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Sin is popular in today's world, but its devastating consequences both in this life and in eternity are pretty much denied or ignored. Moderns prefer to live without restraint or accountability. In their hedonistic world, passions reign supreme. Orderliness and self-control are traits for old people or people too ignorant of the ways of the world to know any better. What feels good is the ultimate determination of good. And yet this supposedly 'enlightened' world has created some of the most brutal, violent political leaders and nations since Adam and Eve. The environment all over the globe is polluted and rotting under the weight of greedy modernistic lifestyles. Increasingly in a technology age with connections to people possible at unparalleled levels, growing numbers of individuals have virtually no people skills and increasingly live lonely, isolated lives.



Christians from the beginning have been tempted to throw off restraint and self-control. John certainly faced this trend in the late first century world. His letter came to congregations with folks in them who were moving this direction through a twisted theology that gave hedonism a semblance of legitimacy. Sin in the name of Christ seemed to be their slogan. Through twisting the apostolic gospel in adoption of contemporary Greek ways of thinking, especially Platonic dualism, a belief emerged that a Christian didn't need to worry about sinful activity. It was only connected to his 'flesh' and had no impact on his 'soul.' Thus one needn't concern himself with fleshy actions. God has saved the soul and made it immune from the fleshly passions of the body.

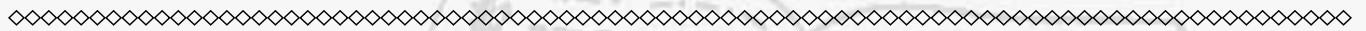
But the apostle John knew better. This heretical teaching would be spiritual suicide to anyone buying into it. In countering this false teaching, John began with a basic principle: God is light. To be sure this was a theme of his opponents as well, but John saw in this motif drastically different implications than his proto-gnostic opponents. Light is purity and purity abhors contamination! Anyone claiming to be a child of God must live in God's light of purity. And this entails profound obligation to live in holiness and righteousness. The temptation to sin and to live in sin is always present and the believer must realize this -- and deal with it! Thus at the outset of his letter several strong affirmations are made about sin in the Christian's life and how to handle it.

Our modernistic world -- and especially the so-called post-modern aspects -- need desperately to hear and heed these words of the apostle. We believers dare not ignore

them!

I. Context

As is always the case, much of the background material will be drawn from previous studies in 1 John. New material will update and supplement the previous material.



a. Historical

External History. **Who was responsible for the composition of this document?** 1 John is one of three letters in the General (Catholic) Letter section of our New Testament with the name of 'John' attached to them. Careful reading of the texts of these letters will leave the reader searching in vain for any direct mentioning of John as the writer of any of these letters. The only person's name mentioned in 1 John is Jesus Christ. In 2 and 3 John the sender of these letters is identified only as "the elder."

Where then does the idea that a John wrote these letters originate, since it cannot be based directly on references to the writer inside these documents? The answer comes from early Christian tradition in the second through eighth centuries. Yet, careful examination of this body of early Christian literature indicates difference of opinion over the author of this letter. The term 'The Elder' in 2 and 3 John was gradually identified with the apostle John, the son of Zebedee, in the gospels in many early Christian circles, but not in all. Papias of Hierapolis in 130 AD challenged this view, as did Dionsyus of Alexandria in 262 AD. Eventually, however, the linking of the three letters, along with the fourth gospel and the book of Revelation, with the apostle John prevailed and become the basis for the headings of these three letters containing the name 'John.' Current biblical scholarship reflects divided opinion on how reliable this early church tradition is. Serious arguments, both pro and con, can be marshaled in support of either side of the issue.

My personal *inclination* is to link the three letters together (at minimum, only 1 John) with the fourth gospel in a common authorship, although readily acknowledging the difficulties of such. At best, tentative conclusions must be drawn, rather than hard-and-fast judgments. The contents of the three documents provide some helpful insight into the historical situation surrounding their composition toward the close of the first Christian century.

Where was this document written? Most scholars, although skeptical of early church tradition about John the apostle as author, will nevertheless accept the early church idea that associates the writing of 1 John in and around the ancient city of [Ephesus](#)

toward the end of the first Christian century. Within the traditional view of authorship, the understanding is that the apostle John spent the last several decades of his earthly life in ministry to Christians in Ephesus.

If correct, then this letter emerges after the initial preaching of the gospel in the city by Paul in the middle 50s. Another apostle has become a revered leader of the Christian movement there. This letter is then addressed to the believing community at Ephesus, in a manner similar to Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, although we can determine far less of the specific circumstances surrounding the Ephesian community of faith at this point in time.

To whom was this document written initially, and why? The above exploration probed the historical identification of the recipients of the letter from early church tradition. From the contents of 1 John some insight can be gleaned about the first readers of this letter. Through a careful reading of the document, one can see that the teaching authority of the writer had been challenged and thus the letter was responding to that challenge. An alternative understanding of Christianity was being set forth in the Christian community(s) of Asia, and this new view of the gospel led to behavioral patterns that were different from those set forth in the apostolic gospel message as G. B. Caird ("Johannine Letters," *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, iPreach) describes:

"Throughout the first letter we find a series of warnings against those who make claims which are not justified by the facts: 'if we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness' (1:6); 'if we say we have no sin' (1:8); 'he who says 'I know him' but disobeys his commandments' (2:4); 'he who says he abides in him' (2:6); 'if any one says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother' (4:20). It is obvious that these denunciations are not made without good reason and that someone has actually been making such professions. The opposition has been laying claim to a special knowledge and love of God and to a peculiarly intimate relationship with him which has set them above the common distinctions between good and evil and therefore above the demands of Christian ethics. It is probable, too, that the initial message of the letter: 'God is light and in him is

no darkness at all,' is directed against a theology which held that God comprehended in himself both light and darkness."

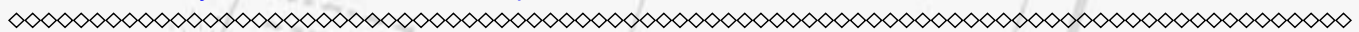
This opposition movement had questioned the incarnation of Christ (2:20; 4:2). Although previously participating in the apostolic believing community, they had abandoned it (2:19) in order to begin their own version of Christianity, and it had been met with pagan acceptance (4:5). G.B. Caird sums up the identity of this group with this statement:

"An aberrant Christianity, which teaches salvation by esoteric knowledge, excites an enthusiasm devoid of moral concern, and nourishes a spirituality contemptuous of all things material, can be identified unmistakably as an early form of the movement which came to be known as Gnosis or GNOSTICISM. At this stage, however, there is no sign of the gross sensuality which was countenanced by some of the later developments of the Gnostic heresy; the moral laxity here stigmatized consists solely in an indifference to the practical de-

mands of the law of love."

Therefore, the main thrust of 1 John was to assure the members of the apostolic community of the essence of authentic Christianity, both in its belief and in its ethics, as a corrective to the false teaching being spread by the opposition. What we see in 1 John is a Christian leader appealing to believers to base their religious experience on a firm foundation, rather than the foundation of falsehood and error.

Internal History. The very generalized nature of 1:5-10 means that few historical markers of time and place surface in these verses. What is clear, however, is that John is responding to specific ideas among his targeted readers that he considered false and dangerous. These can be identified generally as ideas which later found fully developed expression in the movement known as Gnosticism, as mentioned above.

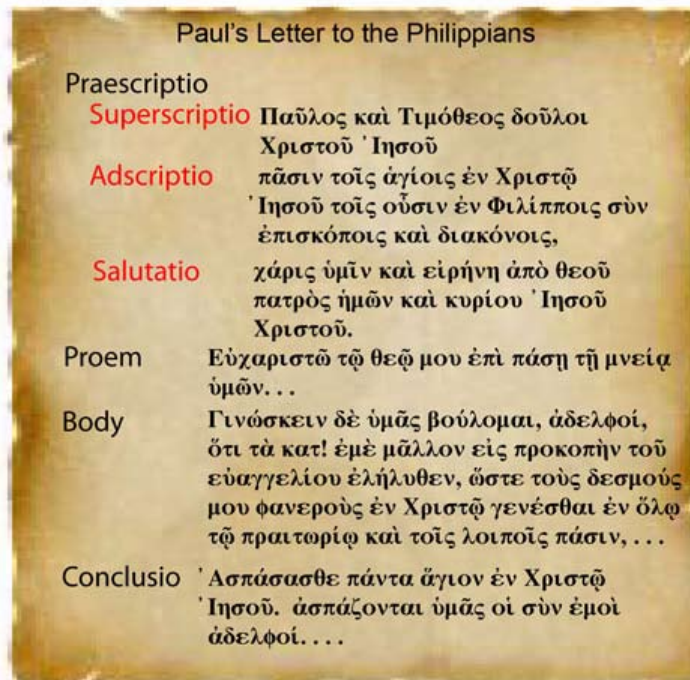


b. Literary

Genre. Although labeled an ancient letter, this document bears few of the marks that are found in ancient letters. See my discussion on this at cranfordville.com under <http://cranfordville.com/NT-genre.htm#Epistle>. The graphic to the right highlights the basic elements on an ancient letter. 1 John only contains the Body element and none of the others.

In contrast, [2 John](#) and [3 John](#) follow ancient letter patterns very closely. The prologue of [1 John 1:1-4](#) somewhat sets the foundation for the remainder of the document (NRSV):

"1 We declare to you 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 — 2 this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us — 3 we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with



Ancient Letter on papyrus

us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. 4 We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete."

As to literary form, the Bible student can only conclude that 1 John is an ancient letter in a very loose definition of the term. More accurate is that the document is an ancient tractate defending a specific theological/philosophical viewpoint. Such tractates in the ancient world often incorporated limited elements of the ancient letter form. John seemingly follows this style of writing.

The text should be read against this backdrop. A major implication of this is that the letter is to be read as a polemic defending the apostolic gospel against false teaching. Thus various positions taken by the writer will most often reflect his reaction to a perverted expression on the same topic.

Literary Context. Our passage comes as the first topic after the somewhat formal Prologue in 1:1-4. Thus in many ways it sets the stage for the remainder of the 'letter.' Also it plays off the founda-

tional motifs put on the table in the Prologue.

II. Message

Literary Structure. As set forth in the [Block](#) and [Semantic](#) diagrams of the Greek text, along with the [Summary of the Rhetorical Structure](#) sections, the division of thought in these verses is rather clear and easy to detect. Two basic units of thought are present: 1) God is light and its implications, vv. 5-7; and 2) dealing with sin, vv. 8-10. Our exegesis of the passage will flow out of this understanding of structure.



a. God is light, vv. 5-7

Greek NT

1·5 Καὶ ἔστιν αὕτη ἡ ἀγγελία ἣν ἀκηκόαμεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀναγγέλλομεν ὑμῖν, ὅτι ὁ θεὸς φῶς ἐστὶν καὶ σκοτία ἐν αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδεμία. 1·6 Ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι κοινωνίαν ἔχομεν μετ' αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐν τῷ σκότει περιπατῶμεν, ψευδόμεθα καὶ οὐ ποιοῦμεν τὴν ἀλήθειαν· 1·7 ἐὰν δὲ ἐν τῷ φωτὶ περιπατῶμεν ὡς αὐτὸς ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ φωτὶ, κοινωνίαν ἔχομεν μετ' ἀλλήλων καὶ τὸ αἷμα Ἰησοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ καθαρῖζει ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ πάσης ἁμαρτίας.

NASB

5 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. 6 *If we* say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; 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.

NRSV

5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. 6 If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; 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.

NLT

5 This is the message he has given us to announce to you: God is light and there is no darkness in him at all. 6 So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness. We are not living in the truth. 7 But if we are living in the light of God's presence, just as Christ is, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from every sin.

Notes:

The internal structure of these verses is clear and understanding it facilitates more accurate interpretation of the text. In simple expression that structure begins with the 'header' declaration in verse five: God is light. It is followed by a pair of "if we..." (ἐὰν...) conditional sentences that stand in contrast to one another. These two scenarios represent a negative and then a positive reaction to the truth that God is light.

God is light: "This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all" (Καὶ ἔστιν αὕτη ἡ ἀγγελία ἣν ἀκηκόαμεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀναγγέλλομεν ὑμῖν, ὅτι ὁ θεὸς φῶς ἐστὶν καὶ σκοτία ἐν αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδεμία).

The beginning declaration, "this is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you..." comes off the Prologue in the preceding four verses. Steven Smalley (WBC) has some helpful observations:

John's concerns, as we have already seen from the preface to this document (vv 3b-4), are intensely

practical, as well as theological. He is confronting a community which is divided in its opinions about Jesus, and seriously inclined to heterodoxy, with a message concerning the life and unity which may be found in God through Jesus. On this basis all the members of the Johannine circle are challenged to "live in the light"—to examine their faith, and to practice it.

The section begins, in this v, with an affirmation. The conditions, both negative and positive, for proper Christian living will be discussed in due course (1:8-5:11). Meanwhile John makes a bold and summary statement which takes his audience back to the fundamental basis of all Christian belief and experience. He reminds them of the nature of God himself, and of the truth that "God is light."

καὶ ἔστιν αὕτη ἡ ἀγγελία ... ἀναγγέλλομεν ὑμῖν. The first v of this section is associated with the preceding paragraph by the use of similar language, which was perhaps well-known in the Johannine community. Thus the verb ἀπαγγέλλομεν ("we are declaring") in vv 2 and 3 is picked up here by the similar verb ἀναγγέλλομεν ("we are proclaiming"), and by the noun ἡ ἀγγελία ("the news").

The formula καὶ ἔστιν αὕτη (literally, "and this

is”) points forward to the statement, prefaced by ὅτι (“that”), in the second part of this v (“God is light”). Such a formula occurs frequently in the letters of John; although it is not always clear whether the reference is retrospective or prospective (cf. 2:25; 3:23; 5:4, 11, 14; 2 John 6; note also the appearance of the formula with a personal predicate in 5:6). Here John is obviously introducing material which follows: the leading theme of his first main division, and its subsequent explanation.

The term ἡ ἀγγελία (“the news”) appears in the NT only here and at 3:11. In vv 2 and 3 the writer speaks of the revealed life (of God in Christ) which “we” (associating himself with the orthodox members of the Johannine community, who were committed to the preservation and propagation of the apostolic message; see the comment on 1:1) are “proclaiming” (ἀπαγγέλλομεν). Now, in association with a similarly community witness (ἀναγγέλλομεν, “we are proclaiming”), John declares to “you” (ὕμῃν, the Johannine circle as a whole) the “news” that God is light as well as life. Such a message, in Christian terms, is *good news*, and the virtual equivalent of “gospel.”

This “news,” it is affirmed, has been “heard from him” (ἀκηκόαμεν ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ). For this verb see the comments on 1:1 and 3. Perhaps for the benefit of some gnostically inclined members of his congregations, John emphasizes the reality of the Incarnation. For those with ears to hear, he implies, the “word of life” (1:1) was audible in the life and teaching of the historical Jesus; and it is this gospel (already outlined in the preface, 1:1–4) which is now being transmitted afresh. It has been heard, says the writer, “from him” (ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ). The use of pronouns in 1 John is not always precise; but the allusion to “hearing,” which in the preface is associated with Jesus, and the fact that the news is said to concern God, suggests that in this context the author of the message is Jesus himself (cf. also John 3:32; so Marshall, 108 n. 1). Even if the description of God as “light” is not found in the teaching of Jesus as reported in the Gospels (but see Matt 6:22–23 = Luke 11:34–36), it is noteworthy that the advent of Jesus is seen by other writers than John as a revelation of light (cf. Matt 4:16; Luke 2:32).

ὅτι ὁ θεός φῶς ἐστίν ... οὐδεμία (“that God is light” etc.). The background to the image of God as “light” is both Hellenistic and Jewish; indeed, “the categories of light and darkness belong to the universal language of religious symbolism” (Stott, 70). It was, for example, a feature of Zoroastrianism. Gnosticism itself, furthermore, was in effect a “religion of light” (developed in the dualist systems of Manichaeism and Mandaism), in which light and darkness stood over against each other as hostile and independent powers (cf. further H.-C. Hahn, NIDNTT 2 [1976] 490–91). For the Hellenistic sources in general, especially in Plato and Philo, see Dodd, 201–205.

Such associations of the term “light” in Greek thought would clearly have appealed to John’s ex-pagan readers. But the context most readily available to the



writer of 1 John was probably Judaism; and the use of the image of light in the OT and Qumran would therefore be appreciated in addition by the ex-Jewish members of his community.

In the OT “light” is used in an intellectual sense to symbolize truth (where “darkness” is error), and in a moral sense to represent righteousness (where “darkness” is evil). So, for example, Ps 119:130; Isa 5:20; Mic 7:8b; see also Ps 27:1. (In the NT cf. Rom 13:11–14; 2 Pet 1:19.) This language is also familiar to us from the literature of Qumran (cf. 1QS 1:5, 9–10; 5:19–21; 1QH 4:5–6; 1QM 13:15; and note the description of God as “perfect light” in 1QH 18:29). See further the association between Jesus and light in the Fourth Gospel (he is the carrier of divine illumination), and the contrast between “light” (symbolizing life) and “darkness” which characterizes its teaching (John 1:4; 8:12; 9:5; 12:35–36 and 11:9–10; in the last text a moral element emerges, while in the other passages the stress is on light as the revelation of truth).

The declaration, “God is light” (ὁ θεός φῶς ἐστίν), is a penetrating description of the being and nature of God: it means that he is absolute in his glory (the physical connotation of light), in his truth (the intellectual) and in his holiness (the moral). See Westcott, 16. The Logos of God is “the light” (τό φῶς, 2:8; cf. John 1:7–9); but God himself is “light” (φῶς, anarthrous), just as he is love (1 John 4:8, 16) and spirit (John 4:24). As such, God is infinite, transcendent and “wholly other”; the source of all *life* and renewal (cf. 2 Cor 4:4–6).

But this does not mean that John is being speculative in his thinking at this point. To say that God is “light” is not a purely conceptual representation of his nature, detaching the being of God from his historical activity in creation; even if those from a Greek environment might have been inclined to think in this way. There are, once more, practical implications in this description. To describe God as absolute “light” presupposes that God and darkness (error, or evil) are mutually exclusive. Indeed, as the writer says here (typically following a positive statement with a contrasting negative), in God there is “no darkness (σκοτία) of any kind” (οὐδεμία, literally “no,” is intensive; hence the addition in our translation of the phrase “of any kind”). This amounts

to the claim that God as light (truth and righteousness) reveals darkness (error and evil) for what it is (cf. 1:1-2; John 1:4). The statement “God is light” carries with it an inevitable moral challenge: “his followers must walk in the light”; and this is precisely the writer’s present subject (see vv 6 and 7). For the intertwining of faith and duty in this section of 1 John, with special reference to 1:6, 8 and 10 (cf. 2:4, 6 and 9), see J. L. Houlden, *ExpTim* 93 (1981/82) 132-36.

For εἶναι ἐν (“to be in”), which occurs in the phrase σκοτία ἐν αὐτῷ (“there is no darkness in him”), see the comment on v 8.

The powerful image of light, especially from its OT and Jewish heritage affirmed to John’s readers the perfection of God as a source of understanding and of living. God stands as the ultimate expression. But in His involvement in creation, He actively reaches out to sinful humanity for relationship and fellowship.

“If we...” (1-): “If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true” (Ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι κοινωνίαν ἔχομεν μετ’ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐν τῷ σκότει περιπατῶμεν, ψευδόμεθα καὶ οὐ ποιοῦμεν τὴν ἀλήθειαν). Here the scenario pictured is hypocrisy. The claim



to having fellowship with the God who is pure light is not matched by behavior. Walking is a metaphor for living life with strong emphasis on behavior and ethics. Absolutely no darkness exists in the God of light. Therefore those claiming fellowship with Him cannot be living in darkness and have authentic fellowship with God.

Whom did John have in view with this scenario? Smiley (*WBC*) offers some helpful perspective:

Whom did John have in mind? The people most likely to be maintaining a detachment from sin would be those who were inclined to gnostic views. Their dualist understanding of existence would mean that, in some cases at least, they could despise the material level of being and thus claim to be sinless (see the introduction, xxiv-vii). But this position, the writer now demonstrates, implies that its proponents had failed to come to terms with man’s actual nature. The heretics were denying the fact and results of sin because they had not accepted the truth that the goodness of God demands the goodness of man, if fellowship is to exist between them.

It is possible that heterodox opinions of this kind were held by extremists who still remained within John’s circle. But it is more probable that such ideas were characteristic of the secessionists, who had

withdrawn from the community, and “defected into the world” (see the comment on 2:19; cf. also 2 John 7). They would not have claimed explicitly that sin was unimportant; but their behavior, together with the claims they were making (vv 6-10), amounted to the assertion that sin does not matter because righteousness and right conduct are unimportant. John is concerned that such heretically inclined views should not influence the orthodox members of his church. He therefore identifies himself closely with his readers (“if we claim”), as often when speaking of common Christian experience, and distinguishes three claims from which all believers should be dissociated.

When individuals get caught up in such twisted approaches to Christian living, what is the consequence? Here John asserts two results of such hypocritical living: 1) we lie and 2) we do not do what is true. Such individuals are living a lie. Spiritual reality asserts that light and darkness cannot mix. God as pure light cannot and will not fellowship with those living in darkness. For individuals to claim to be able to do this is nothing more than a flat out lie. It just doesn’t happen! In the second place, such hypocrisy means we are not practicing what is true.

Raymond Brown (*Anchor Bible*) gives some understanding here:

Literally, “We do not do [*poiein*] truth”—another Semitism. In I John there is reference to *doing* the following: the will of God (2:17), what is pleasing before Him (3:22), justice (2:29; 3:7, 10); sin (3:4, 8-9); and lawlessness (3:4). The expression “doing a lie” occurs in Rev 21:27; 22:15; and it involves acting falsely (see 1QpHab 10:11-12 in the preceding NOTE). The idiom of “doing” applied to divine realities suggests that they can be concretized in human behavior.

The expression “to do the truth” brings the first epistolary occurrence of *alētheia*. Of 109 NT instances of this term, almost half are Johannine, with 25 in GJohn and 20 in the Epistles. (For the related adjectives *alēthēs*, “true,” and *alēthinos*, “true, real,” see the NOTE on 2:8ab below.) The greater proportional frequency in the Epistles is explained by the fact that Johannine thought tends to identify “truth” with the revelation in and by Jesus, and in the author’s judgment that revelation is now under attack by the secessionists. In ABJ 29, 499-501, I discussed the two main schools of thought about the background of the Johannine

notion of truth: the Dodd-Bultmann thesis of a Greek background whereby for John truth is a quasi-Platonic heavenly reality; the de la Potterie thesis of an OT and intertestamental background whereby for John truth is predicated of God's mysterious plan of salvation, which is revealed to human beings. Since that time de la Potterie has published his massive study, *La vérité*, making his case even more convincing; and Aalen, "Truth," and Mundle, "Wahrheitsverständnis," think in a similar manner. The Hebrew word for "truth" (*ʿemet*) is related to a root (*ʿmn*) that conveys the notion of firmness or solidity as a basis for trustworthy acceptance. When the truth of God's revelation is accepted by the believer, it becomes the basis from which that person lives; and if one acts in truth (does truth), one is not simply following an outside model of what is right (which would be Platonic) but is acting from an interior principle. This becomes apparent in the Dead Sea Scrolls where identity is expressed in terms of an interior relation to truth, so that the Community's members are the "sons of truth" (1QS 4:5-6), or "men of truth" (1QH 14:2), "generations of truth" (1QS 3:19), "witnesses of truth" (1QS 8:6). The Community itself is a "community [*yaḥad*] of truth" (1QS 2:24, 26) and a "house of truth" (1QS 8:9).

The phrase "to do truth" (*ʿasāh ʿemet*) occurs twice in the Hebrew Bible: in Neh 9:33 in reference to God's fidelity in action, and in 2 Chr 31:20 in reference to King Hezekiah's doing the precepts of the Law. The literal Greek expression (*alētheian poiein*) is more frequent in the LXX but has about the same span of reference, e.g., Gen 32:10 in reference to God's action; Gen 47:29; Isa 26:10; Tob 4:6; 13:6 in reference to a range of human actions (being faithful, doing right). "To do truth" is quite frequent in the Hebrew of Qumran and in the intertestamental works preserved in Greek, often colored by the view that what is found in the Law (or in the interpretation of it) is truth. This is implied in 1QpHab 7:10-11: "The men of truth, those who do the Law"; and it is explicit in 1QS 8:1-2, which speaks of the community officers as "perfectly knowledgeable in all that is revealed of the Law in order to do truth." In *T. Benj* 10:3 there is the instruction "to do the truth, each one to his neighbor, and to keep the Law of the Lord and His commandments"—a combination of commandments and love of neighbor attested in John (see also *T. Reuben* 6:9). For the Johannine Christians Christ has replaced the Law as the basis of operation, and so "truth" as an interiorized principle is more personal

in John than at Qumran—it is close to OT Wisdom and the Qumran spirit of truth. De la Potterie insists that to do the truth is not the same as to walk in light: it involves belief, intermediary between truth, the interiorized principle, and the exterior action which corresponds to one's faith. Personally I find the distinction oversubtle. For more detail, see Zerwick, "Veritatem facere"; de la Potterie, *La vérité* 2, 479-535; and ABJ 29, 134-35, 148-49.

To claim a relationship with God that doesn't really exist is a huge tragedy and represents a ruinous deception of both the individual and of other people as well. Yet, in our contemporary world -- as well as in John's world -- many Christians are living in such deception. Thinking they have relationship with God, they are plunging themselves head long into eternal damnation when they face God on judgement day. And by teaching their deception to others, they are taking countless numbers of other individuals with them into Hell. No wonder that John issued a stern warning to his first century readers against accepting this false teaching!

"If we..." (2+): "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" (ἐὰν δὲ ἐν τῷ φωτὶ περιπατῶμεν ὡς αὐτός ἐστιν ἐν τῷ φωτὶ, κοινωνίαν ἔχομεν μετ' ἀλλήλων καὶ τὸ αἷμα Ἰησοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ καθαρίζει ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ πάσης ἁμαρτίας).

The opposite of deception is the individual whose profession is matched by his lifestyle of obedience to God through Christ. As a reinforcement of the apostolic gospel John presents the converse side of walking in God's pure light. This is the corrective to the false teaching being promoted among John's readers.

Living our lives in the paths that God has laid out for us brings certain blessings two of which John sets forth here in the apodosis part of this conditional sentence in the Greek text. First, we enjoy "fellowship with one another" (κοινωνίαν ἔχομεν μετ' ἀλλήλων). Second, we experience cleansing from our sin through the blood of Jesus (τὸ αἷμα Ἰησοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ καθαρίζει ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ πάσης ἁμαρτίας).

Smalley (WBC) offers helpful insights here:

Two positive consequences of living in the light are now set out, corresponding to the negative results of living in darkness mentioned in v 6. It might be expected that the first would be "we share fellowship with God," which was the claim made by the heretics and just refuted (see v 3b). Instead, the thought moves on: to live in the light is to share

fellowship with God's people. But this is an entirely complementary thought, and one which is implied in the challenge to live in the light. It is axiomatic for John that fellowship with God involves fellowship with his people. Perhaps the secessionists had claimed to have a relationship with God while at the same time neglecting to love their fellow-Christians. This attitude, which would have been typical of those with gnostic inclinations, existed as a further mark of the heretics' falsehood (see further the comment on v 6).

John has already stated a desire for "fellowship" (κοινωνία) with his readers (1:3; for the term itself see the comment on that v). In 1:3 he uses the pronouns ὑμεῖς ("you") and ἡμῶν ("us"). Now he identifies himself even more closely with the orthodox ("apostolic") members of the Johannine circle by using the first person plural alone: "we share (ἔχομεν, literally, "we have") fellowship with each other." For this usage see further the comment on v 5; see also 1:1.

καί τὸ αἷμα ... ἁμαρτίας. John suddenly widens his theological terms of reference by his announcement that "the blood of Jesus purifies us from every sin" (cf. 5:6). The second result of living in the light follows from the first: "we share fellowship with each other, and (καί) the blood of Jesus purifies us." This is because the achievement of fellowship with God, however remote it may be, immediately produces an awareness of God's holiness and man's unholiness, or sin. The author therefore reassures his readers that God has anticipated this need. In the death and resurrection of Jesus exists the possibility of purification from "every sin" (πάσης ἁμαρτίας). This refers to man's sinful nature in general, although it may include the wrong acts which can occur even when a Christian is living "in the light."

Note on "Sin"

The Gr. terms for "sin," like the Hebrew, are varied. The most common is ἁμαρτία, which is defined in 1 John as both "lawlessness" (ἀνομία, 3:4) and "wrongdoing" (ἀδικία, 5:17). This is the normative understanding of the concept of sin throughout the Bible; for in both the OT and the NT "sin" describes "every departure from the way of righteousness, both human and divine" (BAG, 42). In characteristic Johannine usage, sin also appears as that which is opposed to the truth (1:8; cf. John 9:41). Westcott (38) distinguishes (perhaps too sharply) in the use of the singular noun ἁμαρτία (sin in general, or an act of sin) and the verb ἁμαρτάνειν (to present a sinful character, or commit a sinful act);

between the principle of sin, and the manifestation of this in the sinful acts of the individual (cf. John 16:8-9; 1 John 3:6; 5:16-18). In the plural use of the noun, ἁμαρτίαι ("sins"), there is no ambivalence (cf. 1:9).

In 1 John sin is regarded as a universal condition (1:10), resulting, apart from Christ, in alienation from God (2:15) and spiritual death (3:14). But, in Christ, sin (and sins) can be removed (2:2; 3:5; cf. John 1:29). See further Westcott, 37-40.

τὸ αἷμα Ἰησοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ. John says that "the blood of Jesus" purifies us from every sin. The term αἷμα ("blood") is a symbol for the crucifixion of Christ, and its background is to be located in Jewish sacrifice. In the OT blood (Hebrew *dām*) was regarded as the seat of life (Lev 17:11). In terms of sacrifice, as a means of atonement ("at-one-ment" between man and God), the "blood" of a victim was thus its life yielded up in death; and the "sprinkling" of that blood guaranteed for the worshiper the effectiveness of any sacrifice (cf. Exod 30:10; Lev 16:15-19).

The "blood" of Jesus occupies an important place in NT thought, and must be interpreted above all against the specific background of the cultic observances on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16; but cf. also the Passover story and ritual, Exod 12). In his suffering and death, the NT writers claim, Jesus in perfect obedience offered the *true* and lasting sacrifice for sin (cf. Rom 3:25; Heb 9:12-14; 10:19-22; Rev 1:5; also 1 Cor 5:7). Thus to say here that the blood of Jesus "purifies us from every sin" means that in the cross of Christ our sin is effectively and repeatedly (καθαρίζει, "purifies," is a continuous present) removed; although John does not explain how this happens. The *covenant* between God and Israel, sealed and restored by sacrifice, is also related to the NT idea of Christ's offering for man's sin (cf. Jer 31:31-34; Heb 8:7-13).

On the basis of this v Westcott (34-37) argues, with particular reference to Lev 17:11, that the "blood" of Jesus in the NT, rather than signifying his sacrificial *death*, always includes the thought of his *life*, "preserved and active beyond death" (36). A similar position is adopted by Dewar, *JTS* ns 4 (1953) 203-208. Against this view, and for further consideration of the biblical idea of "blood," especially in association with the death of Jesus, see Morris, *Apostolic Preaching*, 112-28; J. Behm, *TDNT* 1 (1964) 172-76. cf. also Taylor, *Atonement*, 130-61; F. Laubach, *NIDNTT* 1 (1975) 220-24, especially 223.

The sacrifice which "purifies us from every sin" is described here as that of "Jesus his (God's) Son" (Ἰησοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ). Such a designation

may have been carefully chosen by the writer. For the christology which is implied in this phrase could provide a counterbalance to the views of those who were making, or were inclined to make, heretical claims about Jesus. Those with too high a view of his person are reminded that Christ was genuinely human (hence the use of the earthly name, “Jesus”), and therefore able to be the sacrifice for human sin. On the other hand, those whose estimate of Jesus was too low are recalled to the truth that he was also God’s own Son, so that he could offer the sacrifice perfectly. (See the introduction, xxvi–vii.) On “Son” see further the comments on 1:3 and 3:8.

O’Neill (*Puzzle*, 10) regards the whole phrase τὸ αἷμα Ἰησοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ (“the blood of Jesus his Son”) as a gloss, introduced after the writer had completed his work. (Similarly Bultmann, 20, sees it as a later redaction.) O’Neill’s argument is that *confession* in the total passage 1:5–10 is the only condition of forgiveness (see v 9). However, as he admits, there is no textual evidence in favor of this view. Moreover, the reference to the “blood of Jesus” is a logical and indispensable step in John’s argument at this point, and consistent with the other sacrificial references to the death of Jesus in 1 John (cf. 2:2; 4:10). It is true that references of this kind are explicit in the letters and not the Gospel of John. But (i) sacrificial ideas are implicit in the Gospel (e.g. John 1:29, 36; 3:14–16; 10:11; 11:50–52; 12:24; see also 6:53–56, using αἷμα); (ii) in 1 John the sacrificial description of Christ’s death develops the understanding of atonement in the Fourth Gospel, for the special benefit of those readers (from a Greek background) who may have been prepared to play down or even deny the reality of the cross; and this is no doubt one further reason for the distinctive formulation of John’s argument here.

The verb καθαρίζειν (“to cleanse,” or “to purify”), as used here, denotes the removal of sin’s entail, and not merely the forgiveness of sin (cf. Eph 5:26; Titus 2:14; Heb 10:2; also John 13:10; and see 1:9). The “purified” (καθαροί) in heart are elsewhere promised by Jesus the ultimate blessing of “seeing God” (Matt 5:8).

The secessionists from the Johannine community who were maintaining that sin was unimportant (vv 6–7), and whose views the writer is especially attacking at this point, may have appealed to the Fourth Gospel to support their position. For example, they might have interpreted John 3:16–18a to mean that present salvation is all, and that the believing sinner therefore need not fear condemnation.

Similarly John’s reply, that salvation is a universal need which has been met in the sacrificial death of Jesus, may also hark back to elements of teaching preserved in the Fourth Gospel. See 2:4–9. cf. further Brown, *Community*, 124–27; also the introduction, xxvi–vii.

Thus with powerful imagery John launches his first blast at the false teaching that failed completely to understand the implications of God being pure light. To them this meant the possibility of superior ‘enlightenment’ about God. The focus was exclusively on the interior aspect of human existence. Through possessing this superior knowledge we gain deliverance from our ignorant ways. Moral responsibility and the possibility of moral failure are things of the flesh, not of the soul and spirit. Therefore they were considered unimportant and irrelevant by the heretical teachers.

But John knew better than this nonsense! And he was concerned to protect the apostolic community from this disastrous influence. Thus he counters this teaching by both critique and corrective. The critique in verse six contends the image of God as pure light demanded consistency between profession and behavior. Light is ethical demand that must be followed by the believer; otherwise no relationship with God exists. Failure to do so, as was the case with these false teachers, meant living a lie and failure to live by the Truth of God.

The corrective in verse seven asserts that walking in the light as God is light brings authentic fellowship, not just with God but with the believing community as well. These false teachers, often labeled secessionists by modern commentators, had severed ties to the apostolic communities of faith and were advocating that others follow them. But true faith commitment inherently means living in community with other sincere believers. Isolationist thinking has no place in true Christianity. It will and must form communities of faith where mutual encouragement and insight can be gained.

The other benefit mentioned by John is the ‘bottom line’ of genuine Christian experience. In a faith commitment that is lived out in God’s light, the blood of Jesus Christ provides full cleansing from every sinful action. Implicit in this is the contention that sin is a serious issue that has to be solved if one is to have fellowship with God, and with other genuine believers. Cleansing purges the darkness out of our life and enables us to experience the full blessing of the divine Light coming into our lives. This purging only comes with a faith commitment that seriously

seeks to implement the ethical demands of the divine Light.

What John set forth at the end of the first Christian century is timeless truth that remains vitally relevant and important for our day. Although different

motives for ignoring sin and the ethical demands of God upon our lives exist, the result is the same. Any teaching without emphasis upon holy living is heresy and ruinous for anyone buying into it.

b. Dealing with sin, vv. 8-10

Greek NT

1·8 ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι ἁμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν, ἐαυτοὺς πλανῶμεν καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν. 1·9 ἐὰν ὁμολογῶμεν τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν, πιστός ἐστιν καὶ δίκαιος, ἵνα ἀφῆς ἡμῖν τὰς ἁμαρτίας καὶ καθάρισῃ ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ πάσης ἀδικίας. 1·10 ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι οὐχ ἡμαρτήκαμεν ψεύστην ποιοῦμεν αὐτὸν καὶ ὁ λόγος αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν.

NASB

8 If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.

NRSV

8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

NLT

8 If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth. 9 But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong. 10 If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts.

Notes:

This second unit of text grows out of the first. The false teachers ignored the seriousness of sin and sinful living. John countered this with the image of God as pure light from the ethical, moral aspect rather than the exclusively intellectual aspect, as had his gnostic opponents. The cleansing by the blood of Jesus of every sinful action in the first unit paved the way for a more detailed elaboration of the sin issue in this second unit in verses eight through ten -- actually it extends through verse two of chapter two where the role of Jesus in regard to sin is picked up again by John.

The literary pattern of third class conditional sentences, began in verse six, continues here. But a shift in topic takes place so that the common theme now is 'sin' (ἁμαρτία). Smalley (WBC) has some very important comments on ἁμαρτία in 1 John:

The Gr. terms for "sin," like the Hebrew, are varied. The most common is ἁμαρτία, which is defined in 1 John as both "lawlessness" (ἀνομία, 3:4) and "wrongdoing" (ἀδικία, 5:17). This is the normative understanding of the concept of sin throughout the Bible; for in both the OT and the NT "sin" describes "every departure from the way of righteousness, both human and divine" (BAG, 42). In characteristic Johannine usage, sin also appears as that which is opposed to the truth (1:8; cf. John 9:41). Westcott

(38) distinguishes (perhaps too sharply) in the use of the singular noun ἁμαρτία (sin in general, or an act of sin) and the verb ἁμαρτάνειν (to present a sinful character, or commit a sinful act); between the principle of sin, and the manifestation of this in the sinful acts of the individual (cf. John 16:8-9; 1 John 3:6; 5:16-18). In the plural use of the noun, ἁμαρτίαι ("sins"), there is no ambivalence (cf. 1:9).

In 1 John sin is regarded as a universal condition (1:10), resulting, apart from Christ, in alienation from God (2:15) and spiritual death (3:14). But, in Christ, sin (and sins) can be removed (2:2; 3:5; cf. John 1:29). See further Westcott, 37-40.

This time three "what if" (ἐὰν protases) situations are posed, with the first and third being negative while the middle, second one is positive.

Note Smalley's (WBC) observations here:

The literary form of each verse here is balanced, and John follows carefully the structural pattern which has been established in the previous section (see vv 6 and 7). He uses two more pairs of ἐάν ("if") clauses in order to present a false assertion made by the heretics, introduced with the words "if we claim" (the first ἐάν clause), followed by an explanatory statement, followed by a positive assertion of the truth (the second ἐάν clause). Two such claims, which are roughly two versions of the same claim (see the comment on v 6), are set out

and commented upon now. Thus:

8. If we claim to be sinless, we are deceiving ourselves.

10. If we claim that we have not sinned, we are making him out to be a liar.

9. But if we acknowledge our sins, he will forgive our sins.

2.1. If anyone should sin, we have an intercessor, our sin-offering.

After each version of the heretical error presented in vv 8 and 10 the explanatory comment is repeated in a roughly “parallel” form: “we are deceiving ourselves/the truth has no place in us” (v 8); “we are making him out to be a liar/his word has no place in us” (v 10). Compare v 6, the first version of the claim that sin is inconsequential: “we are lying/we are not practicing the truth.”

O’Neill (*Puzzle*, 13–15) regards vv 1b and 2 (with 2:6) as Christian glosses on a Jewish hymn about obedience (the rest of 2:1–6). Similarly Bultmann (23) sees v 2 as an ecclesiastical redaction. But there is no evidence for treating these vv as secondary; and, on the contrary, it is possible to show (as we shall do) that they are integral (both theologically and in terms of practical exhortation) to the structure and content of John’s argument at this point.

What if... (1): “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (ἐάν εἴπωμεν ὅτι ἁμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν, ἐαυτοὺς πλανῶμεν καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν).

This first scenario sets up the situation of a believer claiming to not have a sin problem. Smalley (WBC) rightly notes concerning the framing of the protasis:

Using the same formula as in v 6a, ἐάν εἴπωμεν ὅτι (“if we claim that”; literally, “if we say that”), John introduces a variation of the basic assertion which was being made by the gnostically inclined secessionists from John’s community (cf. further the comment on v 6). This was the assertion that sin could not affect their relationship to God (v 6), because (in their eyes, at least) they were sinless (vv 8 and 10). Their “gnostic illumination,” that is to say, made sin a matter of moral irrelevance to them. For the philosophical basis to this dualist view see further the introduction, xxiii–iv; cf. also the comment on 2:3.

The version of the heretical claim to be sinless mentioned in this v (ἁμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν; literally, “we have no sin”) is more clear-cut than in v 6. The assertion now reported may have been a response

to the accusation levelled at the heretics by the orthodox Johannine Christians: that those who boasted of living in the light while walking in darkness were in practice committing sin (being unrighteous) without acknowledging it. The explicit reply of the heretics, that they were “sinless” (cf. also v 10), may have depended on the discussion in John’s Gospel (8:31–47),¹ misapplied in their own case, about sinfulness as a characteristic of those who do not believe (see the introduction, xxvi).

The expression ἁμαρτίαν (“to have sin”) is found in the NT only here and in the Fourth Gospel (e.g. John 9:41; 15:22; cf. 5:26, ζῶν ἔχειν, “to have life”). To “have sin” is the equivalent of possessing a sinful character or disposition. Cf. the use of the phrase πιστὶν ἔχειν (“to have faith”) in Matt 17:20, to describe the active principle of faith in the life of the believer. Thus “‘sin’ is the principle of which sinful acts are the several manifestations” (Brooke, 17). The latter, sinful acts, are distinguished as such in v 10 (οὐκ ἠμαρτήκαμεν, “we have not sinned”). However, perhaps the contrast should not be drawn too sharply; for man’s sinful nature is not, in fact, easily discerned apart from his sinful actions.

Law (*Tests*, 130) interprets the phrase ἁμαρτίαν ἔχειν judicially, to mean “having guilt or responsibility for wrong actions.” But although the idea of responsibility for one’s sin is certainly involved in the use of this phrase (rather than the verb, ἁμαρτάνειν, “to sin”) by the fourth evangelist (e.g. John 15:22), it is in any case only one aspect of the notion of sin in both Hebrew and Christian thought (see above, 24). For sin in biblical terms is basically a departure from right; and guilt or responsibility is therefore an inevitable consequence of sin, but not its inclusive character. In this v it is precisely a denial of sin *altogether* to which the writer is alluding.

These proto-gnostic opponents of John first of all failed to come to grips with their sinful na-

¹John 8:38–41 (NRSV): 38 I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.” 39 They answered him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would do what Abraham did, 40 but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth which I heard from God; this is not what Abraham did. 41 You do what your father did.” They said to him, “We were not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God.”

ture. To be certain this was based on a false application of the dominant philosophical thinking of their Greek world, Platonic dualism, and led them to a perverted severing of the connection of the spiritual 'soul' from the 'fleshly' body of human existence. Modern Christian tendencies to ignore or deny the human 'sin problem' are based on different ideological grounds, but produce just about the same results. For whatever the reason, denial of a fundamental problem with human sinfulness leads to a perverted and false Christian doctrine. The cross of Christ becomes unnecessary and only a thin covering of supposed Christianity is layered over a rotten human heart and is called Christian. But nothing changes down inside the person, and he remains just as lost as ever. Only now he has this totally false sense of security that he is Heaven bound. The human heart is sinful to its core, and only the blood of Jesus can clean it up and make it presentable to God. Conversion doesn't eliminate the sin problem in some kind of imaginary 'perfected soul' situation where sinlessness becomes possible this side of Heaven. The modern 'perfectionist' doctrine is nothing more than an resurfacing of the same essential heresy that the apostle John is condemning in our passage. As long as we believers live in a sinful world and in our corrupted bodies we will have to deal with the tendency toward sinful behavior and attitudes. This was John's point emphatically in this first 'what if' declaration.

Unwillingness to deal with one's own sinfulness as a believer, John declares, makes that person "deceived" and void of the Truth of God. Smalley (*WBC*) adds to our understanding with his comments:

The result of the heretical claim to sinlessness is described in two parallel ways. Positively, "we are deceiving ourselves"; negatively, "the truth has no place in us." The emphatic *ἑαυτούς πλανῶμεν* ("we are deceiving ourselves"), rather than the single verb, *πλανώμεθα* ("we are deceived"), suggests a deliberate refusal to face the facts. To deny that human nature is sinful is actively to practice self-deception. The verb *πλανᾶν* ("to deceive") has an OT background (cf. Deut 13:6, LXX; also Wis 5:6; 1QH 4:16), and includes the

notion of "leading astray" (cf. 2:26; 3:7; see also John 7:12, 47, where Jesus is accused of deceiving people). The verb is also used in Rev (e.g. 2:20; 12:9) to describe the deception of the faithful by the servants of evil.

The fact that the truth has "no place" in the secessionists (and those who are like them) means not merely that they are lying, but also that they do not and cannot share, as they suppose, in the reality of God, whose "true" nature has been revealed in Jesus as *the truth* (cf. John 1:4; 8:31, 32; 14:6). Like the "word" of God (v 10), *the truth of God has no place in such people.*

What a tragedy! John realized it was happening among his readers, and so moved to block this influence among the house church groups. How successful he was remains unknown because of lack of concrete data about the history of the churches in Asia Minor in the latter decades of the first Christian century.

What if...(2): "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (*ἐὰν ὁμολογῶμεν τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν, πιστός ἐστὶν καὶ δίκαιος, ἵνα ἀφῆς ἡμῖν τὰς ἁμαρτίας καὶ καθάρῃσι ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ πάσης ἀδικίας*).

The middle conditional sentence presents the positive corrective. Some of John's readers were unwilling to acknowledge their sinfulness. But others evidently were, and John sets forth a fundamental theological principle on confession of sins. Smalley (*WBC*) has some helpful elaboration on the nature of confession from the wording of the Greek text here:

Although the verb "we acknowledge" (*ὁμολογῶμεν*) appears in a conditional clause (beginning with *ἐάν*), the whole phrase has the force of a command (so Marshall, 113). We *ought* to acknowledge our sins; and, if we do, God responds. The manner of the acknowledgment is not specified. However, Westcott (23) may be right to suggest that an element of public confession before others, as well as God, is involved; for elsewhere in the Johannine corpus the verb *ὁμολογεῖν* ("to acknowledge") is used in the sense of open "witness" (see 2:23; John 1:20; Rev 3:5; cf. also Matt 10:32; Rom 10:9). For the cognate verb *ἐξομολογεῖν* ("to confess"), used in a baptismal context, see Matt 3:6 = Mark 1:5; *Did.* 4:14. The use of

the plural, “sins” (τὰς ἁμαρτίας), probably indicates that the confession of particular acts of sin is meant in this context, rather than the acknowledgment of “sin” in general. The exact phrase, ἐάν ὁμολογῶμεν τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν, occurs only here in the NT (but cf. Mark 1:5; James 5:16, “confess your sins to each other”). For “sin” see the comment on 1:7.

Confession is much more than a quick “I’m sorry, God.” It is a profound realization of one’s own sinfulness and a willingness to publicly acknowledge it before the people of God. Such is not easy but stands as critically necessary for the forgiveness and cleansing from sin.

The promise of this confession is again stated in twofold manner: 1) forgiveness of sin, and 2) cleansing of all unrighteousness. John states this a little differently by putting the focus on God’s dependability to take these measures in behalf of one making the confession.

What is stressed is not so much the forgiveness and cleansing, but the absolute confidence that we can place in God and His willingness to take these actions in our behalf.

Raymond Brow (*Anchor Bible*) reminds us of the Old Testament background of this parallel phrase πιστός ἐστιν καὶ δίκαιος.:

As for I John, besides the present passage, which joins GJohn in calling God “just,” there are four occurrences of *dikaiois* in 2:1, 29; and 3:7. Three of them describe Jesus as “just” while the fourth asks Christians to be just in imitation of him. (Piper, “I John” 442, contends that the epistolary author’s tendency to use this title of Jesus reflects primitive Semitic strains in the Johannine tradition [see INTRODUCTION II C2a and V C2d]). In the 3:7 passage the statement that Christ is just is prefaced in 3:5–6 by the idea that he revealed himself to take away sins and “there is nothing sinful [*hamartia*] in him.” Indeed, *adikia*, “wrongdoing,” or what is not *dikaiois*, is another Johannine word for sin; and 1 John 5:17 states, “All wrongdoing is sin” (cf. 1:9). Similarly John 7:18 states that in Jesus, who seeks the glory of the One who sent him, “there is no wrongdoing.” This opposition to sin is usually thought to imply a negative, punitive aspect of the just God or the just Christ, making justice equivalent to condemnation; but in IJohn the just God is related to the forgiveness of sins, as we see in the next line (1:9c). This is true in the OT as well, where *dikaioisynē*, “justice” (to be discussed in the next paragraph), can be used in

the LXX to translate Hebrew *hesed*, “God’s covenant mercy” (Exod 15:13; 34:7). In Isa 45:21 we hear of “a just God and therefore a Savior,” and in Isa 50:8 the verb *dikaiooun* is used for God’s vindication of the afflicted Servant of the Lord. In Ps 88:12–13 (11–12) God’s justice is placed in parallelism to His mercy. Lyonnet, “Noun *hilasmos*” 152, concludes, “God is called ‘just,’ not inasmuch as He punishes sinners, but for the very same reason that He is called ‘faithful,’ namely insofar as He spares them.” Thus, the joining of *pistos* and *dikaiois* reflects a covenant attitude toward God, echoing the OT description of a God who is “faithful and without injustice, just and holy” (Deut 32:4), a God “just and faithful” who could be invoked by His people as a covenant witness (Jer 42[49]:5). Evidently the combination had a certain currency among Christians; for, writing about the same time as the author of I John, Clement of Rome urged: “Let our souls be bound to Him who is faithful in His promises and just in His judgments” (1Clem, 27:1; also 60:1).

The two actions of forgiving and cleansing are part of a larger Johannine vocabulary dealing with the removal of sin from the believer, as Brown (AB) summarizes:

The Johannine redemptive language contains many words to describe what has been done to sin (see Rivera, *La redención* 20–26), including:

- “forgive” (*aphienai*): John 20:23; 1 John 1:9; 2:12
- “take away” (*airein*): John 1:29; 1 John 3:5
- “destroy” (*lyein*): 1 John 3:8
- “atonement, expiation” (*hilasmos*): 1 John 2:2; 4:10
- “cleanse” (*katharizein*): here; 1 John 1:9
- “clean” (*katharos*): John 13:10–11

What is removed are 1) ἡμῖν τὰς ἁμαρτίας (“our sins”) and 2) πάσης ἀδικίας (“all unrighteousness”). Smalley (*WBC*) helps us here:

God’s saving action, in response to acknowledged sin, operates in two directions: forgiveness of sin, and purification from “every kind of unrighteousness.” The images are expressive; for sin is an offense which God expiates, and also a stain which he removes (cf. Stott, 77). The verb ἀφιέναι (“to forgive”) means literally “to release,” or “to let go.” Its background is forensic (cf. Luke 7:43, concerning release from debt); although in the LXX the verb is also used in a cultic setting (cf. Lev 4:20; 19:22). For the verb καθαρίζειν (“to purify”) see v 7. The two verbs, “forgive” and “purify,” are not entirely synonymous; for καθαρίζειν may mean

the removal of sinful desire in general, as well as of the guilt attaching to actual sins (cf. Westcott, 25). But the primary significance of this passage is in any case related to the divine pardon which is available for every believer who confesses to sinful actions (hence the plural, τὰς ἁμαρτίας, “sins”; see v 7a).

John no doubt chose the term ἀδικία (“unrighteousness”), instead of ἁμαρτία (“sin”), because it forms a contrast with δίκαιος (“righteous”), used of God earlier in the sentence. The only other occurrence of the word in the Johannine letters is at 5:17, where ἀδικία is identified with ἁμαρτία. The singular phrase, “every kind of unrighteousness” (πάσης ἀδικίας), refers to the confession of sin in detail.

God’s salvific actions in this v are regarded as constant. The verb ἡμῖν (literally, “he forgives”) is thus in the present tense, suggesting his daily forgiveness. (At 2:12 the verb appears in the perfect tense, where the complementary sense is that of the initial experience of divine forgiveness on becoming a Christian.) The pronouns ἡμῖν (literally, “to us”) and ἡμᾶς (“us”) are repeated for emphasis; God’s healing is essentially personal, and concerned with the individual.

Thus divine pardon is available to the sinning believer, but only in his serious dealing with sin in his life. Sinful conduct has to be acknowledge and surrendered to God; and God can be counted on then to remove it from our life.

What if...(3): “If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us” (ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι οὐχ ἡμαρτήκαμεν ψεύστην ποιοῦμεν αὐτόν καὶ ὁ λόγος αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν).

With this third conditional protasis John returns to the negative angle that his gnostic opponents at Ephesus were guilty of adopting.

The ‘what if’ protasis is cast a little differently than in the first scenario: ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι οὐχ ἡμαρτήκαμεν instead of ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι ἁμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν as in the first one. But the concept seems to be almost the same, as Smalley (WBC) points out:

It is difficult to see any real difference between the affirmations “we are sinless” (v 8) and “we have not sinned” (v 10); although Westcott (25) argues that in the earlier v the heretics are represented as denying the “permanence of sin as a power,” whereas here they are said to be denying absolutely the practice of sin in their own lives. A broader, and more likely, distinction possibly exists in these two

vv between the *principle* of sin, ἁμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν (literally, “we do not have sin,” using the present tense of the verb), and its *expression* in sinful acts (οὐκ ἡμαρτήκαμεν, “we have not sinned,” using the perfect).

The dramatic difference between the first and third ‘what if’ scenarios comes in the apodosis main clause of these third class conditional sentences. Both use a twofold parallelism but the thrust is different:

First what if in v. 8:

- 1) “we deceive ourselves” (ἐαυτοὺς πλανῶμεν).
- 2) “the truth is not in us” (ἡ ἀλήθεια οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν).

The focus is on the individual and his self deception.

Third what if in v. 10:

- 1) “we make him a liar” (ψεύστην ποιοῦμεν αὐτόν).
- 2) “his word is not in us” (ὁ λόγος αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν).

Now the focus is on God and our slandering of Him through our denial of sin in our life.

Note Smalley’s (WBC) elaboration here:

First, the claim to be without sin suggests falsehood on God’s part; it “makes him out to be a liar.” The universality of human sin is a common biblical doctrine (cf. Ps 14:3; Isa 53:6; John 2:24–25; Rom 3:22–24); and so also is the theme of the mercy of God, who forgives the sinner (Jer 31:34; Eph 4:32; among the Johannine writings the actual verb ἀφιέναι, “to forgive,” occurs only in this letter). Thus, to deny the tact of sin in one’s own life is to deny the holy and forgiving nature of God; it is to impute falsehood to him, and to challenge his own verdict on man’s guilt as a sinner (see John 16:8–9; Rom 8:1; cf. Schnackenburg, 88). The use of the expression ψεύστην ποιεῖν τίνα (“to make someone a liar”) is characteristically Johannine (cf. 5:10, where the same formula occurs; also John 5:18).

καὶ ὁ λόγος αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν, “and his word has no place in us.” The second (negative) outcome of the claim to be without sin is an extension of the first. It is that “his word has no place in us.” The “word” (λόγος) of God may refer to the personal Logos (as in John 1:1–14). Equally, it could refer to the *message* of the gospel, the proclamation about the Word (see the comment on 1:1; cf. also 2:14; John 17:6; Acts 4:31). The meaning in this latter case would be that those, like the heretics, who claim that they have not sinned cut themselves off

from all that God has said to man in Christ, and from all that he continues to say through the Christian preaching of the apostles.

However, as in 1:1, a deliberate ambivalence may be included in the reference to λόγος at this point. To make God out to be a liar, the writer may be saying, is only possible *either* for someone who is not listening clearly to the good news about Jesus, or for someone in whom Jesus, by his Spirit, does not dwell (cf. John 14:23; 15:4; Col 1:27). We may notice in passing the extent to which, as here, John and Paul are at one in their profound understanding of the Christ-Christian relationship; see Smalley, "Christ-Christian Relationship," especially 96–100.

The phrase "(his word) has no place in us" (οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν) is parallel to that in v 8, "(the truth) has no place in us." For the use of εἶναι ἐν ("to be in") see the comment on v 8. The significance in both places is roughly synonymous. However, if the term λόγος in the present context is ambivalent, and includes a reference to Christ (see above), it could be argued that John regards the indwelling of God's word in more personal terms than the interiority of divine "truth." Nevertheless, see John 17:17, where Jesus describes God's "word" as "truth."

What do these verses have to do with us today? Everything! Although modern Christianity for the most part doesn't base a denial of sinfulness on the same foundation as did John's first century opponents, the same general conclusion is frequently reached from other sources: we don't have a sin problem. And thus the spiritual impact on the modern believer denying his sin remains exactly the same as was true for John's first century readers.

To deny one's sinfulness, even as a believer, is to demonstrate that such an individual has no contact with God, and has never had one! This in spite of his claim to be in close fellowship with God. Countless millions of supposed Christians in our world today have fallen prey to this false understanding of the gospel, and thus have never seriously dealt with their own sinful nature and the sinful conduct produced by that corrupt nature. The Day of Judgment is going to be spiritual disaster for them with the horrifying words from Almighty God, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers" (Matt. 7:23). Their eternal fate will be sealed by the words of Jesus in Matt. 25:46: "And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

No amount of 'Christian business' will compensate for this failure, as Jesus declares in [Matt. 7:21-23](#):

21 "Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?" 23 Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers."

What a pity? Because God has been ready to cleanse and forgive all along, if they would have gotten serious about their sinfulness.

Greek NT

1·5 Καὶ ἔστιν αὕτη ἡ ἀγγελία ἣν ἀκηκόαμεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀναγγέλλομεν ὑμῖν, ὅτι ὁ θεὸς φῶς ἐστὶν καὶ σκοτία ἐν αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδεμία. 1·6 Ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι κοινωνίαν ἔχομεν μετ' αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐν τῷ σκοτεῖ περιπατῶμεν, ψευδόμεθα καὶ οὐ ποιοῦμεν τὴν ἀλήθειαν· 1·7 ἐὰν δὲ ἐν τῷ φωτὶ περιπατῶμεν ὡς αὐτὸς ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ φωτὶ, κοινωνίαν ἔχομεν μετ' ἀλλήλων καὶ τὸ αἷμα Ἰησοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ καθαρίζει ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ πάσης ἁμαρτίας. 1·8 ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι ἁμαρτιᾶν οὐκ ἔχομεν, ἑαυτοὺς πλανῶμεν καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν. 1·9 ἐὰν ὁμολογῶμεν τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν, πιστὸς ἐστὶν καὶ δίκαιος, ἵνα ἀφῆς ἡμῖν τὰς ἁμαρτίας καὶ καθάρσῃ ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ πάσης ἀδικίας. 1·10 ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι οὐχ ἡμαρτήκαμεν ψεύστην ποιοῦμεν αὐτὸν καὶ ὁ λόγος αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν.

NASB

5 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. 6 If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; 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.

8 If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.

NRSV

5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. 6 If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; 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.

8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

NLT

5 This is the message he has given us to announce to you: God is light and there is no darkness in him at all. 6 So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness. We are not living in the truth. 7 But if we are living in the light of God's presence, just as Christ is, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from every sin.

8 If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth. 9 But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong. 10 If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts.

Greek Text Diagram

1:5 Καὶ
 4 ἔστιν αὕτη ἡ ἀγγελία
 ἣν ἀκηκόαμεν
 ἀπ' αὐτοῦ
 καὶ
 ἀναγγέλλομεν ὑμῖν,
 ὅτι ὁ θεὸς φῶς ἐστίν
 καὶ
 ἐν αὐτῷ
 σκοτία...οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδεμία.

1:6 Ἐὰν εἴπωμεν
 ὅτι **κοινωνίαν** ἔχομεν
 μετ' αὐτοῦ
 καὶ
 ἐν τῷ σκότει
 περιπατῶμεν,
 5 **ψευδόμεθα**
 καὶ
 6 **οὐ ποιοῦμεν τὴν ἀλήθειαν·**
 1:7 δὲ
 ἐν τῷ φωτὶ
ἐὰν... περιπατῶμεν
 ὡς αὐτός ἐστιν
 ἐν τῷ φωτί,
 7 **κοινωνίαν** ἔχομεν
 μετ' ἀλλήλων
 καὶ
 8 **τὸ αἷμα Ἰησοῦ καθαρίζει ἡμᾶς**
 τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ πάσης **ἀμαρτίας**.

1:8 **ἐὰν** εἴπωμεν
 ὅτι **ἀμαρτίαν** οὐκ ἔχομεν,
 9 **ἑαυτοὺς πλανῶμεν**
 καὶ
 10 **ἡ ἀλήθεια οὐκ ἔστιν**
 ἐν ἡμῖν.

1:9 **ἐὰν** ὁμολογῶμεν τὰς **ἀμαρτίας** ἡμῶν,
 11 **πιστός ἐστιν καὶ δίκαιος,**
 ἵνα ἀφῆ ἡμῖν τὰς **ἀμαρτίας**
 καὶ
 καθάρσιν ἡμᾶς
 ἀπὸ πάσης ἀδικίας.

1:10 **ἐὰν** εἴπωμεν ὅτι οὐχ **ἡμαρτήκαμεν**
 12 **ψεύστην ποιοῦμεν αὐτὸν**
 καὶ
 13 **ὁ λόγος αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἔστιν**
 ἐν ἡμῖν.

Semantic Diagram

		Καὶ							
A-----	4	Pres	---	Ind	3	S	αὐτή		

I--	5	Pres	Dep	Ind	1	P	(ἡμεῖς)		
	1--	καὶ							
		b-----	6	Pres	Act	Ind	1	P	(ἡμεῖς)
	B--	δὲ							
		a-----	7	Pres	Act	Ind	1	P	(ἡμεῖς)
	2--	καὶ							
		b-----	8	Pres	Act	Ind	3	S	τὸ αἷμα Ἰησοῦ

	1-----	9	Pres	Act	Ind	1	P	(ἡμεῖς)	
	A--	καὶ							
	2-----	10	Pres	---	Ind	3	S	ἡ ἀλήθεια	

II-B-----	11	Pres	---	Ind	3	S	(αὐτός)		

	1-----	12	Pres	Act	Ind	1	P	(ἡμεῖς)	
	C--	καὶ							
	2-----	13	Pres	---	Ind	3	S	ὁ λόγος αὐτοῦ	

Summary of Rhetorical Structure

This text naturally divides into two sub-units of material: #s. 4-8 and 9-13.

In the first unit, #s 4-8, the beginning statement, # 4, functions as a 'header' declaration that God is light. The implication of that is the demand that His children live in that same 'light.' Then follows two sets of 'what if' third class conditional sentences. The conditional protasis in each set states a possible situation of verbal claim and lifestyle pattern of living. The first set, #s 5-6, is negative in its thrust. The claim of fellowship with God isn't matched by living in the light. The result is a synonymous twofold declaration: we are lying and we are not practicing the Truth. The second set, #s 7-8, are positive in thrust and stand as the opposite of the first set. The individual is living in the light. The twofold consequence is the possessing of fellowship with God and cleansing from sin by the blood of Jesus. These two sets of conditional statements are tied on to the header declaration in a chiasmic sequence:

A Light
 B Darkness
 B' Darkness
 A' Light

In the second unit, #s 9-13, three 'what if' conditional sentences are put forth. The first and third have parallel apodises while the center one is a single apodisis. The first, #s 9-10, and third, #s 12-13, are negative with claims of not sinning, while the center declaration, # 11, is positive with confession of sin. The unifying word serving as the key motif is 'sin.'

The two negative denials of sinning are set up with first ὅτι ἁμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν (# 9) and with ὅτι οὐχ ἡμαρτήκαμεν (# 12). The first denial is of having committed a single sin, while the second denial is denial of having committed sin with any consequence (Greek perfect tense verb). The first set of apodises, #s 9-10, asserts that denial of any act of sinning means that such a person is deceiving himself and that God's truth does not dwell in him. The second set of apodises, #s 12-13, declares that a person denying any consequence of sinning means making God a liar and that His word does not dwell in such an individual.

The central positive declaration, # 11, sets up the situation of an individual confessing his sin to God in the protasis. The apodisis then asserts that forgiveness of sin takes place and, in parallel assertion, cleansing from every act of iniquity takes place. The core apodisis is a logia on the trustworthiness of God. With confession by the sinner, God can be absolutely counted on to forgive and to cleanse.

The first, #s 4-8, and second, #s 9-13, units are tied together with the 'header' link word of sin (ἁμαρτίας/ ἁμαρτίαν) at the end of statement 8 and the beginning of statement 9. Cleansing (καθαρίζεῖ/καθαρίσει) also links the two units together.