

## **SANCTIFICATION IN 1 JOHN: KEY TERMS AND DOCTRINES IN LIGHT OF THE ARGUMENT OF 1 JOHN**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the discussion of the spiritual life of the Christian, the epistle of 1 John is instrumental. It is not only an important book because it is part of God's inspired word (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21), but also because of the statements contained in the text related to the believer's walk with God. However, not all interpreters are in agreement as to how the reader is to apply the words of the text. Even though the different interpretations are affected by issues related to translation, many of the difficulties and differences in interpretation stem from passages in which opposing parties often agree in terms of translation. Two central views have emerged in the interpretation of 1 John that will be discussed in this paper. Is 1 John presenting the tests of whether or not one is truly born again, or tests as to whether the one who is born again is walking in fellowship with God? As Dillow stated, "In a word, are they tests of regenerate life, or are they tests of abundant life?"<sup>1</sup>

### **THE TEST OF RELATIONSHIP / SALVATION POSITION**

The test of life view has many scholarly proponents.<sup>2</sup> The test of life view holds that 1 John reveals tests to apply to one's life to determine if the one who professes faith in Christ is truly born again. John MacArthur wrote, "John also wrote an entire epistle about the marks of a true believer (cf. 1 Jn. 5:13). His counsel with those struggling with

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings, A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle Publishing, 1993), 162.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to understand some of the presuppositions by commentators that will greatly influence the interpretation of the text. For example, John MacArthur states in *The Gospel According to Jesus* (p. 256), "All the greatest saints throughout the centuries of church history have repudiated the notion that salvation effects anything less than the complete transformation of a believer's character, behavior, and way of life."

assurance was not that they should pin their hopes on a past incident or a moment of faith. He gave instead a doctrinal test and a moral test, and reiterated them throughout his first epistle.”<sup>3</sup> MacArthur goes on to quote several passages in 1 John to support his view (1:6; 2:4, 29; 3:3) and then states, “Scores of other passages throughout the epistle confirm the same truth: the one who is truly saved cannot continue in a pattern of unbroken sin (3:6-10).”<sup>4</sup> Fruit can be used either to reveal the absence of eternal life in an individual or to assure him of the presence of that life.<sup>5</sup> D. L. Akin would contend that 1 John gives tests to prove the evidence of life when he wrote,

John depicts Christian assurance from both an objective and a subjective perspective. Objectively, believers know the historicity and reality of Jesus Christ’s life and work. The events of his life were observed by eyewitnesses and passed on to them (1:1–3). Similarly, those who have trusted God’s Son possess eternal life (5:12). Subjectively, Christians know that their lives have been transformed through faith in Christ. John summarizes the characteristics of true Christianity as right belief, righteousness, and love; he wants these believers to observe the manifestations of their faith, which are evident in their lives and evidence of life.”<sup>6</sup>

In Gary Derickson’s analysis of the fellowship view and the relationship view, he made this comment that summarizes the relationship view in light of the central terms in the book:

John used “eternal life,” “fellowship,” “to know God,” and “abiding” synonymously when describing the Christian. Eternal life is a soteriological term, though quality of life is not completely removed from its meaning. Κοινωνία (“fellowship”) should be understood soteriologically so that “to be in fellowship” is equivalent to having eternal life, or being “saved.” Fellowship means participating and having partnership in the common possession of eternal life, not communion or relationships as one would expect in a family. Knowing God also refers to possessing eternal life (salvation), on the basis of John 17. Abiding is understood as reflecting the Pauline concept of being “in Christ” rather than that

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<sup>3</sup> John F. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1994), 253.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 253.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 22, 33, 126, 178.

<sup>6</sup> Akin, D. L. (2001). *Vol. 38: 1, 2, 3 John* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (30). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

of walking in the Spirit. Therefore even the affirmations of 1 John 1:5–10 are tests of spiritual life.<sup>7</sup>

According to the test of life view, John wrote to encourage his believing audience of their salvation based on their compliance with certain tests, which includes adherence to the teaching of the apostles as well as possessing righteous behavior. If these tests are not evidenced in the believer's life, then he does not actually possess eternal life and is merely professing faith.

Some believe that 1 John was not written with an evangelistic intent as was the Gospel of John.<sup>8</sup> But its purpose is related to that of the Gospel of John in that the Gospel was written so that the readers could have eternal life (salvation), whereas the epistle was written so that the readers could know that they have eternal life.<sup>9</sup>

### THE TEST OF FELLOWSHIP POSITION

The test of fellowship view also has many scholarly proponents.<sup>10</sup> The test of fellowship view contends that 1 John was written to encourage believers to walk in active

<sup>7</sup> Gary Derickson, "What is the Message of 1 John?" *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 150:597 (January 1993): 92.

<sup>8</sup> G. S. Barrett, *The First Epistle General of St. John* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1910), 206.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 207; E. M. Blaiklock, *Letters to Children of Light* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1975), 103; Blair, *The Epistles of John*, 8; Maurice Bogaert, "Structure et Message de la Première Epître de Saint Jean," *Bible et Vie Chrétienne* 83 (1968): 35; Burdick, *The Epistles of John*, 91; Robert Cameron, *The First Epistle of John* (Philadelphia: Rowland, 1899), xii, 240; Epp, *Studies in the General Epistles of John*, 5-6; Grayston, *The Johannine Epistles*, 140; George E. Henderlite, *Notes on the First Epistle of John* (N.p., n.d.), 66; Hiebert, *The Non-Pauline Epistles and Revelation*, 201; Horner, "Introduction to the Johannine Epistles," 47; Houlden, "Salvation Proclaimed: II. 1 John 1<sup>5</sup>-2<sup>6</sup>: Belief and Growth," *Expository Times* 93 (1981/82): 132-33; Lewis, *The Johannine Epistles*, 119; Plummer, *The Epistles of St. John*, 120; David Smith, "The Epistles of St. John," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 5:197; Stott, *The Letters of John*, 187; Henry C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 306; W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Apostle John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 231; William E. Vine, *The First Epistle of John* (Bangalore: Scripture Literature Depot, 1934), 156.

<sup>10</sup> 31. Guy H. King, *The Fellowship* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1954); C. C. Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1959); *idem*, "I, II, and III John," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody, 1962), Zane C. Hodges (*The Gospel under Siege* (Dallas, TX: Redención Viva, 1981); *idem*, *Absolutely Free!* (Dallas, TX: Redención Viva, 1989); *idem*, "1 John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983); J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Joy of Fellowship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977); John G. Mitchell, *An Everlasting Love* (Portland, OR: Multnomah,

fellowship with God. John reveals certain tests in the text that provide believers assurance that they are actively abiding in their family relationship with God.

“What then is the purpose of the writer in writing 1 John? It is found where one would often find a purpose statement in a book or letter, in the opening paragraph (1 John 1:3): “What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, **so that you too may have fellowship with us**; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ (NASB).” His purpose in writing to these regenerate people is so that they may walk in fellowship with God!”<sup>11</sup>

The objective John had in mind in writing about these significant realities was that you, the readers, may have fellowship with us, the apostles. Since he later, in 2:12-14, made it perfectly clear that he regarded the readers as genuine Christians, his goal was obviously not their conversions. It is an interpretive mistake of considerable moment to treat the term “fellowship” as though it meant little more than “to be a Christian.” The readers were already saved, but they needed this letter if they were to enjoy real fellowship with the apostolic circle to which the author belonged. In the final analysis that apostolic fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup>

Derickson comments on the fellowship view in relation to some of the key terms in the book:

“The terms “fellowship,” “abiding,” “eternal life,” and “knowing God” are related, though understood as describing aspects of the believer’s relationship to the Father within His family. They develop John’s doctrine of sanctification rather than regeneration. Fellowship should be understood in its natural sense as expressing relationship or communion, rather than merely possession of a common property. Abiding should be understood in the Pauline sense of walking in the Spirit rather than being in Christ. This is supported in part from the Johannine use of abiding in John 15, which need not be understood soteriologically. Eternal life refers to quality of life, as in John 10:10, rather than salvation. Knowing God is not equivalent to being saved, but is the result of walking with Him in fellowship.”<sup>13</sup>

Some would hold that there is a relationship between 1 John and the Gospel, but that the epistle has its own distinct purpose, which basically develops the concept of the believer’s experience and enjoyment of eternal life in the way of fellowship with other

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1982); idem, *Fellowship* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1974); and J. W. Roberts, *The Letters of John*, The Living Word Commentary (Austin, TX: R. B. Sweet, 1968); Robert Lightner, *The Epistles of 1, 2, 3 John and Jude: Forgiveness, Love, and Courage* (AMG Publishers, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 162.

<sup>12</sup> Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (2:883). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

<sup>13</sup> Gary Derickson, “What is the Message of 1 John?” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 150:597 (January 1993): 98.

believers and the Father, while the Gospel focuses on acquiring eternal life.”<sup>14</sup> Edward Curtis agrees that eternal life in 1 John is related to the believer’s experience:

“The tests given within the epistle enable the readers, understood as believers, to recognize when they are in fellowship with God in the sense of communion, not whether they are His children. The tests are not given to produce assurance of the possession of eternal life, of inclusion in God’s family, but of the “functioning” of that life within the fellowship of God’s family.”<sup>15</sup>

To summarize, the test of fellowship view contends that 1 John reveals certain tests to demonstrate whether or not born-again believers are actively abiding in fellowship with God.

## **STATEMENT OF THE ARGUMENT OF THE EPISTLE**

I propose the argument of the book to be as follows:

Based on apostolic eyewitness testimony (1:1-2), John, who desired his joy to be complete by seeing his audience walking in the truth (1 John 1:4; 2:6; cf. John 15:11-12; 3 John 4), is writing to believers (2:7-14) to assure them of eternal life (5:13) in the midst of false teachers (2:22, 26; 3:7; 4:1) and to explain that fellowship with the only true God who is Light (1:3, 5; 5:19-21) is experienced and maintained by those who avoid sin (1:8-10; 2:1; 3:6-10) and walk in the light by abiding with Him on the basis of God’s truth (1:6-7; 2:24), which will result in the desired goal of revealing our identity as God’s children (3:9-10), avoiding deception from deceivers (2:26; 3:7), a mature love for God and fellow believers (2:5; 3:11, 23; 4:7-21), a knowledge of the true God instead of the alternative idolatry (5:20-21), and confidence at the coming of Christ (2:28).<sup>16</sup>

## **VALIDATION OF THE ARGUMENT OF THE EPISTLE**

Studying the purpose statements in a biblical text is helpful when trying to arrive at the author’s argument. The differences of opinion on the meaning of the purpose statements in 1 John are numerous. The fact that purpose statements exist in the text is not difficult to determine, since John uses the conjunction ἵνα (*hina*) nine times in his epistle, a word that denotes purpose in the

<sup>14</sup> Mitchell, *Fellowship*, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Edward M. Curtis, “The Purpose of 1 John” (ThD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1986), 135.

<sup>16</sup> The statement of the argument of the epistle of 1 John is influenced by the major purpose statements throughout the epistle (1:3, 4; 2:1, 12, 26, 28; 4:9; 5:13, 20).

Greek language. Seven of the nine purpose statements are directly related to the walk of the believer:

### 1 John 1:3

“What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, **so that you too may have fellowship with us**; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

### 1 John 1:4

“These things we write, **so that our joy may be made complete**.”<sup>17</sup>

### 1 John 2:1

“My little children, I am writing these things to you **so that you may not sin**. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”

### 1 John 2:28

“Now, little children, abide in Him, **so that when He appears**, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming.”

### 1 John 4:9

“By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world **so that we might live through Him**.”<sup>18</sup>

### 1 John 5:13

“These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, **so that you may know that you have eternal life**.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Joy is a product in the believer’s life that results from his actively abiding in fellowship with Christ by means of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 15:11; Gal. 5:16, 22-23).

<sup>18</sup> A person must first enter into this life through faith alone in Christ alone (Jn. 5:24), but the believer’s spiritual life continues to be a life of faith in Christ in experiential sanctification (cf. Gal 2:20; Rom 6:4; 1 Tim. 6:12). John could be referring to a person’s initial conversion, but it is more likely that he is focusing on the post-salvation spiritual life (cf. Jn. 10:10).

<sup>19</sup> This verse is often understood as an affirmation of the believer’s position as permanently saved, but it could also be understood as an affirmation of eternal life, namely, the experience of the abundant life (Jn. 10:10) validated through the fulfillment of the tests in the epistle (active fellowship with the true God; avoiding sin and walking in the light; abiding in Him evidenced by loving the brethren, etc).

### 1 John 5:20

“And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding **so 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.”

Other statements that are included to support John’s purpose for writing are found in 2:12 and 2:26:

### 1 John 2:12

“I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name’s sake.”

### 1 John 2:26

“These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you.”

## A CENTRAL PURPOSE STATEMENT

Many who hold to the test of life view of 1 John do so based on their interpretation of the purpose statement in 1 John 5:13. Some hold that this verse states the overarching purpose of the book and use this verse to inform the difficult passages in the text. Many scholars argue for the purpose of 1 John in light of the purpose and structure of the Gospel of John.<sup>20</sup> Even though not all who hold to the test of life view see a connection with the structure of the Gospel of John and 1 John, some who hold the view see the Gospel of John written with an evangelistic purpose so one could obtain eternal life, whereas 1 John was written so that believers could know that they have eternal life.<sup>21</sup> It is

<sup>20</sup> Some interpreters see a parallel structure between the prologue of John 1:1-18 and the prologue of 1 John 1:1-4 and a parallel with the purpose statement in John 20:31 with purpose statement in 1 John 5:13.

<sup>21</sup> 11. G. S. Barrett, *The First Epistle General of St. John* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1910), 207.

understood by some that just as John 20:31 contains the purpose statement that governs the entire Gospel, so also 1 John 5:13 governs the entire epistle.<sup>22</sup>

Even though it is not in dispute that 1 John 5:13 contains a purpose statement, not all interpreters are in agreement that the verse governs the entire epistle. Therefore, a major question revolves around whether the Ταῦτα (“these things”) in 5:13 refers to the preceding verses (5:11–12) or to the entirety of the epistle. It is possible that the purpose statement in 5:13 governs the entire epistle since the prologue in chapter 1 mentions eternal life as well, but not all are in agreement with this conclusion. Ryrie commented on the purpose statement in 1 John 1:3, “This purpose statement, expressed by the ἵνα clause in 1:3, governs the message of the epistle.”<sup>23</sup> Other scholars would argue that the purpose statements in 1:4, 2:1, and 5:13 are secondary to the overall purpose of encouraging fellowship between believers as well as between believers and God the Father.<sup>24</sup> Hodges contends that 1:3 reveals the overall purpose of the epistle.<sup>25</sup> Ryrie and Hodges would hold that the controlling theme of fellowship is given in the purpose statement of 1:3 and that fellowship is the subject of the epistle.<sup>26</sup> Some scholars would argue that even though there are similarities to the Gospel of John, the epistle of 1 John has its own distinct purpose by developing the concept of the believer’s experience of eternal life in the way of fellowship with God and other believers, while the Gospel focuses on obtaining eternal life.<sup>27</sup>

Some interpreters believe that the central purpose statement occurs in the prologue

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 206.

<sup>23</sup> Ryrie, “I, II, and III John,” 1466.

<sup>24</sup> Hodges, “1 John,” 884; Judith M. Lieu, “‘Authority to Become Children of God’: A Study of 1 John,” *Novum Testamentum* 23 (1981): 213; Mitchell, *Fellowship*, 16-17.

<sup>25</sup> Zane C. Hodges, “We Believe In: Assurance of Salvation,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 3 (Autumn 1990): 5.

<sup>26</sup> Ryrie, “I, II, and III John,” 1466; Hodges, “1 John,” 881, 883.

<sup>27</sup> Mitchell, *Fellowship*, 13.

of 1 John 1:1-4 based on its early placement in the text. Derickson stated, “Since the epistle was written to be read aloud to a listening audience, John logically stated his purpose at the beginning of the writing.”<sup>28</sup> He quotes Elliot Johnson, who although was not writing a commentary on 1 John, offers an argument that supports the purpose of the epistle being located in the prologue of chapter one:

The subject is commonly introduced at the *beginning* of the text or in some shared context with the original readers. For communication to take place, the reader must understand what the author is talking about. If the author fails to introduce his subject somehow, then what he says has no relation to any subject in particular. Communication of a message is thereby thwarted.<sup>29</sup>

A subject that will be addressed later in this paper in more detail which greatly influences the argument of the epistle is the meaning of “eternal life,” a term found in the important verses related to this discussion in 1 John 1:2 and 5:13. Some within the test of fellowship view see “eternal life” in 5:13 as a reference to salvation, not the abundant life. For example, Ryrie holds that fellowship is based on salvation.<sup>30</sup> Hodges says that John wrote in order to “assure his readers that, despite anything the antichrists have said, the believers do indeed possess eternal life.”<sup>31</sup> Pentecost notes that, though a believer’s misunderstanding these truths does not affect his eternal destiny, it does affect his stay on earth. Further, without the comfort of the knowledge of one’s salvation, the believer cannot “enter into the peace of God,” that is, fellowship.<sup>32</sup> If 1 John 5:13 is referring to salvation, then it is to be understood as a sub-purpose, referring only to the immediate context, and being written in order to

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<sup>28</sup> Gary Derickson, “What is the Message of 1 John?” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 150:597 (January 1993): 99.

<sup>29</sup> Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 83.

<sup>30</sup> Ryrie, “I, II, and III John,” 1477.

<sup>31</sup> Hodges, “1 John,” 902.

<sup>32</sup>J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Joy of Fellowship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 132.

strengthen the readers' confidence in their fellowship with God through the confidence that results from assurance of salvation. However, if eternal life in 5:13 is a reference to the quality of life, then the focus of the epistle is whether or not the believer is actively abiding in fellowship with God and enjoying the abundant life (1:3; 5:13; cf. John 10:10).

### **THE MEANING OF KEY TERMS IN THE EPISTLE**

If one studies the different views among interpreters concerning the central terms in 1 John they will discover that those who hold to the test of life position and the test of fellowship position both use the central terms to support their interpretation. The understanding of these central terms will have a strong impact on the interpretation of the epistle. It is noted by Derickson that John used "eternal life," "fellowship," "to know God," and "abiding" synonymously when describing the Christian.<sup>33</sup> But a question remains as to what way they are synonymous. Are they synonymous in describing the tests of fellowship view or the tests of life view? I will argue that each term in 1 John is describing the believer's walk.

### **FELLOWSHIP**

Many argue the importance of understanding the terms in the Gospel of John to inform the meaning of the same terms in 1 John. While this is definitely helpful and valid, it is not always possible. For example, the word *κοινωνία* (*koinonia*) does not occur in the Gospel of John. However, the word is found a total of 19 times in 17 verses

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<sup>33</sup> Derickson, "What is the Message of 1 John?" 92.

in the New Testament.<sup>34</sup> It occurs in John’s writings only four times with every occurrence in 1 John 1:3–7. Therefore, to understand the use of κοινωνία in 1 John based on the usage in the Gospel of John would be impossible.

### THE FOUR USES OF ΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΑ IN 1 JOHN:

Since John only uses κοινωνία exclusively in his first epistle, then it is best to look to those usages in their context before comparing other uses in the New Testament.

#### 1 John 1:3

“What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have **fellowship** with us; and indeed our **fellowship** is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

#### 1 John 1:6

“If we say that we have **fellowship** with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.”

#### 1 John 1:7

“But if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have **fellowship** with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.”

The four uses in 1 John and the other uses outside of John’s writings give strong support for fellowship (κοινωνία, *koinonia*) referring to active participation in the spiritual life. Some commentators understand fellowship in 1 John equal to possessing salvation or eternal life. For example, Akin says “John’s purpose statements in 1 John 1:3 and in 1 John 5:13 are, thus, practical equivalents: John proclaims Jesus as the Christ, the incarnate Son of God, to assure them in their faith and encourage them to persevere

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<sup>34</sup> Acts 2:42 and Heb 13:16; Rom 15:26; 1 Cor 1:9; 10:16 (twice); 2 Cor 6:14; 8:4; 9:13; 13:13; Gal 2:9; Phil 1:5; 2:1; 3:10; and Phlm 1:6. The verb κοινωνέω (*koinoneo*) occurs only once in John’s writings (2 John 11). A similar compound verb συγκοινωνέω (*sugkoinoneo*) is found only in Revelation 18:4. The noun κοινωνός (*koinonos*) is never found in John’s writings.

(cf. 1 John 5:21). Failure to persevere in this faith is, by implication, to exclude oneself from the apostolic fellowship, fellowship with God the Father and with his Son, and eternal life.”<sup>35</sup>

As already stated, to understand fellowship in 1 John one must look to the immediate context of the epistle. It is also valid to look at other places in the Bible outside of John’s writings. Paul uses the word more than any other writer, and based on his usage and other uses even outside of Paul, the common meaning is active participation, sharing, contribution, or fellowship. Based on the uses of *κοινωνία* in 1 John along with passages outside of Johannine writings, fellowship is not simply a permanent positional reality, but a state maintained by the obedience of the believer to God’s word (cf. Gal. 5:16; Col. 3:16; Jas. 1:22; 1 Jn. 2:24), and when broken through personal sin is recovered through the confession of sin (1 John 1:9; cf. Ps. 51; Jn. 13:8-10).

## **ETERNAL LIFE**

The understanding of John’s meaning of “life” (*ζωή*, *zoe*) or “eternal life” (*ζωήν αἰώνιον*, *zoen aionion*) in 1 John has greatly impacted the interpretation of the epistle. Some see eternal life as a soteriological term that exclusively describes the salvation of the individual and the resultant never-ending life with God that comes through faith alone in Christ alone. Others have an understanding of eternal life that includes a quality of life in its meaning.<sup>36</sup> When commenting on John 17:3 Edwin Blum made a statement that demonstrates that some understand eternal life to be more than unending existence:

Eternal life, as defined by Jesus here, involves the experience of knowing the only

<sup>35</sup>Akin, D. L. (2001). *Vol. 38: 1, 2, 3 John* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (57). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>36</sup> Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, 39; C. Crain, *Readings on the First Epistle of John* (New York: Loizeaux, n.d.), 13–14; Van Gorder, *In the Family*, 7.

true God through His Son (cf. Matt. 11:27). It is a personal relationship of intimacy which is continuous and dynamic. The word “know” (ginoskosin) here in the present tense, is often used in the Septuagint and sometimes in the Greek NT to describe the intimacy of a sexual relationship (i.e. Gen 4:1; Matt 1:25). Thus a person who knows God has an intimate personal relationship with Him. And that relationship is eternal, not temporal. Eternal life is not simply endless existence. Everyone will exist somewhere forever (Matt. 25:46), but the question is, “In what condition or in what relationship will they spend eternity?”<sup>37</sup>

Other writers also have a qualitative dimension to their understanding of eternal life:

Jesus added further content to the concept of eternal life by connecting it with knowing the true God (Jn. 17:3). In Greek thought, knowledge referred to the result of either contemplation or mystical ecstasy. In the OT, however, knowledge meant experience, relationship, fellowship, and concern (cf. Jer. 31:34). This connotation of knowledge as intimate relationship is underlined by the usage of the verb form to designate sexual relations between male and female (cf. Gen. 4:1). Jesus stated, “I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father” (Jn. 10:14–15, RSV). The intimate and mutual relationship of Father and Son is the model for the relationship of the Son and his disciples. This knowledge does not come by education or manipulation of the mind but by revelation through the Son (1:18; cf. 14:7).<sup>38</sup>

Eternal life is a mode of existence referred to in Scripture characterized by either timelessness or immortality; kind of life attributed to God and distributed to believers. The perspective of the biblical writers flowed from an understanding of a living God who existed prior to the world’s creation and who will continue to exist when the end of time arrives. God’s gift to those who are obedient and responsible to him is designated as “eternal life” or some such synonym. John’s Gospel provides the most definitive material on eternal life. The phrase “eternal life” occurs only once in the Greek version of the OT (Dn 12:2, with the basic meaning of “the life of the age,” designating the life of the age beyond the resurrection from the dead). The primary meaning of “life” in the OT, however, is the quality of well-being in earthly existence. In the intertestamental period, the rabbinic distinction between “this age” and “the age which is to come” emphasized that the concept of life in the new age consists of a qualitative, rather than simply a quantitative, distinction from the present age.<sup>39</sup>

The meaning of the term “life” has its foundation in the Hebrew Scriptures. Life is not only seen as life beyond physical death (Daniel 12:2), but is often related to God Himself

<sup>37</sup> Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (2:883). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

<sup>38</sup> Hughes, R. B., Laney, J. C., & Hughes, R. B. (2001). *Tyndale concise Bible commentary*. Rev. ed. of: *New Bible companion*. 1990.; Includes index. The Tyndale reference library (480). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

<sup>39</sup> Elwell, W. A., & Comfort, P. W. (2001). *Tyndale Bible dictionary*. Tyndale reference library (448). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

and the abundant blessing for the believer who walks according to God's word (Deut. 5:26; 8:1; 30:6, 15-20; Ps. 84:2; 133:3; Prov. 3:1-2, 16, 18, 22; 22:4; Isa. 55:3; Jer. 10:10). Ultimately this blessing for Israel will be in the Promised Land when Israel is gathered together in unity under the rule of Jesus Christ the Messiah, a blessing referred to as "life eternal" (Psalm 133- עֲדָיִם עֲדָיִם עֲדָיִם; cf. Lev. 25:18-19; Deut. 4:1, 26, 40; 8:1; 12:19; 30:16, 19-20; 32:47; Prov. 2:21; Isa. 52:7; Ezek. 36:28; 37:14, 25; Zech. 9:9).

Though life or eternal life may include a meaning of unending existence, it is incorrect to limit the meaning for the term to simply living forever with God beyond physical death.

In his first epistle, John uses "life" (ζωή, *zoe*) as an independent term (1:2; 3:14; 5:11, 12, 16), connects life with the word "eternal" (ζωὴν αἰώνιον - 1:2; 2:25; 3:15; 5:11, 13, 20), and also uses the verb (ζάω, *zao* – to live; 4:9):

### 1 John 1:1-2

"What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the **Word of Life**—and the **life** was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the **eternal life**, which was with the Father and was manifested to us."<sup>40</sup>

### 1 John 2:25

"This is the promise which He Himself made to us: **eternal life**."

### 1 John 3:14-15

"We know that we have passed out of death into **life**, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has **eternal life** abiding in him."

<sup>40</sup> Jesus is referred to as "life" (cf. John 14:6; Col. 3:4- ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν). In the prologue of 1 John, the word "life" is used to refer to Christ Himself who eternally existed with the Father as well as a reference to His message. The words of 1 Jn. 1:2 concerning the eternal life "who was with the Father and manifest to us" (ἦτις ἦν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα καὶ ἐφανερώθη ἡμῖν) reflects Jn. 1:1 (καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν) and Jn. 1:14 (Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο). Jesus, the One who is life, came with the message of life.

“Life” and “eternal life” are parallel concepts when comparing 1 John 3:14 and 15. Verse 14 often understood as the equivalent to John 5:24 because of the similar wording and argue that a person can know he is saved if he demonstrates love for his brother.

However, some scholars understand 1 John 3:14-15 as pertaining to the walk of the believer:

Is John actually saying that the person who murders can not possess eternal life? Several commentators inconsistently switched views at this juncture. Having previously interpreted the tests as giving criteria for life, they seemed to take this test as a test of fellowship. For example, Bruce said, “John is not saying that a saved man cannot hate. He is not saying even that a saved man cannot kill, because he can and does. What John is saying is that no man who is controlled by the new life of Christ can hate. No man who is under the control of the love of God can manifest hatred in murder.” This is precisely the point. John is not discussing the existence of life, but its manifestation in the believer. Law would counter that life, and so abiding, not salvation, is the issue. Hence, to remain in death is to remain in the sphere in which the world lives, and to fail to have eternal life abiding in a person is simply to say that the believer is not abiding in Christ.<sup>41</sup>

### **1 John 4:9**

“By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him.”<sup>42</sup>

### **1 John 5:11-13**

“And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.”

### **1 John 5:16**

“If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin

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<sup>41</sup> Curtis, “The Purpose of 1 John,” 150.

<sup>42</sup> A person first enters into this life through faith alone in Christ alone, but the believer’s spiritual life continues to be a life of faith in Christ in experiential sanctification (cf. Gal 2:20; Rom 6:4; 1 Tim. 6:12). John could be referring to a person’s initial conversion (Jn. 3:16), but it is more likely that he is focusing on the post-salvation spiritual life (Jn. 10:10).

leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this.”

### 1 John 5:20

“And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so 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.”

Both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of life are a promise from God. But I think in 1 John, the qualitative aspect of life is emphasized. Some would find difficulty seeing only the qualitative aspect of life in 1 John and as an example might point to 1 John 3:14 and reference John 5:24 as a parallel statement. Curtis offers an interpretation that allows 1 John 3:14 to remain a qualitative issue:

Cain, as a prototype of the children of Satan, killed Abel. This passage expands on the hatred of Cain. The test is simply about whether one has “passed from death to life.” The criteria for passing the test is that one loves “the brethren.” The one who hates is identified as a murderer who does not have “eternal life abiding in him.” There are two main problems in connection with this test. The first question is about the meaning of “has passed from death to life.” The second question concerns the implication of the statement that no murderer has “eternal life abiding in him,” and that he “abides in death.” On account of the similarities between 1 John 3:14 and John 5:24 most scholars interpret the clause “has passed from death to life” as referring to conversion. In John 5:24 there is no doubt that the phrase does refer to conversion. In addition, Paul consistently used similar imagery to express conversion (cf., for example, Eph 2:1-2). The assurance that the conversion has taken place is love in the believer. Thus Bruce said, “As the presence of murderous hatred is a token that one does not belong to the family of God, the presence of brotherly love is a sure sign that one does belong to it, that one has, through the new birth, ‘passed out of death to life’ (cf. John 5:24).” Similarly, Burdick wrote, “Love for Christians is evidence that one is saved; hatred for Christians reveals that one is still lost.” Finally, Law argued, “There is no clearer proof of the great transition from life to death than love of the brethren; but the absence of such love is not only the absence of such proof, it is proof that transition has not taken place.” A number of arguments can be advanced that the passing from death to life does not look at conversion. First, John 5:24 is the only other occurrence of the clause used here and, “...a phrase only used twice in John’s writings can hardly be said to have a fixed meaning.” (Hodges BKC). Thus while the phrase in John 5:24 may mean the same as it does in 1 John 3:14, it does not necessarily mean the same in both places. Second, because both passing from death to life (v. 14) and the expression “has eternal life abiding in him” (v. 15) is so closely related to the obedience of the believer, not his faith, it suggests that “...that the spheres ‘death’ and ‘life’ are here treated as experiential and determined by one’s

actions. If so, the issue of conversion is not in view here. Therefore, “to pass from death to life” looks at the same change in the believer expressed elsewhere as change from walking in darkness to walking in light. Death and life are the sphere in which the believer can live. If he live in death he walks in darkness and does not enjoy fellowship with God. If he lives in life, he walks in light and enjoys fellowship with the God who is light.<sup>43</sup>

If fellowship and eternal life are both dealing with the active walk of the believer, then two major purpose statements in 1 John may be closely related:

### **1 John 1:3**

“What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

### **1 John 5:13**

“These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.”

In 1 John, fellowship with God is eternal life, namely, the quality of life through intimate fellowship with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ, the One who is Life. Equating fellowship with God with a qualitative aspect of eternal life is not inconsistent with Scripture. There are passages in Scripture that use life as a reference to our eternal destiny beyond physical death (Dan. 12:2; Jn. 3:16; 5:24; 6:47, 51; 11:25-26), but there are other passages that deal with the concept of life or eternal life in the sense of the spiritual quality of life that can be enjoyed by the believer even in the present:

### **John 10:10**

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Curtis, “The Purpose of 1 John,” 148.

<sup>44</sup> Jesus came at His first advent to offer kingdom to Israel, which included abundant life, blessing, joy, peace, salvation, reward, and glory for Israel in the Promised Land under Messiah (cf. Ps. 2:6; 14:7; 110:2; Isa. 46:13; 62:11; Jer. 23:5-6; Joel 2:32; Zech. 8:12; 9:9).

**John 17:3**

“This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”

**Galatians 2:20**

“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”

**1 Timothy 4:7-8**

“But have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women. On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.”

**1 Timothy 6:12**

“Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.”

**1 Timothy 6:18-19**

“Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.”

**Galatians 6:8**

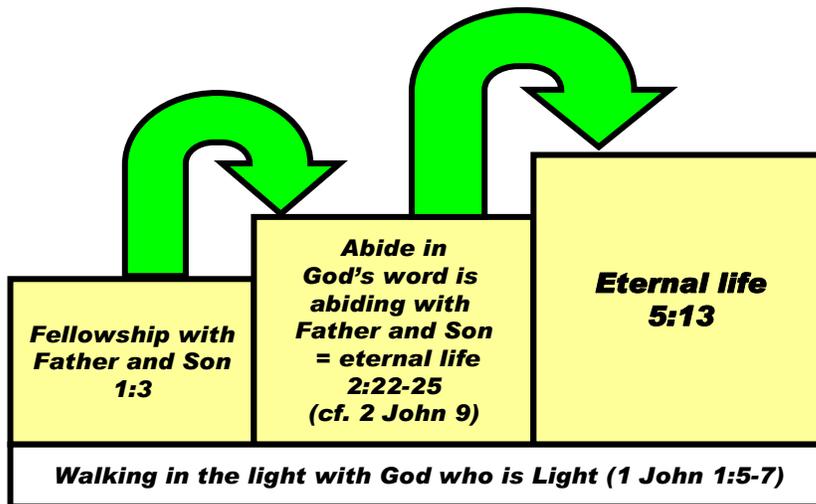
“For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.”

The quality of life resulting from abiding in Christ is also a promise that will come to pass if the believer chooses to abide.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> In 1 John 2:24-25, abiding in the Father and the Son in v. 24 is closely connected to eternal life in v. 25. 1 John 1:3 connects fellowship with the Father and Son. When the believer abides in fellowship with the Father and the Son, he is enjoying eternal life in the qualitative sense.

**The progression of 1 John  
(fellowship = eternal life)**



The Old Testament meaning of life is similar to that of the New Testament and often focuses on a believer's quality of relationship with God. This understanding is also helpful when interpreting the epistle of 1 John. For example, Deuteronomy 30:19 says to "choose life that you may live" in a context of serving the true God as opposed to idolatry when the redeemed nation enters into the Promised Land (cf. Deut. 4; 32:16-22). In a similar way, 1 John instructs believers to obediently abide in fellowship with the only true God and avoid idolatry so that they may live (cf. 1 Jn. 2:25; 4:9; 5:20-21).

In summary, life and eternal life are not terms only related to a believer's position before God and the promise of unending existence, but also refer to the Person of God Himself and include a qualitative meaning related to the believer's walk with the Lord.

## **ABIDE**

One of the most important and controversial words in Johannine writings is the word abide ( $\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omega$ , *meno*), which means to abide, remain, live, dwell, or stay. This word is

used 118 times in the New Testament, with 24 uses in 1 John. Out of the total 118 occurrences in the New Testament, 50 are used by John (42%), and of the 50 occurrences, 24 are found in 1 John. A major question is whether μένω refers to the believer's active fellowship with God, or whether it refers to the position of all believers?

Zane Hodges comments on abiding as it relates to 1 John 2:6:

“With John, the kind of relationship pictured in the vine-branch imagery describes an experience that can be ruptured (John 15:6) with a resultant loss of fellowship and fruitfulness. Thus here in 1 John 2:5-6, the proof that a person is enjoying this kind of experience is to be found in a life modeled after that of Jesus in obedience to His Word. In short, 2:5-6 continues to talk about the believer's fellowship with God.”<sup>46</sup>

Curtis adds, “To abide in Christ is to remain in the fellowship initiated at the new birth.”<sup>47</sup> Wuest sees μένω to have a meaning that includes more than a believer's position as revealed in his comment on 1 John 2:6:

To understand this verse, we will need to study the Greek word translated “abide,” and see how it is used in the New Testament. It is *menō* (μένω). Thayer gives, “to abide, to remain, to sojourn, tarry.” The word refers, in a connection like this, more than merely to position. It is used very often of persons abiding in a home, which implies more than mere position, but rather fellowship, communion, dependence, harmony, friendship. See, “there abide till ye go thence” (Matt. 10:11); “tarry ye here and watch with Me” (Matt. 26:38); “Mary abode with her” (Luke 1:56); “neither abode in (any) house” (Luke 8:27); “for today I must abide at thy house” (Luke 19:5); “They came and saw where He dwelt, and abode with Him that day” (John 1:39, 40). These instances could be multiplied. To abide in the Lord Jesus therefore implies not only position, but relationship. It implies fellowship, friendship, dependence, harmony, communion. There are three Greek words which give us the three aspects of a believer's life. The verb of being (*eimi* (εἶμι)), refers to the saint's position in Christ. He has been placed into vital union with Him by the act of the Holy Spirit baptizing (*baptizō* (βαπτίζω) placing) him in Christ. Our present word, *menō* (μένω), refers to the saint's fellowship with and dependence upon Him, communion, closeness of intercourse. The word *peripateō* (περιπατέω) “to order one's behavior, to conduct one's self,” speaks of the saint's manner of life. The first, the saint's position in Christ, makes possible his Christian manner of life. The second, the saint's fellowship with

<sup>46</sup> Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (2:883). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

<sup>47</sup> Curtis, “The Purpose of 1 John,” 175.

and dependence upon the Lord Jesus, conditions that manner of life, makes it what it should be. The word *peripateō* (περιπατεω) literally means “to walk around.” And since the way a person walks is often a good index as to the kind of person he is, the word not only referred to the physical act of walking, but came to have the idea of the manner of life of the person.<sup>48</sup>

Other commentators understand abiding to refer to the believer’s position in God’s family and that it is something characteristic of all believers.<sup>49</sup> For example, Andy Naselli stated in his closing comments on the meaning of μένω in John 15:

In John 15, the key passage on abiding, Jesus contrasts genuine believers (fruitful branches that remain in the vine) with phony believers (fruitless branches that do not remain in the vine). Jesus’ words in John 15.4 should not be frustratingly confusing to believers. “Abide in Me, and I in you” means “Obey My words, and let My words remain in you.” Abiding is a characteristic of all believers.<sup>50</sup>

Naselli claims that abiding is a characteristic of all believers, but based on the fact that word μένω is often put in the form of a command (e.g. Jn. 15:4; 1 Jn. 2:28), which presupposes that not all believers will not automatically abide, it would be more accurate to say that abiding is a *potential* for the believer who chooses to obey the mandate to abide. Andy Naselli’s article is titled, “Abiding: A Characteristic of All Believers,” but I think a more accurate title would be “Abiding: A Potential Only for Believers.” Believers have a choice to abide or not, and according to 1 John 2:28 there are consequences for either decision.

MacArthur also understands abiding as something that refers to all believers. In a comment to support that all believers inevitably produce fruit, he quotes John 15:5 as a support:

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<sup>48</sup>Wuest, K. S. (1997, c1984). *Wuest's word studies from the Greek New Testament : For the English reader* (1 Jn 2:5-6). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

<sup>49</sup> Stephen S. Smalley, *Word Biblical Commentary: 1,2,3 John*, vol. 51, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Publishing, 2002), 129.

<sup>50</sup> Andy Naselli, Sola! Putting Theology Back in the Pew, March 2005; “Abiding: A Characteristic of all believers.”

### John 15:5

“I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.<sup>51</sup>

But if the words “he who abides in Me” refers to all believers and is a positional idea, what about the command to abide in John 15:4? As stated earlier, a command to abide presupposes that not all believers will abide.

Another important passage on abiding that challenges the view that all believers abide is found in John 8.

### John 8:30-32

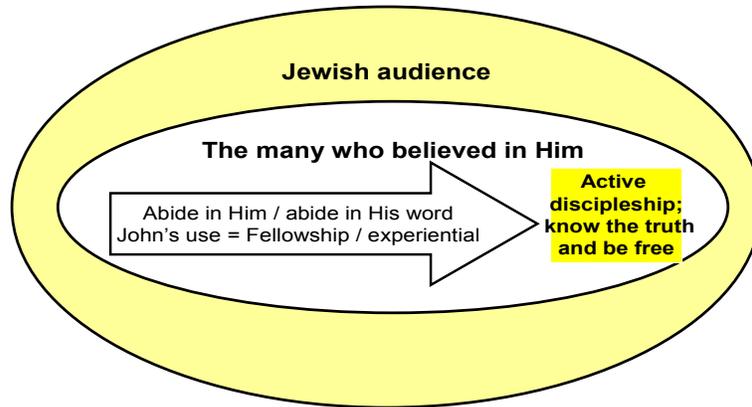
“As He spoke these things, many came to believe in Him. So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, “If you **continue** (μένω - abide) in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

According to John 8:30, there were some Jews in the crowd who believed in Jesus, and to those Jesus said that if they continued in His word they were truly His disciples and that the truth would make them free. A “disciple” (μαθητής, *mathetes*) refers to a student, pupil, learner, or follower.<sup>52</sup> After believing in Jesus Christ, choosing to abide in God’s word would make one a committed follower of the Lord, resulting in spiritual freedom for the believer in his walk with God. Obviously after believing in Christ one could choose not to abide in His word, which would result in not knowing the truth and the resultant loss of spiritual freedom in his daily walk with God.

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<sup>51</sup> MacArthur, The Gospel According to Jesus, pp. 277-78.

<sup>52</sup> Strong, J. (1996). *The exhaustive concordance of the Bible : Showing every word of the text of the common English version of the canonical books, and every occurrence of each word in regular order.* (electronic ed.) (G3101). Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship.



Along with 1 John 2:28, the epistle also contains other passages that supports a meaning of abide as a reference to active fellowship with God and not a characteristic of all believers:

### **1 John 2:6**

“The one who says to abide in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.”

1 John 2:6 does not say, “The one who says to abide in Him *will* walk as Jesus walked,” or is “*guaranteed* to walk as Jesus walked,” but that he “*ought* to walk as Jesus walked.”

The word translated “ought” is the Greek verb ὀφείλω (*opheilo*), which means to owe, to be in debt for, that which is due, a debt or obligation. In some contexts it takes on the idea of “should” as it relates to God’s desired behavior of an individual:

### **John 13:14**

“If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also *ought* to wash one another’s feet.”

### **Ephesians 5:28**

“So husbands *ought* also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself.”

The fact that Christians ought to walk as Jesus walked does not mean that all Christians will automatically behave in accordance with God's will simply because they are saved, but that they *should* walk as Jesus walked as saved individuals who claim to actively abide in Him.

Many of the other uses of abide in 1 John that extends beyond the treatment in this paper also argue that abiding is not characteristic of all believers (2:24; 3:6, 9, 14, 15, 17, 24, 4:12, 13, 15, 16). Being saved does not guarantee that we will automatically abide in God's word and walk in obedience, but based on the commands to do so, it is a potential that God desires all believers to fulfill.

## **KNOW**

Another important term in 1 John is the word "know" (γινώσκω, *ginosko*). In our own present day it is common in Christian circles to ask someone if they "know" Jesus with the implied meaning "are you saved from hell?" But is this the understanding of γινώσκω in the Bible? Some believe that "knowing" God in 1 John refers to possessing eternal life (salvation), and often use John 17:3 for support. Some hold that John's frequent use of the word "know" argues for assurance of salvation rather than maintenance of fellowship.<sup>25</sup> For example, John MacArthur said, "Professing Christians utterly lacking the fruit of true righteousness will find no biblical basis for assurance of salvation (1 Jn. 2:4)."<sup>53</sup> MacArthur references 1 John 2:4 with the implication that "knowing" God is the equivalent to being saved. Dillow would disagree and would understand knowing God as a reference to a believer's fellowship with God:

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<sup>25</sup>Blair, *The Epistles of John*, 8; Boice, *The Epistles of John*, 12-15; Robinson, *Twelve New Testament Studies*, 127; Stott, *The Letters of John*, 56-60; Thomas, *The Apostle John*, 233.

<sup>53</sup> MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 29.

“Experimental Predestinarians have used these passages to prove their doctrine of perseverance in holiness. True Christians, i.e., those who “know God,” are those who keep His commandments and who have love for their brethren. The absence of obedience or love in the life of a man is, on the authority of these verses, proof that he is not a Christian at all. He does not know God! But for John in this passage, knowing God is to walk in fellowship with Him. It does not refer to entrance into eternal life at justification but to the continuing experience with Christ called fellowship.”<sup>54</sup>

To support the fellowship understanding of knowing God, Dillow gives an illustration of a wife complaining that even though she has been married to her husband for ten years, he doesn’t know her. “Her meaning is not that they have never become acquainted but that her husband never took the time to know her in a sense of intimate fellowship.”<sup>55</sup>

A key passage on “knowing” God in 1 John is found in the second chapter, which contains the first use of γινώσκω in the epistle:

### 1 John 2:3-5

And **by this we know** that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, “I have come to know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love for God has truly been perfected. **By this we know** that we are in Him.”<sup>56</sup>

John begins verse 3 with the word “and” (connective καὶ, *kai*). John uses the word καὶ to connect his thought with the previous section of the text. John does not abandon the subject of fellowship with God in chapter 1 and start a totally unrelated topic, and therefore, what is covered in 2:3ff is connected to what is said in 1:5-2:2. John advances the discussion and adds information about developing a deeper fellowship with God and progress to spiritual maturity. The “by this we know” in verse 3 is the same phrase in verse 5 and forms an inclusio, which bookends the text. In verse 3 John says, “by this we

<sup>54</sup> Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, p. 163-64.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 165.

<sup>56</sup> Note that the NASB and the NIV put a colon after verse 5; the NKJV and the NET put a period after verse 5 and make verse 6 a new sentence.

know we have come to know Him.” The “by this” refers to that which follows in vv. 4-5.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, a believer has a test to determine if he has experientially come to know Christ, which is given in the second half of verse 3, “if we keep His commandments.” Though not the desire of God, it is possible that a true believer may not know God experientially or intimately in his post-salvation walk. Some understand this to mean, “By this we (Christians) know that we know Jesus (know that we are truly saved) if we keep His commandments,” therefore equating “knowing God” with saving faith. I understand this to mean, “By this we (Christians) presently know that we have come to know Jesus (experiential knowledge as permanently saved believers) if we keep His commands.” This understanding can be validated in another Johannine passage in John 14. This same verb γινώσκω, also in the perfect tense, is used when Jesus is speaking to the saved disciples in John 14:7 and to Philip in 14:9, demonstrating that the verb does not indicate salvation in these verses, but coming to know God after salvation in an experiential way. Jesus had already told the disciples in the Upper Room Discourse that they were permanently bathed and completely clean, a reference to their salvation (Jn. 13:10). He then says a little later in the same discourse:

**John 14:1-9**

“Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way where I am going.” Thomas said to Him, “Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me. “If you **had known** Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him.”

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<sup>57</sup> The phrase “by this” can refer to that which precedes (anaphoric use), or it can refer to that which comes after (kataphoric use). If there is a subordinate explanatory clause that follows, then it is kataphoric use. The “by this” refers to what follows because it has a subordinate clause “if we keep his commandments.”

Philip said to Him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been so long with you, and yet you (singular) have not **come to know Me**, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?”

Both uses of “know” (the first use in verse 7 and the use in verse 9) are perfect active indicatives of γινώσκω, just as in 1 John 2:3. By the time of the dialogue in John 14:9, Philip was already saved from the penalty of sin, but had not come to know Jesus in a sufficient way in his walk in order to understand Jesus words. Dillow concurs:

What did Jesus mean when he said Philip did not know Him? Of course Philip did know Jesus in a saving sense. He had believed and followed Christ (1:43). But he did not know Him in another sense. He did not seem to know how fully the Son manifested the Father. This knowledge comes only as the disciples obey Him.”<sup>58</sup>

Another passage in 1 John that contains γινώσκω is in 1 John 5:

### **1 John 5:20**

“And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so 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.”

During the incarnation Jesus came to reveal the Father so that believers could have an experiential knowledge of Him (John 1:18; 14:9). This is reflective of the use of γινώσκω in John 17:

### **John 17:1-8**

Jesus spoke these things; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life. This is eternal life, that **they may know** You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do. Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was. I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me out of the world (the disciples); they were Yours and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word. Now **they have come to know** that everything You have given Me is from You; for the words which

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<sup>58</sup> Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, p. 165.

You gave Me I have given to them; and they received them and truly **understood** that I came forth from You, and they believed that You sent Me.”

All the highlighted words above translate the word γινώσκω and reveal a use of the word that denotes a believer’s post-salvation knowledge of God.

Even though it is possible for the word “know” to refer a positional relationship with God as a saved member of His family (e.g. Gal. 4:8), many uses refer to a post-salvation knowledge of God in terms of the believer’s walk.

## **BORN OF GOD**

The phrase “born of God” or “born of Him” occurs several times in 1 John. John uses the word “born” (γεννάω, *gennao*) ten times in the epistle:

### **1 John 2:29**

“If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who does righteousness is **born** of Him.”

### **1 John 3:9**

“No one who is **born** of God commits sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is **born** of God.”

### **1 John 4:7**

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is **born** of God and knows God.”

### **1 John 5:1**

“Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is **born** of God, and whoever loves Him who **begot** loves the child **born** of Him.”

### **1 John 5:4**

“For whoever is **born** of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.”

## 1 John 5:18

“We know that no one who is **born** of God sins; but He who was **born** of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him.”

A vast amount of interpreters agree that the one born of God is referring to one who has the position of a born one in God’s family. However, if this is true, then the obvious difficulty arises as to how a born again believer is said to not sin and not be able to sin because he is born of God (3:9; 5:18). Different interpretations exist to explain this difficulty, especially in view of clear statements in the same epistle that believers do commit sin (1 Jn. 1:8, 10; 5:16). Many interpreters resolve this by saying that a born again believer will not *continue* to sin, and understand the present tense of the verb to be describing an on-going action (he does not *habitually* sin). MacArthur understands “the one sinning” in 3:9 in a habitual sense rather than taking the language as an absolute statement that one born of God does not sin:

The apostle John wrote an entire epistle about the marks of a true believer (cf. 1 John 5:13). His counsel with those struggling with their assurance was not that they should pin their hopes on a past incident or a moment of faith. He gave instead a doctrinal test and a moral test, and reiterated them throughout his first epistle. The moral test requires obedience (1:6; 2:4, 29; 3:3). Scores of other passages throughout the epistle confirm the same truth: the one who is truly saved cannot continue in a pattern of unbroken sin (3:6-10).<sup>59</sup>

However, the understanding of the present tense of the verb as continual or habitual is challenged by scholars. Hodges commenting on 1 John 3:6 says,

A widely held explanation of this verse is that a believer “does not sin habitually,” that is, sin is not his way of life. However, the Greek text has no words to represent phrases such as “keeps on” or “continues to” or “habitually.” These phrases are based on an understanding of the Greek present tense which is now widely in dispute among New Testament scholars (see, e.g., S. Kubo, “1 John 3, 9: Absolute or Habitual?” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 7. 1969:47-56; C.H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, pp. 78-81; I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, p. 180). It cannot be

<sup>59</sup> MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 253.

shown anywhere in the New Testament that the present tense can bear this kind of meaning *without the assistance of other words*. Such a view is invalid for this verse and also for 1 John 3:9. Nor is John saying that sinless perfection must be achieved, and that those who fail to do so lose their salvation. Such a notion is foreign to John's argument and to all of Scripture.<sup>60</sup>

One group of commentators notes that the verbs for "sinning" in these verses are in the present tense, which in Greek is a continuous tense. The NIV stresses this continuous aspect by translating "keeps on sinning" and "continues to sin" and "go on sinning." The argument is that while true believers may sin on occasion (so 1 Jn. 1:7–9), they will not habitually sin. The weakness of this position is that it depends on a grammatical subtlety which an interpreter cannot stress in other places in the New Testament where this tense is used. Furthermore, in 1 John 5:16 the same tense is used for a believer seen by a fellow believer "committing a sin." Here is a true believer who is doing the same thing that is denied in 1 John 3:6, 9. Why doesn't the NIV translate consistently and so translate this passage "continuing to sin"?<sup>61</sup>

Others resolve the difficulty by seeing the words of the text as describing the believer's sinless new nature that has been born from a perfect God and see it as a statement from the perspective that there is no sin at all in the new creation from God.

"God's seed" is His nature, given to each believer at salvation (John 1:13; 2 Peter 1:4). The point here is that the child partakes of the nature of his Parent. The thought of a sinless Parent who begets a child who only sins a little is far from the author's mind. As always, John dealt in stark contrasts. All sin is devilish (1 John 3:8); it does not stem from the believer's regenerate nature, God's seed, but the child of God cannot and does not sin. The explanation here is the same as that given in verse 6. The "new man" (or "new self"; Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10) is an absolutely perfect new creation. By insisting on this point, John was seeking to refute a false conception about sin. Sin is not, nor ever can be, anything but satanic. It can never spring from what a Christian truly is at the level of his regenerate being.<sup>62</sup>

Dillow seems to have a blend of Hodges' position with that of the aspect of the "born one" viewed as a believer who is actively abiding. Dillow comments on 1 John 3:6-9:

It is better to take the statements as they stand, as absolutes. Then it is saying "anyone born of God does not sin even one time, not at all." Yet since he has already said that a man who says he never sins is a liar (1:8), he must be viewing the sinning Christian

<sup>60</sup>Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (2:894). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

<sup>61</sup>Kaiser, W. C. (1997, c1996). *Hard sayings of the Bible* (736). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.

<sup>62</sup>Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (2:883). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

from a particular point of view. The “anyone” refers to a person as a whole and not just part of him. The Christian, viewed as a man born of God, and particularly as abiding in Christ, does not sin even once. For the Gnostics, a man could be abiding in Christ and yet sin could still be in his life because sin was from the body and was a matter of indifference. John countered that sin is never a part of the “abiding” experience. The reason he does not sin even once is because “God’s seed abides in him.” God’s seed is the regenerate new nature given to each believer when he is born again (Jn. 1:13). Elsewhere Paul describes this perfect new nature as the “new self” (Eph 4:24) or the “new man” (Col 3:10). This means that sin cannot be a product of regenerate life, as the Gnostics maintained. So when anyone sins, he is responsible for it, but the source cannot be the seed of God in him. That seed cannot ever result in the Christian committing even one act of sin. John is saying that the believer, from his capacity as one born from God and who is abiding in Christ, cannot sin. If he sins, it is not an expression of the character as the new creation. Jesus said, men “cannot” fast while the bridegroom is with them. So long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast.” They can fast, but to do so is incongruous and unnatural. Similarly, when John says, “No one born of God sins,” he is saying that the person, as a man born of God, does not sin. If he sins, it is not an expression of who he is as a man who has been born of God. It is not compatible with “abiding in him” (1 Jn. 3:6). We are not ascribing to John the teaching that a part of a man, such as his new nature, cannot sin, but that the total, responsible man, as a born one, cannot sin as an expression of who he is as the new creation of God. If he sins it is not an expression of who he is in Christ. If the president breaks the law it is not an expression of who he is as president. But according to the Gnostics, sinning can be a possible expression of the born-again person, and this is the precise heresy which John is trying to counteract. To them an imperfect demiurge can create an imperfect new creation. This interpretation allows us to take the absolutes seriously and fits well with the context and is explainable in light of the Gnostic heresy being refuted. The new creation, being a product of a sinless perfect parent, cannot sin even once. The Gnostics, seeing a mixture of sin in God, allowed that the new creation (the “born again” Christian) inevitably sinned and this was not a matter of great significance. The Gnostics could derive no justification for antinomianism from the notion of an imperfect God and a resultant imperfect new creation.<sup>63</sup>

Curtis takes a view on being “born of God” that focuses on the believer’s walk rather than on his position in Christ:

John used *gennao* twenty-eight times in his writings. At times the word refers to normal physical birth (John 9:2, 19, 20). Of more importance is the use of the term for spiritual birth. A Ringwald, *NIDNTT*, s.v. “birth,” p. 179, stated, “The Johannine writings use the expression *gennethenai ek* (to be begotten of) to describe the origin of the believer.” The question that needs to be asked is whether John’s use of *gennao* looks at regeneration or whether it also presupposes a degree of maturity. Clearly the passage in John 3:1-8 speaks of regeneration as Jesus testified to Nicodemus. Here

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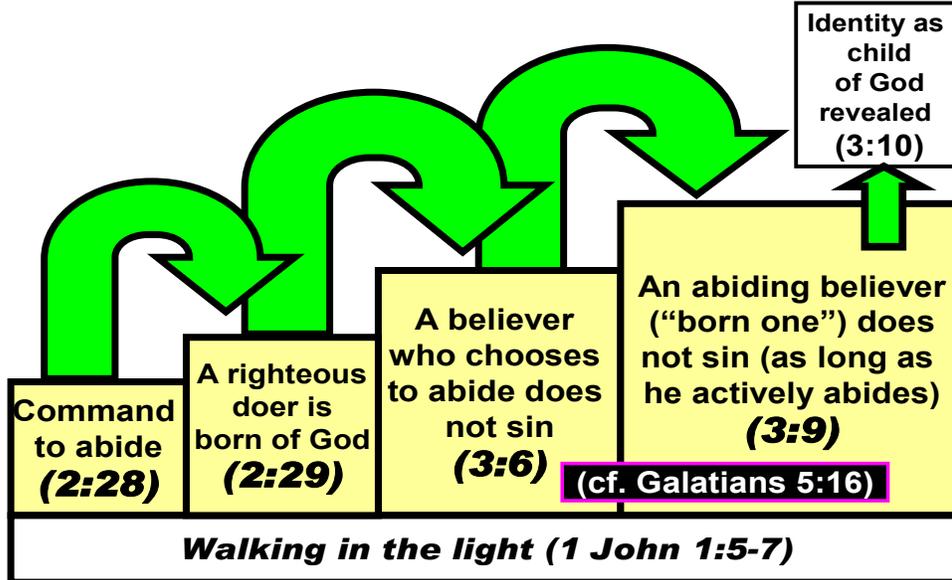
<sup>63</sup> Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, p. 168.

John used the aorist of *gennao* to refer to regeneration (except in verse 6 and 8, which contain somewhat, unusual wording). Similarly, John 1:13 used the aorist of *gennao* to refer to regeneration. In 1 John, however, John generally used the perfect of *gennao* (2:29, 3:9, 4:7, 5:1, 5:4, and 5:18). The aorist is used only twice (5:1 second occurrence and 5:18 second occurrence). In 5:1 it refers to God and in 5:18 it may refer to Christ or perhaps the believer depending on the solution to the textual problem. Two considerations make it plausible that John used *gennao* in the perfect tense to refer to a maturing believer as opposed to a believer who was not maturing. First, the perfect tense itself frequently stresses the results of the action of the verb (cf. Burton, p. 37). Thus the perfect stresses the fact that the believer stands in the state of having been born of God. While this is not identical to the concept of abiding, it is very similar. To abide in Christ is to remain in the fellowship initiated at the new birth. Hence, it was a short step for John to use the perfect of *gennao* to reflect the concept of abiding and not just regeneration. Second, the contexts in which John used the term suggest that he is thinking of more than regeneration. The one who has been born of God is not simply saved; he does what is righteous (2:29); he does not and cannot sin (3:9; 5:18); he loves and knows God (4:7); he has overcome the world (5:4). The fact that the one who has been born of God does not sin is parallel to the one who abides, who also does not sin (3:6). Also, in saying that the one who has been born of God loves God, John is making a parallel, to the one who abides in the light (2:10) cf. also 4:12-13, 16). Therefore, it seems likely that when John said that a person had been born of God, he was implying that more than the new birth had taken place (which he expressed by the aorist). Such a person had grown in his position as a child of God. There is one example where John used the perfect to express the new birth, 1 John 5:1. However, even here the evidence of love is prominent...If one who abides in Him does what is righteous, it follows that the one who sins is not abiding in Him and is of the devil. Then John repeated his thought that the one who has been born of God, i.e. the one who abides, does not sin and indeed cannot (3:9).<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Curtis, "The Purpose of 1 John," 175.

### **The progression of 1 John 2:28-3:9**



In the progression of John's argument, it is very likely that John is not simply looking at the believer in terms of his position as born-again (cf. John 1:12-13; 3:3), but is viewing the believer as one who is actively abiding in fellowship with God in light of his regeneration.

## **PERFECTED**

In the vein of the perfect tense view of γεννάω emphasizing the walk after the completed action as stated by Curtis in the previous section of this paper, this could be applied to other terms in the perfect tense in John. An example of this is the verb τελειόω, *teleiōo*. This word means to make perfect, complete, to carry through completely, to accomplish, finish, bring to an end.<sup>65</sup> The word is used 4 times in 1 John:

<sup>65</sup>Strong, J. (1996). *The exhaustive concordance of the Bible : Showing every word of the text of the common English version of the canonical books, and every occurrence of each word in regular order.* (electronic ed.) (G5048). Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship.

**1 John 2:5**

“But whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him.”

**1 John 4:12**

“No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.”

**1 John 4:17**

“By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world.”

**1 John 4:18**

“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.”

The emphasis of this word on the believer’s spiritual maturity seems to be the same idea with Abraham in James 2:

**James 2:22**

“You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected.”

The verb τελειόω is also used for the position of the believer:

**Hebrews 10:14**

“For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.”

The word is used in the Gospel of John for Jesus completing the Father’s work:

**John 4:34**

Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.”

**John 5:36**

“But the testimony which I have is greater than the testimony of John; for the works

which the Father has given Me to **accomplish**—the very works that I do—testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me.”

#### **John 17:4**

“I glorified You on the earth, having **accomplished** the work which You have given Me to do.”

All four uses of τελειόω in 1 John use the word in the context of love to emphasize the spiritually maturing love in the believer, not a perfection related to the believer’s position. This conclusion would further support that the epistle of 1 John is not a text to determine if a believer is truly saved, but a text to reveal whether or not a believer is maturing in his walk with Christ.

## **WALK**

“Walk” is a biblical term that is often used in connection with a life of fellowship, worship, and obedience before God. The word for “walk” in the Old Testament is the Hebrew verb הָלַךְ (*halak*). The first use of this word is in Genesis 3:8, indicating the abiding presence of God in the garden:

#### **Genesis 3:8**

“They heard the sound of the Lord God **walking** in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.”

הָלַךְ is also used for believers walking in close relationship with God:

#### **Genesis 5:22-24**

“Then Enoch **walked** with God three hundred years after he became the father of Methuselah, and he had other sons and daughters. So all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. Enoch **walked** with God; and he was not, for God took him.”

#### **Genesis 17:1**

“Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; **Walk** before Me, and be blameless.”

**Psalm 56:13**

“For You have delivered my soul from death, indeed my feet from stumbling, so that I may **walk** before God in the light of the living.”

**Psalm 101:2**

“I will give heed to the blameless way. When will You come to me? I will **walk** within my house in the integrity of my heart.”

Those in the nation Israel were commanded to walk in obedience to God and His word (Exod. 16:4; Lev. 26:3, 12). In the future messianic kingdom, the nation Israel will walk with the Lord:

**Isaiah 2:5**

“Come, house of Jacob, and let us **walk** in the light of the Lord.”

As seen above, the Old Testament Scriptures support a view of “walking” as referring to a saved person who is actively walking in close relationship with God.

The New Testament word for “walk” is the Greek verb περιπατέω (*peripateo*). This word is used for forward motion (literal walking) and is also used figuratively with the meaning of “conduct, behave, or live.” The word περιπατέω is used for literal walking (Matt. 4:18; 14:26), it is used for obeying or following traditions or customs (Mark 7:5; Acts 21:21), and is also used for believers in Christ living in a worthy manner before God:

**Ephesians 4:1**

“Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to **walk in a manner worthy** of the calling with which you have been called.”

### **Colossians 1:10**

“...so that you will **walk in a manner worthy** of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.”

### **1 Thessalonians 2:12**

“...so that you would **walk in a manner worthy** of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.”

The word “walk” is used for the believer’s active advance in the spiritual life:

### **Galatians 5:16**

“**Walk** by means of the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”

### **Romans 6:4**

“Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might **walk** in newness of life.”

Many other passages in the epistles relate “walking” to actively participating in the spiritual life or living contrary to it (Rom. 8:4; 13:13; 14:15; 1 Cor. 3:3; 2 Cor. 5:7; Eph. 2:2, 10; 4:17; 5:2, 8, 15; Phil. 3:17; Col. 2:6; 4:5; 1 Thes. 4:1; 2 Thes. 3:6, 11). The word “walk” is even used to describe the active assault of Satan toward believers:

### **1 Peter 5:8**

“Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, **prowls around** (περιπατέω, *peripateo*) like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”

## **THE USE OF περιπατέω IN JOHANNINE WRITINGS**

The apostle John uses the word περιπατέω extensively in the Gospel of John for physical walking (Jn. 1:36; 5:8, 9, 11; 6:19; 7:1; 10:23; 11:54; 21:18) as well as in a metaphorical way (6:66; 8:12; 11:9-10; 12:35). The other uses in John’s epistles and Revelation are as follows:

**1 John 1:6-7**

“If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.”

**1 John 2:6**

“The one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.”

**1 John 2:11**

“But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes.”

**2 John 4**

“I was very glad to find some of your children walking in truth, just as we have received commandment to do from the Father.”

**2 John 6**

“And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, that you should walk in it.”

**3 John 3**

“ For I was very glad when brethren came and testified to your truth, that is, how you are walking in truth.”

**3 John 4**

“I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.”

**Revelation 3:4**

“But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.”

The word περιπατέω is also used for believers in Christ who are behaving like a person who is unsaved:

**1 Corinthians 3:1-3**

“And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not **walking** like mere men?”

“Walk” is an active term and does not simply refer to a position of being saved or unsaved, but refers to a believer who actively walks with God as one permanently saved (cf. Eph 1:13; 5:8). The challenge in 1 John is to determine which category of person is being emphasized, the believer or unbeliever. John’s epistles use “walking” in relation to the terms light, darkness, and truth, and based on the fact that John is writing to believers and even applying these truths to the apostolic circle, it is best to see the term “walk” in 1 John as relating to the believer who can either walk in the sphere of light or darkness.<sup>66</sup>

Although walking with God is inseparably linked to walking according to God’s word, walking in the light should not be restricted to simply walking according to God’s revelation. Light represents God’s character and the revelation of His character (1 John 1:5; Ps. 119:105). So walking in the light is not only walking in accord with the precepts and commands of Scripture, but is also walking in accord with whom and what God is. This is important because when we commit a sin it violates His word revealed in Scripture, but also His very nature and character. To walk in the light is to walk in fellowship with God, a God who is perfect in His essence, and to walk in the sphere of

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<sup>66</sup> See the section on “light and darkness” in this paper for further discussion.

the revelation of our perfect God.



## LIGHT AND DARKNESS

Since “walking” in 1 John refers to the believer actively abiding in the spiritual life, John reveals there are two opposing spheres a believer can walk, namely, the light or the darkness. Some interpreters understand “light” and “darkness” in 1 John as referring to the realm of spiritual life (salvation) or the realm of spiritual death. Charles Baylis comments on the meaning of light and darkness in 1 John related to Old Testament usage and the Gospel of John:

As life (light) reveals the Father to man, so the absence of light, or darkness, indicates the state (death) wherein man does not know God. This was the scene before the original creation (no light) and this was the state of the world before Jesus entered it (no life). People in the world remain in darkness (death) because of rejecting Him. Therefore those who “love darkness rather than light” are those who reject the revelation of eternal life through Jesus Christ. . . In summary, light is eternal life (1:4) by which man knows God. This life is the very life of God provided through Jesus Christ to the believer (5:25-26). He who “walks in the light,” then, is one who receives the revelation of Jesus Christ. Darkness is the absence of eternal life.

Darkness, in other words, refers to spiritual death. Since eternal life is knowing God, not having eternal life is not knowing God; it is “walking in the darkness.” The one who walks in the darkness rejects the revelation through Jesus Christ, since life (light) is provided only through Him and His words.<sup>67</sup>

Other interpreters understand light and darkness as two spheres in which a Christian can reside.

Since “God is Light,” it follows that a Christian cannot truly claim communion with Him while living in the darkness. As John warned, **If we claim to have fellowship with Him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.** John knew, as does every perceptive pastor, that Christians sometimes feign spirituality while engaging in acts of disobedience. . . A Christian who says he is in fellowship with God (who “is Light”) but who is disobeying Him (walking “in the darkness”) is lying (cf. 1 John 2:4). Ten times John used “darkness” to refer to sin (John 1:5; 3:19; 12:35 [twice]; 1 John 1:5-6; 2:8-9, 11 [twice]).<sup>68</sup>

Even though light and darkness can describe the realm of the saved and the realm of the unsaved (John 3:20-21; 5:24; Eph. 5:8; Col 1:13; 1 Pet. 2:9), in 1 John it describes two spheres a believer can walk (1 John 1:6-7; 2:9, 11; cf. John 8:12).<sup>69</sup> A good argument for the fact that a believer can walk in the light or in the darkness is found in the use of the word “we” throughout 1 John 1. In the prologue the “we” refers to John and the apostles, with the uses in 1:5-10 referring primarily to the apostles and including his believing audience. Hodges sees the use of “we” pertaining to his saved audience:

It is important that the “message” John had heard is the one he directed to his readers (“we . . . declare to you”). Some scholars have maintained that the false assertions which are condemned in verses 6, 8, and 10 are those of the false teachers, or

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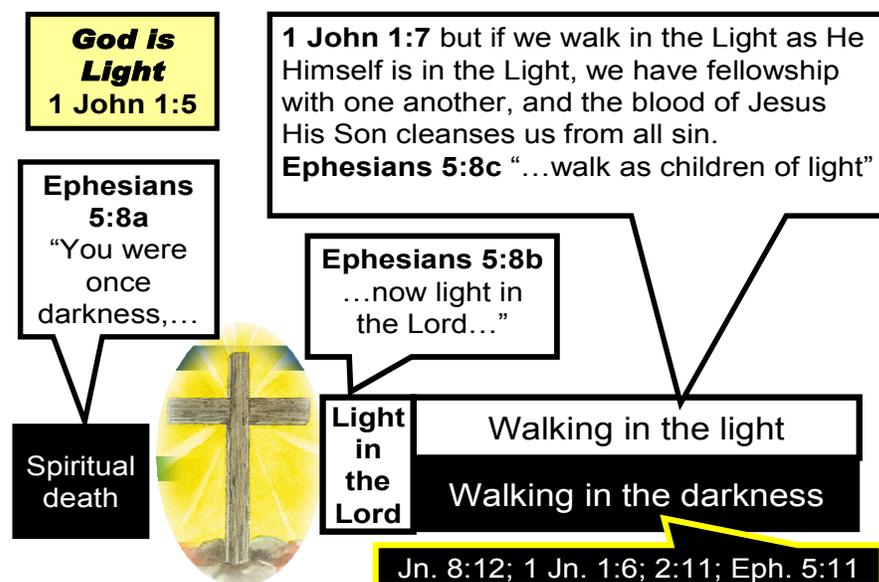
<sup>67</sup> Charles P. Baylis, “The Meaning of Walking in the Darkness” (1 John 1:6), *Bibliotheca Sacra*, (April-June 1992): 218-19.

<sup>68</sup> Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (2:884). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

<sup>69</sup> Some understand “follow” in John 8:12 as a synonym for “believe.” However, the word “follow” (ἀκολουθέω, not πιστεύω) in John 8:12 is often used by Jesus to refer to a believer who is to follow Jesus in post-salvation committed discipleship (Matt. 10:38; 16:24; 19:27-28; Lk. 5:11; 9:23; 18:28; Jn. 12:26; 21:19-22). To believe in Christ will transfer one from death into life (Jn. 5:24), but to continue to follow Jesus will keep one from walking in the darkness (Jn. 8:12). If the religious leaders to whom Jesus addressed continued to reject Him they would remain in spiritual death (darkness). But if they would believe in Him and continue to follow Him they would not walk in darkness and would also know the truth that would set them free (Jn. 8:30-32).

antichrists, about whom John wrote later. But there is no proof of this. The writer continued to use the word “we” throughout as though both he and his readership were in view.<sup>70</sup>

The apostle John understood that it is a real possibility that the apostles as well as his saved audience could walk in these two spheres. The potential for a believer to walk in light or darkness or a believer to be connected with darkness does not conflict with Scripture outside of Johannine writings (2 Sam. 22:29; Prov. 2:13; Lam. 3:2; Eph. 5:8, 11).



## OVERCOME

The word “overcome” in Scripture translates the Greek verb νικάω (*nikao*), which means to conquer, to carry off the victory, come off victorious, or overcome. The understanding of νικάω as a word for active victory is common.<sup>71</sup> However, interpreters are divided on the meaning of the term “overcome” in John’s writings with some seeing

<sup>70</sup>Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (2:884). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

<sup>71</sup>Vincent, M. R. (2002). *Word studies in the New Testament* (2:261-262). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.; Robertson, A. (1997).

it as referring to the believer's position in Christ and others seeing it as a reference to the believer's walk with God. Some see the word "overcome" referring to both the position of the believer and the spiritual walk, with the context determining which meaning is in view. Dillow comments on the various views,

There are three views of the overcomer. Arminians view him as a Christian if he continues in the faith and perseveres under trial. However, if he falls away, he forfeits his salvation. Experimental Predestinarians view him as simply a true Christian and as such he will necessarily and inevitably overcome. For them all Christians are overcomers. The Partakers view the overcomer as the faithful Christian in contrast to one who is not.<sup>72</sup>

Many interpreters hold that the word "overcome" refers to the position of all believers in Christ. For example, Warren Wiersbe states concerning the use of νικάω to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3:

"Revelation 2:7 makes it clear that individual believers within the church may be true to the Lord, no matter what others may do. In these seven messages, the "overcomers" are not a "spiritual elite," but rather the true believers whose faith has given them victory (1 John 5:4-5)."<sup>73</sup>

MacArthur would agree and holds that a true believer (overcomer) would never fail to persevere to the end:

John was so confident of the ultimate triumph of faith over sin that he had a special name for the believer, "the one who overcomes" (5:5; cf. Rev. 2:7, 11, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 21:7). He wrote, "Who is the one who overcomes the world, but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1 John 5:5). For John, a true believer could never fail to overcome.<sup>74</sup>

MacArthur cites James E. Rosscup who believes that the term "overcome" is conclusively a term equivalent to the believer.<sup>75</sup> John Walvoord also holds that at least

<sup>72</sup> Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, p. 470.

<sup>73</sup> Wiersbe, W. W. (1996, c1989). *The Bible exposition commentary*. "An exposition of the New Testament comprising the entire 'BE' series"--Jkt. (Re 2:1). Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.

<sup>74</sup> MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 253.

<sup>75</sup> James E Rosscup, "The Overcomer of the Apocalypse," *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (Fall 1982), 261-86.

in certain passages the word “overcome” refers to the condition of all believers.

Walvoord states concerning Revelation 2:7:

As in the other letters, Christ gave the Ephesian church a promise addressed to individuals who will hear. He stated, **To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.** The tree of life, first mentioned in Genesis 3:22, was in the Garden of Eden. Later it reappears in the New Jerusalem where it bears abundant fruit (Rev. 22:2). Those who eat of it will never die (Gen. 3:22). This promise should not be construed as reward for only a special group of Christians but a normal expectation for all Christians. “The paradise of God” is probably a name for heaven (cf. Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 12:4—the only other NT references to paradise). Apparently it will be identified with the New Jerusalem in the eternal state.”<sup>76</sup>

Walvoord would also state the following concerning the “overcomer” in Revelation 2:11: “The promise is given to overcomers, referring in general to all believers, assuring them that they **will not be hurt at all by the second death** (cf. Rev. 20:15).”<sup>77</sup> However, in other passages to the seven churches he seems to understand the “overcomer” as a reference to a Christian who receives reward for his faithfulness.

Christ promises believers who are faithful that they will join Him in His millennial **rule** (Ps. 2:8-9; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 20:4-6). The word in verse 27 translated “rule” (*poimanei*) means “to shepherd,” indicating that they will not simply be administering justice but will also, like a shepherd using his rod, be dealing with his sheep and protecting them as well. Though Psalm 2:9 refers to Christ’s rule, John’s quotation of it here relates the ruling (shepherding) to the believer who overcomes. Believers will have authority just as Christ does (1 Cor. 6:2-3; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 3:21; 20:4, 6).<sup>78</sup>

It seems that scholars are divided on whether to take the “overcomer” as a positional idea or a term related to a believer who actively overcomes in his spiritual life, or a combination of both depending on the context where the word is found. I see at least three views emerging in the study of the use of νικάω in relation to the believer in John’s writings: 1) every use of νικάω refers to all believers in terms of their position, 2) every

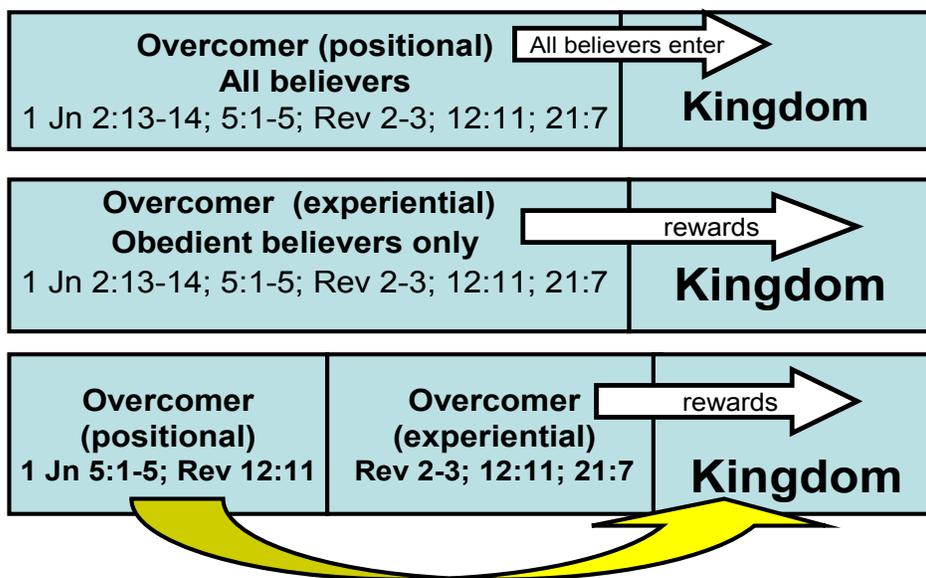
<sup>76</sup>Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (2:934). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

use of νικάω is a reference to believers in terms of their walk, and 3) νικάω is a reference to the believer's position in some passages and a reference to their walk in others.<sup>79</sup> The following chart diagrams the three positions.<sup>80</sup>

## Who is the overcomer? (νικάω - *nikao*)



If one looks to the Gospel of John to help inform the meaning of νικάω in the rest of John's writings, the only place that it occurs is in John 16:33:

### John 16:33

“These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have **overcome** the world.”

Some take this as a proleptic statement concerning the cross and that the overcoming of the world at the crucifixion is so sure to happen that it is viewed as past event.

<sup>79</sup> Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, p. 470. Dillow holds that the uses in 1 John refer to the believer's position as overcomers simply through faith in Christ at conversion while the uses in Revelation refer to the believer who perseveres under trial and receives rewards in eternity.

<sup>80</sup> This author realizes that there are other views as well as other passages in John's writings that use the word νικάω that are pertinent to this debate. The chart above gives a model of some of the common interpretations of what it means to overcome in John's writings.

But in spite of such predicted troubles in the world, the followers of Jesus were called to encouragement because Jesus had “overcome” the world. The use of the perfect *nenikēka* was obviously intended by John to communicate a proleptic sense of victory even before the crucifixion.<sup>81</sup>

Others would understand John 16:33 to mean that Jesus overcame the world throughout His entire earthly ministry, even before the cross.

The world system, the enemy of God and His people, opposed Jesus’ message and ministry (cf. 1:5, 10; 7:7). **But** Jesus won the victory over the system; He has **overcome the world**. As the “strong man” who came and ruined Satan’s kingdom (Matt. 12:25-29), Jesus is the Victor. Jesus wanted the disciples to remember this fact and to rejoice in His victory.<sup>82</sup>

This verse reveals the dramatic situation of early Christians who recognized that final victory would come, as Jewish prophets and teachers said, when the Messiah comes in the future; but they also recognized that the Messiah had already come and therefore had inaugurated triumph in the midst of present tribulation.<sup>83</sup>

It is more likely that in John 16:33 Jesus overcame the world through His obedient life, a victory that is seen as complete by the time of His words in John 16:33. This in no way diminishes the importance of Jesus obeying the Father by going to the cross to bear the sins of the world, a major component of His work that He came to accomplish (John 19:30; Phil 2:6-8).<sup>84</sup>

The word νικάω is also used in the book of Revelation for Jesus who overcame experientially, and based on the timeframe of the events after the Rapture the use of the word in that particular passage would not exclude the victory of the cross:

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<sup>81</sup>Borchert, G. L. (2002). *Vol. 25B: John 12-21*. The new American commentary, New International Version (184). Nashville: Broadman & Holman.

<sup>82</sup>Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (2:330). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

<sup>83</sup>Keener, C. S., & InterVarsity Press. (1993). *The IVP Bible background commentary : New Testament* (Jn 16:33). Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press.

<sup>84</sup> After the Upper Room Discourse Jesus would go to the cross and would at that time receive judgment for the sins of the world in His true humanity, a completed work that is also expressed in a perfect tense verb τετέλεσται in John 19:30

### Revelation 5:5

“...and one of the elders said to me, “Stop weeping; behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has **overcome** so as to open the book and its seven seals.”

One of the most challenging interpretations of the use of the word “overcome” is found in 1 John 5:4-5. It is important to note the other uses of νικάω in the epistle before that particular passage:

### 1 John 2:13-14

“I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have **overcome** the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father. I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have **overcome** the evil one.”

### 1 John 4:4

“You are from God, little children, and have **overcome** them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.”

### 1 John 5:4-5

“For whatever is born of God **overcomes** the world; and this is the victory that has **overcome** the world—our faith. Who is the one who **overcomes** the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”

Some scholars see these uses of “overcome” in 1 John 2:13-14 as positional with the verses that immediately follow being a command to actively overcome in the spiritual life.

In the preceding verses (2:12-14), John had given his readers reason to be confident that they had a wonderful position in Christ. Positionally they have already “overcome the evil one” (v. 14). They therefore have reason to rejoice in their riches of grace in Christ. He now reminds these same people (vv. 15-17) that although they have overcome the evil one positionally, they still must contend with the evil one’s anti-

God philosophy on planet earth as they seek to live out their faith.<sup>85</sup>

However, it is likely that John is commending his readers in 2:13-14 for their spiritual growth through the word of God that abided in them. Jesus overcame Satan and the world through abiding in God's word (Matt. 4:1-11; Jn. 15:10; 16:33). Likewise, the young men to whom John wrote his epistle had overcome the evil one through abiding in God's word (1 Jn. 2:13-14; "...and the word of God abides in you...").

The uses of νικάω in 1 John 5:4-5 are often viewed as a reference to the believer's position and understand that all believers overcame when they first trusted Christ as Savior.

Whatever speaks of the new nature of the child of God. Regeneration (that is, our spiritual rebirth) provides victory over the world which is opposed to God. The faith that overcomes the world is faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God (see v. 5), who died for us (v. 6).<sup>86</sup>

Every Christian has overcome the world by his or her initial faith in Jesus Christ. To continue to overcome and obey God all we need to do is continue to exercise faith in God (cf. Rom. 8:27; 1 Cor. 15:57). It is striking that John does not say 'whoever' but 'whatever' (Greek: *to gegennemenon*, neuter gender). This suggests that there is something inherently world conquering in the very experience of being born of God...Continuing to overcome is not automatic for the Christian. Not all Christians continue to overcome the world (cf. 2 Tim. 4:10). Only those who continue to live by faith (i.e., trust and obey God) do. However, no one can overcome the world unless he or she believes that Jesus is the Son of God. It is in this sense that John refers to overcomers here; every Christian overcomes essentially because we believe in Jesus Christ.<sup>87</sup>

As a matter of fact, God's commands are not burdensome (cf. Matt. 11:30). This is because the principle of victory resides in everyone born of God. Every such person has already overcome the world (cf. 1 John 4:4). His faith in Christ, by which he was regenerated, constitutes a victory over the world system which is satanically blinded to the gospel (cf. 2 Cor. 4:3-4). Who is it then that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. With these words, the writer

<sup>85</sup> Robert Lightner, *The Epistles of First, Second, Third John and Jude: Forgiveness, Love, and Courage*, (AMG Publishers, 2003), 31.

<sup>86</sup> *The NKJV Study Bible*. 2007 (1 Jn 5:4). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.

<sup>87</sup> Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on 1 John* (2007 Edition), 54.

affirmed that a believer is a world-conqueror by means of his faith in Christ. This suggests that such faith is the secret of his continuing victory and, for that reason, obedience to God's commands need not be burdensome.<sup>88</sup>

In a statement that reveals the complexity of the passage, it seems that Dan Wallace would agree with a positional understanding based on the grammar:

The use of the aorist participle (ἡ νικήσασα, *hē nikēsasa*) to refer to faith as the conquering power that “has conquered the world” in 5:4b is problematic. Debate here centers over the temporal value of the aorist participle: (1) It may indicate an action contemporaneous with the (present tense) main verb, in which case the alternation between aorist participle in 5:4b and present participle in 5:5 is one more example of the author's love of stylistic variation with no difference in meaning. (2) Nevertheless, an aorist participle with a present tense main verb would normally indicate an action antecedent to that of the main verb, so that the aorist participle would describe a past action. That is the most probable here. Thus the aorist participle stresses that the conquest of the world is something that has already been accomplished.<sup>89</sup>

Though heavily debated as already indicated in the introductory statements on the word νικάω, the meaning of “overcome” in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 is best understood as a believer who receives reward for being spiritually victorious in the midst of trial:

### **Revelation 2:10-11**

“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. ‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who **overcomes** will not be hurt by the second death.’”

### **Revelation 2:17**

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who **overcomes**, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.”

<sup>88</sup>Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (2:901). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

<sup>89</sup>*The NET Bible First Edition; Bible. English. NET Bible.; The NET Bible.* Biblical Studies Press.

**Revelation 2:26**

“He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations.”

**Revelation 3:5**

“He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.”

**Revelation 3:12**

“He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name.”<sup>90</sup>

**Revelation 3:21**

“He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.”

Other uses of νικάω in Revelation refer to physically overcoming in battle during the Tribulation period.<sup>91</sup>

**USES OF νικάω OUTSIDE JOHANNINE LITERATURE**

Luke uses the word νικάω only one time in his writings with a usage that indicates overpowering an enemy:

**Luke 11:22**

“But when someone stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away from him all his armor on which he had relied and distributes his plunder.”

Paul uses νικάω only three times in two verses and a compound of the verb in one verse:

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<sup>90</sup> The previous verse says, ‘I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown.’ If all believers are overcomers, then why is there a warning to persevere or lose your crown? If all believers are overcomers this statement loses its meaning.

<sup>91</sup> Rev. 6:2; 11:7; 13:7; 15:2; 17:14.

**Romans 3:4**

“May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, “That You may be justified in Your words, And **prevail** when You are judged.”

**Romans 12:21**

“Do not be **overcome** by evil, but **overcome** evil with good.”

**Romans 8:37**

“But in all these things **we overwhelmingly conquer** through Him who loved us.”<sup>92</sup>

In view of the brief analysis above, is it possible to understand overcoming in 1 John 5:4-5 as a reference to a believer’s post-salvation walk? Based on the teaching of Jesus to His disciples in the Upper Room Discourse, which shows that Jesus had already overcome the world even before the cross (John 16:33), and the fact that 1 John 5:4-5 speaks of overcoming the world as well, it is very possible.<sup>93</sup> 1 John 5:4 says that the victory that has overcome the world is our faith. The word “faith” (πίστις, *pistis*) is often understood as a reference to the saving faith that brought salvation from the penalty of sin (cf. Acts 26:18; Eph. 2:8), but in 1 John 5:4 it is a reference to the word of God which must be trusted, with spiritual victory over the world coming through keeping the word and not denying it. This would be in line with another use of the word “faith” in John’s writings in a context of overcoming:

**Revelation 2:13**

‘I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny **My faith** even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was

<sup>92</sup> The verb in this verse is the present active indicative of ὑπερνικάω (*hupernikao*), which means to gain a surpassing victory.

<sup>93</sup> John 16:33 contains the only use of νικάω in the entire Gospel of John, which is found in the Upper Room Discourse, an event that reveals Jesus’ spiritual life teachings to His disciples to be applied in the period of His absence from earth. John is encouraging his readers based on Jesus’ teachings to do the same as they encounter the world.

killed among you, where Satan dwells.”<sup>94</sup>

If John is viewing the “born one” in the epistle as more than one who is regenerated in the positional sense (e.g. John 3), but as one who is actively abiding in God’s truth, then the born one of 5:4-5 overcomes the world through his faith (active trust in the word of God as Jesus actively trusted God’s word; John 15:10; 16:33; Rev. 5:5) and continuing to believe that Jesus is the Son of God rather than trusting in a Jesus not revealed in the Bible, thus falling into idolatry (1 Jn. 3:23; 5:4-5; 20-21).

## JOY

The concept of joy (*χαρά*, *chara*) in Scripture is related to the spiritual life, and is not something all believers experience simply because they are regenerated. The Greek word “joy” (*χαρά*, *chara*) is found only one time in 1 John:

### 1 John 1:4

“These things we write, so that our **joy** may be made complete.”

In 1 John 1:4, John spoke of the apostle’s joy being made “complete.” The word “complete” is the verb *πληρώω*, which means to complete, to fill, or to make full. “Joy being made full” was something found in the Gospel of John. John the Baptist spoke of his joy being made full (John 3:26). Jesus spoke of joy being made full in a context of abiding fellowship between God and believers:

### John 15:11

“These things I have spoken to you so that My **joy** may be in you, and that **your joy may be made full.**”

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<sup>94</sup> The word “faith” in Revelation 2:13 translates the Greek noun *πίστις*, which often includes the idea of what is believed as well as a person’s active trust; Eph. 4:13; Col. 1:23; 2:7; 1 Tim. 4:1, 6; 2 Tim. 3:8; 4:7; 1 Pet. 5:9; Jude 3. Not denying the faith in Rev. 2:13 is in the context of overcoming in 2:17. The idea of believers overcoming through the word of Jesus is also found in Revelation 12:11.

Joy is related to answered prayer:

**John 16:24**

“Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask and you will receive, so that your **joy** may be made full.”

Christ’s joy in us is related to the truth He spoke:

**John 17:13**

“But now I come to You; and these things I speak in the world so that they may have My **joy** made full in themselves.

Joy is a fruit of the Spirit:

**Galatians 5:22-23**

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, **joy**, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”

The apostle John speaks of joy being made full in the believer’s post-salvation walk:

**2 John 12**

“Though I have many things to write to you, I do not want to do so with paper and ink; but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, **so that your joy may be made full.**”

In 1 John 1:4, the apostle John is saying primarily that he is pleased that people are responding properly to the word of Christ, which brought him and the other apostles joy. This same principle is emphasized in 3 John:

**3 John 4**

“I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.”

Joy is related to fellowship in 1 John 1:4, which is related to experiential sanctification in other passages. Dillow comments on the meaning of joy in 1 John:

“He is not writing to test their salvation; he is writing so that his “joy may be made complete” (1 John 1:4). His joy was present; it had “begun” because they had been born again. But he wants to complete his joy by seeing them walk in fellowship. Jesus

used the term in the same way when He addressed His regenerate disciples: “If you love Me, keep my commandments... These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and your joy may be made full” (Jn. 15:11-12). To have one’s joy “made full” is not to become a Christian but, being a Christian already, to act like it!”<sup>95</sup>

In summary, joy being made full was an experience by believers in Scripture, namely John the Baptist (Jn. 3:29), the apostles (1 Jn. 1:4), and available to all believers (Jn. 15:11). Having Christ’s joy is a product of walking by the Spirit (Gal. 5:22) and is available to all Christians, but not experienced by all Christians. Only the Christian who actively abides in fellowship with God experiences joy. So if a believer does not have joy, it does not mean he was never saved, but that he is not walking properly in the spiritual life. The use of the word “joy” in John’s writings pertains to the believer’s walk with God, and is never portrayed as a concept to be analyzed to determine if one is truly born again.

## **LOVE**

The focus on loving the brethren in 1 John has strong connections with the Upper Room Discourse, which reveals the teaching Jesus personally taught concerning the spiritual life to the eleven disciples who would go into the period of the church age. Love was commanded by Jesus to the already permanently saved disciples, not a command to obey to obtain salvation (cf. John 13:10; 14:21, 23). The command to love would also be given by the apostle Paul to already saved believers as a product of the spiritual life of a permanently saved believer (Eph. 1:13-14 cf. 5:2; Gal. 2:16 cf. 5:16, 22). Derickson makes a strong point supporting 1 John being a test of fellowship rather than a test of salvation based on the subject of love in the epistle:

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<sup>95</sup> Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, pp. 162-63.

“The Upper Room Discourse gives a strong support for this view, since Jesus addressed His disciples (with Judas absent) about issues of their relationship to each other and to the Father, much as is indicated in the prologue of 1 John. Jesus gave them the “new commandment” to love one another (John 13:34), which then became one of the tests in the epistle. The three occurrences of the test of love for the brethren are in 1 John 2:7–11; 3:10–24; and 4:7–5:5. Of note is the reference to this test being an “old commandment” which they had had “from the beginning.” As love for other believers was not a test of salvation in the Upper Room, but one which proved their identity to “all men” as Jesus’ disciples (John 13:35), it should not be seen as a test of salvation in the epistle.”<sup>96</sup>

## CONFESS

Scholarship is divided over the meaning of “confess” (ὁμολογέω, *homologeō*) in 1 John 1:9. Some see 1 John 1:9 dealing with the necessity of a believer confessing personal sin for temporal cleansing and restoration to fellowship while others see this verse related to a person’s salvation. Akin provides an example of the view that 1 John 1:9 is a reference to the salvation of the unbeliever:

In contrast to these fatal errors of rejecting Jesus and claiming personal sinlessness, John makes clear in 1:9 that it is those who confess their sins by believing in Jesus who have fellowship with the Father and fulfill the condition for fellowship. If our identification of vv. 8–10 as dealing with the condition necessary for fellowship with God is correct, John’s point is that the true condition for fellowship is the confession of our sins. Yet John does not dispute their premise of the need for sinlessness. “When someone acknowledges and avows his fault ... honestly [neither hiding nor denying his sins], he experiences God’s faithfulness and righteousness in the forgiveness of sins.” By virtue of the cleansing effect of Jesus’ atoning death, believers’ sins are forgiven. In effect, they are sinless in God’s sight (though not in themselves) and fit for fellowship with him.<sup>97</sup>

Akin’s comment above mentions “those who confess their sins by believing in Jesus” and equates confession with a person believing in Christ. However, the text does not mention the word “believe” at all in the verse, with the word “believe” not even occurring in 1

<sup>96</sup>Derickson, “What is the Message of 1 John?” 101.

<sup>97</sup>Akin, D. L. (2001). *Vol. 38: 1, 2, 3 John* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (74). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

John until 3:23. Others see 1 John 1:9 as unrelated to a person's salvation, but as a necessary part of a believer's walk.

What is considered in 1 John 1:9 may be described as “familial” forgiveness. It is perfectly understandable how a son may need to ask his father to forgive him for his faults while at the same time his position within the family is not in jeopardy. A Christian who never asks his heavenly Father for forgiveness for his sins can hardly have much sensitivity to the ways in which he grieves his Father. Furthermore, the Lord Jesus Himself taught His followers to seek forgiveness of their sins in a prayer that was obviously intended for daily use (cf. the expression “give us today our daily bread” preceding “forgive us our debts,” Matt. 6:11-12). The teaching that a Christian should not ask God for daily forgiveness is an aberration. Moreover, confession of sin is *never* connected by John with the acquisition of eternal life, which is always conditioned on faith. First John 1:9 is not spoken to the unsaved, and the effort to turn it into a soteriological affirmation is misguided.<sup>98</sup>

If 1 John 1:9 refers to salvation, then confession is synonymous with believing. The Gospel of John uses the word “believe” (πιστεύω, *pisteuo*) and “confess” (ὁμολογέω, *homologeō*) with distinct meanings. The verb “confess” in John's Gospel only occurs twice:

### **John 9:22**

“His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone **confessed** Him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue.”

To confess Jesus would be to make a public acknowledgement of their faith in Him that had already occurred. John 12:42 is helpful in demonstrating that believing and confessing are distinct actions:

### **John 12:42**

“Nevertheless many even of the rulers **believed** in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not **confessing** Him, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue.”

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<sup>98</sup>Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (2:886). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

This passage shows that many of the rulers believed in Christ for salvation, but because of their fear of persecution from the Pharisees they were not willing to publicly admit it. Therefore, believing is not a synonym for confession. Acts 19:18 follows a similar pattern:

**Acts 19:18**

“Many also of those who had **believed** kept coming, **confessing** and disclosing their practices.”

The rest of the occurrences of ὁμολογέω in John’s writings have the same meaning as “admit” or “acknowledge” (1 Jn. 3:23; 4:2-3, 15; 2 Jn. 7; Rev. 3:5). In a statement concerning a possible early undeveloped form of Gnosticism that may have been influencing John’s audience in the epistle of 1 John, Walter Kaiser makes a comment supporting the importance of a believer confessing personal sin:

“With respect to sin there are two directions that Gnosticism took. One direction was to deny sin. On the basis of ascetic practices and inner enlightenment the Gnostics believed that they were beyond sin. Naturally such beliefs were underpinned by a good dose of denial. The author addresses such people in 1 John 1:7–9. Rather than think that we are beyond sin and deny that what we do is sinful, Christians should confess their sin and get it removed.<sup>99</sup>

In summary, confession of sin in 1 John 1:9 is a post-salvation act whereby the believer acknowledges his sin(s) to God for temporal cleansing and restoration to fellowship with God in the spiritual life (cf. Psalm 51; John 13:8-10).

**A NEGLECTED OBSERVATION IN LIGHT OF THE ARGUMENT OF THE EPISTLE OF 1 JOHN**

In view of the prologue’s statement that fellowship is with the Father and the Son (1:3), I think one of the major components often missed in the argument of the epistle is

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<sup>99</sup>Kaiser, W. C. (1997, c1996). *Hard sayings of the Bible* (593). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.

the connection with the last verse. 1 John 5:21 states, “Little children, guard yourselves from idols.” At a casual reading this verse might seem out of place and a statement that has very little to do with the argument of the epistle. But viewed carefully in light of the whole book, and even the entirety of biblical revelation, it closes the epistle well.

The word “guard” in 5:21 is φυλάσσω (*phulasso*), which means to keep or guard. The previous two verses give insight as to why John mentions idols in verse 21.

### **1 John 5:19-20**

“We know that we are from God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This One is the true God and eternal life (emphasis mine).”

The word translated “true” is the Greek word ἀληθινός (*alethinos*) and is found three times in verse 20. This word emphasizes something that is genuine. God is the genuine God as opposed to false gods or idols. Idolatry is a counterfeit of the genuine. John warned against loving the world or the cosmic system (1 John 2:15-16), and because idolatry is so much a part of the all-surrounding world-system, and compromise with the world system leads to idolatry, John warns Christians in 5:21 to be ever watchful. The word “idol” is prevalent throughout the Old Testament, which demonstrates the on-going problem it was for Israel throughout their history, especially in the pre-exilic times.<sup>100</sup> The Jews were to worship the only true God and avoid idolatry which destroyed true worship. Idolatry was not simply bowing to some image, but worshipping something other than the true God (Exod. 20:1-5). Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, idolatry is put

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<sup>100</sup> One of the Hebrew words for an idol (פֶּסֶל, *pesel*) occurs 48 times in the Old Testament and is used in all three sections of the Hebrew Bible, thus highlighting the importance God placed on avoiding it.

in direct opposition to the only true God (e.g. 1 Chron. 16:26; Isa. 42:5-8; Jer. 10:1-10; Ps. 97:7; Ps. 106:34-36; Hos. 4:12). Jeremiah 10:10 sounds similar to 1 John 5:20:

“But the LORD is the **true God** ( **וַיְהִי הָאֱלֹהִים אֱמֶת** ); He is the living God and the everlasting King. At His wrath the earth quakes, And the nations cannot endure His indignation.”

In the New Testament Jesus told Satan that worship is to be directed to God alone (Matt. 4:10).<sup>101</sup> 1 John tells us that fellowship is with the true God, and that we should avoid being “of the devil” and his cosmic system, which was being encouraged by the false teachers (1 Jn. 2:15; 3:8). Jesus said in John 17:3, “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” This is similar to 1 John 5:20 “And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so 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.” Paul also spoke against idols as opposed to the true God (1 Cor. 8:4; 1 Thes. 1:9).

So believers are to guard, keep, and protect themselves from idols. A believer does this by defining accurately the God of the Bible, then abiding in fellowship with this same God by means of His revealed truth. John speaking of false teachers leading believers astray into satanic idolatry is not limited to the epistle of 1 John. John wrote to the church in Thyatira:

### **Revelation 2:20**

“But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols.”

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<sup>101</sup> Jesus was not willing to bow down to Satan and fall into idolatry by worshipping this angelic being (Matt. 4:8-10). However, John actually did bow down to an angel and violated his mandate to guard oneself from idols (Rev. 22:8-9).

As stated in 1 John, spiritual fellowship is with the only true God, and along with other Scripture He is revealed as the Father Son and Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14; 1 Jn. 1:3; 4:13). Fellowship with any god other than the true God revealed in the Bible is idolatry. One writer holding to the fellowship view saw the importance of understanding the nature of God in the experience of the believer's fellowship and wrote, "John most likely wrote this letter with two purposes in mind—one pastoral and one polemical. John's pastoral purpose was to promote fellowship (1:3). But for the believers to have true fellowship, they needed to understand the true nature of God (1:5; 2:29; 4:7, 8)."<sup>102</sup>

We must fellowship with the Triune God of the Bible through His revelation to us:

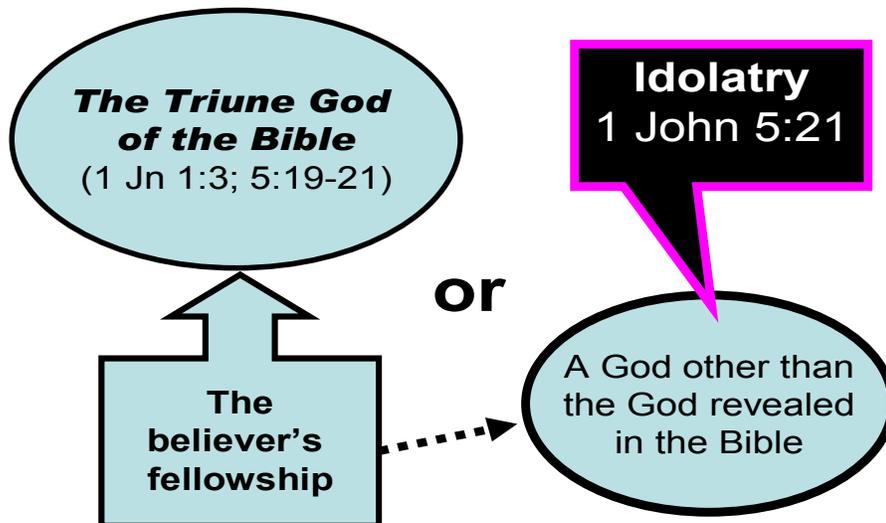
**1 John 2:24**

"As for you, let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father."

The issue in 1 John is not whether the born again believer is really saved and merely professing faith, but whether or not he is actively abiding in fellowship with the only true God. Denial of the nature of God or distortion of anything He has revealed hinders the believer's fellowship with Him. Not only is the believer to avoid the acceptance of any false god outside of biblical revelation, but as believers we must never fall into the error of redefining God.

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<sup>102</sup> *The NKJV Study Bible*. 2007 (1 Jn). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.



## WHAT DOES 1 JOHN SAY ABOUT SANCTIFICATION?

1 John reveals three major things concerning the believer's walk of fellowship with God:

### 1) With whom you walk:

**1 John 1:3** "What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.<sup>103</sup>

### 2) Where you walk:

**1 John 1:5-7** "This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin."

### 3) How you walk:

**1 John 2:6** "The one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked."

<sup>103</sup> cf. **John 6:67-68** So Jesus said to the twelve, "You do not want to go away also, do you?" Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life."

**1 John 3:11** “For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.”

**1 John 3:16-18** “We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.”

**1 John 3:24** “The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.”

**1 John 4:21** “And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.”

**There are Pauline equivalents to these in his epistles:**

**With whom you walk:**

**Galatians 2:20** “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”

**Where you walk:**

**Colossians 2:6** “Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, **so walk in Him.**”

**Romans 6:4** “Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so **we too might walk in newness of life.**”

**How you walk:**

**Galatians 5:16** “But I say, **walk by the Spirit**, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.”

**Ephesians 5:2** “and **walk in love**, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.”

**Ephesians 5:15** “Therefore be careful **how you walk**, not as unwise men but as wise.”

As the believer walks as Jesus walked by actively abiding in fellowship in the light with the Father who is light, he will come to know the Lord in a spiritual intimacy developed through the knowledge and application of God’s word that will result in joy

and eternal life (abundant life), overcoming the devil's world, love for God and the brethren, and the resultant revealing of his family identity as a child of God.

## CONCLUSION

As stated earlier in this paper, the argument of 1 John in view of the purpose statements in the book and the understanding of the central terms is as follows:

Based on apostolic eyewitness testimony (1:1-2), John, who desired his joy to be complete by seeing his audience walking in the truth (1 John 1:4; 2:6; cf. John 15:11-12; 3 John 4), is writing to believers (2:7-14) to assure them of eternal life (5:13) in the midst of false teachers (2:22, 26; 3:7; 4:1) and to explain that fellowship with the only true God who is Light (1:3, 5; 5:19-21) is experienced and maintained by those who avoid sin (1:8-10; 2:1; 3:6-10) and walk in the light by abiding with Him on the basis of God's truth (1:6-7; 2:24), which will result in the desired goal of revealing our identity as God's children (3:10), avoiding deception from deceivers (2:26; 3:7), a mature love for God and fellow believers (2:5; 3:11, 23; 4:7-21), a knowledge of the true God and the avoidance of idolatry (5:20-21), and confidence at the coming of Christ (2:28).

John argues that God is perfect and without sin (1:5; 3:5). However, even though the believer should not sin, it is still a potential in the believer's life that must be recognized (1:8, 10; 2:1). When the believer walks in the light (1:7), walks as Jesus walked (2:6), and abides in His word (2:24; 3:24; cf. Jn. 15:7), he does not sin (3:6, 9). Instead, the believer manifests his identity as a child of God (3:10), specifically by loving one another (3:11-24; 4:7-21), and, therefore, has eternal life abiding in him (3:15). All of this is descriptive of fellowship with the only true God (1:1-3; 5:20-21). Therefore, in order to encourage present fellowship with God in the "imperfect now," John writes within an eschatological framework of the "ideal future"<sup>104</sup> Until this perfection comes in the future when sin is no longer a potential, the believer must confess personal sin to God in order

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<sup>104</sup> The "imperfect now" in the framework of an "ideal future" is seen throughout 1 John: the future age of light is already shining- 2:8; the antichrist is coming with many antichrist being in the present- 2:18; the believer must abide to have confidence at Jesus' future coming- 2:28; when Jesus appears the believer will be like Him- 3:2.

to receive temporal forgiveness and cleansing so that he may continue to abide in fellowship with the Lord.

Is 1 John an epistle to be understood as tests for life or tests for fellowship? I believe the text supports the tests of fellowship view. I agree with Derickson's criticism of the test of life view (p. 11):

The Tests of Life view ends up holding that failure indicates a lack of life. Every Christian who is honest must admit to some habitual sin, whether great or small. Yet if the practice of sin or righteousness in 1 John 3 proves the presence of death or life, then one is forced to decide "how much is too much." Thus arguing that John intended these tests as indicators of the presence or absence of eternal life is both indefensible and dangerous. The question is legitimately asked, after giving such impossible tests as "proofs" of eternal life, how could John then say that he wrote to assure them of their possession of eternal life? The tests, if absolute and if proving the presence or absence of life, can only cause one to doubt his salvation whenever he sins.<sup>105</sup>

Fellowship with God and a fellow believer does not occur when walking in the darkness on the basis of the teaching of the false teachers (lusts of the flesh, denying the true God, etc). The presence of a mental attitude of love toward God and one's brother and the physical expression of that love toward a brother as mandated by God may reveal one's identity as God's child, but is not the inevitable result of being His child.

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<sup>105</sup>Gary Derickson, "What is the Message of 1 John?" *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 150:597 (January 1993): 97.

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