

The Letters from John

Light, Life, Love,
Liars & Lawlessness.

Letters to my Little Children

Thoughts & Notes

by

Steven Cutts

These notes have been produced from my personal study of John's letters, assisted by William Barclay's "The Daily Study Bible" series, Tom Wright's "For Everyone" series, various study Bibles, personal notes from other sermons I've heard and some of the multitude of resources available in e-Sword.

This is not intended to be an academic work, but it is hoped that the reader may gain a deeper and practical insight into God's Word.

© 2021 Steven Cutts

Contents

Eyewitness Testimony 1 John 1:1-4	4
Background.....	4
Testimony (1 John 1:1-2).....	4
Fellowship (1 John 1:3-4)	5
Light and Truth 1 John 1:5-10	7
Introduction	7
The Message (1 John 1:5).....	7
Cleansed by Truth (1 John 1:6-7)	7
Self-Deception or Confession ? (1 John 1:8-9)	8
Who's the Liar? (1 John 1:10).....	8
The Advocate and Our Actions 1 John 2:1-6	9
A Precaution and a Protector (1 John 2:1)	9
The Penalty Paid (1 John 2:2).....	9
To Know Him... (1 John 2:3-6)	10
... Is to Obey Him.....	10
...And to Emulate Him	11
Finally.....	11
The Old New Command 1 John 2:7-11	12
A word to keep.	12
Something both old and new.....	12
An ever-brightening light.	13
Hate requires nothing.	13
Left in darkness.....	13
Living in light.....	13
Reason for Writing 1 John 2:12-17	14
Children, Fathers & Young Men (1 John 2:12-14)	14
What the World Wants (1 John 2:15-17).....	15
Antichrist and the Antidote 1 John 2 18-29	16
In opposition (1 John 2:18).....	16
Of the World, not the Kingdom (1 John 2:19)	16
Anointed (1 John 2:20)	16
Truth and Lies (1 John 2:21-25).....	16
Like Father, Like Son (1 John 2:26-27)	17
Living in Truth (1 John 2:26-29).....	17
Children of God or Children of the devil? 1 John 3:1-10	18
What We Are (1 John 3:1)	18
What We Shall Be (1 John 3:2-3).....	18
Lawless (1 John 3:4-6)	18
Clarity (1 John 3:7-8)	19
Stating the Obvious (1 John 3:9-10).....	19
In Deed and in Truth 1 John 3:11-24	20
A Matter of Love and Death (1 John 3:11-18)	20
Passive or Active (1 John 3:16-18)	20
Certainty in the Midst of Doubt (1 John 3:19-20)	21
Confidence to Ask (1 John 3:21-24)	21
Tested and Proven (Origins) 1 John 4:1-6	22
Tested (1 John 4:1-3)	22
Perspective (1 John 4:4)	22
Origins (1 John 4:5-6).....	22
Love Defined and Demonstrated 1 John 4:7-12	24
Love Perfected (by Abiding) 1 John 4:13-21	26

Abide (1 John 4:13).....	26
Testify (1 John 4:14)	26
Acknowledge (1 John 4:15)	26
Know and Rely (1 John 4:16-17).....	26
Beyond Fear (1 John 4:18-19)	27
The Seen and the Unseen (1 John 4:20-21)	27
Born to Overcome 1 John 5:1-5	28
Of God (1 John 5:1-4).....	28
No Hassle (1 John 5:3)	28
By Faith (1 John 5:4)	28
To Overcome (1 John 5:5)	28
To sum up	29
The testimony of Three Witnesses 1 John 5:6-12	30
Water and Blood (1 John 5:6)	30
Evidence of Truth (1 John 5:7-10)	30
Real Life (1 John 5:11-12)	31
Confidence 1 John 5:13-21	32
Know Life (1 John 5:13)	32
Know the Father (1 John 5:14-15).....	32
Standing in the Gap (1 John 5:16-17).....	33
Does not persist in sin (1 John 5:18)	33
We are Born of God (1 John 5:19).....	34
Christ Came (1 John 5:20).....	34
True God (1 John 5:21)	34
The Truth Walkers 2 John 1-6	36
Greeting (2 John 1)	36
Abiding in Truth and Love (2 John 1-3)	36
The Truth Walkers (2 John 4-6).....	36
The Deceivers 2 John 7-13.....	38
Deployed to Deceive (2 John 7)	38
On Guard! (2 John 8)	38
Racing Ahead (2 John 9)	38
Closing Greetings (2 John 12-13).....	39
Testimony to Love 3 John 1-8	41
Truth.....	41
Joy	41
Love	41
Faithfulness.....	42
Loves to Testify 3 John 9-14	43
The trouble with Diotrephes (3 John 9-10)	43
Testimony to Excellence (3 John 11-12)	44
Face to face (3 John 13-14).....	44

Eyewitness Testimony 1 John 1:1-4

Background.

John's letters were written late in the first century, at a time when the church was becoming less of a novelty and more of a normality. While there would have been pockets of persecution, most of the problems came from within, from those who should have known better, yet sought their own agenda, rather than God's. Second and third generation disciples, who had never personally met any of the original apostles, were far more susceptible to false teaching – both giving it and receiving it¹. There was a belief by some that Christ Jesus only *seemed* to have a physical body (known as Docetism). Closely related to this error, and even incorporating it, was Gnosticism. While it's not a simple thing to describe, there were two kinds of Gnostics, both agreeing in the essential evil of matter, and neither accepting the Person of Christ. Some practised severe self-discipline and avoided all forms of indulgence, some swung to the other extreme and practised licentiousness. John opposed both types in his writing. They claimed to possess a superior, secret knowledge (*gnōsis*) and so were called Gnostics (*Gnōstikoi*). Nine times John shows us how to recognise the truth and uses the verb *ginōskō* (know) each time to make it clear what kind of error he is targeting.²

There is something rather contemporary in the issues John addresses in his letters. Barclay has this to say, that to my ears at least, could be speaking of the today's church:

“The trouble which 1 John seeks to combat came not from people who were out to destroy the Christian faith but from those who thought they were improving it. It came from people whose aim was to make Christianity intellectually respectable. They knew the intellectual trends and currents of the day and felt that the time had come for Christianity to come to terms with secular philosophy and contemporary thought.”³

We are seeing the same kind of thinking today. Thinking that seeks to make following Jesus acceptable, that takes on a modern, enlightened approach to sin that denies the need for repentance, regeneration and renewal. The requirement for a transforming holiness has never been rescinded. The God who set the standards of 'apartness' for Israel still calls us to be set apart for His service. What does that look like? How does our behaviour set us apart from those with whom we live and work?

Testimony (1 John 1:1-2)

‘That which was from the beginning...’ From the get-go, John references the eternal nature of Christ. He is one with the Father, before time was created. He has no origin, no first cause. If we look at the opening of John's Gospel account, we see that Christ Himself is the ‘first cause’, the initiator of all things: ‘All things were made through Him’, nothing was made without Him – He is the only source of life. It is this very fact that sets Jesus apart and qualifies Him to be ‘a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek’ and through the power of His indestructible life is able to save completely all who come to Him. In chapter seven, the Writer of Hebrews puts it far more clearly than I could, logically explaining how limited the Levitical Priesthood was and how vastly superior Christ Jesus' Priesthood is. While Christ's pre-eminence is a recurring theme throughout the New Testament, John especially seems to keep touching on His eternal nature. In the Revelation, we are reminded several times that Christ is the first and the last, the beginning and the end. To deny or ignore Christ's ‘godness’ is as much of an error as denying his humanness.

‘Which we have... seen... touched... looked upon... touched...’ This is a first-person witness, not hearsay, not something made up. This perspective echoes John's account of Jesus' life where in

¹ Barclay, William. The Daily Study Bible: The Letters of John and Jude Introduction. St Andrews Press 1976.

² A. T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, Introduction to 1 John 1930-1933 Public Domain e-Sword edition

³ Barclay, William. The Daily Study Bible: The Letters of John and Jude Introduction page 5. St Andrews Press 1976.

chapter 21, verse 24 he identifies himself as both witness and author. This personal testimony is first-hand evidence of what has been seen and touched. As in Peter's letter, this is not some cleverly crafted story to suck people in. This is real history, real people, real events, that generate real joy.

Everything about the Word of Life was made conspicuous. Jesus didn't hide His actions from public scrutiny, He didn't conceal His origin or purpose. The confusion and misunderstanding came because people were blind to the truth, as Jesus said when He quoted Isaiah 6:9-10.

Mat 13:14-15 NIV In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them."

They could not see because they would not. Seeing Jesus as the Messiah would mean being accountable to Him. It would mean ditching the comfortable system of worship that had been held for so long. To those in authority, it was frighteningly uncomfortable because the subversive, upside-down nature of the Kingdom meant they would lose all their influence and power. Even now, it is something that we do not necessarily get right. Far too often we have tamed, chained and institutionalised the power of the Gospel. Far too often we condemn the Scribes and the Pharisees while doing exactly the things they did.

Just in these first two verses we see the eternal reality of Christ, His substance confirmed by eyewitnesses, the veracity of His actions and words confirmed by one who was there. This is no myth or fable. This is no fantasy. Before all things is the *Logos Zoe* – both the act of His speaking (Gen 1) and His words (John 6:68) bring about Life.

Fellowship (1 John 1:3-4)

Why was John so intent on proclaiming what he saw and heard? So that we could have fellowship, or relationship. The relationship is with the apostles, the great cloud of witnesses, and contemporary saints. It ties us together with them and because they already have fellowship with the Father, and now so do we. Have a look at what Peter says in his letter:

2Pe 1:1 ESV Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have *obtained a faith of equal standing with ours* by the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ.

This never fails to amaze me. Those of us who have never seen Jesus in the flesh, who have never met any of the apostles, who live hundreds of years after the fact, have a faith that is no less valuable, no less real than theirs. Not that it is because of any merit on *our* part. No, it is because of 'the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ'.

Why do some relationships last and some do not? I know that some friendships are just for a particular season in life, a relatively short-term need for both. Others remain in the background but will always be there if needed. Though most will fade into the obscurity of distant memory, a very few will remain connected and current. Some relationships end because they are creating more harm than good. As sinners, none of us can expect to be perfect in this life, but there may be times when unhealthy extremes are reached, and it is better for all to end association.

When things go well, when friendships endure, what has gone *right*? I would suggest that it is because the thing that drew you together in the beginning has remained as important as it ever was – or perhaps even more so. As members of the Family of God, we share a common mission. Yes, we each have different roles that may change over the years, depending on our gifts and passions, yet there is one goal that should be our focus: bringing glory to God. How do we do that?

John gives us some practical ways to make that happen later in his letter, but at the foundation of it all is our own relationship with God and introducing others to His family. This is the essence of the family business. Our connection with the apostles as well as today's disciples is as secure as our relationship to Christ is.

This is the fellowship that John writes of here. It is deeper and stronger than friendship and it is more enduring than any connection to earthly family. And yet, it is reflected in those relationships. The eternal connection that we have with the Father, through Christ Jesus gives us a foundation and a pattern for all our temporary, earthly relationships. There is of course an enduring nature to the fellowship we have with others who follow Christ. That is because of the eternal nature of our shared fellowship with Christ. This physical life is not all there is. It is the beginning of us, not an end in itself. When we are in fellowship with Christ and His family, there is a joy that is not dependant on circumstances and a peace that cannot be explained.

John's purpose for writing is that we would share in the complete experience of Joy that can only come through relationship. This is the reason we were made (Gen 2:18-25), this is what our sin has destroyed, and this is what Christ has put back together through His suffering and resurrection. Our joy is made complete when we have fellowship with both other believers and Christ. One way that we find Joy is in this kind of abiding. This is Relationship as it was intended to be. Joy is produced by the Spirit. It is part of a range of things that we experience in increasing depth as we 'abide', or rather, when we allow Him to abide in us. Enduring joy comes, in part, from an enduring relationship, primarily relationship with Christ.

Fellowship with others must be anchored in our fellowship with the Father. Only in this balance that joy can be perfected, made complete, abundant. We need the restoring relationship with the Son so that we can have fellowship with the Father. And it is only then that our sense of family with others in relationship with them will be mature enough to allow the Spirit to produce Joy in us.

Light and Truth 1 John 1:5-10

Introduction

Does anyone like walking around in the darkness? I'm not talking about a pleasant night-time stroll in the bush where the moon and stars give enough light to see the path. No, I'm talking about a deep darkness that cannot be penetrated. Our bedroom in the house where we lived in Canberra was very dark. None of the nearby streetlights shone in our bedroom window at night and unless the moon was up, it was almost impossible to find the way to the bathroom except by feel. More than once, I bumped into the wardrobe or stumbled against the tallboy. Even in a familiar room, darkness can cause us to stumble. On an unfamiliar path that kind of impenetrable darkness can be far more dangerous.

This short passage is not just about Light, it is also about Truth. We have a message that is not our own, it is one that has been handed to us through the saints of old from the Word of Life Himself. The source of the message is important because it assures us of its authority and therefore its truth. What we do with that Message is important. We can understand what it says and yet not allow it to penetrate to our core and produce a change in behaviour. We can have a light shine on our faults yet ignore what we see, just like the man in James 1:22-25 who walks away from the mirror without even remembering what he looks like. John, like James, holds a mirror up that reveals just how dirty we are and compels us to do something about it.

The Message (1 John 1:5)

God *is* Light. This is the Message John says that we have been given. This is a statement of God's fundamental nature. It is the same when we say that God is Love. Light is a precondition for Life, it represents glory, truth, and holiness⁴. As it is fundamental to the nature of God, there can be no shadow that moves as the season changes. God is not unpredictable and moody.

Only in Him is there Relationship that is completely transparent. Nothing is hidden in the light – we can see both our own blemishes and the obstacles that would trip us up. The question then must be, "What do we do with that knowledge?" It is darkness that hides sin. If we live away from God, we live in the shadows and sin can fester. Light exposes sin, Christ's blood washes it away and in doing so washes away all impediments to relationship with God and others.

Cleansed by Truth (1 John 1:6-7)

We can *say* all these things, but what matters is how we 'walk'. Walking in the Light allows us to see our faults and 'say' them so that Jesus Christ can forgive and clean them out. Walking in the Light allows us to see the faults in others and Love them anyway – remembering our own failures and extending to them the same Grace that has been shown to us. Light allows us to see things as they truly are.

Darkness cannot exist in the presence of light. You cannot fellowship with light and walk in darkness. To walk in darkness is not possible when you live in light. The two are mutually exclusive – the presence of one makes it impossible for the other to exist there. This is why sin and evil cannot exist in the presence of God. Dark is an absence of light; it does not have any substance. In the same way evil is not so much a thing in itself, but rather an absence of holiness.

Before we are even able to speak up about what we have done, we must be able to *see* what we have done. Light is needed for that. For many, there is a need to realise that there *is* light. They have always walked in darkness and are not aware that there is any Light at all. Here's the thing – Jesus has called us 'the light of the world'. Those who only know darkness can see the Light that

⁴ Word Studies in the New Testament (M. R. Vincent) 1888

we reflect. Now that means that firstly we must be living in the Light to be able to reflect it and secondly, we must be living in the world to be seen by it.

Walking in the Light is the same as abiding in the Vine. It is a lifestyle, a constant state of being, it is a mindset. It is not about slavishly following rules, though there *are* expectations regarding behaviour. We don't always meet the expected standard. We behave (walk) in a way that reflects who we are. We are new creatures in Christ, but we still wrestle with sin. We have our priorities set on the Kingdom of Heaven, but we live in the World. This tension, at times, is too much and we fail. However, that is not the end of it all, because we have Christ speaking on our behalf.

Self-Deception or Confession? (1 John 1:8-9)

The act of remaining connected to the Vine, or walking in the Light, exposes how much I need His Life and how many dark corners exist in my own. Yet it is the pain of exposure that provokes humility and drives us to seek, not only the forgiveness, but the cleansing as well. 'But if we live/remain/abide/rest in the light', the same kind of Light that is God, then our relationships with each other can be restored and we have a connection with Christ that effectively deals with those dark corners. It is far too easy to become complacent. It is far too easy to become distracted.

His Light exposes our darkness. His Life drives out our decay.

Confession is only possible when light exposes the problem. Only when it can be seen can the filth be cleaned off. Consider Luke 18:10-14. In this parable, the Pharisee could not see his sin and so could not understand that he needed mercy. As for the Tax Collector, all he could see was his sin and realised that it was impossible to free himself from it. Getting gravel out of a wound, hurts but it must be done in order to heal. It hurts to admit sin, it hurts to debride a wound, but it is the starting point for healing.

Who's the Liar? (1 John 1:10)

God has said that these things must be done to allow healing and restoration. Plenty of people call God a liar, many simply refuse to take responsibility for their actions. There are people who don't, can't, or won't recognise their sin. Jesus gave us two commands as being the most important, yet in our pride and selfishness we cannot keep either of them. Our pride prevents us from consistently loving God with all our heart. Our selfishness prevents us from consistently loving our neighbour as our self. Failure in these two areas is such a habit that we often fail to see it. This is not what John is referring to here. He isn't speaking of failure to acknowledge something unknown. If the Holy Spirit possesses you, He will convict you of the things that need to be dealt with. God has made it clear that *all* have sinned, that *all* need to turn away from sin, that *all* can only do so through Jesus Christ's work and not their own. His word declares this, and if His word is in us, then we will see it for the truth that it is.

If we *say* and do not *do*, we are lying, we are fooling ourselves, we are calling God a liar. Owning up to what we have done exposes our sin to the light and in doing so, drives out the darkness through the work that Christ did on the Cross. Nothing less is sufficient.

The Advocate and Our Actions 1 John 2:1-6

A Precaution and a Protector (1 John 2:1)

Those we love, we protect. We care about whether they succeed or fail. We do all we can to equip them for success and we do all we can to help them get back up when they fail. When my children were learning to ride their bicycles, I ran alongside them to steady them if they wobbled too much and to help them back up when they fell over. It helped to keep me fit and it kept them travelling safely as they built up their skill and confidence.

Jesus promised to send ‘another helper’ (John 14:16), one that was equal to Himself. The word used in John’s gospel account and in this letter is that of a legal counsel who ‘comes alongside’ to intercede or assist. Unlike my running alongside my children, who after a time ceased to need my help, the Holy Spirit remains with us to comfort, encourage, and exhort⁵ – even as Jesus promised that he would never leave or forsake us.

John’s fatherly concern for those he is writing is woven throughout this letter. He does not want us to ‘miss the mark’ or to veer away from what is true. The consequences of falling short of the goal are eternal, yet there is hope, even in the midst of our failure. What I find amazing is that it is *us* who have fallen short, wandered off and disobeyed, yet it is the One that we have offended through our actions who has taken the necessary steps to bring us back.

Scattered throughout chapter one is the encouraging thought that though we fail, there is a way to be restored. Right here in 2:1 it is unequivocal. John’s purpose for writing is clearly spelled out, ‘I am writing this so that you will not sin.’ This is so that our lives can reflect the character of Christ, so that we may bear His mark, so to speak. Yet John is equally clear that we will sin, though it is an ‘if’ not ‘when’ that he uses. This being the case, the Father Himself has provided the legal counsel for our defence – our advocate, the *paráklētos* – the ‘one who lends his presence to his friends’⁶. This is of course Jesus Christ, the one who gave everything to make us His friends.

It’s easy to convince ourselves that what God clearly calls sin is not so bad. We can justify every little act of selfishness, every time we push to make people into our own image, every time we fail to rein in our desires. We often look around us and blend in with the culture we are in because what everyone else is doing appears so good. Yet it doesn’t matter how times change – sin is still sin. We don’t get to change the standard to suit what we think is right, we don’t have the authority to adjust what God has set as acceptable just because the culture we are in wants it to be so. Every time we step over the line, or deliberately stop short of it, we set a new benchmark in behaviour that we tolerate. We need to regularly recalibrate our ‘sin micrometre’ to bring our standards back into line with God’s.

The Penalty Paid (1 John 2:2)

It is our actions that have alienated us from God. It is our unbelief in what God has said that leads to the offensive behaviour that drives a wedge between us. We cannot bribe our way out of trouble, we cannot pay back anything that can make up for the hurt we have caused. Christ Himself is both the sacrifice that turns away God’s anger at our sin and the High Priest who offers it. The cross where Christ’s blood was poured out is the place where we receive mercy. As well as restoring our relationship with God and thus being able to be in His presence, the work of propitiation is an ongoing washing and regeneration (Titus 3:5). In putting away sin, righteousness is established in its place.

⁵ Complete Word Study Dictionary, 1992 AMG International

⁶ Barclay, William. The Daily Study Bible: The Letters of John and Jude page 38. St Andrews Press 1976.

Some people call the Father a child abuser, but the Son did not go as a child under coercion or control. He went willingly, as an adult, eyes fully open, even as Isaac did when he went with Abraham to the mountain⁷. There was no other way. Only such a terrible sacrifice could demonstrate such limitless love for us. Only love unlimited could deal with such unlimited evil in us. He is not only our Advocate who stands alongside us and pleads our case, but the one who provides the necessary means to restore the relationship that we broke!

To Know Him... (1 John 2:3-6)

John gives us the certainty of hope. We *can* be sure that we know Him. If we know Him, we *can* be sure of His advocacy for us. What then is the certain sign that we know Him? It is simply whether or not we keep His commands. No punches pulled, no careful stepping around sensibilities. You can say, "I know God", anybody can speak those words. But what is behind the words? What is the intent, the motivation, the substance? John doesn't muck around here – if you say that and yet live in disobedience, then you are living a lie.

We come back to chapter one, verse seven and living in the Light. A life of obedience to the Father is a life of light and truth. Faith that does not result in action is dead⁸. Love that is not put into practise is empty and dark. Faith, Hope and Love are all active words – things that provoke a response in those who really have them. They are, in fact, proof of Life. If we are truly God's children, we will copy our big Brother.

Truth and Light are paired as are Lies and Darkness. In the dark, we cannot see what really is. Some obstacles are hidden, while shadows exaggerate others. (I am reminded of the times I have walked into furniture or walls when trying to navigate an unfamiliar room in the dark). Just as light exposes the difficulties before we collide with them, so too does truth reveal deceptions. Truth exposes our hypocrisy. Truth is revealed in how we behave and especially how we react in stressful situations.

By no means have we 'made it'! Much is made these days of 'continuous improvement' and our walk in the Light of God is not any different. We are on a life-long journey towards complete maturity that can only be achieved when we finally 'see Him face to face'.

... Is to Obey Him...

The relationship has been restored, we have 'the mind of Christ'⁹, though we can never know all His thoughts and ways. Still, we can know His character, His heart, His passions, and we can ask for wisdom. In this way, we can know what He would want us to do. And we have His Holy Spirit to give us the strength of will to do it. In John's Gospel account¹⁰, Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." It's a deceptively simple thing to require, especially when we see what that command is. In John 15:12, Jesus lays out what that He requires of us, and we'll look at that in the next section of this letter.

Jesus is our brother, the 'first born' of many, but He is also much more than that. He is also Lord of all – all things have been placed under His feet, all authority in heaven and earth are His. If we do truly know Him and what he has done on our behalf, how can we not feel the weight of that debt? How can we not marvel at His love and love in return?

⁷ Genesis 22

⁸ James 2:26

⁹ 1 Corinthians 2:16

¹⁰ John 14:15

...And to Emulate Him

To genuinely know Jesus, to really understand what He has done for us *must* provoke us to love Him. Paul puts it rather bluntly in Romans 6:1-5

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

If we are to share Christ's resurrection, we must first share His death. To properly unpack that would be a study series in itself. Suffice to say here that this is at the core of the reason that a change in behaviour is expected. Dead people do not react to the same kind of stimuli that living people do.

So, we see that 'the love of Christ compels us'¹¹ and provokes us to love. In that love, there will be an admiration that makes us want to be like Him – just as child copies their parent or older sibling. Where do we learn? We may get information from lessons or lectures, but we learn when we observe and copy the examples of speech and behaviour that are before us. How we demonstrate love, how we live by faith are things that we learn by copying others. But the ultimate example is Jesus.

Finally...

We have not been left alone to try to figure things out ourselves and muddle along. The One who said, "I will not leave you as orphans" has also promised to be with us always¹². Not only can we ask for the wisdom that we lack, but we also have One who will speak on our behalf when we are honest and speak up about our failures. None of us have managed to completely die to sin and live completely for Christ, but we serve a gracious Master who provides the way to be restored and renewed.

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 5:14

¹² John 14:18 & Matthew 28:20

The Old New Command 1 John 2:7-11

At first glance, this short passage may seem a bit cryptic or confusing, but this is very much a case of needing to have context – both from within this letter and from other Scripture. He has just been writing about keeping Christ's commands as an indicator of a person's relationship with Him, linking keeping His word with loving God.

A word to keep.

John indicates that it is both new and old. We have had this command from the beginning, it is 'the word you have heard'. It should be obvious that the word is from Christ Jesus Himself. If we are to get the intent, the logic, behind the command, then we really need to know the One who has commanded it to understand the intent of what they are saying.

What is John's intent here? In every corner of this letter, John drags us back to the foundations of following Jesus. It is no mystery. There is no secret knowledge to be unearthed. Jesus Himself made it very plain from the beginning:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. (John 13:34 NASB)

What was Jesus' intent in giving us this command? It seems such a simple thing to require, though those of us who are trying to do it realise that while it may be simple, it is anything but easy.

By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:35 NASB)

The indicator of our relationship with Jesus is how we love. Not a wishy-washy, touchy-feeling emotional response. Rather, what Jesus and John are referring to is a deliberate choice, a determination to keep a promise of seeking another's good regardless of cost. This has a two-fold purpose. The first is that those outside of Christ can see what Love truly is. The second is so that those of us in Christ can have a living example in front of us to follow.

Something both old and new

When we look through the Old Testament, we see the command to love in many places. Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 19:18, and 34 are just a small sample. We can also see God's command to love when He rebukes His people for not acting in love towards others. There is nothing new about the requirement to love as God loves.

We also have evidence of the commitment from God to Love all through the Old Testament. His covenant to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was reconfirmed repeatedly. It is God's stubborn determination to Love Israel in spite of her failures that we see recorded time and again throughout the Old Testament. And yet, it isn't until we see Jesus, that we really see what God's love is like up close. His life and sacrifice make it personal. His determination to Love us even when we were kicking against Him and running the other way, makes it personal.

The command to love is seen in sharper relief when seen in the light of Christ's life and sacrifice. Previously we could look at how God persisted in loving Israel in spite of her unfaithfulness, or we could observe the imperfect example of other people. We have eyewitness accounts recorded of how Jesus lived, perfectly demonstrating God's love as He dealt with all kinds of people. More importantly, we have the example of His self-sacrificing love. Love that goes out of its way, in fact puts itself in harm's way, to do what is necessary for our eternal good.

And the truth of this new command is also seen in us as we imitate Christ, reflecting however imperfectly the light of His love. John keeps coming back to love – not a soft, feel-good emotional

thing that advertisers try to sell us; rather it is something that is strong and enduring and sometimes uncomfortable and difficult. For us to reflect the love of Christ, we must live in His light. This is the very foundation of our faith.

An ever-brightening light.

John has been saying all through this letter that if we are living in God's presence, we live a life that is visible, open, transparent, and full of light that comes from God. Our sin breaks the fellowship that we were created to have with God and with each other, yet God has done all that is necessary to restore that fellowship. When we look around us at the world and observe how people are behaving, it looks as if things are getting darker. John says that this is not the case. His observation is that the darkness is fading, and the true light is already shining.

We are in that pre-dawn time. It is still too dark to see clearly, but there is a bright stain of gold on the horizon which promises full light. It is not yet day, though it is no longer night. Whenever we choose to demonstrate to others the kind of Love that Jesus has for us, we push back on the darkness and allow His light to shine a bit brighter.

Hate requires nothing.

We often think of hate as an act that harms another, and that is certainly true. But if Love is an act of selflessness for the good of another, where does doing nothing for someone fall? Even as cold is an absence of heat and darkness is an absence of light, so too hate is often an absence of love rather than any specific overt act. God demonstrated His love for us – He made a choice to love us and went out of His way to prove to us how great that Love is. If He had done nothing, we would have no evidence that He was committed to our welfare. Our death in our own sin would be as sure as if we were put to death immediately.

There is both a command to love and an example of love given to by Jesus in John 15:12-13. For us to walk in obedience to Him is beyond us. Unless we remain connected to Him as our source of life and power, we simply cannot do what He asks of us. Consider Peter's response to Jesus in John 21:15-19 – Jesus was asking if he loved with *agapáō*, Peter could only respond with family affection, *philéō*. Of course, this was before Peter was empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, but it is an example of how limited we are unless we are connected and empowered by Jesus.

Left in darkness

I think if that if we are not actively seeking to love others in a way that reflects Jesus' love for us, we are blind to what He has done. Can we forgive if we have not truly accepted His forgiveness? Are we able to love even our enemies if we are not living in His love? Have we failed to even begin to 'comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ' if we are not active in demonstrating His love? Jesus' love is not blind. It sees a person's faults and failings and chooses to seek what is best for them anyway. In fact, the light of love exposes those things which are to our harm.

Living in light

Love, the *agapáō* the Jesus has for us, allows us to see our own faults and with His strength overcome them as we grow to be more like Him. It also allows us to see the faults of others and walk with them anyway. As we do, we can draw them to the One who is more than able to transform them too.

Reason for Writing 1 John 2:12-17

Children, Fathers & Young Men (1 John 2:12-14)

In this section, John switches from writing about Christ's command to Love and how the act of loving illuminates our life. Then comes this song or poem, seemingly randomly placed. Though it mentions specific groups of people, I am confident that John wants to apply it to all believers. He uses repetition to reinforce his point, as he does throughout this letter. After all, these precious and encouraging truths are an encouragement that we all need to remember.

Little children, your sins have been forgiven. Not because of anything that they have done, but 'for His name's sake'. All that the Father has done to restore us has been motivated by His love for us. But if he did not act on that love, He would dishonour His name – His very nature is bound up with His name. The confidence that we have, our assurance of forgiveness, is bound up with our knowledge of His character as revealed in 'His name'.¹³

Little children – you know the Father. With sin completely dealt with, we are now able to come to know the Father, to know both His character and His will. Our life begins at this point, we become the Father's children. There is innocence, energy, and curiosity in children. Both Mark (10:14-15) and Luke (18:16-17) record Jesus saying that the Kingdom of God belongs to those who receive it with the simple trusting faith that children have. Those of us who have been around long enough to be jaded, still need to have that innocence, that energy and the curiosity so typical of children.

Young men – you have overcome the evil one; you are strong; the Word of God abides in you. The enthusiasm and energy of youth, still learning how to navigate the difficult waters of temptation. Their strength is that the 'Word of God abides' in them and it is through that strength that the evil one is able to be overcome. There is a vigour and strength in young adults that is enviable to those of us who have lost it. There is a fearlessness that is at times their undoing but daring to risk all for the Kingdom is not such a bad thing when in alignment with the Father's priorities.

Fathers – you know Him who is from the beginning. There is a familiarity that comes with a long-term relationship. Not that it requires less effort or energy, but that you are familiar with how the other thinks, how they will react in certain situations, what they require of you. So, it becomes easier to anticipate and be proactive in your service to them. Those of you who have been married for a long time have hopefully experienced this – both in the anticipating and being anticipated. While we may no longer have the same energy we did in our youth, while we may be wary of consequences, there is a wisdom that comes from many years of seeking to follow God's ways that in a healthy Church family will temper the rashness of youth but will not quench it.

Guiding those new to faith requires wisdom gained from years of discipline. Those who can, do and those who can do so no longer, teach. Children need to be taught the fundamentals by Fathers and Mothers, even while they look up to and admire the youths. Youths need to be guided and encouraged with the wisdom of their elders, without being crushed. Those who are fathers and mothers, not only need to speak into the lives of the children and youths but be encouraged and inspired by their energy and enthusiasm.

Note that these are basics, but there is still a depth to them. It may seem to come out of nowhere, without really fitting in. Sandwiched between love for your brother and love for the World. Yet we all know how inconsistent we are when it comes to loving our brother and how difficult it is to resist the pull of the world. John's apparent sidestep here is intended to bring into clearer focus what we have and who we are in Christ. Note how much emphasis is on knowing the Father. Observe too, how strength and overcoming the evil one is bound up in God's Word living in you.

¹³ Barclay, William. The Daily Study Bible: The Letters of John and Jude page 54. St Andrews Press 1976.

It's Jesus and the work He did that opens the door for us to be adopted into God's family, but it's His Word that opens the dialogue which grows that relationship.

Perhaps this word of encouragement is meant to help counter some of the heavy thoughts John has raised already in preparation for those he is about to raise. Though it's hard to love your brother, your sins have been forgiven. We have an advocate, but you have overcome the evil one – those desires John is about to mention are difficult to master, yet God has given you strength. Knowing God, the One who is beyond time, is about understanding his character and thus pursuing the things He cares about.

What the World Wants (1 John 2:15-17)

You cannot serve two masters¹⁴. You cannot have part-time discipleship any more than you can have a part-time marriage. In the same way, you cannot remain engaged with the World if you are wedded to Christ. Those things that ignite desire will not last. Those things *seem* so real, so solid, but they are not. They are a shadow, a vapour, they have no enduring substance. But doing the will of God produces an effect that endures forever. Compare the two positions in Psalm 1:3-4 – the tree and the chaff. One is fruitful and enduring, the other disappears in the lightest puff of wind. Chaff becomes dust that is swept away and forgotten, whereas the tree is a blessing for generations to come.

We cannot long for and chase after the things of this world and expect the Father's love to remain in us.

The lusts of the flesh are about physical gratification. Not only sex, but pleasure generally, food, and physical comforts. The lust of the eyes is that which captivates us by its appearance. We see it, we like it and so want it and pursue it. The boastful pride of life is that always wanting more – more power, more wealth, more things, so that the ego is pleased with what self has achieved. It is the pursuit of power, position and possessions. Such people judge everything by their appetites, they are slaves to showiness, they are pleased when they can boast of their excesses¹⁵.

There is a subtle, almost implied thought that rather than lusting after the things of this world, we are to strongly desire and pursue the gifts the Father offers us (v16b). In Matthew 5:6, Jesus says that we are blessed when righteousness is our greatest desire. Desire in itself is not bad, but what are we expending our energy in pursuing? Other passages that refer to gifts from the Holy Spirit, call us to use His gifts in a way that empowers others. They are not for our own glory.

Whatever age we are, whatever stage we are at in our walk with Jesus, we have something to contribute to the Kingdom. Whether we are children, youths, fathers, or mothers, we need to desire righteousness above all else. We all need to ask, "How can I use what the Father has given me in a way that pleases Him? Am I building up someone's faith? Am I helping them to gain knowledge? Does what I do contribute to the way they honour God with their life? What about speaking up for and acting to support those who are vulnerable?" These are things that please the Father.

¹⁴ Matthew 6:24

¹⁵ Barclay, William. The Daily Study Bible: The Letters of John and Jude page 88. St Andrews Press 1976.

Antichrist and the Antidote 1 John 2 18-29

In opposition (1 John 2:18)

'Antichrist' can either mean one who opposes the Lord's anointed, or one who seeks to usurp His position¹⁶. We are to be on our guard against both and we are to be careful that we do not fall into the same trap ourselves. Could someone who has the anointing of the Holy Spirit oppose the Son, or seek to put themselves into the position that only He has the right to be? John makes it clear that cannot be the case. Nevertheless, we must be careful to weigh our own actions and motives against the clear command of Jesus to love and pursue the Kingdom and righteousness. We must hold each other to account in this regard, even while we work together to build one another up in these things.

Of the World, not the Kingdom (1 John 2:19)

"These people ... never really belonged to us". It's not that these people were following Jesus and turned away, it's that they never did in the first place. They looked right, they sounded right, they behaved right – right up until they went out. Is every fallen believer an anti-Christ? I'm not sure, but having walked away from Christ, they are certainly not for Him.

Confusing the created world as being evil and to be avoided is part of the problem with Gnosticism. God made the world 'very good' and even though under the curse, it is still for us to enjoy with thanksgiving¹⁷.

The term 'world' in John's writing (and in many other places in Scripture) has to do with the systems – the principalities and powers – that set themselves against God. If we find that the things of this world draw us away from God, it is not that those things are evil, it is that our attitude to them is twisted by our sin. James makes the point in his letter that we fall into sin when we give in to our desires (James 1:13-17). Ultimately, our lust for those created things is in essence idolatry. Creation is a gift to use for our benefit and enjoyment, with gratitude to the One who made it. It is not intended to be a god to worship.

Anointed (1 John 2:20)

Barclay makes the point that even as we have the anointing of the Holy Spirit which energises us to work for God's Kingdom, there are those who are *anti-anointing* who are in fact driven by the deceiver to oppose any work that is for the King¹⁸. Once we realise what is happening, there may be a temptation to become disheartened. I think this is why John reminds us in 4:4 and 5:4 that not only is Christ greater in every way, but that He has already won the victory. Thus, there is no reason for us to be afraid when false teachers arise.

"But you are not like that..." There is a very human tendency to wonder if we will fall in the same way as someone we know has already. John encourages his readers to remember *what* they believe and *who* they believe.

Truth and Lies (1 John 2:21-25)

Those to whom John was writing knew the truth, they knew the difference between truth and lies, because they had the Holy Spirit who "will lead you into all truth" (John 16:13). Even as Jesus is the Anointed One¹⁹, He has also anointed us with a holy anointing. A king or a priest was set apart

¹⁶ Barclay, William. The Daily Study Bible: The Letters of John and Jude page 61. The St Andrews Press 1976

¹⁷ Tom, Wright. Early Christian Letters for Everyone (New Testament for Everyone) (p. 147). SPCK. Kindle Edition; 1Timothy 4:4-5

¹⁸ Barclay, William. The Daily Study Bible: The Letters of John and Jude page 64. The St Andrews Press 1976

¹⁹ Word Studies in the New Testament (M. R. Vincent) 1888 Public Domain

for a specific purpose by being anointed with oil. In this same way, we are set apart for a holy purpose by the anointing we receive from the Holy Spirit.

Anyone who denies Jesus as God's Messiah cannot possibly have the truth in them, that is to say, they cannot have the Holy Spirit in them. Because He only testifies to what is true, he cannot deny who Jesus is.

Sound doctrine may seem to be a bit of a hassle. The problem John addresses in verses 20-23 relates to people who made up their own teaching. They denied the deity of Christ, they ignored the connection between Father and Son, they did not have the Spirit who takes us by the hand and leads us to truth.

Being a disciple of Jesus *is* primarily about relationship, but it begins with faith, it is built up with knowledge and it is crowned with determined, covenant love (2 Peter 1:5-7). Remaining faithful to the Apostles' teaching enables us to be willing to be led by the Spirit. He works in us to build up the relationship we have. This *remaining or abiding* is strengthened into an enduring bond that does not end with death.

Like Father, Like Son (1 John 2:26-27)

The Son and the Father are inseparable. We cannot know the Father except through the Son. We cannot come to the Father except through His anointed one. (Matthew 11:27; Luke 10:22; John 12:44-45; 14:6-9). This lying spirit of the antichrist strikes at the foundation of our salvation by denying that connection. Their intent is to deceive and destroy rather than to speak the truth and build up. If we move away from the apostles' teaching, if we reject what Christians have believed for millennia and cling to an interpretation of Scripture that has been bent to fit a modern narrative, we are putting ourselves and others in danger of an eternal peril.

There will always be those who seek to draw people to themselves. The difficulty is that lies are subtle, they sound good, that is until they are exposed to the light of truth. Those promoting false teaching may be convinced they are right, that their way honours God, but the Holy Spirit will make it clear what they really are.

Living in Truth (1 John 2:26-29)

You see, those who have the Spirit of Truth in them, who let the teaching of Jesus and His apostles saturate their existence, can spot what is false. When you are intimately acquainted with what is genuine, a fake stands out. There is more to it than that. The Holy Spirit testifies to our hearts what is true. There is a deep sense of being unsettled by falsehood, even though you may not be able to identify exactly why. Likewise, the truth will ring a chord deep down, it may even provoke a verbal "Amen!" though again, you might not be able to put your finger on exactly why.

We are also able to see what a person's life produces – their fruit reflects what they are. There is no need to be ashamed of our work when our lives are producing 'the peaceful fruit of righteousness'. John wants his readers to be confident in Christ's presence, but only the righteous can stand before the Son of God without fear. Those who do what Christ would do reflect His character and copy His actions because of the relationship they have with Him. Therefore, we need to remain close to Christ, but also our brothers and sisters in Christ. We need to invest time with them, hearing what He has to say both to us and through us.

Children of God or Children of the devil? 1 John 3:1-10

Throughout this passage, John flicks from describing those who are in Christ and those who are of the devil. Being in Christ produces predictable patterns of behaviour, and being apart from Christ produces different, but equally predictable behaviour. In the descriptions of these different characteristics, we have a standard to measure our behaviour against. And this standard is purity, righteousness, and love. Who we belong to is revealed by the things that we do.

What We Are (1 John 3:1)

There's a feeling when you see something of incredible beauty – a view, a sunrise maybe – that makes you just want to look at it forever, to drink it in, to share it with someone you love, or indeed, anyone and everyone. I think that is the kind of depth of feeling that John wants to get across when he says, "Look at the love God has poured out on us..." Examine the detail, drink in its beauty, marvel at it, share it with others. The thing of incredible beauty, the marvel, is that we can be called God's children.

As incredible as it seems '...that is what we are...' The Father calls us His children because he has made us so. The work that the Son has done puts us in a position where we can be in His presence, and so we are adopted into His family. Those outside, whose entire existence is in this current world, simply do not get it. How can they? The World doesn't know us. The NLT paraphrases it as 'recognise that we are God's children'. There is something that blinds them to the spiritual realities. They couldn't recognise the Messiah when He came, they can't recognise our relationship with Him. It seems as if they are wilfully ignorant and thus wilfully blind.

What We Shall Be (1 John 3:2-3)

Our adoption into God's family as His own children is certain, it is a fact, it is what we are now. Exactly what our position will be when the new heaven and earth come into being is not clear. It seems that the relationship will deepen, and our role will change. Indeed, we will change. We will see the King of all kings in all His splendour and glory. The image that we bear will be restored (Gen 1:26-27)

Keeping pure. Single minded. Pure in heart (Mat 5:8). Our end state is to be like Him. Our current state is one of continuous, but slow, transformation. Do we disqualify ourselves from the race when the end is in sight? (1Co 9:24-27; 2Ti 23-7, 15; Rom 13:11-14). The teaching throughout the New Testament is consistent – we cannot continue to live the way everyone else lives if we have truly been reborn of the Spirit through Christ's sacrifice.

What will that look like in our speech and our conduct? How will our faith express itself in what we do? How do we demonstrate to the world what God's love looks like?

Lawless (1 John 3:4-6)

If we break the Law, then we are sinning. The word 'lawless' is more to do with the person who lives without reference to the Law. Thus, sin is ignoring the commands, instructions, and directions of the Father. John's argument is that because Jesus came to take our sins away, (which He alone could do because He had none of His own), then one who has truly been washed, regenerated, and renewed by the Holy Spirit, and who abides, remains, and is grafted in Christ cannot continue to walk in disobedience. Those who continue to deliberately 'miss the mark', have neither seen Him (verse 2), nor do they know Him. If what we believe does not provoke a response in the way we behave, can we really say that we believe it? Holiness cannot have unholiness in its presence. We cannot abide in Christ and do those things which fall short of God's standards, those things which by their nature are offensive to God.

Clarity (1 John 3:7-8)

What we do is a product of what we are. Fruit. The kind of fruit a tree produces indicates what kind of tree it is. CWSB Dictionary describes righteousness as 'conformity to the claims of higher authority and stands in opposition to lawlessness'. Where does our authority come from? When a member of the ADF is given an order that is the question asked, at least subconsciously. Is there a higher authority that has given an order that contradicts this one? To obey the higher authority is what is required. You may get grief from the lower one, but the higher one will have your back.

There will be times when, as Peter did in Acts 4:19-20, where we must say, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard."

The Accuser, Deceiver, has been doing his own thing since then beginning. He has, since creation, refused to obey Higher Authority. So, all that follow his example are his, even as all who follow the Son's example are His. But the Son of God set out to destroy the work of the devil. That process has commenced and will not fail to be completed. Those who do the work of the devil will also be destroyed.

Stating the Obvious (1 John 3:9-10)

We know from painful experience that even those of us who are following Christ do sin. John says that all those with God's nature *cannot* sin because we have been born of God (as opposed to being born only of the flesh/body/physical). Yes, we will fail at times, but our desire will not be to remain in sin. We may fall or jump into the mud, and it feels good for a while. Then we remember what it feels like to be clean and dry. So, we cry out to be lifted from the mud, washed, dried, and dressed in clean clothes.

Have you noticed that your taste changing as you age? I know mine has, though not completely. Many good foods that I didn't enjoy as a child I do now. There are also some unhealthy food that I still like. The sugary junk food might feel good for a short time, but for those who 'have tasted heavenly gift and been made partakers of the Holy Spirit', the food which this world offers loses its appeal. It is bland and unfulfilling compared to the wholeness, and joy found in the good word of God and the powers He offers.

So, those who have the Life of God in them, that is the Holy Spirit, cannot continue to sin. Oh, we fall short – far more often than we would like. But the Life of God in us draws us back to Him, back to obedience to His character. Persistent, deliberate falling short, disobedience, is proof that a person does not have the Holy Spirit. Look at the qualities of the fruit He produces in Galatians. You will not see these qualities consistently growing and developing in those who are not truly 'born into God's family'. What is the first characteristic that Paul mentions in Galatians? It is the same one that John mentions here – Love.

Who determines what 'righteousness' is? Is it left to us to say what is right and what is not? We know that 'all scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness' (2Ti 3:16). We need to be careful to hold ourselves to the standards set in scripture. It is only by carefully studying scripture that we can be 'adequate, equipped for every good work' (2Ti 3:17).

We have a tendency to impose our own standards on others. Sometimes they align with God's but more likely is that they are a twisted version of what He requires – twisted by our own selfishness and devoid of Grace. Genuine Love seeks what is best for others and we must hold ourselves up to the highest standards while humbly accepting correction and reproof.

In Deed and in Truth 1 John 3:11-24

Truth reveals itself by the deeds it produces. This is true of love also. A rose might smell the same regardless of what we call it but calling manure a rose will not change its smell either. There is much that we call love, yet it bears little resemblance to the love we see demonstrated by Christ Jesus. Words matter, yet people will remember what we do long after they forget our words.

A Matter of Love and Death (1 John 3:11-18)

Through this passage, Love is juxtaposed with death. We see that Cain did not love and it resulted in Abel's death. We also see that Jesus loved and it resulted in His death. Love gives life, even if it is through death. Life without love is death, because to hate is to kill.

Contrast the deeds of Cain and Abel, one evil, the other righteous. Their actions came out of their character – their actions did not make them evil or righteous, what they did came out of what they were. At the very foundation of righteousness is love. Not some kind of wishy-washy feel-good emotional thing, but something solid, that is difficult and is a deliberate choice. We see what happens when such love is absent, when the devil has a hold on someone, as he did with Cain. We also see what this kind of love does when we look at Christ laying down his life for all. Determined, selfless love always results in action. Action that goes out of its way for those who are on the edges of society and who are often vulnerable to exploitation.

Passive or Active (1 John 3:16-18)

Does hate require action on our part? Is it not merely the absence of love? Love must act. Love demands, compels us to step forward to help our brothers and sisters. An open heart is demonstrated by open hands (v17). To hate simply requires us to do nothing. Hate closes its eyes to needs and walks to the other side of the road, while Love dodges traffic crossing the street to help. When we examine our *actions* and compare them to the self-condemnation that at times rises in our hearts, those acts of love that we do are confirmation of our love for Christ. Barclay nailed it in his commentary:

We cannot begin the Christian life until we accept Jesus Christ for what he is; and we have not accepted him in any real sense of the term until our attitude to others is the same as his own attitude of love²⁰.

We don't always get it right; we can never achieve love to the degree that Christ did. It is in our work of sacrificial love, childish copies though they be, that others see Christ's love reflected. John's argument for our being in Christ centres on whether we love with the same kind self-sacrificing love that Christ showed for us. It is important to understand this so that when you fall short, and your heart condemns you for it, you can look at the works of love you have done in Christ's name and be reminded that His love does indeed live in you. God made you. He knows both your abilities and your limitations, and He loves you regardless of what they are. He has provided the way to come into His household. He has given us His Spirit to walk alongside of us so that we need never lose our way – even if we do miss the path at times.

Love is practical action. Love sees a need and goes out of its way to meet it. Love is not expressed in words, for while words can express what we think, it is action that proves the state of our heart. If your love does not set its own needs aside to help those who cannot help themselves, is it really any better than one who actively hates?

²⁰ Barclay, William. The Daily Study Bible: The Letters of John and Jude, page 88. St Andrews press 1976

Certainty in the Midst of Doubt (1 John 3:19-20)

John writes to give us certainty (John 20:31; 1 John 5:13). He wants us to have confidence that we do in fact belong to God's family. A heart and a conscience that are sensitive to the Holy Spirit will be pricked when we sin – we will feel the condemnation of our actions. For those who abide in Christ, these actions are not the norm. Rather, the Holy Spirit draws us back to the Father, back to the right actions that we modelled in the Son. "...And God is greater than our hearts..." or to put it another way, his grace is more than sufficient when we truly turn away from sin.

Albert Barnes²¹ notes that our hearts will condemn us at times, our tendency to sin and a conscience made tender by the Holy Spirit ensures that. While the past is covered by Grace, current sins must be exposed, they must be confessed, and we must turn away from such behaviour. We cannot have peace with God while we continue to indulge in sin. Our actions reveal our hearts. What we do with the resources we have been given in this world show how much emphasis we place on the next. Hebrews 4 reminds us that nothing is hidden from God, and it also reminds us that in Christ we have a High Priest who knows what it is to be human. Thus, we can boldly approach the Throne of Grace – the Mercy Seat – without fear of death as we come to Him, confident of receiving both grace and mercy.

When doubts arise, when guilt surfaces, when we feel the impossibility of being accepted by a holy God, we can look at our actions that demonstrate love and realise that His life is indeed in us.

Confidence to Ask (1 John 3:21-24)

It is at the foot of His throne that we can receive 'whatever we ask...' Keeping His commands is a condition of this promise, and we see a similar promise made by Jesus in John 15:7, where the precondition is "If you abide in Me and My words abide in you..." And how do we abide/remain/consistently live in Christ? John 15:10, echoing this letter tells us – "If you keep my commands, you will abide in my love." John records Jesus commanding us to love. Not just with any kind of love, but with the same kind of self-sacrificing, determined-to-do-what's-best-for-us kind of love that he demonstrated.

Believe... obey. Belief in Christ, in His "god-ness", in His "human-ness" and in the saving sacrifice that he made *must* provoke us into action. Radical demonstration of God's Enduring Love *must* provoke Radical Action on our part. With all that He has forgiven you, with all that he has given you, such unstinting generosity, how can you not 'pay it forward' and demonstrate the same kind of counter-cultural love that He poured out on you?

His Spirit confirms the truth, confirms your position in His family. His presence in your life provokes you to ask for the things that are on the Father's heart, rather than seeking your own pleasure. Pursue the things that the father is passionate about and the things that you need will come together in ways you cannot imagine²².

²¹ Albert Barnes' Notes on the Bible 1826, Public domain – e-Sword edition

²² Matthew 6:33

Tested and Proven (Origins) 1 John 4:1-6

Tested (1 John 4:1-3)

In these verses, we have a warning and a test. Warnings of course help us to avoid danger. Generally, if we apply a test to something, we measure it against a specific set of criteria. We gather evidence to prove that those criteria have been met. In education, we have assessments to show that the learning outcomes have been achieved. We ask, does the person demonstrate the knowledge, skills, attitude, and behaviour required to do this task or role? Many skills are measured against a nationally recognised framework, so that employers can have confidence in the qualifications held by prospective employees.

The standard that we measure against is all of Scripture. What we are to test for is the origin of the words being spoken. Do they come from God, and therefore align with what we have in Scripture? Or are they things that people have made up to suit their own agenda? It is far too easy to rush into judgement and condemn those who do not agree with everything we think is true. It is also easy to spend all our efforts in looking for common ground and then miss serious errors.

The problem of false teachers is not new. Peter warns his readers of this in his second letter, when he refers to the false prophets as an earlier example of the same problem. The devil doesn't change his tactics – why should he when they continue to work so well? Be careful though, just because someone's theology seems a bit out doesn't mean that they are a false teacher. I mean, I'm pretty certain that no one has everything down perfectly. But John gives us a benchmark to test them by, a question to ask. In fact, it is the same one Jesus asked his first disciples, "Who do you say I am?" And the answer is still the same, "You are the Messiah, the son of the Living God" (Mat 16:15-17). In short, regardless of whether we disagree with someone on other points of doctrine or not, we can call them family-in-Christ if they believe that God's anointed One came from the Father as one both fully God and fully human. Remember that we are not fighting people, but spiritual powers (Ephesians 6:12).

Perspective (1 John 4:4)

There is only one anti-Christ, but many are of the same spirit, who have the same mindset and attitude that rails against the Kingdom of God. Their thinking, actions and attitudes are opposed to the things of God. They are infused with the same mindset as the anti-Christ.

Following Christ does not exempt us from difficulties. It is in fact, quite the opposite. Whether it is blatant persecution from those who are of the World, or the more subtle trap of false teaching, we are assured that we will face opposition. Even so, we have the assurance that we 'have overcome them because greater is He who is in [us] than he who is in the world.' The World will put the squeeze on us, as long as we are living in this world, but Jesus has overcome the world. We can be encouraged that nothing this world throws at us is beyond Jesus' ability to deal with (John 16:33).

Our strength is only in the Lord Jesus Christ. Abiding in Him, covered by the Good News of His coming as King is the only way that we can continue to stand through this spiritual battle that we are in. Paul makes this clear in his letter to the Ephesian (6:10-17). Truth, Righteousness, the Good News of Peace, Faith and Salvation can only be found in Christ, and they continue to be ours as we remain in Him. These are the characteristics that gave Christ His victory, and they are ours also through Him.

Origins (1 John 4:5-6)

We have our origin, our foundation, our mission from God. He is in us and is the source of our strength. This is vital to remember, especially when we press against the false teachers who speak

in the power of the World. There will be resistance, push-back, even outright persecution. Yet we need to remember that our origin is also our destiny, and we will prevail. How do we know our victory is certain? Because Christ, who has already defeated the Powers and Principalities, is the One who is in us. (1Co 15:57-58, Eph 6:12)

Those who have the mindset of the World, whose All is in this life, cannot grasp, cannot understand those things that are of the Kingdom. They cannot understand those who look beyond the physical to the permanent. Unless the Holy Spirit breaks into their heart, they cannot grasp the things of God – it is mere foolish to them (1Co 1:18-29) it goes against their nature, it is as foreign as an unfamiliar language.

Who is listening to you? Who is refusing to hear what you are saying? John says that this is a way to identify where a person's heart is. Those who are of the world listen to those who are of the world. Their senses are dull to the things of God's Kingdom, they simply cannot understand what God is saying. Often, they are outright hostile to both His words and His Kingdom.

The other side of that is who are you listening to? Are you taking the time measure what you are hearing against the Word? Are you spending time in the Word, seeking wisdom from the Holy Spirit as you do? The Holy Spirit speaks the truth, He testifies to our hearts what is true regarding Jesus Christ (John 15:26). His words are truth – they create, they build up, they unify. The deceiver can only speak lies (John 8:44). He comes only to destroy, to tear down and divide. He does this by propagating error that is often subtle by design to fool even those who are in Christ.

Even though safety in this life is not certain, our identity and life in Christ *is* secure. The presence of the Spirit of Truth in us confirms that.

Love Defined and Demonstrated 1 John 4:7-12

These verses show us just how God's love for us has been put into action. We are shown that God is the source and initiator of love. He is set apart as the benchmark of what love does, He is the one we are to emulate. If we are from God, if we are walking in the Truth, if we know God, then the natural result is that we will love one another with this same kind of love. Of course, this requires the same kind of rebirth that Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about (John 3:3-6), because it is not something that we can produce in our natural state or by our own efforts.

Before we get too far into these verses, we must nail down what John means when he uses the word that has been translated as 'Love'. English is such a two-dimensional language – we use one word to cover a wide range of different things. By looking at the Greek word that John used, we get a clearer picture of exactly what he means. The word '*agápē*' cannot be translated as 'like', 'enjoy', or 'desire'. It is far deeper than any self-focused feeling. The kind of love John is thinking of is a deliberate act of will that seeks what is best for the recipient regardless of any cost to the giver. John gives us the perfect example of perfect *agápē* - the sacrifice the Father made so that we could be restored in our relationship to Him.

So, we have a command to love – it cannot be taken as a suggestion. David Guzik notes 'The ancient Greek sentence begins in a striking way - "those who are loved, let us love."' ²³ Here is action required of those who are loved, and we are given this call to action because the source of Love is in us. Our acts of love are an indicator of our rebirth through the "washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). It is thus an indicator that we know, are intimate with, the source of Love. John seems to be saying here that all love (*agapáō*) has its origin in God, who is by very nature Love. What does this mean when we observe such love in those who are outside of Christ? I think that perhaps they are unwittingly testifying to God's nature, in the same way they bear his image, whether they acknowledge His existence or not.

God put His love into action, He proved its breadth and depth by setting aside all that He was entitled to, taking on our physical nature so that we might be fully alive through His efforts alone. Love is demonstrated sacrificially – it costs everything. Love is setting aside your life so that others can live. For those of us in Christ, we take on His death in order to take on His life.

Verse 10 is important – God loved us first. Love initiates, it does not wait for its object to show interest, it cannot wait until they are worthy. There is a timeliness but also a sense of urgency – love makes its choice and acts with no certainty of love being returned. It is not very remarkable that we should love the One who gives and sustains life. What is remarkable is that the One who rebel against and ignore would go to such lengths to not only prove his love, but to restore the relationship that I broke. Paul adds some detail to this in Romans 5:6-11. We were helpless, you were not able to do even the tiniest thing that could pull you out of slavery to sin. There was nothing about us that made us even remotely worth saving. Death was all that we were good for, the only thing that we really deserved. But God went out of His way to show through His actions, just how great His Love, His *agápē*, is for you. In spite of your unbelief, in spite of your disobedience, in spite of continuously falling short, he saw in you inestimable value and purpose that He had in mind for you when He spoke the All into existence.

Now, if this is true – and certainly the apostle John believed it to be so – then what is our response? Such great Love *must* be reciprocated. But God is spirit, and His Son is seated with the

²³ David Guzik's Enduring Word Commentary 2020, e-Sword edition

Father. To whom can we demonstrate our love for God? Quite simply, we demonstrate it to those who bear His image. In the beginning God created man in his image – both male and female (Gen 1:27). All people of all nations, ‘every tribe and tongue’ bear the image of the Creator – broken, faded and obscured though it may be. “In as much as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it unto Me” (Mat 25:31-46).

The ‘one another’ that we are to love refers to those who are brothers and sisters in Christ. This is essential – we must be able to love our family! But I do not think that it ends there. If God put His love for us into action while we were still His enemies, not even acknowledging His existence, then we must also love those who go out of their way to hurt us. I suspect the rubber hits the road when it comes to loving your enemies. Love is not fully shown by our response to God’s love for us, as important as that is. Responding to love with love is expected, perhaps even required. But God loved before we knew that He loved us, even before we could love Him. He loved when we were openly hostile towards Him. That is the example that we have. That is the standard that we cannot live up to without being in Christ and empowered by the Spirit. This is not an easy thing to do. I would go so far as to say that without the Holy Spirit’s help that we cannot do it at all! Yet the kind of love that God has demonstrated by loving us is a deliberate choice. It is a determined act of the will to do what is good for another regardless.

It is only Love that is put into practise that can be made perfect or complete. Love must act to be complete. For us to be able to love with the same kind of determined, self-sacrificing love with which Christ has loved us is only possible supernaturally. Actions of love are only possible through the power of the Holy Spirit. When we act in that love, when as Paul says, Christ’s love drives us forward into action, we have evidence of our abiding that is visible to everyone – both to those in Christ and to those without. This is essentially what Jesus was saying in John 13:35.

This love that we have demonstrated by God, through Christ is the same love that we demonstrate when we are truly in Christ and living by the power of the Holy Spirit. Tom Wright compares 1 John 4:12 with John 1:18, pointing out that we know God (whom we cannot see) through Jesus (who was seen)²⁴. We see that ‘God is love’ by observing the unlimited love of Jesus. Those who are not part of God’s Family, who are outside of Christ, can only get to know the unseen God through the seen church. Those who bear His image and demonstrate His perfect love are ‘little Christs’ who show the watching world who God is.

And yet we struggle to love our fellow image-bearers with that perfect love that was perfectly demonstrated on the cross. But when we do love one another as Christ does, that love is ‘made perfect’ in us. Not that God’s love is less than perfect. No, our imperfect attempts at love are grown and matured as we continue to practise the self-sacrificing love modelled for us by Jesus.

Just as we demonstrate our love for God by actively loving those who bear His image, so too people catch a glimpse of His Love for all mankind as we love them. They cannot see God. They cannot know God because of their sin. Yet they can see us, they can know us. As we bear the image of the One who made us and as we reflect the self-sacrificing Love that He first demonstrated to us, they can be presented with the Good News that in their helplessness there *is* One who can rescue them. This is our testimony – lives that speak of the work that Christ has done.

²⁴ Tom, Wright. Early Christian Letters for Everyone (New Testament for Everyone) (p. 159). SPCK 2011

Love Perfected (by Abiding) 1 John 4:13-21

Abide (1 John 4:13)

While the NIV uses the more familiar word “live”, and some others use “remain” I still love the way the NASB and ESV use “abide”. Sure, it’s not a word that we use in everyday speech, but it conveys not only a sense of permanency but also of rest. John seems to like it too as he uses it some 68 times throughout his writing – most of them in reference to our relationship with The Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

Whether we live, remain, dwell, or abide it is not about a physical location but a relational one. I might live in Adelaide or Sydney or Canberra or Brisbane but in all of them I abide with my wife, Debbie. Indeed, even when we are not living in the same city, as my work has required at times, there is still a sense that we abide with each other. How much more so those of us who live in Christ, who has given us His Spirit!

Testify (1 John 4:14)

When Peter and John were arrested after healing the crippled man and preaching to the crowd at the temple, their response when told to keep quiet was, "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:20). All that they had seen convinced them of the truth that Jesus was indeed sent from the father to be the saviour of the world.

Now we have not walked with Jesus through the dust of first century Palestine, but if we are in Christ there be will things that we have observed and done that could only be through Him. So, we must speak the truth of that to the world, we must clearly and truthfully tell how God’s story meets our own and how it can also meet with theirs. Words are necessary and important, but the most powerful testimony is our ongoing demonstration of the love of God abiding in us.

Acknowledge (1 John 4:15)

Let me say again that our acknowledgement, or confession, of Jesus’s sonship and kingship *is* important. John is repeating here in verse 15, in a slightly different form, his statement in verse 2. Note the subtle difference between verse 2 and verse 15. ‘Confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh’ and ‘Confess that Jesus is the Son of God’. The first indicates the presence of the Holy Spirit in you, the second indicates the enduring nature of that relationship – that deep connection with the father that is only possible through the Spirit. The first emphasises His humanity, the second His divinity. In doing so, John is giving a less than subtle refutation of the gnostic teaching that was gaining traction in some areas of the church.

Know and Rely (1 John 4:16-17)

Love is something that can be known and believed. It is known when it lives (or abides) in us. The presence of the Spirit enables the abiding (and the confession that declares it). This abiding is our source of the self-sacrificing act of will that true love is. God is Love; He is its only source.

The love God demonstrates through Jesus is one that expends all for the sake of others. How does my selfishness align with that? Do I pour myself out like a drink offering for those that I love? More often, I spend my energy on my own desires. It is because of the presence of the Holy Spirit that we can be certain that we do really abide in God. There is at times a tendency to doubt, especially when we struggle with sin. Yet, as long as we don’t continue to quench or suppress the Spirit, His abiding presence in us is the confirmation of our abiding presence in God.

Love is perfected, made complete, when God who is Love infuses your whole life. God’s love is already perfect, there is nothing to add to His love. It is *our* love that is lacking. It is we who are

polluted by our sin. Love is the filtration plant that makes the water of our lives pure, drinkable and thus life-giving. Through His purity, His holiness, we are able to stand before the Judgement Seat without shame. Through Christ's death for our sins and His resurrection for our salvation, we are able to be seen as He is. In fact, it is because we are in Christ that we now have the same standing before the Father as he does, we share in His righteousness. The likeness is limited because our sin means that we are not yet fully like Him, yet we are all that the world is able to see of His righteousness.

This is the relationship that we are ultimately made for – this union with Jesus. It is as Paul says, a great mystery, yet we have been given glimpses of what it is intended to be like in our everyday relationships here and now – Mother and children, father and children, brother and sister, husband and wife. Though we see but an image distorted by our sin, we do see something of what we truly long for.

Beyond Fear (1 John 4:18-19)

Love is the antidote to fear. Fear cannot exist in the presence of deliberate, covenant love, because love like that seeks what is best, seeks to build up. How can you be afraid of One who will stop at nothing to rescue and restore, who gives all to give what is best? Love does not punish, but it does discipline. Love is fearless. It does not regard its own safety when pursuing what is best for the one who is loved. Love will do what is necessary to produce 'the peaceful fruit of righteousness' in another's life, no matter what the cost.

God initiated the love. He is the source of love. He knew that many would not return the love he poured out so generously, but he did so anyway. Love does not fear, it loves in spite of the cost. Love will act even if it is never returned. Love risks all and gives all so that some may love in return.

The Seen and the Unseen (1 John 4:20-21)

We demonstrate love to those we *can* see, because of the love shown to us by the One we *cannot* see. Love cannot be passive. Hate on the other hand does not need to be active for it to be hate. Simply doing nothing will suffice for hate. Ignoring injustice, passing by those in need, failing to hold others to account – all of these things are 'absent actions' that do not seek out what is best and do indeed cause harm. We love Christ Jesus when we obey His commands and His command to us is to Love – to go out of our way to do what is best for others.

To love our fellow believers is a *command* as much as it is *evidence* that we 'know and believe' God's love. How can we love if we do not put the needs of others ahead of our own? How can we love God, if we lay aside what He wants of us to pursue our own interests?

Born to Overcome 1 John 5:1-5

Of God (1 John 5:1-4)

We know from John's account of Jesus' life that we cannot be part of God's Kingdom without being reborn (John 1:12-13; 3:3-6). Not a physical rebirth, but a spiritual one, as Jesus explained to Nicodemus. To be in Christ, to see His Kingdom, we must be born of God. This great privilege is available to all who receive Jesus, to all who believe in His name. Believing that Jesus is the Christ means that we believe, not only who Jesus is, but also the authority that He carries. Belief is a central part of John's writing, both in his Gospel account as well as his letters, primarily to counter the false teaching that was beginning to arise. Christ, or Messiah, means one who is anointed. Anointing was used to set aside both Kings and Priests for service and is an indicator of both position and authority.

No Hassle (1 John 5:3)

John says that the things God requires of us will not weigh us down. That doesn't mean they will be easy; it means they will be a joy and not a hassle. When someone you love deeply asks you to do something, when there is something they need, do you not go out of your way to do it? Will not your love for them drive you out of your comfort to meet that need?

In the same way, we don't obey God simply because he commands us. We obey Him because we love Him and thus want to please Him. We know that He loves us perfectly, so we have nothing to fear from doing anything He commands us to do (4:8). Therefore, we know that obeying His commands will be for our good, they will not weigh us down, but rather they will bring us joy. It doesn't always feel like that though, far too often we get in the way of what God is wanting to do. Rather than resting in Him and trusting in His goodness, we will at times press on with what we think is good. But when we are fully assured of who Jesus is, we know that we have been 'born of God'. This is confirmed by active and increasing obedience in our lives which results in overcoming the difficulties that the godless system of Empire tries to force on us. Faith is the starting point for that victory.

By Faith (1 John 5:4)

The lightness of God's commands is linked to the fact that those who have been born of God have overcome the World. The thing that makes that possible is our faith. The word John uses here is *Pístis* and it means to win over, persuade, conviction, firm persuasion, or belief. We know from Ephesians 2:8 that even our faith has its origin in God, so that we have nothing in ourselves worth boasting about.

The words 'believe,' and 'faith' are interchangeable, at least here in John's letter. This is not "I think this is true." This is more "I am convinced this is true." This what the Writer of Hebrews was talking about in chapter 11 – certainty of things hoped for, conviction of things unseen. Things that we do not yet have but are convinced that we will obtain. This faith that conquers the World is not wishful thinking or screwing up our energy and saying something until it becomes true. It starts with hearing what God has to say, believing what He says, or more correctly, being firmly persuaded that what He says is true. Finally, it requires action based on His truth rather than our own wishes.

To Overcome (1 John 5:5)

John is writing to an audience that was being persecuted and his command to love is a command to not retaliate as some were doing. Paul points out in Ephesians 6:12 that we are not at war with people, but 'the rulers, ... the authorities, ... the powers of this dark world and ... the spiritual

forces of evil in the heavenly realms.’ We cannot overcome spiritual forces with our physical strength.

Only by being convinced that Jesus is the Son of God can we overcome the World. Only when we are in relationship with God can His Spirit fill and empower us to love as He does. The radical, self-sacrificing Love that is the very substance of God runs in opposition to everything the World pursues. This Body that we are part of, this *church*, is made up of flawed humanity and yet in Christ we are made perfect even as we still struggle with our faults. The unity that we have is possible because we are in Christ and as such are united with God. Christ is essential to bring us together, He is the foundation and the focus of our community. The unity within God (what we call the Trinity) is reflected in the unity within the church.

To sum up

To be born of God means that we love those who are also of God. If we truly love the Father, it will be no burden to love others. The love to which we are called is a revolutionary love that these days we have lost sight of to some extent. Yet God is within us – His strength in us, His victory in us, His life in us through faith. Those who share His life, share His victory.

.

The testimony of Three Witnesses 1 John 5:6-12

Water and Blood (1 John 5:6)

Previously, we looked at the fact that it is essential to be abiding in Christ to overcome the world. To be born of God, by believing in all that Christ Jesus' name is, is the only way to have the strength to overcome.

What is it about Jesus that makes Him the key? Hebrews explains this at length, but it is the parallel truths of His divinity and His humanity that is at the heart of it. Water and blood are perhaps just as appropriate to His birth as they are to His death. Mention of the blood confirms His humanity, for 'the life is in the blood'. Now, it is probably Jesus' baptism that John is referring to here when he mentions the water. This is perhaps another refutation of Gnosticism by John, but it is certainly targeted at the kind of thinking called Docetism. That is a false teaching that crosses over a few different world views, as well as being a core principle of Gnosticism. But if Jesus were not both man and God he could not have 'been tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15)', nor could He have been 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29)'. Jesus' baptism and His death bookend His public ministry and John is making the point that Jesus was every bit God's messiah when He was baptised as He was when he was put to death on the cross.²⁵

On a side note, I want to mention that David Guzik points out in his commentary that Jesus did not have to be baptised for repentance, because he had nothing to turn away from. Nor did He have to die for His sins. His baptism was to identify with us in our humanity, His death was stand in our place – taking our punishment.²⁶

Evidence of Truth (1 John 5:7-10)

How does the Spirit bear witness to the truth of Christ's humanity and sacrifice? Primarily this is through His continuing work and presence in the lives of believers. In this way, the rescue initiated at the Cross is confirmed by the life-transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Yet that work could only be effective if Christ is fully God and fully human. His obedience is demonstrated by His baptism at the start of His ministry and His death at its completion. These are the three witnesses that we have. In this way, the water of baptism at the start of His mission, the blood poured out after it was finished, and the on-going testimony of the Holy Spirit agree that Christ is who he said He is, did what Scripture said He did and continues to work in the lives of those who believe in Him.

Anyone who believes in the Son has been born of God (5:1) and we know that requires the work of the Holy Spirit, who speaks the truth about Jesus. Thus, what the Spirit testifies concerning Jesus is embedded in the core of our being. John has shown us how to be certain that we are in Christ or born of God. The Holy Spirit within us testifies to the truth of all that Jesus Christ has done. And we've seen throughout this letter that believing in Christ Jesus produces something that we simply cannot manufacture ourselves – a sacrificial love for others that is to mark us as belonging to Christ (John 13:35).

Tom Wright points out in his commentary that John was an eyewitness of Christ's crucifixion, that he saw the soldier pierce Jesus' side and that he saw the blood and water pour out.²⁷ We have in our possession the written account by an someone who was there, someone who saw all that happened. This is not something to dismissed lightly. While forensic investigators will use fingerprints and DNA to testify about what has happened, there is still a need for eyewitnesses to

²⁵ Believer's Bible Commentary, William McDonald 1995

²⁶ David Guzik's Enduring Word Commentary, David Guzik and Enduring Word Media 2014

²⁷ Tom, Wright. Early Christian Letters for Everyone (New Testament for Everyone) (p. 164). SPCK 2011

say what they have seen or experienced. If we can rely on the testimony of two or three people in a court of law to establish what is true, how much more trustworthy is it when the one who bears witness has truth as His very character? God Himself has testified. He who cannot lie has spoken concerning His Son. We can agree with what has been said, or we can in effect call God a liar.

Real Life (1 John 5:11-12)

In verse 7 we are told that the Spirit bears witness, both to Christ's humanity and His sacrifice. The waters of Christ's baptism, the blood of His sacrifice and His Holy Spirit in us all declare the same truth: That there *is* eternal life and there is only *one* place to find it. John tells us explicitly what that means for all mankind – that real Life is found only in the Son of God. To be anywhere else is to be outside of life.

Eternal life, as described in Scripture, is not a slow wearing down, spread too thin life that Bilbo experienced in Lord of the Rings. Rather, it is a full and enduring life that does not wear out. It is, as Tom Wright puts it, 'the life of the age to come'. There is no third option. Either you have the Son and share in His Life, or you do not have the Son and have no part in it. There is no other name by which we may be saved. There is no other way for people to come to the Father. Religion, as man has made it, may well be a placebo²⁸, but when we are in Christ we have gone beyond Religion and into Relationship – and that is where Life is found.

²⁸ The comment, "Religion is a placebo" was heard by the author from Todd Sampson at a presentation on 24 March 2018.

Confidence 1 John 5:13-21

In his effort to counteract the false teaching that was becoming prevalent in his day, John writes to give us certainty. In this passage, John gives us the six things that we can be certain of, six things that we can have confidence in. This is knowledge that anyone in Christ can have. They are not things that only a select few can understand. John writes to give us all certainty in the knowledge of the things of God. You can know that:

- You have eternal life.
- That God hears you.
- That the requests we ask will be given.
- God's children do not make a practice of sinning.
- You are a child of God.
- The Son of God *has* come.

Know Life (1 John 5:13)

The first of these gives us certainty and security. We do not need to wonder if we have done enough to deserve to be rescued. John writes to remind us that no one can earn it, and no one can ever deserve to be rescued. Yet the offer is available to everyone anyway.

John's purpose for writing his account of Jesus' life is that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ and thus share in His life (John 20:30-31). John's purpose in writing this letter is found in here in 5:13 – so that having believed, we may KNOW – perceive, be aware of, understand – that we share in Christ's life. Such life is enduring because it is from God, and being from God, it is perfectly good. In a world where feelings increasingly give way to facts, where uncertainty is the norm, where people have no confidence in what to believe, John tells us that Jesus is to be believed, Jesus can be known, His life can be shared with us. There is no doubt, no wavering, no confusion in John's mind. Those things that he saw, heard, and touched truly happened. Their importance is beyond measure and John wants to clearly communicate them to us, so that we too may share in all that has been done by Jesus.

Know the Father (1 John 5:14-15)

Secondly, once we have this assurance of salvation, we can be confident when we come to the Father with our requests. This is a similar thing the Writer of Hebrews is referring to in Hebrews 4:14-16 when they speak of coming confidently to the Throne of Grace. Being fully aware of our security in Christ, our life embraced in His, we can also have confidence that He hears us when we cry out to Him. We can be confident that our concerns, worries, and requests will be heard with compassion. I think too that this implies that our praise and thanks will also be heard. We pray to a living God who hears and loves. John's focus here is on our requests and while we can be confident in coming to the Father, there remains this caution: '...if we pray anything according to His will...'

This can be achieved by abiding as Jesus describes in John 15:7. The context of that passage shows us that the purpose of abiding and asking is that we bear fruit. Here in John's letter, the preconditions and process are the same – abiding in Christ first, then asking in accordance with His will, then receiving what we have asked for. The purpose is the same as well, that we should bear fruit. The Father's heart is for the Kingdom, to have people come to Him, to restore the relationship broken through sin.

Our confidence extends not only to His hearing us, but to His answering us as well. Our relationship means that we know the Father and ask for things that He also wants. How can we possibly be sure? How do we know what God's will is that we should ask in alignment with it? In every corner of this letter John shows us what a person who is abiding in Christ looks like. Are

these characteristics being grown in your life? Is there an increasing fruitfulness that can only come from God? That is a clear indication that you have that kind of relationship where you can come to the Father and hear what is on His heart.

Standing in the Gap (1 John 5:16-17)

That restoration of relationship does not end when we begin to believe. It is an on-going process that requires constant vigilance to ensure we do not neglect it. As John mentions at the start of this letter, we do sin and yet can still receive forgiveness. Here we are reminded that sin, disobedience, unfaithfulness, do occur in the follower of Jesus. There is, however, the ability to turn back, to restore that which we have broken. Sometimes though, we need someone else to stand in the gap for us.

One commentator points out that the first thing that we must do when we see a brother or sister in Christ sinning is to pray for them²⁹. This is of course a practical way to love, but it must not end with prayer. There is also a need to hear from God what needs to be done or said to help them get back to where they ought to be. Prayer, whether praise or petition, is not intended to have self as the focal point. Yes, of course there are times when it is necessary, vital even, to call out to God for help for yourself, but even then, it is more about God's reputation than yours. In praying for a fellow believer who is in difficulty we are seeking both their good and God's glory.

There are a few different thoughts about what John means by 'Sin leading to death'. The three most common ones are:

- Persisting in sin, refusing to repent, falling away, apostasy – Heb 6:4-8
- Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit – Mat 12:31-32
- A particular type of sin that brings an immediate or rapid death – Acts 5:1-11, 1 Cor 11:30

The phrase is translated a couple of different ways, but the Greek is clear that it refers to sins leading a person towards destruction or death. It does not necessarily mean that death will be an immediate effect³⁰. Any of the above list might fit that description. The best understanding that I can glean from the different commentators that I have, is that John is referring to persistent, determined sin that produces a heart hardened and a conscience dulled to both the seriousness and the consequences. I think that those particularly serious sins, such as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, are not possible unless a person has already set their heart on their own destruction. If we look at the Hebrews reference, verse 8 tells us that the fruit produced, or rather that lack of it, can give us insight into where someone is truly at.

As followers of the Way, we are in a unique position – there is certainty in the hope that we have. There is confidence in how approach the Father, and confidence in the goodness of His response to our requests.

Does not persist in sin (1 John 5:18)

We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin. Some translations say, 'No one born of God sins.' Yet my experience is that I *do* sin and that would mean that I am not actually born of God. The important qualification here is whether I persist in my sin, or whether I turn away from it. When we go back to earlier parts of this letter, (1:8, 2:1 and 5:13-17) we see that while the goal is not to sin (that is to live a godly life) the expectation is that we will sin. There is hope. As we read further in chapter two, we are shown the provision that has been made for our restoration. Through Christ we are made holy and blameless. In the Holy Spirit we have the resources that we need to live the godly life that the Father requires of us.

²⁹ David Guzik's Enduring Word Commentary, 2020

³⁰ Word Studies in the New Testament, M R Vincent, 1888, public domain

We are not free from the failings of our natural selves, but we *are* free of slavery to them. Those who are in Christ cannot persist in sin and be happy doing so. Rather, once it has been identified they will wholeheartedly turn back to God. Consider David's response when challenged about his adultery with Bathsheba. It is Christ, through His Spirit, who keeps us close to the Father, who through His power keeps us out of reach of the evil one. This is not something that we can do alone. We need the Spirit; we need our family-in-Christ to pray for us and we need Christ to intercede for us. Through Christ we are no longer in the grip of sin, but in the arms of the Father.

We are Born of God (1 John 5:19)

That we *are* children of God is the next thing that we can be certain of. If God is Father, what does that mean? My understanding is that a father both gives life and takes responsibility for that life by sustaining and nurturing it so that it grows to maturity. This what God does for all those who receive His word, who put their confidence in His anointed One (John 1:11-13). This is what Jesus was talking about in His conversation with Nicodemus (John 3:3). If we read John 3:5-6 alongside of 1:13, I think that we get a bit broader context and a better picture of this 'born again' thing that John is writing about here in his letter.

We can *know* that we are of God, or children of God. How? Because we can look at our lives and see God at work in us as described previously in this letter. It is the work of the Holy Spirit in us and the testimony of transformed lives that point to this spiritual rebirth being true. Just as certain is the World being in the evil one. But this certainty is also based on the understanding we have received from the Son of God.

Christ Came (1 John 5:20)

We know the Son of God has come. John raises this important fact because of one particular thing that the Son has done – through the Holy Spirit, He has given us understanding. This is not special knowledge for a handful of elites, rather it is for *all* who are in Christ. Understanding is to do with our ability to perceive with our mind³¹. It is to do with logic and reason – two things that are not always associated with religion. Yet loving God is not a mindless exercise, there is the requirement to love God with all that we are, including our mind³². The purpose for receiving this understanding is not knowledge for the sake of knowledge. It is so that we can 'know Him who is true', that is so that we can be in relationship with Christ Jesus. In referring to the True God, John sets Him as distinct from any others which can only be false gods, or idols.

It is by our being in Christ that we able to know Him. It is by being in Him that we are able to share in His life – noting that in doing so we can also expect to share in His suffering (Romans 8:17). This is relationship. It is in this relationship we find eternal life.

We *know* Christ came, because we have eyewitness reports, but we also know Him. This relationship is only possible because of the work Christ did. He bought us out of slavery to sin and into the freedom of life in Him. We can *know*, in a relational sense, the One who is perfectly True. This immersion in relationship with Jesus Christ is why we share His understanding, His knowledge. As Paul says, 'We have the mind of Christ... (1 Corinthians 2:16)' It is in this relationship alone that we find Life as God originally intended, Life that is of the Kingdom. Only in the True God do we find True Life. That is confidence.

True God (1 John 5:21)

This is why John urges us to guard ourselves from false gods, or idols. The true God is generous and eternal and gives those in relationship with Him life in the same measure. The false gods of this world are empty and short-lived and the life they give is the same. What is it that you are

³¹ The Complete Word Study Dictionary, 1992 AMG International

³² Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:30, Luke 10:27

pursuing that is taking the place that only the true God is worthy of? By substituting the True God for a false image, we impede access to the true God. Is it money, fitness, influence, or even something as valuable as family? Is it a misshapen picture of what God's character is really like, holding onto what *we* think He should be, rather than what He is?

John Makes it clear that we *can* have certainty that we *can* know God. We can, as Moses did, 'talk with God as a man talks with his friend.' That means we can know what is on *His* heart, and not merely attribute to Him the things we want to be of interest to Him.

We can know Him. We can know that He will help us live for Him. The evil one wants us to be unsure, but the Father wants us to be certain.

The Truth Walkers 2 John 1-6

Greeting (2 John 1)

So, who was John writing this short letter to? The recipient of this letter was most likely a church, and the greeting was probably written to be deliberately obscure. Most commentators agree that the language and content of the letter support it being written to a church rather than a specific, well-regarded woman. It would also make it harder for would-be persecutors to identify those to whom the letter was written. Though this letter is short, there is a great deal of warmth in John's language as he both encourages and warns this collection of believers.

Abiding in Truth and Love (2 John 1-3)

Love and truth go hand-in-hand. Love speaks what is true to hold them to the highest standard. Truth sees them as they are and loves them anyway. Compare this with 1 John 3:15-18 Love in truth is about action, the perfect example of this is Christ laying down His life to rescue us. The historical reality of that is truth, but to love in truth is to love with the same kind of love and in the same kind of way that Jesus loves us. To see a need and not go out of your way to meet it is not love. For John, to love in truth is to act in love and his love for 'the elect lady', while we don't know the exact form it took, was certainly one that was active.

What is the source of this truth? The fact that it abides with us points to the Holy Spirit – the comforter who leads us into truth. (John 16:13, 1John 5:6). That truth abides in us. This means that it has become an integral part of who we are and how we function. Everything we do and say will flow out of the Truth that infuses us. This truth will be with us forever – not merely a passing fad or phase, not something we can pick up and put down when we feel like it.

Our having the Spirit and our abiding in Christ are tied together in John 14:15-27. Our love for Him and our obedience are also linked together in that passage. Yet we must be careful that we don't turn Grace and Faith into something driven by our work of obedience. Paul said the Love that Christ has is what drives us on. In parallel to that, it is the love that we have for Christ that causes us to respond to Him in obedience.

John has confidence that Grace, Mercy and Peace *will* be with us. Such confidence can only come from knowing the source of those things. No one is excluded from the offer, yet only those who take it up will receive them. Let me say that again: only those who take up the offer will receive Grace, Mercy and Peace. It seems so obvious as to be redundant to have to state it. But we need to be reminded that we cannot possess what is offered until we take hold of it.

The Father offers Grace to us, that is He offers an abundance that we do not deserve. Mercy can only be shown to us because the Son has turned away the Father's anger by His sacrifice. That allows us to be in relationship with the Father and it is only there where we can find Peace. Not the cessation of conflict that the World calls peace, but the Peace that defies understanding. Peace that comes from Mercy that cost so much, because of Grace that has been poured out so lavishly.

What motivated the Father to lavish such Grace on us? What drove Him to be so merciful to those who so little deserved it? *Agape* Love – not the love that we have which ebbs and flows with our emotions, but a steadfast, determined Love that goes out of its way to do what is best. Our small grasp of reality cannot stand up to the eternal Truth, the Absolute Reality of the Father's Love.

The Truth Walkers (2 John 4-6)

The first thing that strikes me when we get to verse six is that only 'some' of the Lady's children are walking in the Truth. Obviously not *all* of them are. We can instruct, we can urge, we can

intercede, but ultimately people (including our own children) make their choice whether to follow Christ or not, whether to believe and obey the Father's command or not.

Note that there is only one command. It is not complex, it is not unexpected, it is the same command that Jesus insisted on. The command is to Love one another. Jesus requires this of His disciples to demonstrate that we are truly His disciples. Love is not love. The kind of love here is different from anything else. It is love that is uniquely from God Himself and it therefore must call out unbelief and disobedience. It must go out of its way to secure what is best for the one who is the object of that love. It is not sexual desire. It is far more than family affection or loyalty.

Why is it so important that we 'walk according to His commandments'? It will pay to see what John has written elsewhere to understand why this matters so much. In his account of Jesus' life, John records Jesus saying, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (Joh 13:34-35 NASB). There it is – how else can the World know who we are and what we have in Christ if we do not demonstrate *agapáō* to one another? That of course is just the beginning. It starts with those who are already part of Christ's family, but it must extend to those outside as well.

It is as we walk in truth and love, as we continue to abide in Christ, that we have access to the resources that we need to demonstrate to the World that we are in truth His disciples.

The Deceivers 2 John 7-13

Lies are often dressed up with truth. They can seem so plausible until they are examined closely. While sin is often about falling short of the standard, missing the mark, or failing to do what is required, these false teachers have overstepped the mark and gone beyond sound teaching. In the second part of this short letter, John turns his attention from encouraging the people to warning them of a serious danger in their midst.

Deployed to Deceive (2 John 7)

There are, have always been, and always will be, those who seek first their own empire and glory, those who look at people as a means to their own ends. Verse seven reinforces the need for us to consistently live in a way that reflects God's character and His standards. If we need to stand out from the World generally, how much more must we stand out from those who claim to follow Christ but do not?

We are to 'walk according to His commandments' because of those who seek to deceive. If we are to counter the lies, then we must walk in the truth. Calling out lies is important, but our attitude in doing so *must* be one of love – love for Christ, love for the truth and love for those we seek to correct. It is far too easy to fall into the trap of wanting to be right, to crush those we consider to be wrong, but any time that we seek to correct error, it must be to build the other up, not to tear them down. There is of course the possibility that they may be unwilling or unable to see the truth and John discusses a bit later how to deal with such people.

While 'some' are walking in the Truth, 'many' are deceivers. The key characteristic of their teaching is that Jesus Christ did not come in a real human body. They deny that His 'godness' is combined perfectly with His 'humanness' and this effectively destroys the Gospel. If you want to examine this more, Hebrews, chapters seven and eight in particular, explains why both are required in the One Who Rescues us.

On Guard! (2 John 8)

Listening to, accepting, or considering, this self-made teaching has the potential to undermine our belief in the Truth. If we no longer believe what God has said, what is left? Certainly not anything of substance or eternal value. In a world that loves lies and deceit, our greatest threat is that we will become acclimated to such an environment and fall into the same trap as those we should want to help. Ultimately, we are only accountable for our own actions, so if we have done all we can to expose error, the rest is up to them.

Being aware of false teaching is the first step in avoiding being sucked in by it. It will put you in a position where you can hold firmly to sound doctrine. In Hebrews 6, the Writer urges us to move beyond the basics, but that doesn't mean we neglect them. And it certainly isn't what John has in mind when he describes these false teachers as 'going on ahead'. It is clear that you can appear to be all out for Christ, when the truth is that you are only sold out for self. Now I'm not convinced that you can lose your salvation in the same way that you might lose a pair of glasses. However, I believe that you can throw it away by a deliberate choice. That is likely what the writer of Hebrews is thinking. John may be thinking along the same lines, or he may be thinking along the lines of Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:12-15 where the quality of our workmanship is revealed, and our loss is a loss of reward rather than life. Either way, watch yourself, guard your own thinking – not so that you can sit there with a sense of smug superiority, but so that you can remain faithful and effective.

Racing Ahead (2 John 9)

While Hebrews 6 addresses those who fail to move forward at all, those John warns us of have

moved too far forward. These people were not maturing in their faith but going outside and beyond the boundaries of sound apostolic teaching. They declare that they are building up the faith, perhaps even bringing it up to date. In truth they are undermining its very foundation while tearing down every stone that Christ has laid down.³³

Verse nine always gives me a sense of people racing ahead without knowing the way. We are to *follow* Jesus, not go our own way. The Christian life is a long, slow plod, not a sprint. It takes time and patience to cultivate righteousness. And it takes discipline to stay within the boundaries set by the Father. We follow Jesus because He knows how to get there. He doesn't just *know* the way – He *is* the Way! And while He helps us to catch up when we lag behind, He will not chase after us if we run ahead. He will call us back, but the farther we go from Him, the harder it will be to hear Him. Remaining within the boundaries of what Christ has taught is where we find security. Abiding in Christ involves abiding in His Word. That includes studying Scripture to understand what the Father requires of us.

Verses 10 and 11 are rather strong. They seem to indicate that we are not to even acknowledge these *anti-messiahs* by greeting them. This gives us an indication of just how serious we are to take this. Hospitality is an important part of following Jesus. It is a requirement that Elders demonstrate it and it is perhaps one of the most obvious ways to demonstrate love to a stranger. In his third letter, John praises Gaius for his efforts in this area and encourages him to continue with it, yet here he urges the Chosen Lady to not even greet those who hold to their own made-up version of Christianity. These deceivers have likely fallen into the same error as those mentioned by Jude – using the Grace of God as license to indulge their own desires. We cannot afford to have any association with false teachers, as much as to protect our reputation as to protect our thinking.

Do we have an obligation to love even these, the enemies of Christ? We sure do, but how do you know when to press on with a friendship and when to draw the line? Can we continue to remain in relationship in the hope they might still listen? Up to what point? There must come a time when we have to step away and leave them to their own devices. It is no small matter to cut someone off completely. That decision must be made with such wisdom as can only come from the Father. If we cannot prayerfully and lovingly lead them back to the truth, we must know when to stop. Jude covers this in his little letter, though if we are not being built up in faith and praying in the Spirit, we will not have what it takes to 'snatch them out of the fire'.

Have a look at what Jesus says in Matthew 18:15-17. This is the template for dealing with those who are in Christ who have wronged you. 1 Timothy 5:19-20 is specifically about elders who sin, but it follows a similar pattern. Both passages give us a starting point for dealing with those who continue to sin as well as those who teach things that are not sound. In all things, we need to be driven by love.

Closing Greetings (2 John 12-13)

Even though there are difficulties, there is still much about this body of believers that brings John joy. It is when they are together that John says their joy is complete. There are other places where the hope of being together looks forward to a joy that is made full. This initially made me believe that relationship is where joy is found; that joy is perfected when those in relationship are communicating in each other's presence. And in a way that might be true. We can tweet, post on Facebook, email, phone and Skype but there is nothing that compares with sitting down with a friend face-to-face. We are wired for relationship and when relationships are built on the foundation of a relationship with Christ, then there is a depth and breadth of Joy that simply

³³ Barclay, William. The Daily Study Bible: The Letters of John and Jude page 143. St Andrews Press 1976.

cannot be found elsewhere. What I have since realised is that Joy comes from Hope fulfilled. Whether that is the hope of seeing a loved one face to face or the hope of a goal realised, there is joy when we attain something longed for. In all that we have promised to us in Christ, there is a certainty in our hope that should produce joy.

Walking together in truth and love is a good way to keep one another on track and sharp (Proverbs 27:17). There are some things that just need to be done where we have the ability to read body language and get immediate feedback. Encouragement is never so effective as when given in person. Difficult conversations to correct those in error or who are struggling, are simply not as effective unless done in person. The process of respectful disagreement, discussion with a view to understand and to discover from others that your ideas *are* in accordance with sound doctrine is what we need to be working towards.

Testimony to Love 3 John 1-8

The first letter we have from John is to the Church universal, the second to a specific fellowship and this third one to an individual who is much loved by John. These letters of John follow a pattern that was typical of personal letters in that day³⁴ and while this is a personal letter, there are things that we can learn through it. There are four key things in the first part of this letter: Truth, Joy, Love, and Faithfulness. These characteristics are different and separate, but they are also tightly bound together. Just as in his letter to 'the chosen lady', in John's letter to the 'beloved Gaius', love and truth are tied to each other throughout.

Truth

Note that John had received testimony about Gaius and rejoices in him walking in the truth, even as he rejoiced in 2 John with the children of 'the chosen lady'. Trusted people have brought a report to John, which possibly also detailed the concerns addressed in this letter. This is not about gossip or slander, as it's quite possible that John had asked after those who were known to him. These brothers are almost certainly itinerant evangelists, probably known by John, though perhaps not by Gaius and their report is truthful and honouring of those who have shown themselves faithful.

John loves his Gaius 'in truth' and is glad, to the point of being full of joy that he is walking 'in truth'. What does that mean? It must be something more than just words. Tom Wright describes walking in truth as 'behaving with that integrity that both reflects and embodies the truth of the gospel itself³⁵'. I think that pretty much nails it – when the way we live our lives is aligned with what we know of the good news, that is walking in truth. Of course, this isn't something that we do naturally – it can only be done supernaturally through the Holy Spirit working in us. And I do not believe that we can do it in isolation, we must be in fellowship with others who are likewise walking in the truth, so that we can help and encourage one another when things get difficult.

Joy

The testimony that John received regarding Gaius brought much joy. When hope is fulfilled, there is joy. The great hope of those who are part of bringing about new life is that it will be fruitful and enduring. That is as true of those who have natural children, as it is of those who have children-in-Christ. We long to see those we love walking in the truth that brings abundant and eternal life. Though we don't always see it. Some who begin with Christ fail to continue and some do not even begin (Matthew 13:3-9).

Love

There is a heart-felt concern for this much-loved friend of John's, a concern that extends to both his physical and spiritual wellbeing. Gaius is referred to as one of John's "children" and so he was most likely someone who was discipled by John. To teach someone all that Christ Jesus has commanded takes time and it creates a depth of relationship that can only be accurately described in terms of family. Indeed, in Christ we *are* family in a more enduring way than with our natural children or siblings. Love is not mere lip service – love *acts* – it is faithful, it is reliable. Acting faithfully grows out of truthful love for Christ and our brothers and sister in Christ. I can be certain that truthful love will always act in the best interests of the one who is loved – be that the Bridegroom or the Bride.

Yet love does not act without discernment. Compare the encouragement in hospitality to teachers of truth here with the warning against any association with the false teachers in 2 John. The difference is the content of what was being taught. The necessity of rejecting false teachers is as

³⁴ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Letters of John and Jude*, page 147. St Andrews press 1976

³⁵ Tom Wright, *Early Christian Letters for Everyone*, page 184. SPCK 2011

important as showing hospitality to itinerant preachers who declare the truth. We must be able to distinguish truth from lies. The more familiar we are with truth, the easier it will be to recognize lies when we see them.

Paul calls on us to 'do good to all men, especially to those who are of the household of faith' (Gal 6:9-10). If the world sees Christ's body neglecting its own, why would it want to have anything to do with us? Being hospitable to strangers, going out of your way to welcome them is a qualifying behaviour for elders, but it should also be normal for all who are in Christ. Now, I know that this is an area where I need to develop and with God's help I will. Nevertheless, holding to correct teaching while failing to demonstrate love is no better than preaching lies. 1 Corinthians 13 reminds us just how important it is to act out of love.

Faithfulness

Gaius is not only to receive these evangelists, but he is to 'send them on their way in a manner worthy of God'. These strangers are family, passing through or remaining just a short while. It is as important that we ensure they have what they need when they go, as it is to show them kindness when they arrive. It's true that there is an obligation to family members, but this is what love does. This is what love looks like. Gaius has an attitude of selflessness and service that takes the shape of providing for those whose work is the Gospel – this is love in truth.

Verses seven and eight identify what drove these preachers. It was not selfish ambition or vain conceit that set these people on the road, but the Name of Jesus. They sought to bring honour to His name, to point people to Him. We will see in verse 9 the opposite attitude and we see in the false teachers of 2 John an even deeper self-focus. It matters why people do what they do. When it is for "the sake of the Name", we are to support them. We are to work for those who bear the name of Christ as we would for Christ himself. Those who leave all for the sake of His name, they are the ones in whom we should invest in different ways, as enabled by the Holy Spirit, working for a common goal.

Not all of us have the gifts and abilities to go to the ends of the earth. Some have physical limitations. Some are just not suited. That doesn't mean that those who don't go are uninvolved. When we invest time in prayer, when we provide practical help or finances, we are "fellow workers with the truth". It's a bit like having shares in a company, though we are more involved, and the investment yields eternal dividends. It takes discipline and commitment to support front line workers, but we must – they are fellow workers in the family!

Loves to Testify 3 John 9-14

The trouble with Diotrephes (3 John 9-10)

Sadly, it seems that each week brings another high-profile pastor called out for abusive behaviour of one kind or another. Our willingness to make celebrities of people who ought only to be servants of Jesus is a factor, but more so is our individual tendency to pride and power. Of course, this isn't a new thing. After expressing the joy he has in hearing the reports about his dear friend Gaius, John comes to the difficult part of the conversation. How hard must it be to hear of such destructive behaviour among people for whom he has such love!

'Diotrephes, who loves to be first...' We see this kind of attitude far too often, not only in those in positions of responsibility. Too many times people refuse to submit to authority, refuse to listen to counsel, and do all they can to have their own way in spite of what is right and necessary. Calling attention to what is being done is the first step. Pointing out their error one-on-one, gently with genuine concern for their wellbeing, is where it begins. If they cannot, or will not, see and understand what they are doing, then the behaviour needs to be exposed more broadly.

It is not that that Diotrephes is raising legitimate concerns. It is that he is *unjustly* accusing, it is that he is not listening to wisdom, he is refusing to submit to John's apostolic authority, and he removes those people who impede his plans. Everything is about him. Pressuring people is a common way to manipulate them, eliminating the 'problem' by pushing them away and making it impossible for them to function. This is bullying and coercion and it is far too easy to slip from loving authority into this kind of behaviour. We need people who are loving enough and bold enough to call this behaviour out for what it is. And we all need to support those who do so.

The two charges that John brings against Diotrephes are that he likes to be first and that he does not accept John's authority. (Other translations say, "he will not welcome us" or "refuses to have anything to do with us" but I think the underlying problem remains the acceptance of John's authority as an Apostle). Why are these things a problem? We have Paul urging the Philippians to look out for the needs of others, rather than pursuing their own selfish desires (Phi 2:3-4). And we have Jesus Himself saying that many who are first will be last, (Matthew 19:20; Mark 9:35; 10:31; 10:45; Luke 13:30) which reflects other Scriptures that declare, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1Peter 5:5, James 4:6, Proverbs 3:34). Even without any other issue we can see that Diotrephes does not have the attitude of service that is required of those who act as shepherds in the church. The danger is that any of us can make the same mistake if we take our eyes of Christ for too long. Even so, we must not minimise his behaviour, because we *must* have the same attitude as Christ if we are to follow Him.

The charge of rejecting John's authority is, I believe, a serious charge. My attitude is in constant need of adjustment and can be brought back in line relatively easily when I take the time to get my perspective right. However, if I reject the authority of those whom God has placed over me, I set myself up as my own authority and I have no protection from my mistakes. Indeed, this is original sin in all its deceptive ugliness. The first Adam rejected the clear directions of God, established his own desire as the ultimate authority and set in motion all the destruction that selfishness and pride has produced throughout the millennia. Diotrephes' attitude was destructive. It prevented the itinerant preachers from being supported as they should have, it created divisions in the local fellowship, and it likely had a negative impact on how those outside the Body saw the church.

John has no intention of letting this go. Even though he is not certain of coming, he has determined to confront the problem. Maybe Diotrephes will respond to firm, but loving correction, and maybe he won't. Nevertheless, these issues must be dealt with. Walking away from a problem never resolved it, though there does come a point where we must cut them away, and it is there that much wisdom is required.

Testimony to Excellence (3 John 11-12)

Diotrephes would have been someone who held a lot of influence, so it would have been difficult to go against him. Yet John tells Gaius to imitate what is good. This call to imitate what is good rather than evil comes just before John's commendation of Demetrius. It is almost certain that Demetrius was bringing this letter and was likely travelling with other evangelists. He is given an introduction, even as Paul did for Phoebe in the letter to the Romans, and is commended as being well spoken of, even by the truth itself. This is a powerful testimony to Demetrius' character.

A tree is known by its fruit (Luke 6:43-45). What is your life producing? Are you working for God's Kingdom, or intent on building your own empire? Who do you know who is cultivating Righteousness? That is someone worth learning from. Demetrius is obviously one of those people. His reputation is well known, and consistently good. Gaius knows John and can trust that what he says is true. Indeed, all those who follow Christ should have such integrity, for the same One who is "the Way... and the Life" is also "the Truth". John calls on three witnesses to Demetrius' character – everyone, the truth itself and himself. Throughout Scripture, the testimony of multiple witnesses strengthens whatever claims they have. Considering the difficulties Diotrephes has been making for itinerant preachers, having such a strong character reference was vital. What did John mean when he says that Demetrius has a good testimony 'from the truth itself'?

Seeing God changes us. Though I do think that we can look at someone and not truly "see" them. John implies something more than a passing acquaintance with someone or recognizing a face that goes with a name. That which we closely observe, we will imitate. Children do this, often to a parent's embarrassment. There is an implication in what John writes here that observing and copying Diotrephes' behaviour is not a good thing – his actions do not reflect what God looks like. On the other hand, Demetrius' character reflects that of Christ. He has observed and copied the One who is True, and it shows. Choose carefully who you will observe and whose behaviour you will seek to model.

Face to face (3 John 13-14)

We don't know all the things John wanted to communicate, but he felt that writing was not the best way to do it. Some things can be effectively dealt with at a distance, but not everything. I suspect that there are two reasons for John wanting to see Gaius. The first is because of their friendship, the second is because the problem with Diotrephes can only be properly sorted in person. To be honest, I think it likely that to encourage Gaius in such a difficult time could not be done via letter and what he really wanted to do was to be there to support his friend.

We can't always be there in person to confront or support. Yet we have many more means to communicate than John did. And while they cannot completely replace being present, they can still be a helpful substitute when necessary.