit). John spells out the implication if someone does not believe the witness or testimony which God has given of his Son: he is stating that God is a liar.

What is the purpose of this testimony which God has given to his Son? It is no academic exercise, it has an immense and practical purpose; it is to give us eternal life. This life is in his Son, we have no other access to it. Once again we are taken back to the opening of the

letter (1:2). That which ultimately is, that which existed before anything else existed, the cause of everything, the purpose of everything, is God. No human being could approach God or find him had he not revealed himself and reached out to us. That revelation, that reaching out, was Jesus the Christ. He is of that source, shares the same nature, so he has life, eternal life, in himself. "As the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself." (John 5:26) John concludes his argument, therefore, with the statement that a person who has the Son - who is in such intimate relationship with his that the Son is in him and he or she is in the Son - has life; life as opposed to existence, the very life of God himself. The corollary must be that anyone who does not have this relationship does not have this life.

John's purpose in writing his gospel was that others might believe in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, and thus receive eternal life (John 20:31). His purpose in writing this letter was that his readers, who were already believers, should have the assurance that they do indeed have eternal life. They had stood firm against the heretical teachers, but possibly they had been a little unsettled by them. Because none of us has yet died and seen the life the other side of this, no one can prove scientifically that it exists. But the believer has the testimony of the Holy Spirit within him. Jesus is alive, we are already in that eternal life; or rather, it is in us. We may trust that it will continue and expand as we leave this world, which seems so real but is ephemeral, and enjoy the ultimate reality of being caught up into the life of God himself.

5:14-15

The fact that we already have this eternal life because of our relationship with Jesus leads John to speak of the confidence we have in approaching God. The barriers between him and us are down and we know that he hears us. God is never too busy to listen to his children. However, we have already seen that to receive eternal life we have to align ourselves with the purpose and plan of God, so also our prayers must be in line with his will. Petition is not in order to change God's will, but to bring in his will on earth as it is already manifest in the heavenly realm. God is eternally working out his purpose; our personal desires might well interfere with that overwhelming plan, so it is not our will but his which we are to seek. Having said that, we must remember that his purpose includes our welfare; his plans for us are our highest good. So when we draw near to him the desires of our heart must be his desires. Then we may be sure not only that he hears us but, because our desires are his desires, we have what we ask. John says that we have, not will have. Of course, in God's economy, we may or may not see the outcome immediately, but the petition has already been granted. John stresses that by his insistence that 'we know... we know'. Of course we do; how could God not do what he wills to do? He is only waiting for us to will his will into being on earth.

5:16-17

It seems that John had probably thought he was closing the letter at verse 13 but his mind drives on to a number of other points which he adds as an afterthought. There is no carefully reasoned link between verses 15 and 16, although both have to do with prayer. This passage is very difficult because no one can be sure what John means by a sin unto (leading to) death. Before we look at that, however, we must recognise that there is a difference in understanding between various translations regarding the first sentence of v.16. The original has 'he should pray and he will give him life.' Recognising that all life comes from God, many translations insert 'God' instead of the second 'he'; intending to clarify the meaning as 'the man should pray for the sinner and God will grant life to that sinner.' It may well be, however, that John sees such a close relationship between the believer and God and that the prayer of the believer is so effective that there is a very real sense in which it is the believer's prayer that saves the sinner. We know that it is not God's

will that anyone should perish; and in John's understanding it is the prayer of the believer which releases or brings into effect God's will on earth. So John may well intend that each 'he' refers to the pray-er: by praying for the man and receiving from God the answer to his prayer, it is the believer who gives the sinner life. If that is so, it reveals both how essential it is that we intercede and how effective our intercession is. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. (James 5:16)

Now we turn to the meaning of this difficult verse, and there are two areas of uncertainty. First, of whom is John speaking? and, secondly, what is the sin unto death? The reference here is to a 'brother' committing a sin. Is this a fellow believer or is it any other human being? i.e. he who is a brother because he is in the family of God or a brother because of the common bond of all humanity? If it is the former a difficulty arises over the doctrine of eternal security. Is it possible for the believer to fall from grace and to perish? There are texts which seem to say that this is not possible - "My sheep... I give them eternal life and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my hand." (John 10:26-27). It could be argued that whilst no other person can snatch away a believer, the believer has free will and may choose no longer to believe in Christ, but that still leaves the assertion that "they shall never perish." There are also texts which seem to say that it is possible - "I beat my body... so that I myself will not be disqualified for the prize." (1 Cor. 9:27) Perhaps the strongest argument for the doctrine of eternal security is the parallel doctrine of election; salvation is ultimately the work of God, we do not choose him we only respond to his prior choice of us. We cannot keep ourselves, only he can give us the strength to remain faithful. If that is true then, if a person falls away, it can be only because Christ has allowed him to do so; but it is unthinkable that Christ would choose a person and then deliberately reject him. That conflicts with all that we believe about "Jesus Christ the same yesterday and today and for ever." (Heb. 13:8) The doctrine causes a practical problem in that in order to preserve it, we have to say that someone who gives all the appearance of having a genuine faith, who lives a righteous life, who prays and who has prayers answered, even who leads others to Christ, but then falls away, was never, in fact, a true believer. This is not the place to argue further the pros and cons of this doctrine but its relevance to this passage is that if John believed that it is impossible for a believer to perish then the 'brother' committing a sin unto death must be a non believer. It seems probable that this is what John has in mind because he is about to state that, "anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe and the evil one cannot harm him." (v.18)

What then is the 'sin that leads to death'? We can dismiss the idea that John is speaking about physical death; not only does that not fit the context but it would mean that we were never to pray for an alcoholic or drug abuser. Obviously John is speaking of being lost in eternity. It seems most likely that he is referring to the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:31 and Mk. 3:29). What is that? It is when a man deliberately denies what he knows to be true. People may commit horrendous sins in ignorance, but there is still the hope for them that they will see the truth and repent. However, if someone has an inner witness of conscience that something is true and yet he denies it; what hope is there for him or her? They are divided against themselves and eventually their personality must disintegrate. When someone calls evil good, then what is there in them capable of being saved? The supreme example of this, of course, is Satan. He is in rebellion against his Creator and all creation as it is. To defy such utter goodness which is the eternal reality must result in having no place in that reality and that state is eternal destruction. If a person knows that God is, and that he is good, and then deliberately opposes him, what can we pray for him? that he will see the truth and repent? But that is the problem; he has seen the truth and has determined to reject it.

There is a final comment to be made. Unless someone is committing the sin unto death we may and should pray for him. Is John suggesting that we pray for his conversion? This is a real problem. Whatever we believe about the doctrine of predestination and election, there is the corresponding doctrine that we have free will and are responsible for our actions. However else he brings about our salvation, God does not force it upon us, we choose to accept it. Do we, therefore, have a right to pray for a person's conversion because that would imply that God must over-ride their free will and force them to believe? Indeed, to take it a stage further, if we hold to the doctrine of predestination how do we know whether or not a person is predestined - might such prayers not be aligned to the will of God? In fact, there is nowhere in Scripture where a prayer is recorded for someone's conversion. There are prayers that the gospel will be preached clearly to all the world, but no prayer that any specific individual will respond. There are also prayers that individuals will be strengthened or revived if they are already believers; but no prayer that would imply over-riding his or her free will to compel them to believe. Of course, there are records in history of people praying for the conversion of others (Augustine's mother), and we may well hesitate to forbid such prayers, surely God knows and interprets the desires of our hearts.

In this passage John is referring to someone whom a believer sees is committing some sin and (with the proviso about the sin unto death) says we should pray for him. But what should we pray? Surely we may pray that his eyes will be opened to see both what he is doing and to the way of Christ. What he does in the light of that knowledge must be up to him. If he really sees and rejects the truth, then he may well be in danger of committing the sin unto death, for which we are not to pray. Yet John says that because of our prayers God 'will give him life,' and can that mean anything other than eternal life? But is he really implying that every time we see someone sinning and we pray for them they will be converted? This is, indeed a very difficult passage to understand but certain truths are clear. 1. We have a duty to pray for others. 2. Our prayers are very powerful in their effect. 3. There is a sin which results in death. 4. All wrongdoing (lawlessness 3:4) is sin but, with that one exception, it does not lead to death. John does not here spell out that such sin must be confessed and forgiven but he has already clearly stated that in Ch.1 v.9.

5:18-21

John closes his letter by stating three things of which we may be certain. First, the believer does not sin. He has already dealt with this in some detail in 3:4-10. We have seen that this does not mean that he is incapable of sinning but that he can no longer continue to do so as part of his way of life. John goes on to explain why this is. In 3:9 he said that it was because God's seed remains in us (see note); here he says it is because the Son of God keeps us safe and the devil cannot harm us. At least, that is how almost all the modern versions translate this verse. In fact it seems that John is playing on words. The original states that anyone begotten of God does not continue in sin because the one begotten of God keeps him. Surely John must mean by that, a believer (one begotten of God) is kept by Jesus, (the one begotten of God). The A.V. however, ignores any play on words and takes 'the one begotten of God' as referring to a believer in each case and says that the believer keeps himself. It is true that we must set our hearts to live in righteousness, God will not force us against our will, but we none of have the power to live righteously as we have set our minds to do; we need the power of God. Whether or not John had this intention, by using the same phrase of the believer and of Jesus, he preserves both the uniqueness of Christ's own relationship to his Father - he is the only begotten Son - yet who, by taking our flesh, identified himself with humanity and became our brother.

The NIV says that the evil one cannot 'harm' him. Most other translations have 'touch'. It is the same word used when the risen Jesus tells Mary not to touch him. It really means to fasten or to cling. John is not saying that the devil's attacks cannot have any effect on the believer, but that he cannot gain any hold on him.

The second matter of which we can be certain is that we belong to God. The first had been rather impersonal - 'anyone born of God'; this is far more personal - 'we' are children of God, or are of God. John contrasts this with everyone and everything else; that lies in the evil one. Stott points out that the word 'lies' implies that it does so without struggle as though it is content to be there. Satan does not have to exert his power openly over those who are content with the way of the world or, if they are not, make no effort to fight against it. It is against the believer that Satan turns his attention. Which is why it is important that we have the assurance that Christ will keep us. So the battle lines are drawn and everyone is on one side or the other we are either of God or we are under Satan, and if a person has not chosen the former he or she remains under the latter. However, the reason Christ came was to bring people out of the world and into the kingdom of God, and that offer is open to all.

The third truth we know is that the Son of God has come and that he has enabled us to know God himself. This, of course, is an astonishing claim and at the very heart of Christian faith. Ours is not simply a religion of a book, important as the Bible is. It is not a theory nor a set of doctrines. God is not a being 'somewhere up there.' John is ending as he began; he is talking of 'that which we have seen, looked at and touched' (1:1). The Word became flesh, God entered his creation and the effect of that continues (he 'has' come, not simply 'did' come). He has given us knowledge (the word is stronger than the 'know' at the beginning of the sentence) of the ultimate reality which underlies the whole of John's thought in this letter. This is similar to the comment in his gospel - "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." (17:3)

Further more this is not simply a disembodied fact of our faith; we are in him who is true. There is a double truth of our faith, that we are in him and he is in us (much as a sponge in the sea is in the water and the water is in it). Here John does not refer to the second part of that truth for he is contrasting us being in God with the world being in the power of Satan. It is, perhaps, unfortunate that several translations insert the word 'even' in his Son Jesus Christ because it is not in the original. By doing so these give the impression that John is making no differentiation between him who is true and Jesus Christ. However, we need to preserve both the unity of the Godhead and the separation of the three, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and the fact that within that Trinity the Father is supreme. If John is talking only of the Son here, then why does he speak of his Son? for we have to ask, 'whose Son?' The thought underlying all John's understanding is that it is the Son who brings us to the Father - No one comes to the Father but through the Son (John 14:6).

This question of whether John is referring to the Father or the Son carries over to the final sentence of this verse. As Stott remarks, if it refers to the Son then 'this would be the most unequivocal statement of the deity of Jesus Christ in the New Testament'. Several commentators (including Luther and Calvin) hold this view. However, the reference to 'his Son', as we have seen already, leads us to assume that John is speaking of the Father. Although we believe that Jesus is God and has life in himself (John 1:4 and 1 John 1:2) Jesus is the revelation of the Father who is the true God and eternal life.

John ends his letter abruptly but, once again, refers to his readers lovingly as his dear children. He has just spoken of the Father revealed in the Son as the only true God, so he warns them to keep themselves from idols. Just what idols he had in mind we do not

know. Maybe he was thinking of actual images (he uses the definite article - 'the idols') or the false doctrine, and therefore the mental picture of God, promulgated by the heretics he has been attacking. Whatever the particular idols may be, his concern is that believers know the reality which, or rather who, lies behind everything that is; what can compare with that?

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