

1 JOHN - A PRACTICAL GUIDE  
TO CHRISTIAN LIVING

A Paper  
Presented to  
GraceLife  
Grace Research Room

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November, 2019

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief introduction to the book of 1 John and to address whether John's letter was intended to be used as series of tests to determine if they are eternally saved, or if it was intended as a series of practical guidelines for developing a believer's relationship with God. To state it another way, was John's intent to help the readers determine if they were part of God's family or was the intent to determine how to develop fellowship within the family that they were already a part of? The reason this becomes important is two-fold. First, it can have detrimental effects on how a person views who they are in Christ, and negatively impact their understanding how God views them and what He expects from them. Second, it can have detrimental effects on a person's understanding of their assurance of salvation, which is critical to developing an intimate fellowship with God.

The majority of theologians view First John as a series of tests for salvation. Stedman is an example of this view when he says "the marks that John emphasizes as proof to anyone that he or she is a Christian. The letter gives us a wonderful measuring stick whereby we can test our own lives."<sup>1</sup> Because of commentaries like these, many churches pass out studies for their congregation or Sunday school to test if they are 'in Christ' and thus truly saved; and if they don't pass the test(which is very arbitrary), they are warned to place their faith in Christ again. One example states that if you failed the test, "You may have been deceived into thinking you are a Christian, but are not. If this is the case, you need to repent and trust Christ as your personal Sin-bearer and receive the gift of new life by faith in Him"<sup>2</sup> This entire way of thinking about

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<sup>1</sup> Ray Stedman, *1 John: The Fruit of Fellowship with Christ*. [http://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/stedman\\_ray/Adv\\_1Jo/Adv\\_1Jo.cfm?a=1160001](http://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/stedman_ray/Adv_1Jo/Adv_1Jo.cfm?a=1160001) (last accessed May, 2014)

<sup>2</sup> Paul Tautges. *10 Tests of Genuine Faith*.. <http://counselingoneanother.com/2011/09/01/10-tests-of-genuine-faith/> (Last accessed May, 2014)

First John seems to contradict the concept of assurance of salvation which leads one to ask, is this what John and the Holy Spirit intended in the message of First John?

I will argue that this is not what was intended, and that such claims create more theological and practical problems than it solves. I will include a purpose, audience, key passages, and defense of John's intent to encourage a believer to grow in fellowship.

### **Tests**

First John contains many "tests" or self-assessments throughout the book. Many could be considered difficult passages, but with proper context and an understanding of the words John uses makes them less so. Time doesn't permit an exposition of all of them, but many are worth noting.

1. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. – 1:6
2. He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him – 2:4
3. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. – 2:15b
4. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him. – 3:6b
5. He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. – 3:8
6. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. – 3:15
7. He who does not love does not know God – 4:8

These passages seem to imply that if a believer doesn't love God, love one another, or loves the world over God is not a Christian. These verses taken in isolation from the surrounding

context may indicate this, however when studied contextually the audience, purpose, and language reveal a more accurate interpretation of the text.

### **Audience**

John's target audience was believers. This is made clear as he refers to them as 'beloved' six times and 'children' six times. He also addressed them as 'brothers' ten times, a term reserved exclusively for believers. In addition John also associates himself with the readers, using first person plural terms. For example, the word 'us' is used 39 times, "because He has given *us* of His Spirit." – 4:13. And 'we' is used 80 times in 44 verses! "We know that *we* are of God," – 5:19.

It should also be noted that while pronouns are important, John clearly indicates the eternal salvation of the readers with certain statements. The aforementioned verses state that they have the Spirit (4:13), they know they are of God (5:19); and at the outset he clearly states "that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us." - 1:2b. The evidence is extremely clear that the readers (and the author) are believers. So it begs the question why John, who knows the readers eternal state (including his own), would write to them a list of 'tests' to determine if they are saved. The only answer is; that was not his purpose, since John cannot be affirming their salvation and questioning their salvation simultaneously.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of John's letter seems to be two-fold. The first was to instill confidence in his readers that Christ is who he said he was and that salvation came through Him.<sup>3</sup> Verse 2:18-30 give indication of this. This lack of confidence came about because there were apparently false teachers promoting false doctrines; "These things I have written to you concerning those

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<sup>3</sup> See vv 1:7; 2:2; 3:16; 4:10,14

who *try to deceive you.*” – 2:26. Dr. Constable indicates that one heresy John might have been addressing was called Docetism. “The false teachers and teachings to which he alluded suggest that John wrote about conditions that existed in Asia: Judaism, Gnosticism, Docetism, the teachings of Cerinthus (a prominent Gnostic), and others.”<sup>4</sup> Docetism was the false doctrine that Jesus’ human side was merely an illusion. Likewise, Dr. Niemela makes the observation that in 1 John 2:24-26, John writes to preventatively counteract deceptive teachers; “Evidently, the deceivers denied Jesus Christ’s promise of everlasting life, because the conclusion of John’s response to them emphasizes everlasting life.” And that “John sought to prevent leaders of congregations from developing spiritual-amnesia.”<sup>5</sup>

The second purpose is more clearly spelled out and that was to encourage his readers to find greater fellowship with God. John states his purpose at the outset of the letter in verse 1:3, “that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.” His desire then was to have his readers to experience the joy God intended for them, which comes through fellowship with the Father and the Son. Dr. Constable summarizes John’s letter in one phrase; “Fellowship with God is the essence of eternal life.” Fellowship differs greatly from eternal salvation given freely at the time they place their faith in Christ; which makes a person a *child of God*. Once children, one’s fellowship with Christ can be developed and grown; but there are some necessary steps, both through thought and action, the believer needs to do in order to grow closer to God which John outlines.

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on 1 John* (Dallas, Texas: Sonic Light, 2005), 1.

<sup>5</sup> John H. Niemela, *Grace in Focus May/June 2014: Initial Assurance or Reassurance? (1 John 5:13)*, 31.

## Key Words

### *Fellowship*

Fellowship is translated from the Greek word *koinonia*, which could be thought of as joint participation or binding. A similar Hebrew word *chabar* was used to describe a shared house (Prov. 21:9). Paul used *koinonia* extensively to illustrate not only the deep relationship believers have with Christ, but also other believers. Likewise John does the same in 1 John 1:3,6-7 where he emphasizes that fellowship with God and Christ leads to fellowship with others. As noted earlier, this is the stated purpose of the book. Dr. Bing agrees stating that “Fellowship (literally "sharing") refers not to the establishment of a relationship, but to growing more intimate in that relationship. In other words, John's purpose is not to establish a new relationship, but to enhance an existing one.”<sup>6</sup> More specifically, John wrote to enhance an existing relationship with God, Christ, and other believers. To accomplish this *koinonia* relationship, one must be free from tension that might strain the relationship, hence the need for confession and forgiveness.

### *Forgiveness*

This is a term “used to indicate pardon for a fault or offense.” In the New Testament it’s used in two aspects, one is initial or judicial forgiveness God grants us as judge, it’s one of the things we receive when we believe. “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace” – Eph. 1:7. This forgiveness is a one-time event that ushered in the relationship. However, like any relationship, including interpersonal ones, forgiveness is essential for maintaining a healthy fellowship. Dr. Constable emphasizes this point when commenting on 1 John 1:9. He states:

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<sup>6</sup> Dr. Charlie Bing, GraceNotes: “Interpreting 1 John”. <http://www.gracelife.org/resources/gracenotes/?id=37> (last accessed May, 2014)

Some expositors teach that this verse cannot apply to Christians since God has already forgiven Christians and therefore we do not need to ask for what we already have. This viewpoint fails to distinguish between forensic forgiveness that we receive at conversion and family forgiveness that we need after conversion.<sup>7</sup>

Once forgiven, the fellowship can be restored and be maintained by abiding in Christ so that we do not fall back and weaken the bonds of that fellowship.

### *Abide*

The word abide, is probably the most telling as to John's purpose. In the book of John, he uses the word 'believe' when discussing eternal salvation over 100 times, but when discussing fellowship he uses the word abide. Abide is used 21 times in 1 John and it is apparently a critical component to fellowship with God. But it is a two-way street. John expresses that not only should believers abide in God (2:6, 10, 24; 3:6, 24; 4:13, 16), but that God abides in the believer (2:14, 24; 3:9,17,24;4:12,13,15,16). "If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit." 1 john 4:12-13. To abide means to do what God has commanded (2:3), to remain in fellowship. "He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked." – 2:6. As we abide in God, God abides in us keeping us from sin. A believer is incapable of sinning if they are abiding in Christ, thus they are able to achieve the joy that John spoke of at the outset.

In summary then, John builds a case in his letter for how to find joy; and finding joy comes from abiding in Christ and maintaining healthy fellowship with God and others. This is what John refers to as 'walking in the light' (1:5-2:2), a figure of speech for abiding in Christ.

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<sup>7</sup> Constable, 14.

## Summary and Conclusions

1 John becomes a deep, rich, satisfying book when one understands that it's about fellowship, and he provides practical 'tests' to determine if the individual is on the path of abiding in Christ. To interpret it as a series of tests to determine if one is believer creates many theological problems. Arguably the most significant problem is that the believer cannot determine whether or not they have assurance of salvation.<sup>8</sup> When believers look to their works as tests for salvation, this necessarily 'backloads'<sup>9</sup> the gospel message of faith alone in Christ alone. So not only does assurance become logically impossible, but the fear that is created in one's life makes growth in fellowship difficult. Fellowship cannot grow upon the foundation of fear, growth only happens through unconditional love. John exhorts his readers to love, "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." – 4:11. A marriage cannot grow properly if one spouse is constantly threatening divorce as a means of maturing the relationship. Similarly a child's fellowship with parents does not grow when the parents are threatening to disown them if they misbehave.

In addition, the test for eternal salvation interpretation logically results in no assurance of salvation thus it is in direct conflict that God wants us to know that we are saved! "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life" – 5:13<sup>10</sup> It becomes clear then that to adhere to the idea of testing to determine salvation is contradictory to this clear passage. It's also worthwhile to point out that those who subscribe to the view of First John as a series of tests for eternal salvation, provide no measure of works, it becomes incredibly relative and can manifest itself as legalism.

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<sup>8</sup> Catholics are at least honest and consistent on this matter, as they say that assurance is a mortal sin, an impossibility.

<sup>9</sup> As opposed to 'frontloading' the gospel with works. Meaning adding works prior to salvation. Backloading means to add works after salvation, which, for all practical purposes, has the same result of frontloading.

<sup>10</sup> See also Romans 8



So the problem is, there is no precise measure of good works (how much, how often?) and this nullifies assurance and makes assurance subject to one's own internal idea of how holy they feel at that moment. This is destructive and Christians will begin to focus on themselves and others rather than focus on Christ, who is the author and perfecter of our faith.

Often times, theologians will allow their theology to drive interpretation rather than allow the plain reading of the scripture to form and shape their theology. This can be seen in interpretations of First John. While often well intentioned, practical application of the works based interpretation results in logical inconsistencies at the least, and can create Christians who do not understand the true joys of eternal life now. The intent of First John is to grow the believer experientially rather than determine who they are positionally.

“And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.” – 5:20

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