

## S E S S I O N   T W E N T Y

## AN INVITATION TO APOSTOLIC FELLOWSHIP

*1 John 1:1—2:11***I. CONFLICTING INTERPRETATIVE APPROACHES TO 1 JOHN****A. Identification of the Views<sup>1</sup>**

## 1. View One: Tests for the Assurance of Salvation

## a. Description:

This view presupposes that the book was not written primarily to Christians but rather to a mixed audience of both believers and *professing believers* (the latter not being truly saved). This view would see 1 John 5:13 ("that you may know that you have eternal life") as the primary purpose of the book. One can only have assurance that they are genuinely saved *if* they can successfully pass several tests: (1) they have right beliefs (e.g., that Jesus is the Messiah and that He has come in the flesh); (2) they are being obedient to the Lord; and (3) they practice love for fellow Christians.

## b. Implications:

This view would understand those who "walk in darkness" as non-Christians and those who are "in fellowship with God" as true of all Christians (irregardless of their spirituality). Those who do not keep His commandments and love their brethren show themselves to be non-Christians. "Abiding" is understood to mean the same as being "in Christ" (hence, *all Christians* are "abiding"). Thus, only those who are being obedient and loving their brethren can have assurance of salvation.

## 2. View Two: Encouragement to Have Fellowship with God

## a. Description:

This view presupposes that the book is written primarily to true believers who were being lured away from apostolic teaching and practice by certain false teachers. Instead, the author (while warning them of these false teachings) encourages the readers to *seek intimate fellowship with God* by remaining faithful to apostolic doctrine, walking in obedience, and loving the brethren. This view would see 1 John 1:3 ("that you also may have fellowship with us") as the primary purpose of the book.

## b. Implications:

This view recognizes that it is possible for a true Christian to "walk in the darkness" and to be out of fellowship with God. Disobedience in one's life does

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<sup>1</sup> For helpful discussion of these differing views, see Gary W. Derickson, "What Is The Message of 1 John," *BibSac* 150:597 (Jan-Mar 1993): 89-105.

not prove he is a non-Christian, but implies that he/she is not coming to know God more intimately. "Abiding" is understood to be the result of walking in obedience with God (i.e., a person could be a true Christian but not necessarily *abiding* in the Lord). Assurance of salvation is possible for all Christians on the basis of having *believed* upon Christ, regardless of whether or not they are walking in obedience.

### B. Adherents of These Views

#### 1. View One: Tests for Assurance of Salvation

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#### 2. View Two: Encouragement to Have Fellowship with God

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### C. Evaluation

#### 1. The statement of purpose in 1:3 should be seen as primary rather than that in 5:13:

Throughout the book, John mentions several purposes for writing, but it is more logical that his primary purpose would be stated *up-front* in the prologue to the epistle.

Even if one disagrees that 1:3 is a primary purpose, there is no reason to insist that 5:13 has greater weight than other statements of purpose in the book. [Reference to "these things" (ταῦτα) in 5:13 does not necessarily mean the author has in mind the entire epistle, for John's use of this term elsewhere (see 2:1 and 2:26) can have the immediate context in mind—not the entire epistle.]

#### 2. It is doubtful that 1:5-9 depicts the contrast between a true Christian and a non-Christian, because "confession of sins" (see 1:9) is never given in Scripture as the basis for becoming a Christian.

#### 3. John states his primary intention in 2:1 for what he has written in 1:5-9—namely, that believers ("My little children") should not sin. [Note: the great majority of commentators see 1:5—2:2 as a single unit].

#### 4. Since John urges the believers ("little children") to "abide in Him" (see 2:28), then "abiding" must not necessarily be true of all Christians. Also, "abiding" in John 15 is best seen as sanctification, not soteriological ("you are already clean . . . Abide in me!").

#### 5. John explicitly says in 1 Jn 5:16 that it is possible for a brother to commit "sin leading to death." [The idea that true believers do not persist in sin receives no support from this].

### D. Conclusion

1 John should not be seen as a series of tests for determining whether one is or is not a true Christian. Rather, John was writing to those who were Christians, but whose faith was under attack from certain false teachers (2:26). John was urging them to listen instead to God's apostles (4:6) and to have fellowship with them. They could experience fellowship with God by walking in the light, and thus come to know God more intimately (2:3).

## II. THE PROLOGUE TO THE BOOK (1:1-4)

### A. The Witness of the Apostles to the Incarnate Christ (1:1-2)

#### 1. Their Experience of Christ

We should remember that John is probably writing this epistle many years after his earthly experience with the Lord Jesus. Yet he, like the other apostles, were eye-witnesses of Him and would have forever remembered not only the things he said and did, but also the tone of His voice and mannerisms as well. What he writes in vv 1-2, he writes from first-hand experience of his time with the Lord. Thus, John writes *with authority*, and the readers ought to listen to this apostle rather than those who were trying to deceive them (2:26).

2. Why the Stress on their Physical Experience?

Apparently, these false teachers were distorting the biblical view of the incarnation. See 4:2; cf. 5:6. A true Christology must understand that Christ was fully God and fully human.

B. John's Two-fold Purpose in Writing Stated (1:3-4)

1. Apostolic Fellowship (1:3)

The "with us" obviously refers to the band of apostles. The word "fellowship" (κοινωνία) basically means *to share in* or *have a part in*. John writes so that his readers will shun the false teachings they are being confronted with, and will instead take sides with the apostles to whom Christ entrusted His truth. The issue is not their salvation.

Hodges underscores the significance of this issue:

What the apostles said as representatives of a Risen Lord carried all the authority of the Lord Himself. To refuse to hear the apostles was to refuse to hear God Himself. In the same way, to be "out of fellowship" with apostolic thought and practice was to be "out of fellowship" with the Father and the Son. There is no form of true Christian fellowship outside of apostolic truth, since the New Testament message is nothing more nor less than the truth which the Lord Jesus revealed to His apostles and which He commanded them to teach to us (John 14:25-26; Matthew 28:18-20).<sup>2</sup>

2. Apostolic Joy (1:4)

Their joy is in the reader's welfare—by seeing the readers embrace apostolic truth and not wander from it (cf. 3 Jn 3-4).

### III. APOSTOLIC FELLOWSHIP MUST INCLUDE A HOLY WALK (1:5—2:2)

To have fellowship with the apostles will mean several things, but the very first thing that John confronts his readers with is the right attitude toward sin. To fellowship with the apostles also means to fellowship with a God who is holy. Here is how one must do that.

A. The Holy Nature of God (1:5)

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<sup>2</sup> Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles of John; Walking in the Light of God's Love* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 51.

Light and darkness are very prominent biblical figures. In view of the following discussion about sin, light speaks of holiness and truth. Darkness (the opposite) speaks of sin and lies.

### **B. Lies and Delusions the Christian Must Avoid (1:6—2:2)**

Notice how this material is structured. [In Greek, there are six statements having ἔάν ("if") plus a subjunctive verb]. These are arranged in three couplets.

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|----------------------|---|
| Verses 6, 8, and 10: | (1) negative statements   |
|                      | (2) all begin with "if we say that"   |
|                      | (3) all three conclude that the person is lying or deceived   |
| Verses 7, 9 and 2:1  | (1) positive statements (presume integrity regarding sin)   |
|                      | (2) mention of cleansing from sin is found in each (or in the case of 2:1, the Lord's propitiation for sin) |
|                      | (3) all three conclude with a consolation for the believer  |

#### 1. Lying About Fellowship with God (1:6-7)

- a. The first problem concerns the person who would dare to say they are having "fellowship" with God when they are really walking in darkness. Cf. Eph 5:7-12. The fact that Paul can exhort believers to "walk as children of light" and to "not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness" implies that it is possible for a child of God to do so (cf. 1 Jn 2:11). If they do so while claiming fellowship with God, they are lying. [Hence, it is possible for a believer to be walking in darkness].
- b. The Positive Benefit of Walking in the Light (1:7)
  - (1) The believer truly has fellowship with God ("fellowship with one another" probably means the believer with God, not other believers).
  - (2) There is cleansing from all sin. This probably looks at progressive sanctification. The more we walk in the light, the more God will cleanse our lives from sin.

#### 2. Deceived About Sin in Our Life (1:8-9)

- a. No sin? (1:8) [The issue is not *sin nature*]. While we can "walk in the light," in truth there is probably no moment when we can say we have "no sin." We should not say we are sin-free, because there will always be deep-seated sin we are not conscious of.
- b. Proper Response (1:9) God is concerned about the attitude we take toward the sin we do know about. When He makes us aware of sin in our life, our responsibility is to confess it. The word for "confess" can be used soteriologically, as in 1 Jn 2:23. But there, it is "confessing Christ." In our context, it is confessing sins, which is never a requirement for salvation. [This is why I don't think these verses are talking about Christian vs. non-Christian].
- c. The Positive Benefit of Confessing our Sins (1:9)
  - (1) Despite our feelings, we can be assured of forgiveness.

- (2) There is cleansing from sin. But this probably means from the sins that we may not be aware of. The confession is primarily for sins we are shown while seeking fellowship with God.
3. Refusal to Acknowledge our Sin (1:10—2:2)
- a. The Problem: For Those Who Are Not Honest About Their Sin (1:10)
- This probably looks at the case of the person to whom God has shown them sin in their life, but they are refusing to acknowledge it. That is, they are denying their sin (cf. Ps 51:6). To do this would be to make God a liar.
- b. The Hope: For Those Who Are Honest About Their Sin (2:1-2)
- These two verses seem to be a counterpart to vs 10, just as the first two problems had a positive counterpart. If vs 1:10 looks at the Christian who refuses to acknowledge his sin, then 2:1-2 is probably looking at the Christian who is willing to be more honest about sin in his life. 2:1-2 is looking at the believer who truly wishes to walk in the light and has attempted to do so . . . but nevertheless has stumbled into sin. He is not denying his sin (as in 1:10), but has not been successful in walking in the light. For this person, John can be very compassionate. Notice that (in contrast with vv 1:7 and 1:9), John adds two things: (1) he reminds them that they are still God's children; and (2) he reminds them that the point of writing these verses is to motivate believers not to sin. But even John knows that sooner or later, sin will happen. So, if they do sin when they had sought to walk in the light, John reminds them of their hope: they have an Advocate in Jesus. This is the word *παράκλητος*, which is normally used of the Holy Spirit. Here, it is used to speak of Christ as the One who helps us. This probably suggests that He helps us by mediating on our behalf with the Father (cf. Lk 22:31-33). Notice the text adds the words "the righteous"—He is ideally qualified. Furthermore (2:2), Christ is the propitiation for all sins of all people (cf. Jn 1:29)! The idea that Christ only died for the elect is not true. [Jew/Gentile distinction is not in the context].

#### **IV. THE OPPORTUNITY FOR DEEPER INTIMACY WITH GOD (2:3-11)**

The previous section dealt with an honesty that believers should have toward sin and God's holiness. Walking in the light and confessing sin enable us to have fellowship with God. In 2:3-11, John teaches how it is possible for a believer to even know God more intimately.

**A. Obedience Enables Believers to Know God More Intimately (2:3-6)**

## 1. What Obedience Reveals: Knowing God (2:3-5a)

John is not talking here about a test (namely, obedience) to see if one is truly a Christian or not. He is talking about believers knowing God more intimately. The Christian who is keeping God's commandments is the one who is truly coming to know God in a deeper way. [Illus. – I knew my wife when I married her, but I know her much more deeply after 26 years of marriage].

## 2. What Obedience Enables: Abiding in Christ (2:5b-6)

Vs 5b should not be understood in the Pauline sense of "in Christ." Verse 6 clarifies that he is talking about *abiding in Christ* (not "being in Christ"). The principle of *abiding* is what our Lord Himself had taught in John 15:4-8. Note that in John 15, he says they are already "clean" in vs 3. But he exhorts them to "abide" in vs 4. Abiding is necessary to bear fruit for the Lord. A person may be a Christian, but not necessarily "abiding" in Christ. Confirmed in 2:28 and 3:24.

Transition: What is the "same manner as He walked"? Obedience, yes, but John is probably thinking more specifically about Christ walking in love (same connection in John 15:9-10). Likewise, believers are to walk in love, the greatest of all commandments.

**B. Obedience Will Lead to Loving the Brethren (2:7-11)**

## 1. Reference to the "old commandment" – looks at John 13:34 and 15:12. They have had this from the beginning of their Christian experience.

## 2. This is also a "new commandment" – this is the main principle for the new order that Christ will bring in with His kingdom.

- a. The "darkness" – looks at the world and its lust (2:17), aspects of this present order
- b. The "true light is already shining" – John is thinking eschatologically, i.e., he has the return of Christ in mind (see 2:28 and 3:2). It is already shining as we love one another now (cf. Jn 13:35).

3. Verse 2:9 must have a Christian in view:

- a. The context has Jn 13:34-35 in view—a Christian's love for another Christian
- b. The one whom he fails to love is "his brother"

**FINAL LESSONS FROM OUR STUDY**