

# COMMENTARY

## I. PROLOGUE AND PREMISES: I JOHN 1:1-10

I JOHN  
1

1:1-4

### **A. The Life Appeared (1:1-4)**

#### BEHIND THE TEXT

How the author uses language is a part of understanding this small writing. This holds especially for the verbs and pronouns in this section. The characters in the ancient story of the text go unnamed in 1 John, but there are characters, nevertheless.

In vv 1-4 there are ten first person plural Greek verbs (“we”) and six related pronouns (“us” twice and “our” four times). These pronouns situate the author among a group of like-minded Christians (**we**), writing to another group of Christians (**you**, vv 2-3, always in the plural). He then shifts from addressing the readers as **you**, choosing rather to *identify with them*, using “we” (vv 6-10). Common themes throughout the Johannine writings, along with small hints in John’s use of language, suggest the existence of a “school” of disciples identified with John the apostle (Brown 1979; Culpepper 1975).

The prologue to 1 John (vv 1-4) introduces the apostolic proclamation of the gospel. John does this with declarations that point to what he seeks to emphasize throughout the remainder of the letter.

The prologue of 1 John is reminiscent of the prologue of the Gospel of John (1:1-18). But it falls short of being a commentary on it (Smith 1991, 36). Some knowledge of the prologue of the Gospel helps make sense of the opening verses of 1 John. John 1:1-18 and 1 John 1:1-4 share common vocabulary and concepts (**beginning, word, light, life, witness, and what has been seen**).

## IN THE TEXT

■ **I** What is frequently called the letter of 1 John lacks most of the formal features of Greco-Roman letters of the period (see Introduction). It fails to identify its sender and recipients. It includes no customary greetings and no assurance of prayers or well-wishes. Its conclusion lacks the expected farewells.

At the same time, 1 John gives evidence of being a letter of some sort. In 2:19 John's wording ("they went out from us") depicts him and his readers as an identifiable community of faith. Also, 1 John employs forms of *graphō* ("I write") thirteen times in ten verses (1:4; 2:1, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, 21, 26; 5:13). Thus, as a decidedly written document, 1 John addresses specific readers. Its frequent use of affectionate address ("children," fifteen times; "dear friends," six times) has the feel of a personal letter (see Introduction).

The word **beginning** (*archēs*) *somewhat* echoes the prologue of the Gospel, which draws readers back to Gen 1:1. But numerous scholars see **the beginning** in 1 John 1:1 as referring to Jesus (Strecker 1996, 57; Brown 1982, 158, 175), the beginning of the Christian movement (Jones 2009, 19-20; Bruce 1970, 35), or specifically to the incarnation itself (Bultmann 1973, 9). The term may highlight the inauguration of the gospel message especially in Johannine circles (Smith 1991, 36-37).

What was **from the beginning** had been **heard** (also v 3). But this was more than a proclaimed message. Verbs of seeing, hearing, and touching argue for an incarnate and personified *logos*, not merely a preached message. Some translations identify *logos* here as Christ by means of capitalization—**Word** (so also the NASB and KJV, but not NRSV; see Brown 1982, 163-66).

This gospel was both **heard** (*akēkoamen*) and **seen** (*heōrakamen*). The Greek perfect tense of both verbs indicates that John's and the community's past experience of Christ had an "abiding" (Brooke 1912, 2) or "enduring"

effect (Strecker 1996, 12). The words of the Gospel reverberated in their ears. What they had seen burned an indelible image in their mind's eyes.

The verbs **we have looked at** (*etheasametha*; see John 1:14) and **have touched** (*epsēlaphēsan*) shift to the aorist (simple past tense). This suggests that John's earlier perfect tense was intentional. Bruce suggests that the *apparent* duplication of visual verbs—**seen** and **looked at**—attempted to echo the language of John 14:9. What was seen went beyond mere outward vision to discern the inward glory (1970, 36). Brooke similarly links the use of the aorist to the *character* of what was seen (1912, 4).

John stresses the visual experience—**with our eyes**. This addition of **eyes** emphasizes and personalizes the account, giving immediacy to the report of the experience of Christ (Marshall 1978, 101; Brooke 1912, 2). In the same way the functionally unnecessary **our hands** stresses the tactile evidence. Christ was experienced in all sensory ways (Brooke 1912, 5).

John's claims in these opening lines are bold, first person *plural* (**we**) assertions. Some interpreters understand them as the words of an eyewitness of Jesus' life, who speaks with a representative, collective voice. They take "we" to mean "I" and the first generation of believers. They presume that John the apostle was the author. This is certainly possible.

But if the author of 1 John wished to make a strong claim to being a personal eyewitness of the events of Jesus' life, why did he not use the first person *singular*? He could easily have written "that which *I* have heard, which *I* have seen." The first person singular appears often elsewhere in the letter—fourteen times. A first person singular claim would have clearly asserted the apostle's unique authority as an eyewitness. This would seem a natural and persuasive tactic, given his theological and ethical struggle with formidable opponents.

The words of the prologue claim an encounter with Jesus that is a highly personal and present reality. But they need not require that the author was an eyewitness. The language may be a standardized way of expressing confidence that the message of the gospel came faithfully to the readers in an unbroken chain from **the beginning**.

The use of **we** may indicate that the author is a spokesman for a Johannine "school" (see Introduction), which preserved and passed on the traditions about Jesus originating from the Beloved Disciple (Brown 1982, 175). The words—**heard, seen, looked, and touched**—underline the importance of personal witness to Jesus (Brown 1982, 163).

Jesus is **the Word of life** (*tou logou tēs zōēs*). Yet John delays specific mention of Jesus until v 3. Whereas the Gospel stresses the person of the **Word**, here the emphasis is upon the salvation **life** he imparted. But this

life, truly seen, heard, and touched, was inconceivable apart from the incarnate Son through whom it came. The “subject matter,” the **life**, is Christ the person (Bultmann 1973, 8). The language is strongly experiential. As a fully human incarnation of the invisible God, he became visible, audible, and tangible (Smith 1991, 39). The theological implications of this are at the heart of these letters.

John eagerly advocates a Christology that fully embraces Jesus’ humanity. The Gospel of John presupposes the humanity of Jesus and elaborates on his divinity. In 1 John the emphasis is inverted, significantly stressing his humanity (Black 1990, 40; see 1 John 1:1-3; 2:2; 4:2, 10).

This changed emphasis is an apparent response to the docetic claims of one-time members of the Johannine community. The Christian faith was firmly grounded in a *person*, Jesus, and also anchored in *history*—time, place, and event. Therefore, John may give a subtle, layered meaning, of *logos* as *both* incarnation—**Word**—and the written and preached message—word—about Christ (see Phil 2:16; Flemming 2009, 124).

In v 1 the words **this we proclaim** are not in the Greek text but supplied from v 3. Verse 1 is, strictly speaking, an anacoluthon, that is, a broken construction. John does not grammatically complete the sentence he begins. He starts the sentence with a series of direct object phrases—**That which . . . , which . . . , which . . . , which . . .** But he delays stating an explicit subject or verb (see NASB). After a parenthesis in v 2, John finally clarifies his point in v 3, providing the subject and verb he left unexpressed in v 1.

■ **2** Jesus Christ—this person, who was **life** embodied—**appeared**; or “was revealed” (NRSV). The idea of **life** “manifested” (NASB) or embodied has its basis in the Fourth Gospel: “In him was life” (John 1:4) and “I am . . . the life” (John 14:6). The root of the Greek verb *ephanerōthē* influences the English word “epiphany” and can refer to the appearance of a deity. It often conveys the idea of making visible that which is invisible.

Several NT passages use the term “epiphany” to refer to an appearance of the risen Lord (Mark 16:9, 12, 14; Luke 24:34; John 21:1, 14). All five instances of *phaneroō* in 1 John (1:2; 3:5, 8; 4:9) refer to Christ’s coming into the world. This appearing was soteriological—to “take away our sin” (3:5); “to destroy the devil’s work” (3:8); so “that we might live through him” (4:9). Jesus reveals God’s love; and this revelation continues in the living witness of the churches (Müller 1993, 414).

The verb **appeared** is in the passive voice, indicating action done by another. By using the passive, rather than the active voice, biblical writers were able to refer to God as the agent who accomplished an action without mentioning his name. This “divine passive” was one way for the postexilic

Jews to avoid the error of their ancestors. They would not take God's name in vain.

## Divine Passive

The divine passive in the NT derives from the Hebraic habit of avoiding the divine name. This extra measure of caution was tied to a reverential posture toward God, who was worthy of honor above all. It also expressed a reverential awe before the fearsome holiness of the divine presence. Those who place the kingdom and righteousness first “will be given” (by God) the things necessary for life (Matt 6:33). Faithful asking in prayer means it “will be given to you”—by God (Matt 7:7).

When believers were in need of words to give faithful witness before authorities, Jesus promises, they “will be given what to say” (Matt 10:19). In Revelation divine passive forms include provision of purity—“each of them was given a white robe” (Rev 6:11) and protection (Rev 12:14). The divine passive affirms God as actively engaged in history but without overtly naming him in the text. It also conveys the idea that all things occur within the permission of God. Nothing will happen that can surprise or derail the divine purpose.

An interpretive paraphrase of v 2 would be: *God fully revealed to us in the person of Jesus the very life of God, which was formerly unknown to us.* The emphasis is not on Jesus as an eyewitness of God. Rather, the incarnation allowed believers to see what his enemies failed to see: “The world did not recognize him. . . . his own did not receive him” (John 1:10-11). They saw him for who and what he truly was.

Thus, the divine **life**, identified as **eternal life**, was placed on display, clearly set before human eyes. By examining him who was **life** incarnate, people could come to know the nature of God. Athanasius explained this as the Christian experience of “becoming by grace what God is by nature” (*On the Incarnation*, I). He highlights the knowledge of God not merely as information but crucially as transformation.

These opening lines are similar in tone to the experience of Thomas in the Gospel (John 20:24-29). He would not believe unless he could see for himself and touch the risen Jesus' wounds. In both instances, hearing, seeing, and touching provide conclusive evidence that Jesus' death was not the end of the story. This truly significant fact made the story of Jesus good news that had to be told. The crucified and risen Jesus was experienced as alive and victorious over death. Otherwise, life was hopeless (see 1 Cor 15:14).

The words **life** and **eternal** are combined frequently into **eternal life** (*tēn zoēn tēn aiōnion*) elsewhere in the NT (eight times in the Synoptic

Gospels; nine times in Paul's letters; twice in Acts). But **eternal life** is especially prominent in the Gospel of John (sixteen times) and in 1 John (six times: 1:2; 2:25; 3:15; 5:11, 13, 20).

John perceives **eternal life** as "life from another eon (*aiōn* . . .) or sphere. Indeed, it is the life of God Himself" (Brown 1982, 168). It is life of a different quality, not merely the life of this present age continued without end. The Word (John 1:1) incarnate as Jesus brings us God's age-to-come **life** (John 6:68; 10:28; 12:50; 17:2). Jesus *is* the true life (1 John 5:20). He reveals the life of God from and for all eternity. Jesus is the past, present, and future of God (Rev 4:8; see 1:4, 8).

John differs importantly from the gnostics here. The gnostics located eternal life in an almost inaccessible realm beyond time and space. But the Johannine view brings **eternal life** into the present and firmly anchors it to the person of Jesus Christ (John 17:3). The life of eternity resides in us (John 4:14; 6:27; 12:25; Link 1976, 482).

Jesus gives life and light (John 8:12); indeed he *is* "the light of the world" (John 8:12). He gives light and life even to the creation itself (John 1:3-5). The **eternal life** that Jesus offers is eschatological—it reveals the end times in kind and duration. The implication is that whoever has this life will not be lost in eternity (John 6:40; 10:28). The eternal life is also, in Johannine understanding, a present reality, something one has now (John 3:36; 5:24; 6:47; Schottroff 1991, 108).

Verse 2 reports in the present tense, **we . . . testify** (*martyroumen*) . . . , **and we proclaim** (*apangellomen*). Apostolic and Christian authority is two-fold: personal experience and commission. The translation **we are continually testifying and proclaiming** highlights the continuous emphasis of the present tense. Authentic witness is ongoing, a story that never ends. The Greek word for witness gives us the English word "martyr." Later in Christian circles "witnesses" were those willing to die rather than recant their uncompromising devotion to Christ. Such was not yet the experience of believers in 1 John (Beutler 1981, 2:392-93).

## Faithful Witness and Martyrdom

In the book of Revelation, the title "faithful witness" (*ho martys ho pistos*) is ascribed first and foremost to Jesus Christ (Rev 1:5). To the church at Laodicea the risen Lord identifies himself as "the faithful and true witness" (Rev 3:14). Witnessing for one's faith did not initially mean to die for one's faith. But martyrdom eventually became a synonym for faithful witness even unto death. This was due, in part, to the expanding persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire.

The early tendency to associate these ideas appears already in Revelation: “Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city” (2:13). The statements “be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you a crown of life” (Rev 2:10), and to “those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus” (Rev 20:4) further accentuate the growing issue of martyrdom in the late first century (adapted from Menoud 1962, 288).

■ **3** Bruce distinguishes between the “exclusive” and “inclusive” use of *we*. He argues that it is exclusive in v 3: “we had this experience and you did not.” He insists that the prologue is best understood as the words of a first-generation Christian addressing Christians of a later generation (1970, 38).

Faithful witnessing about Jesus comes from a community of faith. The author speaks with a corporate voice, using the first person plural—*we*—in three verbs in this one verse. This collective testimony indicates that their experience of Jesus was not a solitary religious phenomenon. It was something shared as part of a worshipping community.

The main verb for vv 1-3, *we proclaim* (*apangellomen*), anticipated in v 2, finally become explicit. The word connoting a messenger bearing news was employed in both sacred and secular contexts. The word appears in reports of resurrection (Matt 28:8, 10; Mark 16:10, 13; Luke 24:9); of the message of God (Matt 11:4; Luke 7:22); and declaring Jesus as the Messenger of God (Matt 12:18; Heb 2:12; Schniewind 1964, 56-73).

A number of compound words with *angellō* occur in the NT with essentially the same meaning (see v 5, “declare” [*anangellomen*]). These related words often convey a special technical sense, the proclamation of God’s intention to save. This is not a declaration of a new age to come as much as it is a recollection and clarification of something already known (Becker and Müller 1978, 46-47).

John’s piling up of experiential verbs of testimony and withholding of the main verb emphasized the *content* of the message rather than the *act* of proclaiming (Marshall 1978, 100). In v 3 the verb order is **seen . . . heard**. This reversed the order of v 1, **heard . . . seen**. Along with **seen** in v 2, this poetic repetition intensifies the impact.

John wanted his readers to embrace the one who was **seen** and **heard** and so enter into the **fellowship** (*koinōnian*). To have **fellowship** was to have something in common. Business partners (Luke 5:10); those who share a “common faith” (Titus 1:4); those who enjoy God’s grace along with others (Phil 1:7); those who participate in Christ (1 Cor 1:9); and Gentiles who share the benefits of the “spiritual blessings” of Jews (Rom 15:27) all experience a kind of *koinonia*.

Following Pentecost, Luke describes the life of the first Christians simply as *tēi koinōniai* (Acts 2:42). In view, no doubt, was their “sharing-together quality of life” in the Holy Spirit now understood afresh in terms of participation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The word *koinōnia* occurs only in this chapter in the letters (1 John 1:3, 6, 7) and never in the Fourth Gospel. Nevertheless, the word *menō* (“I remain”) in the Gospel conveys much the same concept and appears frequently (Smith 1991, 38; Bruce 1970, 38-39). The **fellowship** of 1 John was made possible and developed on the basis of a faithful proclamation of the gospel.

Such a web of rich relationships—between believers and God, and among fellow believers—was a natural outgrowth of the incarnation (Strecker 1996, 20). Because the life of God was revealed in Christ, authentic, spiritually valuable relationships could develop between persons. The present tense of the verb, *exēte* (you . . . **may have**), suggests that John addresses those who are already Christians, encouraging them to *remain* faithful (Marshall 1978, 105).

To be in fellowship with Christ was to belong to a community of believers—**you** (plural) and **with us** (*methē hēmōn*). Healthy horizontal relationships involve persons rightly relating to other persons. But John also writes of connections between his readers and **the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ**. In such vertical relationships, worshippers rightly relate to God, the object of worship and author of all right human connections. In a real sense the relationship between Christians, at its deepest level, is simply Jesus!

John was apparently troubled by some readers who were no longer closely tied to him and his message. Consequently, he wrote to call the faithful away from a potentially eroding commitment to the apostolic teaching as he understood it. Further evidence of this may be seen in subsequent sections of the epistle about walking in light vs. darkness (1:5-7) and the labeling as “antichrists” those who “went out from us” (2:18-19). John did not write in a vacuum, but out of real pastoral concerns. Verse 3 expresses the aim of his proclamation: **that you may also have fellowship with us**, as opposed to them. His desire for authentic **fellowship** required them to resist the threat posed to the community by the erring teachers.

■ **4** This verse touches on a vital aspect of the advance of the gospel, namely the importance of writing—**we write**. John stresses this means of pastoral care at a distance an inordinate number of times for such a short letter (**write** appears ten times—1:4; 2:1, 12, 13, 14, 21; 5:13). In the one-



chapter letters he minimizes the value of writing (while writing!) and expresses his preference for a personal visit (2 John 12; 3 John 13).

The Bible is available to modern readers because first-century Christian leaders wrote. Authors and countless scribes faithfully copied manuscripts by hand before the invention of the printing press. Prophets put pen to paper in response to divine command (Isa 30:8; Jer 30:2; Hab 2:2). Revelation records the command (from God/Christ/an angel) to “write” twelve times (1:11, 19; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14; 14:13; 19:9; 21:5).

John writes to enable communal **joy**. The word **joy** (*chara*, related to *charis*, “grace”) appears seven times on the lips of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel (3:29; 15:11; 16:20-24; 17:13). The Greek words in 1 John 1:4 are identical to those in John 16:24 (NKJV): “that your joy may be full,” except in manuscripts of 1 John that have “our” rather than “your.”

The variant reading **your** in 1 John may have been introduced by a scribe attempting to harmonize the epistle with the Gospel. Alternatively, a scribe could have heard incorrectly when a reader in a scriptorium was dictating to a group of scribes making multiple copies of 1 John. In such a setting the words *hēmōn* and *hymōn*, like **our** and “your,” could be easily confused.

The NIV (also NASB, NRSV) translators preferred the reading **our** (*hēmōn*) in v 4 based on two important fourth-century uncial manuscripts, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus. As the more unexpected reading, it is probably more likely. A later editor might be expected to smooth out the reading, not make it more difficult.

The word **joy** appears four more times in the Johannine letters (2 John 4, 12; 3 John 3, 4). The mutual joy experienced in their shared commitments led them to preserve their written communications and look forward to face-to-face contact.

The readers of 1 John familiar with the Fourth Gospel would no doubt have heard echoes of the joy emphasized in Jesus’ final discourse (John 15:11; 16:24; 17:13; see John 3:29). The pattern in John 15 is similar: A shared relationship—**fellowship**—results in **joy**. The meaning in both Gospel and epistle reaches out to include the joy of salvation.

John writes so the **joy** of the Johannine circle may be made **complete** (*peplērōmenē*, “filled up”), experienced in abundance (see 2 John 12). The perfect tense of the participle suggests a **joy** brought to fullness and sustained. Furthermore, the passive voice reminds the readers that their **joy** is a gift from God. This gift is best experienced when received in a faithful, corporate setting in which the hearers obey what they have been taught by apostolic authority.

In summary, vv 1-4 anticipate in essence the message—the theological witness—of the entire letter. Implied first is the continuity of revelation between the Father and the incarnate Son. Second, John stresses the biblical truth that the life of the Christian is a relationship that comprehends both gospel and ethic. Held together is both “What God has done” and “What we are to do”—the inherent unity of the horizontal and vertical dimensions of Christian life.

It is imperative for our spiritual welfare and the health of the church that these two are kept in balance. The presence and interpenetration of both is necessary. “This life, . . . the eternal life,” is “fellowship with us” and “with the Father and with the Son.”

## FROM THE TEXT

### *A Challenge to Witness Faithfully*

Those who experience **eternal life** (v 2) have an obligation to be faithful examples of and spokespersons for this life. Hearers in every generation tell the story and share the life it offers. From the first Christians, through those who brought the Scriptures to us, and passed it on by our faithful witness, the story never ends.

How do we witness faithfully? By personally embracing the Christian faith and the person of Jesus Christ. Faithful testimony happens as we immerse ourselves in that faith. By studying and living its message, we become confident embodiments and retellers of the story. Our competence as faithful witnesses improves with practice.

### *A Concern to Maintain the Christological Paradox*

The ancient struggle to hold in creative tension both Christ’s full divinity and full humanity, evident in this letter, continues today. Jesus was a Jewish man of his times, a rabbinic teacher who lived in first-century Israel. Some see him as a courageous social revolutionary (Crossan 1991), but certainly not a deity (Crossan 1994; for critique of such skepticism see Johnson 1996, 20-27). But the overarching testimony of the NT affirms Jesus as “God” (John 1:1) in whom “God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell” (Col 1:19), “in very nature God” (Phil 2:6), and “the Son [who] is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Heb 1:3).

On the other hand, some well-intentioned Christians have been fearful of anything that might diminish the divine claims made in Scripture and in early creeds about Jesus. So they end up with a Christ who never became truly incarnate. They conceive of his humanity as an illusion or a

disguise he left behind when he returned to the Father. This was precisely the error faced in 1 John. Some denied that Christ had come and remained “in the flesh” (4:2-3).

Maintaining both aspects of Christology, even as they stand in paradoxical tension, reflects historic Christian faith. Both the full divinity and the full humanity of Christ are equally true. The early creedal statement from the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325) that was later adapted at Chalcedon (A.D. 451) declared that Christ was “true God of true God” but also “was made flesh . . . and became man” (Bettenson 1971, 26).

### *A Call to Joy in Christian Community*

In the NT joy is associated especially with Jesus’ birth (Matt 2:10; Luke 1:14, 44; 2:10) and his resurrection (Matt 28:8; Luke 24:41, 52). Joy naturally flows from a transformed life (Luke 15:7, 10) and within a community that has experienced spiritual renewal (Acts 8:8). Joy is not dependent on circumstances. That is, joy can be present whether or not all the aspects of our lives are flowing smoothly. Rather, joy consists of an inner and abiding peace, knowing that, whatever comes, one is rightly related to God and others. This already experienced eschatological joy (assured by resurrection faith; John 16:20-22) anticipates a not-yet fulfillment (1 Cor 2:9; see Bultmann 1973, 14 n. 28, who sees an eschatological salvation on the basis of John 17:13).

One may know joy individually, but it is best experienced in the company of others. Our allegiance to Jesus Christ is nurtured by other believers. First John encourages us to experience the richness of human friendships, anchored and enriched by fellowship with God.

## **B. Forgiveness and Cleansing (1:5-10)**

### BEHIND THE TEXT

The theological vocabulary of this section strongly resembles the non-biblical manuscripts known as the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS). This collection of documents and the Essenes, who probably composed, assembled, and preserved them, espouse a strongly dualistic theology. Those who were properly allied with God and righteousness were “sons of light” and those who were hostile to God and would be judged were “sons of darkness.”

### The Dead Sea Scrolls

In 1947, near the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, a wealth of ancient manuscripts began to be discovered in the caves of the area. The site, called Qumran, provides significant data for understanding the religious thought-world

of a separatist Jewish community as well as some aspects of early Christianity. The DSS include copies of every book of the OT except Esther, as well as a large number of noncanonical writings. For introductory material on the Qumran community, English translations of the scrolls, and extensive bibliography see Vermes (2004); for a short history of the DSS see Fields (2006).

The Qumran community was composed of priests who had totally abandoned the established temple at Jerusalem and relocated some distance away at the Dead Sea. This physical separation, in itself a sharp rejection of temple leaders, was coupled with critical language directed toward Jerusalem (1 QS VIII, 8-9, 14-15; IX, 4-5; see Vermes 2004, 77-84). They understood their function in the Jordan valley as a fulfillment of Isa 40:3: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God."

This separatist Jewish sect was contemporaneous with the developing Christian movement. Both were Jewish expressions of religious faith with significant overlaps in language and worldview. Both intended to perpetuate the best of Judaism; and both affirmed a coming Messiah. But the Essenes anticipated a messiah (or two; 1QS VIII, 10; Vermes 2004, 86) *to come*, while the Johannine Christians celebrated the messiah who *had already come*.

Both the Essenes and the Johannine Christians embraced a sharply dualistic outlook (e.g., truth/lies, light/darkness). The Essenes' self-identity as true light is much like the language of 1 John (Vermes 2004, 84-85; 1QM I, 1-15). In 1 John 2:8 "the true light is already shining" (see John 1:4-9). Both viewed the future as an approaching apocalyptic face-off between good and evil. The references in 1 John to "the last hour" and "antichrists" (2:18) reflect a religious viewpoint akin to those at Qumran.

Both groups practiced water baptism. But it is debatable whether its meaning was similar. The ritualistic lustrations in Judaism were repeated again and again (e.g., prior to entrance to the temple). In contrast, the baptism associated with John the Baptist, and embraced by followers of Jesus, had a "once for all" transformative character to it.

Essenes were, like Jesus, critical of the Jerusalem temple's leadership. John's account of the clearing of the temple (2:13-22) provides more and harsher censure of temple worship than the Synoptic Gospels. John locates this tension-packed action by Jesus at the beginning of his Gospel, whereas the Synoptics report it near the end of Jesus' life. The event heightens the tension between the temple leadership and Jesus (John 7:32; 8:20, 59). Jesus' statement "destroy this temple" (John 2:19), though spoken in refer-

ence to his body, ironically points forward to the actual destruction of the temple by the Romans in A.D. 70.

The preaching of John the Baptist in the Jordan valley also contains themes found in the Johannine and Qumran literature. Like the Essenes, he preached words of warning against the religious leaders (“Pharisees and Sadducees”) to flee the “coming wrath” of a certain fiery judgment. The Baptist expected a final separation of “wheat” from “chaff.” He also urged Jews not to depend on their descent from Abraham as security against this coming judgment (see Matt 3:7-12). This reflects the kind of dualism found at Qumran and evident in 1 John.

## IN THE TEXT

First John 1:1-4 introduces the fundamental fabric of the Christian proclamation. Namely, the comprehensive concern of how Christians relate to God and to each other, woven out of the threads of an adequate ethic and an appropriate Christology. In the content and grammatical structure of 1:5-10, John now moves into a more detailed exploration of the inner or theological structure of his witness to the gospel. This is the first and foundational exposition of his proclamation. As we understand these verses, we understand the message of the entire epistle. In them John utilizes either explicitly or implicitly all of his essential concepts in their inner relation.

■ **5** The Christian **message** (*angelia*) had been **heard** and was still sounding in their ears (*akēkoamen*, perfect tense). But this announcement is ongoing—**we are declaring** (*anangellomen*). The ultimate source of the announcement is God (or Christ; see v 3). The content of this **message** is that **God is light** and **in him there is no darkness at all**. This is a key announcement for John’s interpretation of the gospel to his readers. It is “the theological core of his world picture” (Houlden 1973, 57).

The association between **God** and **light** appears on the opening page of the Bible. Genesis 1:1 reports that “darkness . . . over the surface of the deep” was dispelled by God. He spoke light into existence and declared the light “good” (Gen 1:3). Psalm 104:2 describes God as clothed “in light as with a garment.” Psalm 27 equates salvation and light and identifies God as the source of both.

The prologue of the Gospel of John employs the language of the Genesis creation narrative to say of Christ: “In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it” (1:4-5). The Fourth Gospel speaks of light twenty-

three times, and presents Christ as “the light” (“light of the world” in John 8:12; 9:5). But in 1 John, only **God is light**.

Life and **light** express the salvation offered to those who will believe in Christ (John 1:4). But **light** also speaks of God’s self-revelation as “the true light that gives light to every man” (John 1:9). Thus the “true light” is both a necessity that belongs to God’s moral nature and the source of all moral illumination.

John’s language seems to counter a gnostic use of life and light as secret knowledge to a *few*. Instead the terms mean the revelation of God clearly to *all*. In the dualistic images of the literature from Qumran, **light** and **darkness** typified the radical difference between good and evil. The Dead Sea sectarians referred to themselves as “sons of light” (War Scroll 1QM, 1Q33, 4Q491-7, 4Q471; see Vermes 2004, 161-85; Ritt 1993, 3:448). They were ruled by “the Prince of Light” as opposed to the great enemies of God, who were led by “the Angel of Darkness” (1QS III, 13-IV, 1). *T. Levi* 19:1, a Jewish pseudepigraphal document, speaks of the “sons of light” and the “sons of darkness” (see John 12:35-36, 46; also 1 Thess 5:5: “You are all sons of the light and sons of the day”).

The imagery of **light** in contrast to **darkness** in 1 John identifies those allied with the Johannine community in contrast to the secessionists. To “walk in the light” (v 7) is to live by the truth (implied in v 6). To journey in the light of God’s self-revelation in Jesus is to experience fellowship with God’s people and cleansing “from all sin” (v 7). **God is light** and “God is love” (1 John 4:16), and by inference, God is “truth” (1:6). God as light, love, and truth is good; and evil cannot coexist with good (Marshall 1978, 109).

■ 6 A series of false claims begins. The false statements in vv 6, 8, and 10 are matched with truthful antidotes in vv 7, 9, and 2:1. Each set of erroneous assertions is introduced by **if we claim** (*ean eipōmen*). In v 6, **if we claim** is followed by “but if we walk” (v 7). In v 8, “if we claim” is paired with “if we confess” (v 9). In v 10, “if we claim” (v 10) has its corollary in 2:1.

John expresses the heretical false claims in climactic order. That is, the problems he faces move from the general to the specific, and then to the most personally condemning (vv 6, 8, 10). The solutions follow the same pattern, from the general to the specific and then to the down-to-earth life of the disciple (vv 7, 9; 2:1-2).

The structure of each verse in the sequence is nearly identical—condition, consequence, and explanation (1:6, 7, 8, 9, 10; 2:1b-2). Verse 6 is typical: **if we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in darkness** is the condition. It is followed by the consequence: “we lie,” and the explanation: we “do not live by the truth” (Nauck 1957, 23-24).

The ethical character of the problem John addresses is stressed primarily in the three “conditions” in vv 6, 8, and 10. Its christological implications are present in the “consequences” and “explanations.” The latter two put together balance the verses in a more formal structure. Thus, the problems and the solutions John has set up are both ethical and christological in character.

The verbs in the three pairs of claims are in the subjunctive mood. This suggests a hypothetical probability, but not a certainty (Wallace 1996, 461). A person might or might not make such claims. A professing Christian might choose to walk in darkness, but this is not a certainty. An expanded translation to capture the ideas would be *if we claim to have fellowship with him (though one might make such a claim, or one might not)—and if we . . . walk in the darkness (though that need not happen).*

The repeated phrase *if we claim* seems to indicate that some, either outside or within the Johannine churches, have actually made such claims. This is what John seeks to correct (Smith 1991, 43). John considered such aberrant views a serious danger to his readers. Some had perhaps already been swayed to these positions. It is risky to reconstruct the views of a group by reading materials critical of them written by others. But the opponents of John seem to have been close at hand, even people formerly within the Johannine churches (1 John 2:19). John no doubt understood all too well what the opponents were teaching (Bogart 1977, 28-29).

John, by using *we*, may be identifying with the group to whom he writes (Strecker 1996, 29). He stood as one of them in order to dissuade them from the dangers of the secessionists. But the repeated *if we claim* (vv 6, 8, 10) may be merely a stylistic device. Bogart considers the three first person plurals here as equivalent to the three impersonal pronouns in 1 John 2, represented by the substantive participles *ho legōn* (*the one saying*, 2:4, 6, and 9; Bogart 1977, 28).

Both verbs in the first clause, *we claim* and [we] *have*, are in the present tense. So if we claim to be in a continuous, shared (*koinōnia*) relationship with Christ, but live in a way that is inconsistent with our *claim*, we are actually presently living *in the darkness*. To do so is to *walk* at odds with the *truth* (v 6: *we are not doing the truth*; see John 3:21).

This would involve believing a teaching different from that of the Johannine churches (2 John 9-11). At issue also would be not loving the “brother” (1 John 1:7; 2:9-11; 3:23). To so *walk in the darkness* is to engage in blatant self-deception: *we lie* (*pseudometha*) and are failing to *live by the truth*.

## Truth

The concept of “truth” (*alētheia*) appears more than two dozen times in the Gospel of John, twice as many as in the Synoptic Gospels combined. Truth is the most frequent key word in the letters (Thomas 2004, 20, 39).

In the Gospel of John truth can refer to *content to be believed*—“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (8:31-32; see vv 40-46). God’s “word is truth” (17:17).

But truth also assumes *living in right relationship with* “the only true God” (17:3). Jesus is truth incarnate as God’s revelation (1:17; 14:6; Bultmann 1973, 97, 99), and the Holy Spirit is “the Spirit of truth” (14:17; 15:26; 16:13). The individual who receives God’s truth “lives by” it (3:21), worships “in spirit and truth,” and is sanctified by the truth (17:17).

The world, a domain of darkness and falsehood, has been invaded by Christ, “the true light” (1:9). Jesus, active in creation (1:10), comes into the world he helped shape, but “his own did not receive him” (1:11). Ironically, as Jesus is tried and condemned, *the world is on trial* for its rejection of truth (Köstenberger 2009, 288-89, 437-41).

In the letters John assures his readers that they “have an anointing from the Holy One, and . . . know the truth” (1 John 2:20; see 2 John 1; John 8:32). In 3 John 8 believers are to be coworkers in the truth (Jones 2009, 268). The five instances of “truth” in 2 John 1-4, and five more in 3 John, may signal the elder’s concern over doctrine as he calls his readers to “walk in the truth” (3 John 3). But his imagery indicates that his concern is not for static creedal orthodoxy (Jones 2009, 268; see Lieu 1991, 94-96). The image of walking presents a picture of truth as a dynamic, ongoing, shared relationship.

Truth can be personified and so give testimony in behalf of another (3 John 12). Believers walk in truth, indeed, may live in truth forever (2 John 2; 3 John 3, 4). For the elder, truth signifies not only the Christian message but also the incarnate Jesus, who by the Spirit can enter into a believer (Marshall 1978, 62 n. 17). Not only is Christ the revealer of truth, but also he himself is the truth (John 14:6). Thus, knowing the truth means more than hearing Christ’s words; it involves personal union with him (Dodd 1968, 177-78).

The theme of practicing truth appears also in the Qumran literature—1QS I, 5: “that they may abstain from all evil and hold fast to all good; that they may *practice* truth, righteousness, and justice . . .”; V, 3: “They shall *practice* truth and humility in common, and justice and uprightness and charity and modesty in all their ways”; VIII, 2: “They . . . shall atone for sin by the *practice* of justice” (emphases added; see Vermes 2004, 98, 103, 109).



Truth spurs to action. In 1 John *doing the truth* includes acting in loving ways toward one's fellow believer (2:9-10) and being generous with material support to "his brother [and sister] in need" (3:17; see vv 16-18). This is strikingly similar to James, for whom true faith is always demonstrated by actions (Jas 2:14-26). Also *doing the truth* means not being led astray from what "you have heard from the beginning" (1 John 2:24). The emphasis on **fellowship with** God and the mention of "the blood of Jesus, his Son" in v 7 indicates that Christology as well as ethics is in view.

Walking, having **fellowship**, and doing the **truth** are related, continuous activities. Quitting one reflects cessation of the others. The ancient metaphor of walking naturally became a part of the Christian vocabulary. Jesus said, "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12; also 11:9-10; 12:35). The Apostle Paul employed the image of walking often (*peripateō* is translated "live" in Rom 6:4; 8:4; Gal 5:16; Eph 4:1; 5:8).

The metaphor appears several times in the Psalms (1:1; 15:2; 86:11; 128:1). To walk with another was to be in agreement with him (Amos 3:3), to keep in pace with another (Gal 5:25). Remaining aligned with the Johannine churches was "walking in the truth" (2 John 4; 3 John 4), and to "walk as Jesus did" (1 John 2:6).

■7 God's work in us **purifies** (*katharizei*, present tense) and may be understood as having a continuous aspect—**is continually purifying**. The purifying continues as we walk with God. Cleansing is both *what God does for us* and an unfolding reality as *our obedience enables us to live in a purifying relationship with God*.

**The blood of Jesus** speaks of his suffering on the cross unto death. John offers it as the sufficient basis to cleanse **from all sin**. This purity, conditioned upon a continuing obedient response to God's grace, means this work of God is not accomplished once-for-all in a moment. As Harvey Blaney rightly stressed:

It is a mistake to think that all which John implies here can be attained on one occasion or in response to a momentary total surrender to God. Jesus said "Follow me." Only those who begin to follow and walk in the light can experience the results spoken of. (Blaney 1967, 354-55)

We keep walking, and God keeps the purifying efficacy of the merits of Christ's death applied to our lives. We may never presume we are cleansed from sin by our own efforts.

Walking **in the light** enables believers to **have fellowship with one another**. The image of walking in light is found in the Psalms (Pss 56:13;

89:15) and in Isaiah, “Let us walk in the light of the LORD” (2:5). In the Gospel of John the image is of believing and loving discipleship toward Jesus (John 8:12).

The Essene community considered walking in light evidence one was among the sons of righteousness. In contrast, walking in darkness revealed one to be a son of wickedness (1QS III, 20; Vermes 2004, 101). In 1 John walking **in the light** is to live in obedience to God, who “is light” (v 5). It is to experience God’s presence and be shaped by God’s character as revealed in **Jesus, his Son**.

Previously in v 6 the claim “we . . . have fellowship with him” was negated by walking “in the darkness.” So one might now expect to find John saying that walking **in the light** leads to fellowship with God. Instead, John extends the thought a step further (Brooke 1912, 15). The result of walking **in the light** means **we have fellowship with one another**. For the Johannine Christians, fellowship with the Father and the Son was inextricably woven together with fidelity to the community of faith (1:3).

John is careful to stress the fact that it is God, through **Jesus, his Son**, who does the cleansing. Most specifically, it is **the blood** of Jesus that **purifies**. Many modern minds are deeply resistant to the imagery of blood sacrifice. However, John, the collective witness of the NT, and indeed, the entire Bible, all point toward the concept of reconciliation between sinful humanity and the holy, loving God. This was accomplished by a death, which meant the shedding of Christ’s blood. His death, conceived as a blood sacrifice, appears in the NT in numerous places (Mark 14:24; Rom 3:25; 1 Cor 11:25; Eph 1:7; Heb 9:11-14) and will soon appear in this letter (see the commentary on 1 John 2:2).

The word **purifies** (*katharizei*, v 9), in a variety of usages in the NT and LXX, suggests making clean. It means to cleanse from sin in Heb 9:22, 23; 10:2. Luke, reporting Peter’s words about the outpouring of the Spirit upon Gentiles in Cornelius’ household, describes the giving of the Holy Spirit as achieving the *katharisas* of their hearts (Acts 15:9). The primary point in both Hebrews and Acts is the removal of all that hinders relationship to God.

In the Gospel of John forms of *katharizō* appear in 15:2-3 to describe the cleaning away of branches not producing fruit. In John 13:10-11 the idea is applied metaphorically to explain that not all the twelve disciples were *katharoi*, a reference to Judas the betrayer as having a heart alien to Jesus.

In Matthew the term describes one being cleansed from leprosy (8:2, 3; 10:8). This transformation enables ceremonial, ritual acceptance for the one so cleansed. John, here in v 7, asserts that God does more than *view*

a person differently due to Christ's death and a person being "in" Christ. God **purifies** so that a person *becomes* morally different when brought into relation to him. What was unclean is made clean. The defilement of sin, the fact and the effects of living contrary to God's will, is cleansed (see on 1:9).

The work of God being stressed in 1 John calls for an ethical ordering of one's life as a natural result of a new relationship. It is a holiness that, though certainly and always derived from Christ, and achieving reconciliation to God through him, becomes a transformative reality in the life of the disciple of Jesus.

How thorough is the cleansing? It is from **all sin**. Brooke understood the phrase **purifies us from all sin** as indicating "the *removal* of sin" from the life of the believer (1912, 15). Brooke further proposes that John envisions sin here as an active power, not a reference to specific acts of sin (Brooke 1912, 16-17). Smith speaks of sin as first a root cause, a condition of alienation from God that leads to expressions that are sinful (Smith 1991, 46). Marshall writes that "purification signifies the removal *not only of the guilt of sin but also of the power of sin* in the human heart" (1978, 114, emphasis added). The idea of an inner condition of sinfulness is readily apparent in other NT passages, notably Paul's treatment of sin in Romans as a power at work in persons (Rom 6:12-14; 7:11, 13).

The phrase **from all sin** thus conveys wonderful promise. God's cleansing activity that flows from Christ's death is a deep and thorough work, attending to "all that is called sin" (Blaney 1967, 355). The Greek word *pas* is rendered "all" in three instances in 1 John when the word is used as an adjective with a singular noun—here in v 7, **all sin** (*pasēs hamartias*); v 9, "all unrighteousness" (*pasēs adikias*); and at 5:17, "all wrongdoing" (*pasa adikia*).

The cleansing addresses **all sin** (or "every sin," NIV margin). Forms of *pas* are translated three times as "every" in 1 John as an adjective with a singular noun—in 4:1 as "every spirit" (*panti pneumatī*) and in 4:2-3 as "every spirit" (*pan pneuma*). Whichever translation is used, the implication remains that God's remedy for sin is complete. Sin cannot continue to defile the person, or faith community, that continually walks in the light.

Two instances in 1 John might be taken as approaching a definition of sin. "Sin is lawlessness" (*anomia*, 3:4) and "All wrongdoing [*adikia*] is sin" (5:17). The statement in 3:4 suggests sin as a condition. In 5:17 the obvious sense is of violations. In John 16:9 Jesus speaks of sin as unbelief. The lack of proper belief in Jesus (Christology) is one of the foundational problems faced in the letter.

So in the Johannine writings sin is against God's law, against righteousness, and a failure to believe in Jesus. While "law" occurs only once in the letters, "command" appears twelve times. The commands are twofold: (1) "believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ" (3:23; 5:10, 13); and (2) "love one another" (3:11, 23; 4:7, 11, 12). When John writes of a cleansing from all sin and from all unrighteousness, he points toward a divine remedy for all that is anti-God's law, anti-God's character, and anti-Christ.

What we need, God provides. Liberation from sin through the atoning death of Christ is offered to all, for sin is universal (Strecker 1996, 31). John, in this well-structured set of verses (1:5—2:2) brings strong language to bear on the pastoral challenges at hand. Sin is real, personal, serious, and pervasive. But divine correction is all these as well.

■ 8 The claim to be without sin creates a challenge for interpretation. The present tense of the verb perhaps indicates a continuous force: *if we are presently claiming we have no sin*. Later, John calls his readers to live no longer under the dominion of sin (2:1). But he does, however, clearly acknowledge that sin may intrude into the lives of Christians.

John obviously does not agree with what his opponents are saying. Two different types of perfectionism appear in 1 John, "heretical" and "orthodox" (Bogart 1977, 47-49). Proponents of the rival "heretical perfectionism" perverted the Johannine understanding. It seems to presume gnostic influences, which viewed the material universe, including the human body, as evil. John vigorously resists this understanding as a theological and practical danger for his churches (vv 6, 8, 10).

John energetically contends for the other, "orthodox perfectionism." This type is that of being "born of God" (3:9), with sins forgiven and God's purifying work a present reality by "the blood of Jesus" (1:7, 9). This orthodox perfectionism is marked by avoiding sin through abiding in Christ—"No one who lives in him keeps on sinning" (3:6). Here in v 8, those who **claim to be without sin** are claiming to have knowledge of a superior kind. As essentially "spiritual" rather than physical beings, sin is of no moral issue to them, sin does not relate as such to their lives.

The use of **sin** (singular) and the contrast that follows in v 9, where "sins" are addressed, might permit *hamartian* here to be thought of as **sinfulness**, a condition rather than acts of disobedience. Bede understood the term in this way, as inherited sinfulness. He appealed to this passage in opposition to Pelagians, who taught that children were born without such a sinful propensity (Bray 2000, 172).

To **claim to be without sin** is to engage in intentional self-deception. The Greek word order can be emphatically translated as *ourselves we are deceiving*. John repeatedly warns his readers against this (2:26; 3:7).

Earlier (v 6) John linked walking “in the darkness” with not doing the truth. Similarly here he says **the truth is not in** one who wrongly claims sinlessness.

■9 John offers as an alternative to the false claim of sinlessness the confession of sins. He does not state to whom the confession is to be made. The proposal and the promise are urged upon his readers corporately—**we and us**. John may be calling, as does James, for mutual confession—“to each another” (Jas 5:16). Ultimately the confession is intended toward God/Christ, who grants forgiveness and purity as a result.

In the *Didache* (14) the confession of **sins** occurred on “the Lord’s day.” It was also commended as preparation for it—“on the Lord’s day assemble and break bread and give thanks, having first confessed your sins, that your sacrifice may be pure” (Bettenson 1971, 66).

Forms of **confess** are relatively infrequent in the NT and only a few (Matt 3:6; Mark 1:5; Jas 5:16) are related to the confessing of sins. Secular Greek texts employ *homologeō* for admission of guilt or error, though not with a religious connotation (Hofius 1991, 515).

In the face of human sinfulness, and especially when **sins** are confessed, God is **faithful** (*pistos*). The word can mean “trustworthy” or “dependable” (BDAG 2000, 820; see Matt 25:21; 2 Tim 2:2) or said of promises that are certain. God’s character is **just** (*dikaios*, **righteous**). God’s righteousness is manifested as faithfulness in spite of human unfaithfulness (see Heb 10:23).

The divine act, to **forgive** (*aphēi*) . . . **sins**, can mean to send them away, to remit a debt, or to let off from penalty. Brooke understood that forgiveness of sins might be thought of as a symbolic act whereby the barrier that sins had created between God and persons was removed (Brooke 1912, 20).

In vv 6-8, John used present tense verbs to discuss what God does and what persons do. Here, at a strategic point in his argument, he uses the aorist tense to speak of what God purposes to do, namely, **forgive us** and **purify us**. The aorist tense in Greek is the simple past tense. It does not necessarily make a specified statement about when something occurred, but simply views the act as accomplished, not its duration or result (Haas, DeJonge, and Swellengrebel 1972, 38). At times, however, it can carry the sense of a completed action, even a decisive one.

It is intriguing that just here the aorist tense appears in reference to what God does with cleansing **from all unrighteousness** (*adikias*). The Greek alpha (*a*) at the beginning of the word negates the word to which it is attached. Thus, God removes all that is not righteous. The connection between the words used by John to speak of the nature of God and what God can do for persons is seen when it is translated by **he is . . . righteous** (*dikaios*) **and . . . will . . . purify us from all unrighteousness** (*adikias*).

Earlier (vv 6-8) John stressed God's continuous, ongoing saving work (and the believer's response to it) with present tense verbs. By using aorist verbs John may be emphasizing an action by God, not as continuous, but as a decisive act. God's work speaks to the universal human need to be pardoned and to be purified for relational restoration and personal healing. John urges his readers to understand and experience both forgiveness and purification.

John Calvin rightly saw that confession occasioned "a twofold fruit . . . That God, who is reconciled by the sacrifice of Christ, forgives us; and that He corrects and reforms us" (1959, 241). Yet Calvin resisted a thorough addressing of sin in the present. He too closely identified sinning with being in the body. He dismisses the clear intent of v 9, insisting, "John is not telling us what God performs in us now" (1959, 241).

Only God can purify. But God does not override the human will to accomplish purification. The verbs (**forgive**—*aphēi*; and **purify**—*katharisēi*), both in the subjunctive mood, are combined with the conditional conjunction *ean*. This "if . . . then" construction is a conditional statement, indicating what may or may not happen (Mounce 2003, 293). God can purify us and wants to do so. The pardon and purity God offers is conditioned upon our response. As moral agents, we can either respond positively toward, or resist, the offer of grace.

■ 10 Some first-century readers (heretical perfectionists) appear to have gone so far as to say they had committed no sins from which they needed to be forgiven or delivered. But John will not allow such false assertions to go unchallenged. Claiming no sins on our record is to call God a **liar**. This gives evidence that God's word is not residing in us. The term **liar** here recalls "we lie" in v 6. These may be something of an *inclusio* (a "packaging" of a text portion with literary bookends, so to speak) for the section (Brown 1982, 225). John disputes any who would say **we have not sinned**.

The perfect tense refers to past sins that have continuing effects in the present. The secessionist apparently claimed that they had not committed sins that needed forgiveness. Or, they claimed that their past sins were of no consequence in the present.

Regardless, John's perfect tense verb undermines both notions. In this he agrees with Paul's assertion: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). All continue to be affected by past sins, forgiven and cleansed or not. We cannot claim a sinless past. And we cannot imagine that past sin does not impact the present.

What a perilous thing to call God a **liar** (*pseustēn*)! John does not suggest that the secessionists say this in so many words. But this is what their beliefs and practices imply. Denial of sin, saying **we have not sinned**, declares God wrong about us.

The word for **liar** appears only eight times in the NT. It occurs twice in the Gospel of John, where Jesus calls the devil and those who listen to him "liar" (John 8:44, 55; see Rom 3:4). Significantly **liar** appears five times in 1 John. Two of these refer to a person's words or beliefs denigrating God as a **liar** (1:10; 5:10). Three times they identify persons who defy God's commands, deny Christ, and dismiss their brothers and sisters (2:4, 22; 4:20).

John says that a denial of having **sinned** means **his word has no place in our lives**. This phrase is virtually identical in Greek to the concluding portion of v 8:

- 1:8: "the truth is not in us" (*hē alētheia ouk estin en hēmin*)
- 1:10: **his word is not in us** (*ho logos autou ouk estin en hēmin*)

Further, these two lines sustain the thought from earlier. When "we lie" we obviously "do not [do] the truth" (v 6). When "we deceive ourselves" we demonstrate that "the truth is not in us" (v 8). And when we make God **out to be a liar** then **his word is not in us** (v 10).

The parallelism in these verses suggests that "the truth" (vv 6, 8) is to be equated with God's **word** (v 10). This linkage of truth and God's **word** can also be seen in the Fourth Gospel (see John 17:17). The message of the gospel has neither been heard nor responded to, that is, Christ has not been received!

False claims lead to ever increasing delusion. In v 6 claiming to have a close relationship with God while living in disobedience is effectively a "lie" told to others. Then in v 8 a denial that sin affects our lives is to "deceive [lie to] ourselves." Finally, in the most unthinkable of charges, in v 10, to deny having **sinned** is to call God a **liar**!

## FROM THE TEXT

### *The Danger of Hypocrisy*

When we conduct ourselves in morally corrupt ways and continue to claim to be Christians, we blatantly live a lie (v 6). But worse, we **deceive**



ourselves (v 8). Eventually, the boundary between lies and truth becomes so blurred that we call God a liar by denying even that we have sinned (v 10). Tragically, we believe ourselves spiritually in need of nothing (see Rev 3:17).

### *The Necessity of Divine Cleansing*

Sometimes, as with the opponents of John, the most significant flaw in us might be the self-deception that we have no flaws! Refusal to acknowledge one's sins (not confessing) means God is blocked, called a **liar**, and God's word is absent **in our lives** (v 10).

God will cleanse **from all sin** (v 7) and **from all unrighteousness** (v 9). John Wesley understood **all sin** in v 7 to refer to "both original and actual, taking away all the guilt and the power" (Wesley 1983, n.p.). Adam Clarke, similarly, spoke of sin in two "modes": in "*guilt*, which requires *forgiveness* or *pardon*" and in "*pollution*, which requires *cleansing*" (Clarke n.d., 904). Martin Luther, citing Augustine, differentiated between sin as condition ("indwelling sin") and sinful acts (Pelikan 1967, 228).

Adam Clarke makes a powerful affirmation:

And being cleansed from all sin is what every believer should look for, what he has a right to expect, and what he must have *in this life*, in order to be prepared to meet his God. Christ is not a *partial Saviour*; he saves to the uttermost, and he cleanses from ALL *sin*. (Clarke n.d., 904)

God wants to purge us from all that is unlike God. By this cleansing, **all sin** (v 7) and **all unrighteousness** (v 9) are defeated. Over time God works to smooth out the lingering flaws in our lives—to remove all that is inconsistent with the character of God.

### *The Relational Nature of Holiness*

The theme of **fellowship** (vv 4, 6) highlights the critical nature of righteousness as relational. Being cleansed from all sin does not mean that we experience a surgical intervention, as if sin were organic. Rather, being cleansed from sin means entering into a cleansing relationship with God. We are cleansed by being rightly related to the God who is pure and who always cleanses what is surrendered into his possession. Cleansing results from living in Christ.

John's use of **all** (vv 7, 9) expresses his confidence that God does not merely nibble away at sin in our lives. His intention is to defeat sin decisively. Thus **holy** and **righteous** appropriately describe the true character, not simply the position or standing, of God's people.



## *The Limits of Christian Fellowship*

To what degree can we participate with other Christians who have different views and practices? When does fellowship go beyond shared lives and become compromise? What key doctrinal matters or lifestyle practices are nonnegotiable? There is danger in too quickly labeling those with whom we disagree as being in . . . **darkness** (vv 5, 6). But it is also dangerous too quickly to welcome divergent theologies and practices.

John Wesley dealt with the matter in his sermon “Catholic Spirit.” He urged steadfastness in what one “believes to be the truth as it is in Jesus” (not having “a muddy understanding”). Settled in one’s own theological convictions, and active in a local congregation, the person of a catholic spirit yet has a “heart . . . enlarged toward all” who love Jesus Christ, love others, and seek always to please God (Wesley 1978-79, 5:502-4).