

An Expositional Study of 1 John
Part 6 (of 10 parts):

An Exposition of 1 John 3:13-24

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The authenticity of the Christian gospel is established by the nature of the enemies it encounters. John's readers are given assurance through the varied aspects of the conflicts of faith being portrayed. The conflict between truth and falsehood, depicted in 1 John 2:18-28, was presented as a conflict between the children of God and the children of the devil in 2:29-3:12. Then in 3:13-24 John made clear that this moral conflict is experientially a conflict between God-prompted love and Satan-inspired hatred.

Do not marvel, brethren, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. We shall know by this that we are of the truth, and shall assure our heart before Him, in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight. And this is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. And the one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And we know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit which He has given us (1 John 3:13-24).

John pointed out the revelation of moral identity through the practice of love and hatred (vv. 13-15), portrayed the objective manifestation of love and hatred (vv. 16-18), and presented aspects of the assurance which the practice of Christian love produces (vv. 19-24).

The Revelation from the Practice of Love and Hatred

The antagonism between good and evil, as reflected in the story of Cain and Abel (3:12), has never ceased since that day. John reminded his readers that hatred is still the world's reaction toward believers (v. 13), and he assured them that love of the brethren is the sign of the new birth (v. 14a), and that the practice of hatred is the sign of spiritual death (vv. 14b-15).

THE REACTION TO THE WORLD'S HATRED OF BELIEVERS (v. 13)

In urging his readers, "Do not marvel, brethren, if the world hates you," John reminded them that hatred by the world is to be expected. The first-class condition assumes the reality of the hatred. By stating the conclusion before the condition, John placed emphasis on the admonition being given.

The prohibition, "Do not marvel" (**μη θαυμάζετε**) does not condemn the initial feeling of amazement when they are the innocent objects of unprovoked hatred. The negative (**μη**) with the present imperative, "stop being amazed," calls on them not to give way to a feeling of amazement and self-pity. The prohibition is a direct echo of John 15:18-21. Similar warnings are given in Matthew 5:11-12 and I Peter 4:13. Of central importance for victory when a Christian is subjected to the world's hatred is the recognition that hatred is the natural response of the sinful world toward righteousness. That response assures believers of the moral identity of those hating them.

The added direct address, "brethren" (**ἀδελφοί**), occurs only here in 1 John,¹ though it is a common form of address in other New Testament epistles. With its use here John consciously drew his readers together as fellow-members of the Christian community in contrast to the antagonistic world. As their brother, John too knew what it meant to be hated by the world.

The conditional statement, "if the world hates you" (**εἰ μὲς εἰ ὕμῶς ὁ κόσμος**), presents this hatred, not as a future possibility, but as a present reality. Such hatred is natural, the characteristic attitude of the Christ-rejecting world toward His followers. As Stott remarks, It is not just hatred, but hatred of Christian people, which

¹ The word "brethren" (**ἀδελφοί**) in 2:7 lacks sufficient manuscript support.

reveals the world in its true colours, for in their persecution of the Church their antagonism to Christ is revealed."² Like Cain of old, the world in its alienation from and opposition to God cannot tolerate the presence of righteousness. In the words of Barker,

Whenever the community of faith acts so as to expose the greed, the avarice, the hatred, and the wickedness of the world, it must expect rejection; and if it should go so far as to interfere with its evil practices, as Jesus did in the temple, it may expect suffering and brutal death (cf. John 15:18-19, 25; 17:14).³

THE ASSURANCE OF THE NEW BIRTH FROM LOVE OF THE BRETHREN (v. 14a)

The emphatic personal pronoun in "We know" (ἡμεῖς οἴδαμεν) marks the contrast between the world lost in sin and death and believers with their inner consciousness of their new life in Christ. "We know what the world knows not."⁴ It is an appeal to the Christian consciousness of his readers, namely, "that we have passed out of death into life" (ὅτι μεταβεβήκαμεν ἐκ τοῦ θανάτου εἰς τὴν ζωὴν). This common awareness is grounded in the assurance that the promise of Christ in John 5:24 has been fulfilled in their own lives. The perfect tense "have passed" denotes a permanent transfer from one place to another; geographically it was used of migrating from one country to another. Here it is used metaphorically to denote their spiritual transfer out of the realm of death into the realm of life.

The definite article with both nouns, "out of the death into the life," makes prominent the two distinct realms into which earth's inhabitants are divided. The designation "the death" denotes mankind's state of spiritual alienation from God due to the Fall (Rom. 5:12); it is the opposite, spiritually, of "the life." "As spiritual life is 'conscious existence in communion with God,' so spiritual death is 'conscious existence in separation from God.'"⁵ There is no neutral ground between the two realms. This passing out of death into life denotes the new birth and is the prerequisite for Christian living. Marshall asserts, "John never suggests that some people are by nature endowed with spiritual life; on the contrary, a process of

² J. R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 141.

³ Glenn W. Barker, "1 John," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 12, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), p. 335.

⁴ A. R. Fausset, "The First General Epistle of John," in Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*, 6 vols. (Hartford, CT: S. S. Scranton Co., n.d.), 2:532 (italics his).

⁵ W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, 2 vols. (reprint, Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1966), 1:276.

spiritual birth is necessary."⁶ For the believer in Christ the possession of eternal life is already a present reality, not merely a state to be reached after death.

This assurance of possessing eternal life is grounded in Christian experience, "because we love the brethren" (ὅτι ἀγαπῶμεν τοὺς ἀδελφούς). The particle "because" (ὅτι) connects with "we know" and is causal in force; love for the brethren is the evidence of new life, not the basis for acquiring it. What believers do reveals what they are. As Lenski notes, "Both the physical life and the spiritual life are not seen directly but are apparent only from their evidence, their activity."⁷ The present tense "we love" points to characteristic practice, not merely an occasional act of love. The verb denotes not natural affection stimulated by the loveliness of the one loved but a high ethical love which consistently seeks the true welfare of those loved. Fallen human nature is selfish and reacts with enmity toward those whose claims clash with one's own claims. Therefore to practice a love that consistently places the welfare of others above one's own interests is a sure mark that a spiritual change has taken place. Imparted at regeneration, this love naturally manifests itself toward "the brethren," those who are one with other believers as members of God's family. Blaney asserts, "Love for *the brethren* (14) is a better piece of evidence than love for the sinful world, because if one cannot love the 'children of God,' how could he be expected to love the 'children of the devil?'"⁸ While true Christian love will seek to do good to all men as there is opportunity, it will do so "especially to those who are of the household of the faith" (Gal. 6:10).

THE REVELATION FROM THE PRACTICE OF HATRED (vv. 14b-15)

The practice of love is the determinative test for all who claim to be Christians, and John applied this test both negatively and positively.

The absence of love reveals death (v. 14b). John tersely stated the negative result of this test: "He who does not love abides in death" (ὁ μὴ ἀγαπῶν μένει ἐν τῷ θανάτῳ). The present articular participle with the negative (μὴ) pictures an individual from whose life the practice of love is characteristically absent. This absence of love reveals his true inner state, that he "abides in death." What-

⁶ I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), p. 191.

⁷ R. C. H. Lenski, *The interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude* (1945; reprint, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1966), p. 469.

⁸ Harvey J. S. Blaney, "The First Epistle of John," in *Beacon Bible Commentary* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1967), 10:381 (italics his).

ever his claims of spiritual enlightenment, the absence of love is the sign that he still remains in the realm of "the death" as alienated from God. John did not say that such a person will die but rather that he still remains in his original state as spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1).

After the word "love" some Greek manuscripts add "the brother" or "his brother" (cf. KJV), but the better witnesses express no object,⁹ leaving the statement absolute and general in its scope.

The practice of hatred reveals a murderous personality (v, 15). The comprehensive positive assertion, "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer" (πᾶς ὁ μισῶν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ ἀνθρωποκτόνος ἐστίν), confirms the preceding negative assertion "does not love," which is now equated with active hatred. The emptiness left by the absence of love is always filled by murderous hatred. Love and hatred are mutually exclusive realms and there is no neutral ground between them. The fact that he "hates his brother" establishes his inner identity; he "is a murderer." Hatred and murder both belong to the same moral category. All hatred is potentially murderous and may in actual deed become so. Human law condemns a man for the overt act; God judges the inner desire. In God's eyes the hater and the murderer are both guilty. John here did with the sixth commandment, "You shall not murder" (Exod. 20:13), what Jesus did (Matt. 5:27-28) with the seventh commandment, "You shall not commit adultery." The guilt of sin lies in the inner motive, not merely the outward act.

The rare word "murderer" (ἀνθρωποκτόνος, literally, "man-killer") occurs in the New Testament only here and in John 8:44 where Jesus described the devil as "a murderer from the beginning," because he brought death into the world by deceiving Adam and Eve. Hatred and murder belong to the realm dominated by Satan. He who has such a spirit cannot belong to the realm of light and love of which God is the center and motivating power.

John added a confirmatory note expressing the Christian conviction of his readers: "and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him." The verb "you know" (οἶδατε) denotes "knowledge that is generally accepted, axiomatic, or intuitive."¹⁰ It does not require scientific demonstration or searching inquiry to conclude "that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him" (ὅτι πᾶς ἀνθρωποκτόνος οὐκ ἔχει ζωὴν αἰώνιον ἐν αὐτῷ μένουσαν, literally, "that every murderer not is having eternal life in him abiding"). The in-

⁹ For the textual evidence see Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 26th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1979).

¹⁰ Donald W. Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), p. 266.

elusive "every murderer" allows for no exceptions; it includes every individual whose governing spirit is murderous. John did not mean that a murderer cannot repent and find forgiveness. The statement refers not to the future lot of the murderer but to his present state. No one governed by destructive hatred has "eternal life abiding in him." The adjective "eternal" is qualitative, denoting a life that is neither gained nor lost by physical death; it is also quantitative as denoting its unending duration. The present participle "abiding" (*μένουσιν*), emphatic by its position at the end of the sentence, marks the fact that "eternal life" by its very nature is a divinely communicated gift to the believer in this life. Imparted by God, it is marked by the unchanging nature of God Himself.

The Manifestations of Love and Hatred

Having shown what the presence or absence of love reveals, John now pointed out how love and hatred are revealed (vv. 16-18). He set forth the supreme manifestation of love in the self-sacrifice of Christ (v. 16a), pointed out the obligation of believers to practice love (vv. 16b-17), and issued a call for the practice of true love (v. 18).

THE MANIFESTATION OF LOVE IN CHRIST'S SELF-SACRIFICE (v. 16a)

The words, "We know love by this" (*ἐν τούτῳ ἐγνώκαμεν τὴν ἀγάπην*, literally, "In this we have come to know the love"), direct attention to the needed test for the manifestation of genuine love. "In this" looks forward to the cited event of Christ's crucifixion. The perfect tense "we know" indicates a knowledge that has been gained through intellectual recognition of the true significance of that historical event. Through contemplation of the cross of Christ one comes to understand the meaning of love. In Christ's self-sacrifice believers possess the supreme manifestation of "the love," the kind of love of which John was speaking.¹¹ Smalley notes that "John's reference to love is deliberately couched in absolute terms. He is speaking in the most exalted way of all love, love in its essence; and he is showing how this may be identified."¹²

Christ's love is known by what He did: "He laid down His life for us." As in 2:6 and 3:7, "He" is the demonstrative pronoun (*ἐκεῖνος*, "that one"), marking the distinctive identity of the One whose act of love is cited. He revealed His love by His voluntary and pur-

¹¹ The KJV rendering "the love of God" is a correct interpretation, but the use of italics, of God, makes clear that "of God" lacks manuscript support.

¹² Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 51 (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1984), p. 192 (italics his).

poseful death on the cross when He "laid down His life for us" (ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἔθηκεν). This expression, only here in 1 John, is characteristically Johannine (John 10:11, 15, 17, 18; 13:37, 38; 15:13). The aorist active verb "laid down" (ἔθηκεν) denotes a voluntary act, picturing a love that is willing to sacrifice itself on behalf of others. He was not killed as a martyr; He voluntarily gave Himself "for us" (ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν), acting in the interest of others.

John's purpose here was not to explain the nature of the atonement; rather he was setting forth the exemplary aspect of Christ's death. His love by its very nature was willing to sacrifice self to promote the welfare of others. "'Self-preservation' is the first law of physical life, but 'self-sacrifice' is the first law of spiritual life."¹³ Since life is one's most precious possession, Christ's willingness to lay down His life on behalf of others constituted the greatest possible expression of love (John 15:13; Rom. 5:6-10). Such love is the very opposite of hatred, which is destructive of the welfare of others.

THE DUTY OF BELIEVERS TO PRACTICE LOVE (vv. 16b-17)

With his use of "and" (καὶ) John at once related the example of Christ's self-sacrificing love to the lives of believers. Knowledge of their Savior's love obligates them to love. John first stated the supreme obligation of love (v. 16b) and then pictured the test of love in everyday affairs (v. 17).

The supreme obligation of love (v. 16b). "We ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" states the supreme example of Christian love. "We" (ἡμεῖς) is emphatic, stressing the believers' side of the obligation to love. In 2:6 their obligation to follow the example of Christ was already set forth; now John indicated how sweeping that obligation is. Instead of saying "must" (δεῖ), which would have conveyed the thought of "logical necessity," John used "ought" (ὀφείλομεν) which denotes the inner sense of "moral obligation."¹⁴ The present tense points to the continuing obligation resting on believers, a willingness "to lay down our lives for the brethren." The aorist tense "to lay down" (θεῖναι)¹⁵ depicts the supreme self-sacrifice to which Christian love should be willing to go, if necessary. Clearly John was not thinking of believers atoning for the sins of others. There were occasions in the life of the early church, as t]hLere

¹³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Real* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1972), p. 127.

¹⁴ G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3d ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937), p. 99.

¹⁵ The Textus Receptus has the present tense, τιθέναι, but the present tense lacks adequate manuscript support. For the evidence see Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 26th ed. The present tense would imply a figurative usage of "lay down."

are certain tragic occasions now, which may call for a literal obedience to this precept. Kistemaker remarks, "When the honor of God's name, the advancement of his church, and the need of his people demand that we love our brothers, we ought to show our love at all cost—even to the point of risking and losing our lives."¹⁶ John was not seeking to stimulate a spirit of martyrdom in his readers. He was stressing the extent to which Christian self-sacrifice should be willing to go, even to the point of death if necessary.

The practical illustration of the lack of brother-love (v. 17). The adversative "But" (δέ) marks a duty connected with but different from the ideal just presented. John now pictured the obligation of love with down-to-earth practicality: "whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?" The picture is hypothetical ("whoever has" [ὅς . . . ἂν ἔχῃ]), and John used three coordinated subjunctive verbs to paint the picture. The "whoever" (the relative pronoun ὅς without an expressed antecedent) is general, with no specific individual or group in view. This supposed individual "has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him." The first two verbs are in the present tense, graphically unfolding the scene. He "has the world's goods" (ἔχῃ τὸν βίον τοῦ κόσμου); he possesses the material means that sustain life in this present world. In Luke 15:12 the term βίος is translated "his wealth" (marg. "his living") in the NASB, and "his property" in the NIV. The concept of luxury need not be entirely excluded from the meaning of the term (cf. 1 John 2:16), but clearly John did not mean to apply this test only to those who have wealth. The picture applies to anyone who has the means to meet another's need.

John continued the picture: "and beholds his brother in need" (καὶ θεωρῇ τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ χρεῖαν ἔχοντα). The verb "beholds" is common in the Gospels and Acts but occurs only here and in Hebrews 7:4 in the New Testament epistles. The present tense denotes not a casual glance but a prolonged, contemplative observation of "the brother" "as a spectacle on which he allows his eyes to rest."¹⁷ His observation gave ample opportunity to note the plight of the other person. Both individuals have something: the latter has a personal need, the former has the personal means to meet that need.

The negative response of the brother with material means to the observed need is tersely stated: "and closes his heart against him"

¹⁶ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle of James and the Epistles of John*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), p. 310.

¹⁷ Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John* (1883; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), p. 115.

(καὶ κλείσῃ τὰ σπλάγχνα αὐτοῦ ἀπ' αὐτοῦ). The verb "closes" is in the aorist tense, depicting the specific response to what he observed. He has observed the other's need and is aware of the call for sympathetic action to meet that need, but he restrains any initial sympathy and "closes his heart against him." His interest in his own concerns leads him to shut out consideration for the needs of the brother. The verb "closes" means literally "to close or lock a door or gate"; here it is used figuratively to depict the erection of a barrier between himself and the brother so that his sympathetic action cannot flow out to him. His action is the exact opposite of that of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33-34).

The neuter plural noun here rendered "heart" (τὰ σπλάγχνα) was used by the Greeks of the heart, lungs, and liver, as the seat of the emotions. The usage is figurative for what today is commonly called "the heart" as the seat of human affection and emotions. In closing his heart "against him" (ἀπ' αὐτοῦ, more literally, "from him"), he deliberately and hardheartedly turns his back on the needy brother. James 2:15-16 pictures a similar heartlessness in putting off the destitute brother with empty words.

John's dramatic conclusion, "how does the love of God abide in him?" challenges his readers to express their own evaluation of the heartless scene. The rhetorical question rejects the implied claim of the individual that "the love of God" was abiding in him. The genitive "of God" (τοῦ θεοῦ) has been variously understood: it may be a subjective genitive to denote a love of which God is the source;¹⁸ or an objective genitive designating God as the object of love, love for God;¹⁹ or possibly as a descriptive genitive describing the quality of the love, a Godlike love.²⁰ Westcott viewed the expression as inclusive, "the love of which God is at once the object and the author and the pattern."²¹ Whatever the intended meaning here, in the operation of true Christian love all three aspects of "the love of God" are involved (cf. 4:19-21). Jesus Himself insisted that the command to "love the Lord your God" cannot be separated from the command to

¹⁸ So Stott, *The Epistles of John*, p. 144; Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle*, p. 270; Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle of James and the Epistles of John*, p. 311, n. 38.

¹⁹ So A. Plummer, *The Epistles of S. John*, Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (1883; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), p. 133; Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude*, pp. 473-74; Gordon H. Clark, *First John: A Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., n.d), p. 109.

²⁰ So Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 197.

²¹ Westcott, *The Epistles of John*, p. 115.

"love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:35-40). A person who professes to love God while refusing to express love for his unfortunate brother through a compassionate sharing of his means discredits his claim and subjects himself to the charge of hypocrisy.

THE EXHORTATION TO PRACTICE TRUE LOVE (v. 18)

In again addressing his readers as "little children" (τεκνία; cf. 2:2.8; 3:7), John appealed to them to exercise true love in their family relations. As a spiritual father he was intent on stimulating the love that was implanted in their hearts at regeneration (v. 14). In saying "let us love" (ἀγαπῶμεν) John again included himself in this standing obligation. The exhortation is formulated in a typically Johannine negative-positive contrast. The terms in the negative statement balance the two terms in the positive statement. Plummer thus expresses this balance: "To love in word is to have that affection which is genuine as far as it goes, but which is so weak that it never gets further than affectionate words. . . . To love with the tongue is to profess an affection which one does not feel, which is sheer hypocrisy."²²

Negatively, John insisted, "Let us not love with word or with tongue" (μη ἀγαπῶμεν λόγῳ μηδὲ τῇ γλώσσῃ). Both nouns are in the instrumental case, denoting agency. While Christian love must be a vital inner reality, by its very nature love cannot be limited to mere verbalization but must express itself in definite outward action. Strauss well remarks, "Kind and comforting words are not condemned in verse 18. We need to speak with soft and sympathetic words, but such words should be accompanied by helpful and heart-warming deeds."²³ The tongue (τῇ γλώσσῃ) is the only one of the four terms in this verse with the definite article. It is the well-known agency for the verbalization of love. But if limited to mere verbal expression it is mere "mouth mercy."²⁴

Positively, John insisted that love must be expressed "in deed and truth" (ἐν ἔργῳ καὶ ἀληθείᾳ). The use of the preposition "in" (ἐν) indicates the element in which love must express itself. Besides verbal expressions, love must express itself in the realm of "deed," in love-prompted, beneficent action. Further, the performance of deeds must be combined with "truth." While "truth" here may mean "in reality" as contrasted to mere appearance, more likely the term carries

²² Plummer, *The Epistles of S. John*, p. 134.

²³ Lehman Strauss, *The Epistles of John* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1962), p. 120.

²⁴ An expression used by John Trapp. *Trapp's Commentary on the New Testament* (1865; reprint, Evansville, IN: Sovereign Grace Book Club, 1958), p. 730.

its usual fuller Johannine meaning as being in accord with the divine truth revealed in Christ (John 4:24, "in spirit and truth").

The Assurances from the Practice of Love

In verses 19-24 John set forth the assurances that will arise in the heart of the believer from the practice of love; they are the fruit of love. The practice of love will produce assurance of being in the truth (vv. 19-20), give confidence that prayer will be answered (vv. 21-22), and assure the believer of union with Christ (vv. 23-24).

THE ASSURANCE OF BEING IN THE TRUTH (vv. 19-20)

Grammar and interpretation require that verses 19-20 be kept together: "We shall know by this that we are of the truth, and shall assure our heart before Him, in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart, and knows all things."

These verses present some textual problems and are unusually difficult to interpret. The textual evidence is divided on the use of "And" (καὶ) at the beginning of verse 19. It is part of the Textus Receptus and is used in the KJV, but recent versions generally omit it (e.g., NASB, NEB, NIV, RSV). The evidence for it is about evenly divided; it seems preferable to accept it as authentic.²⁵ Its presence in some early manuscripts supports the view that "by this" (ἐν τούτῳ) looks back to verse 18 rather than to what follows. Manuscript evidence is also divided on the tense of the opening verb. The KJV follows the Textus Receptus in reading the present tense, "we know" (γινώσκουμεν), but the weight of the evidence is for the future "we shall know" (γνωσόμεθα).²⁶ A major difficulty in the interpreting these verses is the meaning of the first of two occurrences of the Greek term ὅτι in verse 20; a second difficulty is the intended significance of the verb "shall assure" (πείσομεν).

The assurance as to one's spiritual origin (v. 19a). The assertion, "We shall know by this that we are of the truth" (ἐν τούτῳ γνωσόμεθα ὅτι ἐκ τῆς ἀληθείας ἐσμέν), literally, "In this we shall know that out of the truth we are"), presents the first aspect of the assurance that the practice of love produces. "In this" refers back to

²⁵ Zane C. Hodges and Arthur L. Farstad, *The Greek New Testament according to the Majority Text* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982), print *scat* as an authentic part of the text. Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 22d ed. (New York: American Bible Society, 1956), omitted it from their text, with footnote textual data. But Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 26th ed., have it in their text but placed in square brackets to indicate that the evidence for the reading is about evenly divided. So also United Bible Societies, *The Greek New Testament*, 3d ed., place καὶ in the text in square brackets.

²⁶ For the evidence see Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 26th ed.

verse 18, which sets forth a recognizable practice as concrete evidence of one's spiritual origin. The future tense, "we shall know," as Westcott notes, "expresses the dependence of the knowledge upon the fulfilment of the specified condition."²⁷ The verb "know" (γινώσκω) indicates the acquisition of knowledge based on experience. The resultant assurance is "that"²⁸ out of the truth we are." The preposition "out of" (ἐκ) clearly marks the source of spiritual origin, namely, "the truth." Used with the definite article, "the truth" retains its full theological significance as denoting the truth of God as revealed in Christ and His gospel. The phrase "out of the truth" occurs in the Johannine writings only in John 18:37; 1 John 2:21; and here. Stott remarks, "Truth can only characterize the behaviour of those whose very character originates in the truth, so that it is by our loving others 'in truth' that we know that we are 'of the truth.'"²⁹

The quieting of one's conscience before God (vv. 19b-20). "And" introduces a further aspect of the assurance from love in action: "and shall assure our heart before Him, in whatever our heart condemns us" (καὶ ἔμπροσθεν αὐτοῦ πείσομεν τὴν καρδίαν ἡμῶν, ὅτι ἐὰν καταγινώσκη ἡμῶν ἡ καρδία). The verb "shall assure" parallels the preceding "we shall know" as a second aspect of assurance from a believer's love. One difficulty presented by this statement is the intended meaning of the verb rendered "shall assure" (πείσομεν). Its usual meaning is "persuade," followed by an indication of the content of the persuasion. With this meaning, the content of the persuasion may be the last part of verse 20, "that God is greater than our heart." But it is not obvious how the practice of love persuades believers that God is superior to their heart. The verb can also mean "conciliate, pacify, set at rest," hence "assure."³⁰ This is its meaning in Matthew 28:14 (cf. 2 Macc. 4:45), and offers a more natural translation here. John was dealing with the matter of quieting or assuring the believers' conscience before God. It is precisely in the area of Christian love for others that the sensitive Christian heart often feels its own inadequacy and needs assurance. With his use of the first person plural, "we shall assure" (πείσομεν), John included himself among those who experience such a need for assurance.

²⁷ Westcott, *The Epistles of John*, p. 116.

²⁸ That the first of the three occurrences of ὅτι in verses 19-20 means "that" is clear from the fact that it introduces a content clause. But the force of the other two occurrences is not so obvious.

²⁹ Stott, *The Epistles of John*, p. 145.

³⁰ William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957), p. 645.

The use of the singular "our heart" (τὴν καρδίαν ἡμῶν) points to the oneness of God's people in the experience described.³¹ The use of the singular "heart" with a plural possessive pronoun occurs 10 times in John's writings.³² In Greek usage the "heart" was the "center and source of the whole inner life, with its thinking, feeling, and volition."³³ Here the emphasis is not on the affections but on the conscience (cf. Acts 2:37; 7:54) as the center of man's moral nature. Bengel notes that "John nowhere uses *συνείδησις*, conscience; but here he implies it, in the heart: for it is the conscience which is assured, and which condemns."³⁴ The Christian deals with his troubled conscience "before Him" (ἔμπροσθεν αὐτοῦ). The phrase stands emphatically at the beginning of the clause and marks "that the assurance is a justified assurance since it is experienced in the very presence of God."³⁵

Conscientious believers will seek assurance before God "in whatever our heart condemns us" (ὅτι³⁶ ἂν καταγινώσκη ἡμῶν ἡ καρδία). John did not elaborate on the nature of the things that cause the believers' conscience to condemn them, and it was not his purpose to catalog such matters. But he well knew how readily an accusing conscience renders ineffective the testimony and service of such a believer. As Barker points out,

Doubt, guilt, and failure are never far from any of us. Sometimes our misgivings are the result of our own actions or inactions. Sometimes it is the "accuser" who seizes our weaknesses and shortcomings and so elevates them that we wonder whether we can really be in the truth.³⁷

Whatever may cause a believer's heart to pass judgment on himself, he can take the matter before God for His judgment. The

³¹ The KJV follows the Textus Receptus in using the plural "our hearts" (τὰς καρδίας ἡμῶν), but the plural has weak textual support and apparently represents a scribal change to express agreement with the plural pronoun "our." For the evidence see Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 26th ed.

³² John 12:40 (twice); 14:1, 27; 16:6, 22; 1 John 3:19, 20 (twice), 21.

³³ Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 404.

³⁴ John Albert Bengel, *New Testament Word Studies*, 2 vols. (1864; reprint, Kregel Publications, 1971), 2:799 (italics his).

³⁵ Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle*, p. 272.

³⁶ This second *οὐ* in verses 19-20 may be rendered "that" as indicating the object of the verb "assure," or "because" as giving the ground for the assurance, but either rendering makes the third *ὅτι* redundant. Such redundancy is avoided if this second *ὅτι* with the following *ἂν* is taken as the neuter of the relative pronoun *ὅστις* with the following *εἴ* to mean "whatever" as denoting the varied things that may cause "our heart to condemn us."

³⁷ Barker, "1 John," p. 337.

troubled conscience can be quieted on the basis of the tests John here indicates. "First, there is the objective test of moral behaviour—whether our love expresses itself in action. Second, there is the faith that God alone is the arbiter in this matter."³⁸

In taking one's conscience before God, a believer's faith assures him: "for God is greater than our heart, and knows all things" (ὅτι μείζων ἐστὶν ὁ θεὸς τῆς καρδίας ἡμῶν καὶ γινώσκει πάντα). "For" (ὅτι, "that," better, "because") points to the ground for assurance. The conscience-smitten believer knows that his conscience, being imperfect and neither infallible nor final, may be either too severe or too lenient in its verdict; God's verdict is neither.

The added words, "and knows all things," explain why God is a better Judge than one's own heart. "It is the difference between conscience and Omniscience."³⁹ None of the believers' failures and shortcomings escape His notice, but He also understands their true motives and desires, the innermost yearnings of their hearts. His omniscience is also linked to His unchanging love and sympathy; He remembers His intentions and purposes for His own. It is to that perfect knowledge that the conscience-stricken believer, like Peter, can appeal, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love you" (John 21:17). The reality that He has implanted that love in their hearts assures believers that He will not reject or disown them.

Some interpreters⁴⁰ understand this reference to God's greatness and knowledge not as a comfort but as a challenge to the believer. Alford remarks, "Our conscience is but the faint echo of His voice who knoweth all things; if it condemn us, how much more He?"⁴¹ But such an interpretation is inappropriate to the present context. As Smalley notes, "John's chief purpose at this point is to reassure his readers that when believers are most aware of their shortcomings, in respect of God's standards, the love and mercy of the Father are present to heal their troubled consciences."⁴² John's aim is to help heal the wounded conscience, not unnecessarily to widen the wound.

³⁸ J. L. Houlden, *A Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 101.

³⁹ Plummer, *The Epistles of S. John*, p. 136.

⁴⁰ So John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. and ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948), pp. 222-23; Henry Alford, *The New Testament for English Readers* (reprint, Chicago: Moody Press, n.d.), pp. 1733-34; Kenneth Grayston, *The Johannine Epistles*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), pp. 115-16.

⁴¹ Alford, *The New Testament for English Readers*, p. 1734.

⁴² Smalley, 1, 2, 3 John, p. 203.

THE ASSURANCE OF ACCEPTANCE BEFORE GOD (vv. 21-22)

John's tender address, "Beloved" (Ἀγαπητοί), expresses his personal love for his readers who have known the struggles of an accusing conscience. He reminded them that this struggle can be resolved and that assurance of acceptance before God can be realized. He wrote of the blessing of personal confidence before God (v. 21) and the experience of answered prayer (v. 22).

The blessing of confidence before God (v. 21). Assurance of acceptance before God is based on the inner experience of a noncondemning conscience: "if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God." The statement of the condition, "if our heart does not condemn us" (ἐὰν ἡ καρδία [ἡμῶν] μὴ καταγινώσῃ)⁴³ leaves open the question of the present reality of that condition. While the negative (μὴ) with the present subjunctive might mean "does not condemn us from the first" because the heart has no misgivings about one's moral state, John more probably means that it "ceases to condemn us" because the charge of conscience against the believer has been resolved before God. While every believer does experience occasions when his conscience condemns him, the present tense clearly implies that such should not be the characteristic experience of the believer. Concerning such a life free from an accusing conscience Westcott remarks, "It does not imply a claim to sinlessness, nor yet an insensibility to the heinousness of sin, but the action of a lively faith which retains a real sense of fellowship with God, and this carries with it confidence and peace."⁴⁴

The resultant blessing is that "we have confidence before God" (παρρησίαν ἔχομεν πρὸς τὸν Θεόν). In 2:28 John spoke of "confidence" in connection with Christ's return. Here the noun, placed emphatically forward, speaks of the believer's free and uninhibited communion with God in daily life. The phrase "before God" depicts a confidence that is directed Godward, bringing the believer into an intimate face-to-face relationship with Him (cf. Heb. 4:16).

The blessing of answered prayer (v. 22). John's "and" unites fellowship with God and prayer answered by God: "and whatever we ask we receive from Him." The expression "whatever we ask" (ὃ ἐὰν αἰτῶμεν, literally, "that which, if we may be asking") leaves unre-

⁴³ The manuscripts vary as to the presence or absence of "our" with "heart." The evidence is about evenly divided. There is also textual confusion between Four" (ἡμῶν) and "your" (ὑμῶν), because the two words were pronounced alike in later Greek. Manuscripts also differ as to whether a pronoun ("our" or "your") was repeated after the verb. For the variants see Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), pp. 713-14.

⁴⁴ Westcott, *The Epistles of John*, p. 118.

stricted both the content and occasion for one's asking. The present tense denotes the repeated requests confidently being raised to God.

Such praying is assured of an answer, "we receive from Him" (λαμβάνομεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ). The present tense denotes repeated answers, while "from Him" makes clear the answers received are not merely fortuitous circumstances but are His specific response. The truth of God's response to the believer's prayer is a teaching common in the Scriptures. This promise of an answer "from Him" must be kept in balance with the preceding picture of one's "confidence before God" (v. 21).

In verse 22b John added that answered prayer is based on the believer's obedience and willing service. Answered prayer, Burdick well notes, "is not a benefit that must be merited; spiritual benefits are gifts of grace. However, there are conditions that God's Spirit enables believers to meet."⁴⁵ The two verbs "we keep" (τηροῦμεν) and "[we] do" (ποιοῦμεν) are both in the present tense, denoting the characteristic conduct of those whose prayers are answered. Such conduct does not earn God's answer but provides "an objective, moral reason for the divine response; it does not simply depend upon the subjective ground of a worshiper's clear conscience."⁴⁶

The statement "we keep His commandments" points to a conscious compliance with the explicit commands God has given, varied in their nature and scope. The further statement, "and do the things that are pleasing in His sight," is not mere repetition. The two are not the same; the first calls for obedience to His commands, which may be carried out in a slavish spirit (cf. the elder brother in Luke 15); the second implies spontaneous activities motivated by love, freely undertaken because Christian love recognized them as "the things that are pleasing in His sight" (τὰ ἀρεστὰ ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ). The expression is reminiscent of the word of Jesus in John 8:29, "I always; do the things that are pleasing to Him." Westcott notes that "the things that are pleasing" are "not simply 'things pleasing,' but definitely those which correspond with our position and duty."⁴⁷ The phrase "in His sight" (ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ, "in His eyes") pictures their performance as carried out under the consciousness of God's observation and approval.

THE ASSURANCE OF UNION WITH CHRIST (vv. 23-24)

Basic to the believer's assurance is the truth of his spiritual union with Christ. This assurance is grounded in the two-sided corn-

⁴⁵ Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle*, p. 278.

⁴⁶ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 205.

⁴⁷ Westcott, *The Epistles of John*, p. 119.

mand to believers (v. 23), and results in a two-sided Christian fellowship which is given experiential confirmation through the indwelling Holy Spirit (v. 24).

The two-sided commandment to believers (v. 23). John gathered up the various commandments just referred to in one comprehensive commandment, "And this is His commandment" (καὶ αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ ἐντολὴ αὐτοῦ). The singular "this" looks forward to the following "that" (ἵνα) with two explanatory subjunctive verbs expressing the content of the command, "that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another." The two parallel verbs, "believe" (πιστεύωμεν) and "love" (ἀγαπῶμεν) together form one whole. As Lenski asserts, "You cannot believe without loving nor love without believing"⁴⁸ (cf. Gal. 5:6). The Christian message calls for a vital union of faith and conduct. This insistence on a living union between faith and love is God's command, not a later apostolic invention.

The command "that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ" involves the first occurrence of the verb "believe" in the epistle.⁴⁹ The manuscript evidence is about evenly divided between the aorist (πιστεύσωμεν) and the present tense (πιστεύομεν).⁵⁰ It seems more probable that the present arose from a scribal desire to conform the tense of the two verbs or that the aorist was felt to be unsuited to John's readers. The present tense would convey the command to "go on believing." The aorist tense may be understood as ingressive, "come to believe,"⁵¹ but more probable is the view of Lenski that "the aorist is effective: definitely, effectively, once for all believe."⁵² As such it is John's appeal to his readers, confronted by the challenge of the heretics, once for all to settle the reality of their faith commitment. Smalley notes that for John "believing" signifies more than "accepting as true"; it also involves the thought of acknowledgment or confession.⁵³ In Romans 10:9-10 Paul shows that faith and confession are both part of a saving experience.

The statement of the command stresses the content of this faith, to believe "in the name of His Son Jesus Christ" (τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ). The words have a creedal ring, being in fact

⁴⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude*, p. 479.

⁴⁹ The verb occurs nine more times in the remainder of the epistle (4:1, 16; 5:1, 5, 10 [three times], 13 [twice in T.R.]). The noun "faith" (πίστις) occurs only in 5:4.

⁵⁰ For the evidence see Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 26th ed.

⁵¹ So F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1970), p. 100.

⁵² Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John, and St. Jude*, p. 480.

⁵³ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 207.

a miniature confession of faith. John used no word for "in" or "on" but rather the dative of personal relationship, a personal committal to "the Name" as denoting the Person of Christ and all that He is. His identity is explicitly stated: "His Son Jesus Christ." "His Son" stresses the true deity and unique Sonship of this Person. In His incarnation He was identified as the historical Person "Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). "Jesus" (Ἰησοῦς) is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua, meaning "the LORD is salvation." It is the name of His humanity, given Him before His birth to declare His saving ministry (Matt. 1:21). "Christ" (Χριστός) is the Greek translation of the Hebrew term "Messiah" (מָשִׁיחַ) (transliterated Μεσσίας in John 1:41 and 4:25), and declares His messianic identity. The double designation represents the earliest Christian confession of faith, "Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 2:36; 3:20; 5:42; cf. John 20:30-31). Christian faith accepts the fact that He truly is all this Name declares.

The other part of God's command is, "and love one another" (καὶ ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους). The present tense calls for mutual love as the characteristic expression of the Christian life. The reciprocal pronoun insists that this love be mutually expressed by members of the Christian community. Christian love is not a one-way street; it must flow in both directions. John had already mentioned the need for mutual love (1 John 2:10-11; 3:11, 14), but now he specifically united faith and love. Both are essential as a test of a true Christian. The added words, "just as He commanded us," have been taken as relating to the command to love,⁵⁴ but others like Lenski⁵⁵ insist that the expression relates to both parts of "His commandment."

The reciprocal nature of Christian fellowship (v. 24). "And" marks the connection with verse 23, "And the one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him." Obedience to the one command to believe and love resolves itself in subordinate commands dealing with varied daily experiences. The one thus characteristically keeping God's commandments experiences a reciprocal spiritual fellowship: he "abides in Him, and He in him" (ἐν αὐτῷ μένει καὶ αὐτὸς ἐν αὐτῷ). Such mutual abiding is the heart of true Christianity (John 15:1-5; Col. 1:27-28). This is the first mention of this mutual abiding in this epistle; it is further developed in 1 John 4:12-16. John's use of pronouns does not clearly distinguish between God the Father and the Son Jesus Christ; he always thought of the Father as working through the Son and the Son as revealing the Fa-

⁵⁴ So Plummer, *The Epistles of S. John*, p. 138; Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle*, p. 280.

⁵⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude*, pp. 481-

ther. The intended identity of "Him" and "He" has not received uniform interpretation. This picture of mutual abiding—God in man and man in God—expresses a union of the closest kind. It is portrayed in Christ's picture of the Vine and the branches (John 15:1-10).

The second part of this reciprocal relationship, "and He in him," elicits a further confirmatory statement: "And we know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us." "By this" (ἐν τούτῳ) stands first in the sentence and may look backward to what precedes or forward to the concluding clause. Some like Westcott⁵⁶ and Burdick⁵⁷ hold that the pronoun refers back to the keeping of the commandments as the objective evidence of the inner mystical experience. But most commentators agree with Smalley that "the more natural interpretation, confirmed by the parallel at 4:13, is to connect ἐν τούτῳ with what follows."⁵⁸ The verb "we know" (γινώσκουμεν) denotes a certainty grounded in Christian experience. That certainty is "that He abides in us," which is the very heart of Christian assurance. Obedience is essential for this assurance, but this knowledge is wrought in believers "by the Spirit which He has given us" (ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος οὗ ἡμῖν ἔδωκεν).

John assumed that his readers were well aware of the reality of the indwelling Holy Spirit who makes believers conscious of the divine indwelling. He uses obedience to foster this assurance in their hearts (Rom. 8:16). The indwelling Spirit is God's gift. As Houlden remarks, "Whatever man has by way of relationship with God is never the result of his own effort or initiative, but the gift of God."⁵⁹ The verb "He has given" (ἔδωκεν) records a definite and memorable occasion when the Spirit was given. Dispensationally, the Spirit was given to the church at Pentecost (Acts 2), but individually, the Spirit is given to each believer at the time of his regeneration.

This is the first explicit reference to the Holy Spirit in 1 John, though indirect reference was made to Him in 2:20, 27. John further refers to the Spirit six times (4:2, 6, 13; 5:6 [twice], 8). The designation "the Holy Spirit" occurs four times in the Fourth Gospel (1:33; 7:39 [T.R.]; 14:26; 20:22), but the adjective "Holy" is not used of the Spirit in the Johannine Epistles or Revelation.⁶⁰ This, reference to the Spirit forms a skillful transition to the discussion in 1 John 4:1-6.

⁵⁶ Westcott, *The Epistles of John*, p. 121.

⁵⁷ Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle*, p. 281.

⁵⁸ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 211.

⁵⁹ Houlden, *A Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, p. 104.

⁶⁰ It does occur in 1 John 5:7 in the KJV in the famous interpolation in 5:7-8, but these words are found in no Greek manuscript before the 14th century.

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