

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of JOHN I

(These Notes were first printed in September 1965)

d) 1:1

On any estimate, the date of 1 John is later than anything that Paul wrote. Some place it as late as 90 A.D. which means that John was a very old man when he wrote it. The Epistle was called forth by the activities of false teachers whose teachings constituted a threat to the life, purity, and well being of the early Church. John's concern is to refute such false teaching, and safeguard believers against it. To do so, he gives a series of tests by which to judge whether they possessed eternal life or not. The background of early Church heresy is important for a full understanding of the Epistle, but it is also fair to say that, the heresy apart, it stands in its own right as a profound and searching Christian document, full of rich teaching instruction for those who are prepared to submit to the discipline of its message and examine its contents with diligent and prayerful hearts.

2) 1:1

Tradition associates the Epistle with Ephesus, and we may assume that John wrote it, if not solely to the Church there, then certainly to the Churches in Asia, including Ephesus. It is known that a certain Corinthus lived there, who was a contemporary and an opponent of the Apostle, and what is usually called the Corinthian heresy is most certainly what lies behind John's warning words throughout the epistle. Corinthus did not believe in the Incarnation, that is, he did not believe that Jesus was born of a virgin but was born to Joseph and Mary as an ordinary child would. He claimed, moreover, that the Christ descended upon Him at Baptism, remained upon Him during His ministry, but that the Christ departed from Him prior to His death on the Cross, that it was Jesus, son of Joseph and Mary, not Jesus the Christ (i.e. God manifest in the flesh) that died and rose again. This severance of the man Jesus from the Divine Christ is the heart of the heresy, but it also had moral and social implications, for on the one hand the Corinthians, claiming superior enlightenment for themselves, reckoned this to be salvation, and consequently considered ethical behaviour a matter of indifference; and on the other hand, being as they thought more enlightened than others, treated them with contempt, and were harsh and loveless in their attitude to them. This threefold error, theological, ethical and social, becomes the focal point of the Apostle's challenge in the epistle, as he asserts the reality of the Incarnation and the Godhead of the Son (2: 22,23; 4:2; 5:5, 10, 13), the necessity of obedience as the expression of the reality of the faith (2:3, 29; 3:3-7), and the primacy of love (2:9, 10; 3:14). It is not too much to say that the whole epistle revolves round this threefold emphasis.

3) 1:1

The opening words of the epistle remind us of the sublime prologue to the gospel, and, in fact, deal with the same subject, namely the eternal pre-existence and historical manifestations of the Son of God. There is a sense in which the epistle is a companion-piece to the gospel, complementary, as it were, in thought and intention. Comparison and contrast afford useful lessons. Plummer comments: "The gospel is objective, the epistle is subjective; the one is historical, the other moral; the one gives us the theology of the Christ, the other the ethics of the Christian; the one is didactic, the other polemical, the one states the truth as a thesis, the other as an antithesis; the one starts from the human side, the other from the divine; the one proves that the Man Jesus is the Son of God, and the other insists that the Son of God comes in the flesh. But the connection between the two is intimate and organic throughout. The gospel suggests principles of conduct which the epistle lays down explicitly; the epistle implies facts which the gospel states as historically true." (Compare John 20:31, "These are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ..." with 1 John 5:13, "These things have I written...that ye may know that ye have eternal life".)

4) 1:1-3

There is a great sublimity about these opening verses, and they present a great and striking contrast which, on any estimate, would challenge thought. What John makes is the assertion that the Eternal (that which was from the beginning), the Invisible, the Intangible, has been manifested in a historical incarnation in such a way that men could hear, see, and handle it. It is good that we should be reminded at the outset that what John is dealing with, and what is the underlying pre-supposition of his teaching, is the breaking in from beyond of the Power behind all power, a supernatural visitation from on high that conditions the whole of our existence, for weal or woe. We should also see however that John effectively demolishes the contentions of the heretics by what he says. It is the Eternal Son Who has been incarnated in history; the Eternal God Who has entered time in the person of Jesus. He who is from the beginning is one and the same as He Whom the Apostles heard, saw and handled. It is impossible, implies John, to distinguish, as the heretics did, between the historical Jesus and the eternal Christ, for the Eternal Son is Jesus. He who was from the beginning came down, to be seen of men. This is John's first assertion against the heretics. And the second is in the words 'declare we unto you'. The gospel is for all men, not for the favoured elite who had 'superior knowledge' (as the heretics claimed exclusively to have); it is not secret and recondite (abstruse, obscure) and open only to those who have been 'enlightened' and 'initiated', but something to be proclaimed to all the world, for all the world to know (cf Matt 28:20). It is of the essence of the true Faith that it can, and must, be shared.

5) **1:3-4**

This sharing and communication of the message is an inevitable accompaniment of having received it. Commitment to it is always followed by commission. The New Testament knows nothing of 'solitariness' in religion in this sense. There must always be 'outgoing', and when there is not, it simply means the message itself has been misunderstood. This does not necessarily mean shouting from the house tops or standing in the open-air or becoming a preacher, but declamation there will be, by life as well as by lip, and in certain circumstances (such as at home or at work) by life first, if we are wise. If, to use Paul's words, God has 'shined in our hearts' (2 Cor 4:6), surely there is something to be seen in our lives that will serve to underline what we say concerning Christ. Indeed, if it is not the constraint of this 'something' in our lives that prompts us to speak, we had better be silent. Testimony that is prompted merely by a sense of duty or by unconscious desire to gratify some fleshly impulse is acceptable neither by God or man. Note also the purpose in the communication of the message - fellowship (3) and joy (4), that is, the restoration of man's relationship with God and his fellows lost through sin, and the fulfilment of the Divine purpose and intention for his life. Thus paramount is the importance of imparting the truth of the gospel to men. O to realise the critical and strategic nature of our calling as Christians! Well might we cry out like Paul (2 Cor 2:16), "Who is sufficient for these things?"

6) 1:5

This is one of the cardinal verses of the epistle. It underlines one of the three main themes elaborated by the Apostle. Indeed, an analysis of its contents could be made around them, thus: God is light (1:5 - 2:29); God is love (3:1-4:21); God is life (5:1-21). There are two things in particular for us to note here. The first is that John, who has always been regarded as the apostle of love, should begin not with an emphasis upon love but upon light. This is an impressive, if unexpected, statement, but one that is entirely necessary for a true understanding, not only of the gospel, but of Divine love itself. It is also, significantly, echoed at the beginning of Paul's Epistle to the Romans, where (1:16) he states that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation because in it is revealed not the love but the righteousness of God. The truth is, God's love is holy love, and consequently when He makes Himself known to men it is as light in which there is no darkness at all. To recognise this is to realise that there can be no possibility of driving a wedge between His love and righteousness. The gospel is not, "He in love forgives, in spite of His being righteous", but rather, "He in love forgives because He is righteous" (see also 1:9). The second point is just as graphic. In 4, John says he writes "that your joy may be full", and what he writes is that "God is light". This, then, is the message that brings joy. To walk in the light as God is in the light is to know fulness of joy. What then are we to say of joyless believers? This is the kind of challenge we may expect to meet in the study of this epistle.

7) 1:5

We must spend another day with this wonderful verse, to let the depth of its meaning sink into our minds and hearts. 'Light' here must be understood as a moral category, not intellectual. To say that in Him there is 'no darkness at all' means not only that He is 'completely light', but also that there is no hidden abstruseness in the knowledge of Him in the sense that only some (e.g. the Gnostics) can know Him. All may truly know Him because He makes Himself known to men. It is not a matter of intellectual grasp, but of 'introduction', and that 'introduction' comes by the preaching (declaration) of the Word. Not only so - and this also is implied in John's fundamental statement here - this revelation of God is given to men not to satisfy their intellectual curiosity, but to touch and cleanse their practical life, as is made clear in the following verses. We are reminded of Amos' word, "Can two walk together except they be agreed?" (3:3) in this connection. If God is moral light, how can any claim to be in fellowship with Him if holiness is a matter of indifference to them? The Gnostic heretics of John's day were certainly not the last to confuse light in the mind with life in the soul.

It is still one of the most perilous snares in Christian life today to imagine that 'knowing all the answers' is the same thing as living unto God and walking in the light. And the timeless message of this epistle is designed to challenge and expose such an error and point to the true way.

8) 1:6-7

In the next few verses and carrying on into chapter 2, John makes a series of statements each beginning with the words 'If we say...'. These deal in the first instance with some of the attitudes adopted by the heretics, as they denied either that sin exists in our behaviour (10) or in our nature (8) or that it matters (6) since it does not interfere with fellowship with God. To each of the assertions, John gives a plain and unequivocal answer that must have left no one in doubt as to the true nature of the Christian message. The first assertion, with the answer given by the Apostle here, is that sin does not matter for those (the heretics) who claim spiritual enlightenment. This is not so farfetched and unlikely as it might first seem to us at first glance. It is paralleled in a fairly common distortion of the Faith in some circles today. There are those who say, in their defence of the true gospel against those who seek to 'work their passage' to heaven, "Good works do not matter, it is Faith that counts". We see what they mean, of course, but this is to commit just as grave an error in the other direction. For works do matter, decisively, maintains John. If we say we have fellowship with God, yet walk in darkness, we have made the biggest mistake of our lives, because walking in darkness is the indisputable evidence that there is no fellowship there with a God of light. Good works are in fact the only real proof that those who profess faith in Him have a faith that is real. To have faith and to walk in the light are inseparable associates. And what God has joined together let no man put asunder.

9) **1:7**

These words give us John's corrective to the heretics' false teaching, and withal a wonderful statement about the true nature of Christian life. Commenting on this verse, James Denney says, "To walk in the light means to live a life in which there is nothing hidden, nothing in which we are insincere with ourselves, nothing in which we seek to impose upon others....it means that we confess our sins without reserve...to accept our responsibilities without reserve, to own our sin that we may be able to disown it ...it means that when we confess our sins to God we do not keep a secret hold of them in our hearts". Looked at in this light, it becomes clear that walking in the light must lead to fellowship, for all that could hinder fellowship is thus put away. The phrase 'one with another' is taken by some to refer to our fellowship with God, but the obvious meaning is fellowship between believers. It is true, of course, that fellowship between believers presupposes and is conditioned by our fellowship with God. In fact the two are interdependent, and neither is possible when the other is absent (this has already been implied in 3). Fellowship, then, is one result of walking in the light, another is that "The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin". The tense in the verb 'cleanseth' here is a continuous one, and has been aptly and correctly rendered 'keeps cleansing'. What John means is that when we walk in the light the atoning death of Christ exercises its sanctifying power upon our lives. It is that process by which the work of moral and spiritual transformation takes place in our lives by which we are conformed to the image of God in righteousness and holiness (see Eph 4:23, 24, Col 3:10). 'In the light' is where this blessed work goes on. Well might John therefore exhort us to walk therein!

10) 1:8-9

Here is the second statement beginning with the words "If we say...." and now the Apostle deals with the heretical teaching that they had no sin (note in passing that each time John says, "If we say", not "If they say". It almost suggests that the error had already crept into the Church and was beguiling believers from the truth as it is in Jesus). This claim to 'have no sin' has been interpreted in two ways. There are those who take it to refer to the guilt of sin, and that the heretics were denying, not the existence of sin itself, but their responsibility for it. Others take it as it stands in the AV as a denial of sin, i.e., indwelling sin, in which case it would mean that in their claim to spiritual 'enlightenment' the heretics believed that the sinful nature had been totally eradicated. It may, however, be that what John is referring to is that the teaching that sin was a matter of the flesh and did not defile the spirits of those who had been 'enlightened'. Whichever view is taken, John condemns it, and declares that those who hold this are deceiving themselves, and the truth is not in them. We have only to think of how wrong or biblically defective views of the nature of indwelling sin lead believers astray in the matter of sanctification to realise how important John's words here are for us today. Let us learn that to claim that sin has been eradicated from our hearts, or that it lurks in the flesh and cannot harm the spirit, or that the responsibility for sin does not lie fairly and squarely upon us, has any kind of scriptural basis. To think otherwise is to deceive ourselves.

11) 1:9

Another cardinal verse, full of deep truth and wonderful assurance for us. Forgiveness here is conditional upon confession. The literal meaning of the word 'confess' is 'to say the same thing as', and means to take the same view of sin as God does, calling it by its proper name, and the same attitude to it as He does, hating it and turning from it. To confess sin is therefore much more than to admit it. We sometimes say, "I admit I did it but I had great provocation". In other words, we plead extenuating circumstances, refusing to own responsibility, and this is to say something other than God says about it, and we have not confessed our sin. (This is what Adam did in the Garden of Eden, "the woman Thou gavest me" was blamed, not himself.) The divine forgiveness is here related to God's faithfulness and justice (See Notes on 1:5, not to His love. The great dilemma for God was how to be at once just and also at the same time the justifier of the ungodly. In the death of Christ divine justice is honoured and upheld, vindicated to the full, so that the possibility of forgiveness is created and a basis made on which it can be honourably bestowed (see Rom 3:25). Forgiveness is accompanied by cleansing from all unrighteousness. Some take this twofold emphasis as meaning the remission of a debt on the one hand and the cleansing of a stain on the other, and this is true, but it is probably that John has more in mind. For truly to confess sin means that we really abandon a whole position and therefore God deals not only with the one specific sin but all unrighteousness. In the experience of conversion, it is often true that the conviction of sin that precedes it has a focal point in one specific issue; but in coming to Christ, not that issue only, but the whole life is brought under the cleansing of the blood of the Cross; and in every new beginning it is the same; He forgives our sins and cleanses us from all unrighteousness. Blessed be His Name!

12) 1:10 - 2:1

The third statement beginning with the words, "If we say...." has reference to the heretical claim that superior enlightenment rendered them incapable of sinning. And John denounces such a claim as clearly and unequivocally as he deals with the earlier assertions in 6 and 8. To say we have not sinned is to make God a liar. This is a word that has relevance today, in view of the sometimes extreme claims to sinlessness made by some schools of sanctification. To testify "I have not sinned for six months", as some in fact do, may not be the fruit of heretical beliefs as it was in John's day, but it is no less misguided and dangerous in intent. At root, this extravagant claim arises from a faulty and defective understanding of the doctrine of sin. What is meant, of course, is that they have not sinned one particular sin for the stated period of time - a real testimony to the victory of Christ, but not a basis for claiming sinlessness. We are not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners, that is, acts of sin become manifest because we are sinners by nature and propensity, and nature will out in spite of us. The inevitability of sinning does not, however, condone sin; but neither need it lead to despair for there is abundant provision made in Christ to deal with the problem. It is to this John now turns, in the opening verses of chapter 2.

13) 2:1-2

The glorious and wonderful fact that God is faithful and just to forgive sin is not to be taken as warrant for regarding sin lightly. On the contrary, John maintains he writes in order that they might not sin. This is very similar to the standpoint Paul takes in the opening verses of Rom 6, "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?" Both apostles react with abhorrence to the very idea. The fact that we are able to call in the Fire Brigade does not mean that we are free to start a fire; but it is a good thing to know that it is there if a fire does break out. This is John's point here. Notice how precise John is in his language. He does not say, "If any man sin we have a Saviour from sin", although that doubtless is true, but "we have an advocate with the Father". It is a particular aspect of Christ's Saviourhood that is emphasised here. His once-for-all finished work on the Cross deals finally and forever with our judicial condemnation, and the question of our standing in grace can never again be raised. But there is such a thing as Fatherly displeasure at sin, and this is what John is concerned to underline now. And it is Christ's continuing advocacy that answers our need in this direction. The relation between Christ's atoning work and His advocacy may be illustrated by the relation between a mother's function in bearing her child and in caring for it after it is born. A mother has complementary functions in addition to bearing the child, which is a once-for-all matter; and being a mother to the child includes also the continuing care for its welfare right through its childhood. So also, Christ does not often bear away our sins; He does so, once-for-all. But He continues to be our Saviour, by exercising a faithful advocacy on our behalf at God's right hand.

14) 2:1-2

The word 'Advocate' is the same as that translated 'Comforter' in John 14:16. There are therefore two Advocates. Christ is our Advocate with the Father; the Holy Spirit is Christ's Advocate in our hearts. When a believer is in need, and cries to the Lord, He pleads our cause at God's right hand and says, so to speak, "O God, for My sake, help this My servant"; and God replies, "For Thy sake I will do all for him", and straightway the Holy Spirit, Who is the Executor of the Godhead, is sent to bring Divine help to us. Christ the Advocate pleads our cause, and the Holy Spirit helps our infirmities. Note once again the emphasis upon the righteous basis of this operation. It is not a question of love pleading with justice on our behalf (as it is often distorted to mean), but rather justice pleading with holy love on the basis of a righteous honouring of the law in the death of Christ for our sakes. 'Propitiation' must not be explained away to make it mean less than John means by it. God's holy and righteous anger is turned away from us by the propitiatory sacrifice made on the Cross, and this means, to use Denney's words, that sin no longer stands; as it once stood, between God and ourselves, as a barrier preventing fellowship and bringing wrath upon us. It is insufficient to render the word as 'expiation', which means the removal of the guilt of sin. The Cross was an expiation, of course, but it was also more, for guilt has a manward reference, and is but one factor (not the most critical) in the problem for which the gospel is the answer. There is also a Godward reference, and the effect sin has on God is so incomparably more serious that the other almost pales into insignificance. It is this that propitiation answers, in the turning away of the Divine anger.

15) 2:3-6

John now proceeds to apply the tests of true and authentic Christian profession, and the first is a moral one, keeping God's commandments. This links with what he has said in the first chapter about God being light (which, as we saw, has a moral rather than an intellectual connotation). If we have fellowship with a God of light, we shall be walking in the light, i.e. doing His will, obeying His commandments. We should note first of all that John is not saying that "If we keep the commandments of God we shall be saved", but rather that the evidence we are truly saved will be that we keep His commandments - a very different matter. The man who claims to be born again but is careless in his life had better think again, and examine himself whether he be in the faith. For he who claims to be Christ's and does not live as a Christian is a liar. Not but that 'keeping His commandments' must be understood in its proper context. No man on earth perfectly keeps the commandments of God. John is referring, as Calvin rightly interprets, to those who strive, according to the capacity of human infirmity, to form their life in obedience to God. It is the same emphasis as we often see in the Psalms when David testifies, "I have walked in mine integrity" - i.e. he is seeking with all his heart to live his life unto God, walking in the light. This then is the test of reality in our religion: has it brought an obedient walk?

16) 2:3-6

John is asserting here that no religious experience is valid if it does not have moral consequences in this life. As our Scottish paraphrase puts it, "Thus faith approves itself sincere, by active virtue crowned". If there is a distinction intended between 'keeping the commandments' (4) and 'keeping His word' (5) it is that the latter is a wider, more general, more comprehensive idea than the former, which may refer to specific commandments. In both, however, the paramount idea is living in loyalty to the Word of God as the supreme, the only, rule of faith and life. In 5 the phrase 'the love of God' can be taken to mean either our love for God, or His for us. If the former, then the meaning would be that the love for Him that is brought to the birth in us at conversion is crowned and perfected by the obedience that we show, and is given its most conclusive proof. If the latter, it would mean that God's purpose has been, achieved, and the redeeming love of God has attained its end in the establishing of obedience in our lives. Either of these interpretations makes good meaning of the words, and commentators are divided on the matter. The threefold sequence in the verses does however seem to favour the first interpretation, for knowing God (3, 4), loving God (5), and abiding in God (6) seem to belong together in the thought of the Apostle. This, then, is what it is to 'walk in the light', keeping His commandments, keeping His Word, and walking even as He walked'. Such is the moral test that must be applied to a Christian profession.

17) 2:7-11

These verses bring us to the second test to be applied to the believer's profession, that of brotherly love, a social test. Compare "He that saith" in 9 with the same words in 4. What John says, however, flows naturally from what he has just underlined in 3-6. To be in the light is not only to walk in obedience, but also to walk in love. This is an all-important combination and association of ideas, and it reminds us that faithfulness to God (walking in the light) does not mean the same thing as being objectionable, forbidding and harshly unbending towards others. There are some good people who do not seem to have realised this sufficiently, and have allowed their zeal for the Lord to make them rather inhuman and unapproachable. Faithfulness should expand the heart, not contract it, and promote the virtues of humanity and kindness in such a way as to make the life of walking in the light attractive and desirable. We remember how it was said of the early Christians, that they had favour with all the people and great grace was upon them all. Light and love are two realities that God has joined together, and we may not put them asunder in our experience. When we do, when we allow faithfulness to become the excuse for hard and loveless dealing with our fellows, we have departed from the example of Him Whose faithfulness was expressed with gentleness and tenderness of spirit, the meek and lowly Jesus.

18) 2:7-11

Faithfulness to God's Word will necessarily mean loving the brethren, for in fact this is the heart of all the commandments, as Paul also points out in Rom 13:9, 10. This commandment to love is both new and old, John says. He is not propounding a riddle here, but simply pointing out that while it is old in the sense that it was from the beginning in the Old Testament revelation, it is also new in the sense that Christ invested it with a new and richer meaning, not only in His teaching (such as in the parable of the Good Samaritan, for example) but also in His actions, and above all in the death He died. "Here in is love...." says John later in the epistle (4:10), holding up that death to our view. The phrase 'in Him and in you' appears to mean that the commandment to love received its new emphasis in the life and teaching of Christ, but also in the action of His disciples in following His example. The reference to darkness and light at the end of 8 serves to underline the newness of the commandment also, in that the darkness, which is the old world, is passing away and the new age is already dawned in the coming of the Spirit and the birth of the New Testament Church. And the distinctive mark of this new age is precisely this new conception of love. "Behold how these Christians love one another" cried the ancient world in wistful astonishment, as they saw the new thing appearing all around them. It is ever so; the old passes away, and the new shines forth, when men learn to love, in Christ. And where they do not, darkness still reigns.

19) 2:12-14

There are a number of questions that arise from these verses, and one alteration must be made in the AV translation. The fourth 'I write' (13) should read 'I have written', so that we have three statements beginning 'I write', and three beginning 'I have written'. Different explanations have been given of this arrangement. Some suggest that 'the Apostle is referring to his epistle ('I write') and his gospel ('I have written') but this is unlikely, as the material in the sentences beginning with 'I have written' does not seem to have any direct or specific reference to the teachings of the fourth gospel. Another suggestion is that John was interrupted in his writing and, coming back to the epistle later, added the threefold 'I have written' by way of recapitulation, as it were. But this is pure speculation, with nothing to indicate that he in fact did so. Perhaps the best interpretation is that the present tenses refer to what he is writing at this particular juncture in the epistle, and the past tenses to what he has written up to this point - i.e. the teaching of the first chapter and the opening verses of the second. But he may quite simply be laying a special emphasis upon what he says by repeating it. Then the question arises whether he is addressing three classes of people or two. Does the term 'little children' (which elsewhere is used to embrace all his readers - of 2:1) include 'fathers' and 'young men' - Calvin, Luther and some of the early fathers thought so - or does it stand as a separate group? In view of the fact that the message to each is quite distinctive, it is probably better to adopt the threefold, rather than the twofold division. The 'age' distinctions are surely spiritual, not natural, and refer to various stages of spiritual development.

20) 2:12-14

We should note that John uses perfect tenses throughout in the statements he makes about the believers - 'have been forgiven' (12), 'have known' (13), 'have overcome' (13). The significance of this is to emphasise the assured standing into which every believer has come, whatever his stage of development. Those who are young in the faith, babes in Christ, have received forgiveness of sins and been brought to a knowledge of God. This is fundamental, initiatory experience. When we are forgiven we are introduced to the Father. As Paul puts it in Rom 5:2, "We have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand". The 'young men', those believers who have grown in grace and in the knowledge of God, are engaged in Christian conflict, fighting the battles of the Lord, warring against the powers of darkness in the name of Christ. The abiding of the Word of God in their hearts, that is, its active working within them to energise them, makes them strong and gives them the victory. The 'fathers' are those who are 'far ben' in the things of God. Of them too it is said that they have known God, but there is knowledge and knowledge in the spiritual life, and the kind of knowledge of God that is the fruit of many years walking with Him is infinitely deeper and richer than the knowledge that is possible to those young in the faith. It is almost as if John were suggesting that those who know God in this way have passed beyond even the wars and battles of the Christian warfare into the deep calms and stillness of the presence of God. In the deepest sense, of course, no one ever passes beyond the place where battles and wrestlings with the powers of darkness are the order of the day - indeed, the closer to God we come, the more fierce these battlings are likely to be - but there is a place of peace and rest in the heart of the battle where nothing can disturb us. Sailors sometimes speak of 'the eye of the storm', and this has its spiritual counterpart (see Pss 91 and 23:5). O to know God thus, so that not even the wildest storm of battle will be able to disturb our calm!

21) 2:15-17

John now gives us a brief excursus on the Christian and the world. It is interesting to see how brotherly love (10) and love of the world (15) stand here in opposition and antithesis to one another. There is a basic incompatibility between them, and for an obvious reason, surely, namely that loving the brethren is an unselfish, sacrificial activity, while love of the world is essentially selfish and self-regarding. How could the two stand together? It should be clear also that the love of the world of which John speaks here is quite different from that expressed in John 3:16, God's love for the world. Stott puts it thus: "Viewed as people, the world must be loved; viewed as an evil system, organised under the dominion of Satan and not of God, it is not to be loved". This is to distinguish the two meanings of 'world'. Alford suggests that it is the word 'love' that has two shades of meaning. In John 3:16, it is the holy love of redemption, whereas here it is the selfish love of participation. Whichever way we may take it, the distinction is surely plain. What is even more important for us to realise is that love is something that can be both commanded and forbidden. Not all are sure about this, but this is because love is thought of more as an emotion or an uncontrollable feeling than as an attitude of the will, which it certainly is in the thinking of the apostles. To love, in the biblical sense of the term does not exclude emotion or feeling of course (how unnatural if it did!), but the constituent element is the adoption of a certain attitude of heart and mind and will that determines both thought and action. Paul speaks in Gal 6:14 of being crucified unto the world and having the world crucified unto him. This also is John's meaning. We are to die to 'this world's empty glory' lest in the end it costs us too dear.

22) 2:15-17

John gives his reasons for warning us against loving the world. He speaks of what C.H. Dodd describes as 'the essential marks of the pagan way of life'. These have been variously rendered and interpreted, and this is as good an indication as any that they are meant to be taken in a broad and general sense. The 'lust of the flesh' is the desire of our fallen, sinful nature, while the 'lust of the eyes' refers to the temptations that assail from without, and has been said to mean "the tendency to be captivated by the outward show of things without enquiring into their real value". The 'pride of life' has been variously described as 'pretentious ostentation' and "the desire to shine or outshine others in luxurious living". In view of our contemporary cult of 'keeping up with the Joneses' this last is a very relevant and topical warning to believers, and serves to remind us that the cold and deadly hand of worldliness can touch lives long after they have "stopped doing this and that and the next thing". The fact is, as John implies in 17, worldliness is not to be restricted in our thinking to a few well-defined practices. All that belongs to the seen and temporal, whether good or bad, legitimate or forbidden, is 'of the world', and will pass away. It is for this reason that we must not become over-attached to these things. It is just as likely for us to be beguiled from the simplicity that is in Christ, and from our true pilgrim character, by things that are noble and good as by questionable and unworthy things. The true biblical attitude is expressed in Paul's words: "God giveth us richly all things to enjoy" (1 Tim 6:17), but we must not be "brought under the power of any" (1 Cor 6:12). Rather, we must "use this world as not abusing it" (1 Cor 7:31). Inasmuch as we fail of this standard, we are worldly, whatever we do or do not do (read the hymn, "My God, I thank Thee, who has made the earth so bright" for a beautiful and telling expression of this philosophy).

23) 2:18-21

Having spoken of the 'moral test' of a true profession of faith (3-6), and the 'social test' (7-11), John now proceeds to discuss the 'doctrinal test' (18-27) - belief in the Son of God. The reference in 18 to 'the last time' should be taken theologically rather than chronologically. In view of the fact that Jesus taught that no one knew the day nor the hour of His Coming, it is unlikely that John would presume to say just when that time would be. What he refers to is the end of the old era and the consummation of the new, and this is just as valid an idea for us today as it was for him then. The whole Christian era constitutes the tribulation (Rev 7:14, Acts 14:22) through which all believers must pass. There is always opposition to Christ (this is the meaning of 'antichrist') and the various manifestations of it (in the form of 'antichrists', evil men) all stem from, and are expressions of, the one great 'antichrist' who is the devil himself. The 'anti-christs' here are not superhuman beings, but evil men who have been duped and deceived by Satan; once within the fellowship of the Church, but now become heretics, they have gone out from the fellowship. John is not saying that they were expelled, in the sense of having been excommunicated; on the contrary they themselves went out, and their departure was their unmasking, showing themselves for what they really were. There seems to be a suggestion that God meant this exposure to take place (19), doubtless with a view to protecting the true Church from the infection of error (see 1 Cor 4:5, Luke 12:2).

24) 2:18-21

In the Greek text, 20 reads 'Ye all know' or 'Ye all have knowledge', not as in the AV, 'Ye know all things'. And it is probable that 'knowledge' here means 'discernment'. The word rendered 'unction' is said to refer not so much to the act of anointing as to that with which the act is performed. In the old economy this was usually oil, but in the New Testament the anointing is with the Holy Spirit. The unction therefore to which John refers is the presence and indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the believer. To say that 'ye all have knowledge' stands as a challenge to the heretics' assertion of an exclusive, enlightened minority who alone had the truth. But more. This unction, which is the heritage of every true believer, should be sufficient to enable them to discern the falsity and error of the heretical position. They should have no doubt concerning them; if they deny that Jesus is the Son of God, it should be clear that they are not of God. In effect, John is saying (21), "I am writing to you because you are the kind of people who can apply the spirit of discernment that is within you to any given situation". In other words, he is saying what Paul said to Timothy, "Stir up the gift that is in you. Let the unction work, to keep you from error and lead you into all truth". His appeal to them to use their power of discernment is based on their knowledge, not on their need of instruction.

25) 2:22-23

These verses might almost be an example of how to apply the spirit of discernment spoken of in the previous note. "It is as categorical as this" says John, "and you must see that the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh is both a liar and antichrist" (see 18). The reference is again to the ancient heresy that was troubling the early Church, by which it was claimed that Jesus was born and died a man, and that 'the Christ' was upon Him only during His public ministry, coming upon Him at His baptism, but leaving Him before He died on the cross. This, as we have seen already, is a denial both of the Incarnation and of the Atonement, and makes nonsense of the saving gospel of grace. This is by no means a dead controversy, however, for us today. It is a fact, for example, that almost all the present-day heretical sects deny the true deity of Christ. It is also true that the entire liberal movement of theology within the Christian Church itself in the 19th century (and reaching down in some quarters to the present time) proclaimed Jesus as a great religious genius, a marvellous Teacher ("Our Guide, our Hero, and our Friend" as one of the hymns of the period put it), but nothing more.

This is exactly the heresy which John brands in these verses as antichrist, denying Incarnation and therefore Atonement alike. There is another expression of the same error that is quite widespread and prevalent, and it is of sufficient seriousness and importance to merit spending another day discussing it.

26) 2:22-23

It is one of the tragic influences of generations of liberal teaching that so many loyal and devout members of our churches today completely misunderstand the gospel and its way of salvation, and hold instead what can only be called a religion of works. And it is because, for them, Christianity is conceived in simple, moralistic terms, that is to say, as a matter of doing the best one can to live a good life, that Jesus Christ has become a largely irrelevant figure, at most an example from ancient history of how that life should be lived. They would be hard put to say where He comes into their scheme of things, into their worship or their thinking in spiritual issues. They may speak of God, of their maker, of Providence but, significantly, the Saviour's Name is an embarrassment to them. To be frank, in a religion of works, Christ as Saviour is unnecessary, for good works are believed to be the way to God. But John maintains here (23) that to leave out (deny) the Son means not having the Father. No-one can belong to God or be right with God except through Christ. And this simply echoes our Lord's own words, "I am the way...no man cometh unto the Father but by Me" (John 14:6). In other words, this emphasis is not simply one way among others of looking at the Christian faith. This is the Christian faith, and there is none other Name (as there is no other way) under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:12). To leave out the Son in this sense is to deny the faith altogether. To be wrong on this point is not merely to subscribe to a different school of thought; it is to be not a Christian.

27) 2:24-27

John now reminds us of two great realities in the Christian life which will give full and sufficient protection against the inroads of heretical teaching (24, 27). "That which ye have heard" in 24 refers certainly to the word of the gospel. We are reminded of what Paul says in Col 3:16 "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom". John's thought here is the same. He means that if the living word of God abides in a man (and this will inevitably mean that he will abide in God - the words 'abide', 'remain' and 'continue' are all the same in the Greek), it will be as a wall of fire about him to keep him immune from all the wiles of the devil. This is the first safeguard. The second (27) is that already referred to, the unction or anointing from the Holy One (20). What is true of the abiding of the Word in us - namely, that it implies our abiding in Him - is likewise true of the Spirit. The anointing of the Spirit upon us and in us remains only as long as we remain obedient to His direction and control. Peter says, in Acts 5:32, that God gives the Holy Ghost to them that obey Him. Given, therefore, this obedience, John implies, all will be well with the believer. It is surely worth noting how 'ordinary' is the Divine provision for healthy Christian experience - obedience to the Word and Spirit of God - no unusual, spectacular visitations, but a diligent use of the appointed means of grace. How slow we are to learn! Christians, no less than Jews, are too prone to seek after signs, and the extraordinary, when the real remedy lies so often unheeded at hand.

28) 2:27

One statement John makes in this verse is open to misunderstanding, and it will be worth spending another day examining it. When he says, "Ye need not that any man teach you" he is referring to the claims of the heretics to have superior knowledge and enlightenment which only they can impart to the generality of believers. "You do not need them to instruct you in the deep things of God; you have the word and Spirit of Christ dwelling in you, and thus have all that you can need to true spiritual life. Do not therefore be taken in by their extravagant and arrogant claims". To take John's words out of this context, therefore, and interpret them without reference to the particular subject in view is to distort his meaning disastrously. The Apostle gives no warrant here for any believer to suppose that he can dispense with the teaching and instruction of God-appointed ministers of the Word, as some have mistakenly supposed. How could it mean any such thing? If it did, it would be contradicting what John implies elsewhere in this epistle itself, as well as fly in the face of the whole witness of the New Testament.

It is a false spirituality in a man for him to suppose that he can 'go it alone' in this or any other sense in the spiritual life. We cannot do without the advice and counsel and instruction that older and more mature believers can give us, let alone the exposition of the Scriptures given by men specially set apart by the ascended Lord (see Eph 4:11-13) in the Church for its upbuilding and growth in grace. Indeed, it is precisely in the fellowship of other believers (cf Eph 3:18) - 'with all saints' - that the deepest and most enriching truths are comprehended, lone. It is a sign of spiritual arrogance, and not a sickness, not maturity, to be contemptuous of God-ordained means of grace.

29) 2:28

A new section of the epistle begins at this point, stretching to 4:6, in which John once more turns to his series of tests - the moral test (2:28 - 3:10), the social test (3:11-18), and the doctrinal test (4:1-6). In the moral test, which he has already emphasised in 2:3-6 (see Notes), he expands and elaborates the moral issues and consequences of a true experience of the grace of God. Interestingly, John relates the righteousness of the believer to the two comings of our Lord: in 2:28 - 3:3 it is His coming in glory, while in 3:4-10 it is His Incarnation. Such is the analysis of the section. Now, as to 28, John holds up the prospect of Christ's second coming as an incentive to holy living. Christian life is lived in the context of the coming consummation, and must be so lived that we may stand with confidence before Christ our Judge. To 'be ashamed' on that day is described by Paul in 1 Cor 3:15 as to suffer loss. If we have built the 'wood, hay and stubble' of unrighteous lives, we will have nothing to show for our stewardship and will certainly be ashamed before the face of Him Whose approbation then will be the only thing that will be important. In the deepest sense, of course, as has already been pointed out, no believer on earth has walked as he should (we are all unprofitable servants), and in strict justice all would be ashamed before Him. Calvin's interpretation, of lives being formed in obedience to God, is perhaps our best guide here. Integrity of life, not sinlessness, is the point.

30) 2:29

John now gives us a new definition of a believer. He is one who is 'born of God'. It is instructive to compare this with earlier statements in the epistle such as in 2:3, 4 ('knowing God'), 2:5, 6 ('in Christ'), 2:9, 10 ('in the light'). Here we have the basic reality, on which all other 'definitions' depend. What lies behind John's words here is once again the behaviour of the heretics. They claimed that their intellectual 'enlightenment' was rebirth, and the Apostle is roundly challenging such a mistaken view. The mark of rebirth is righteousness, not knowledge, and apart from living righteously (abiding in Him, 28) no one has any hope of being accepted of Him at His coming. 28 and 29 are thus linked closely together in thought. To imagine, as the heretic did, that enlightenment was all, and righteous living irrelevant, is to misunderstand not only the nature of the Christian life, but also the nature of God Himself. Their enlightenment did not amount to much, John means, if it did not unveil to them the character of God as holy and righteous, and as One Who laid inflexible demands for righteousness on all His creatures. This is the forte of the first part of the verse; "If ye know that He is righteous" you will also know that He expects His people to be righteous, and that all who are truly born of Him will show the family characteristics, and be righteous like Him. This is the test by which believers may not only ascertain whether they are in the faith, but also discern false profession in the heretics who were indifferent to righteous living.

31) 3:1

The thought of spiritual rebirth makes John pause to marvel at the mystery of Divine love and the unspeakable dignity conferred upon sinful men in being adopted into the family of God. Almost every word here bears a benediction to the soul. The commentators point out that the Greek 'what manner' has as its root meaning 'of what country'. The suggestion is of something so strange and unheard of that it is like something from another world. Which of course it is! There is a verse in the Book of Proverbs (25:25) which says "As cold water to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country". The good news of which John speaks is from eternity, and it has broken in upon us, breaching the isolation and misery of our pitiless world to bring an ineffable hope to the children of men. John was an old man when he wrote these words, and had been a believer for perhaps sixty years, and yet he writes as one who had never got over the wonder and the glory of the gospel. O that such a sense of awe and rapture might characterise our experience! The phrase 'called the sons of God` takes on added meaning when we are told that the words 'and we are', absent from the AV, are in the Greek text and are included by the RV and the RSV. John means that to be called sons of God is no mere legal fiction, but a glorious fact. God has nominated us His children, by His grace, and has implemented this in an unmistakeable way by giving us His Spirit (see 2:20, 27). We have the evidence in ourselves, and the world must also see in our behaviour, that we belong to Him in very truth, for 'the Spirit Himself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God' (Rom 8:16). This is something we should repeat to ourselves many times - 'and we are!' - for our comfort and assurance, and as a witness against the evil one, to assert our impregnable position in Christ.

32) 3:1-2

It is the fact of our sonship, says John, that explains the hostility of the world towards us. They do not know us or recognise us to be of God, in the same way in which they failed to recognise Christ when He was veiled in flesh. Believers cannot but expect the same kind of treatment from the world as it showed to the Lord Himself, and for the same reasons. The more the 'family likeness' appears, the less sympathy will the world have with them. Faith alone can pierce the veil, as it did in the case of Peter's great confession at Caesarea Philippi (Matt 16:16), and as it invariably does when believer meets believer in the world. In 2, note first of all the contrast between present and future tenses, 'what we are' and 'what we shall be'. Our sonship is a present reality (cf Rom 8:1), not something to come, but the full consummation of our salvation lies in the future. The words 'it doth not yet appear' may be taken in two ways. John could mean either that the outshining of what is already there (though veiled) is still to come, or the nature and extent of our final glorification is as yet hidden from us (in the sense of Paul's words in 1 Cor 2:9, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard...."). Be this as it may, one thing we do know: when Christ comes in glory (or, alternatively, when it, our final glorified state, shall appear, as some render it) we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. Seeing Him as He is, in glory and majesty, will in fact be what will work the change in us, for the outshining of that glory will cause the entire old creation (including our mortal bodies) to dissolve and then new to blossom forth in blessed realisation and consummation, and His image, already stamped on us in regeneration, will come into its own in a perfect likeness to Him. "A hope so great and so divine...!"

33) 3:3

Having spoken of the blessed hope, John forthwith underlines the practical implications for the believer. The words can be taken in two ways: 'in him' may refer either to the believer or to Christ, and both readings make very good sense. A man who has such a hope within him, or who has such a hope in Christ will find it one of the most practical and compelling of incentives to holy living. No-one can fail to be impressed with the way in which the doctrine of the second coming of Christ is invariably associated in the New Testament with the summons to holiness of life. In this John, with Paul and the other apostles, simply follows our Lord's own emphasis when, in His teaching about the last days, He exhorted His disciples to 'watch and pray' (Mark 13). The words 'purify himself' could be open to misunderstanding and interpreted as 'self-effort', but this is to miss the point. The real analogy here is the statement made by Paul in Phil 2:12, 13, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure". It is God Who purifies us, but He does so through our outworking of His 'inworked' salvation. On the one hand we have died to sin in the death of Christ - that is something He does; on the other hand we are to wrestle and battle against sin, mortifying the deeds of the body through the Spirit. In all the mortifying we do, He is at work purifying us. When we do it, it is God doing it in us and for us. He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit (1 Cor 6:17), and consequently when in Him we purify ourselves, it is He Who is at work in us.

34) 3:4-7

Having related the life of righteousness to the second coming of Christ, John now proceeds to do likewise with His first coming, in the Incarnation. It will be useful to examine this section (4-10) as a whole first, before concentrating on detailed exposition. The verses divide into two, 4-7 and 8-10, with a central statement in each on the purpose of Christ's coming into the world, namely to deal with sin, and from this statement about the work of Christ the apostle draws an inevitable conclusion in each part of the argument that continuance in sin is an impossibility for the believer. There are two points to note in the first segment of the argument. In the first place, John is still thinking of the heretics who claimed exemption (because of their superior enlightenment) from obligation to the law, and regarded sins as matters of indifference. John will have none of this; he who sins (4) also by his act transgresses the Divine law, that is, becomes accountable to God for his sin. By the same token, John insists, it must be clear that it is only the man who does righteousness that is righteous. The man who thinks he is righteous (through being 'enlightened') without doing righteously is deceiving himself (7). In the second place, John's argument from the work of Christ is simple and categorical. If Christ came into the world to take away our sins, and if we own to an association with Christ, and are 'in Him' by faith (6) then obviously it is impossible for us to continue in sin, for to be 'in' the One Who came to put away sin necessarily involves sharing His attitude to it. We cannot have kinship with sin, if we claim kinship with Him. Well?

35) 3:8-10

John now repeats the pattern of the previous verses, but on a deeper level, in that he deals with the origin of sin, in the devil. He begins with a statement about the sinner parallel to that in 4, but now describes sin in relation to the devil, as is done in Gen 3. It is well for us to be reminded that behind the reality of sin there is a satanic dimension. We have not said the deepest word about it if we fail to take the enemy into account! Now, in coming into the world and suffering for our sins Christ dealt with all the devil's evil works, once and for all. The word 'destroyed' needs to be taken in the sense of depriving him of his power rather than of annihilation. Satan is still active, but his power is broken and he is rendered inoperative in the sense that a chained dog is made harmless to all who keep outwith the radius of its chain. In Christ we are set free from the devil in the same way in which we are set free from sin in Him. The power of the enemy is broken. We should compare similar statements made in passages like Heb 2:14, 2 Tim 1:10, and Rom 6:6, where the idea is that of power overthrown, not abolition or annihilation. In the New Testament, both sin and Satan are spoken of as dark powers which rule over men and by which they are held as helpless prisoners. This, John means, is what we once were, but now we are no longer that, but set free. Well this is something to linger long and exultantly over today, and we shall leave other comment on these verses until the next note.

36) 3:8-10

The series of statements made by John in this section of the epistle - 'sinneth not' (6), 'doth not commit sin' and 'cannot sin' (9) have given rise to a good deal of conflicting interpretation. It should be clear, however, that John cannot be preaching any doctrine of sinless perfection here, in view of his earlier unmistakable statement in 1:8, 10. Short of conceding a blatant contradiction of his own teaching, we must necessarily interpret these words here as referring to continuance in sin. In this connection, it is significant to note that in the Greek, the verbs John uses here are in the present continuous tense, which indicates that it is the settled habit of sin, not the isolated act, that John has in mind. Sin is broken in principle in the believer, and its dark power once for all conquered; but just as after the decisive battle in a military campaign has been fought there may still be pockets of resistance to be mopped up, so also it is with sin. Acts of sin may persist even after the rebellion has been quashed. John gives his reason why the believer cannot continue in sin in 9b. This statement is patent of two possible interpretations. On the one hand 'his seed' can be taken to mean 'God's children' and the meaning would then be that the children of God abide in Him, and therefore are safeguarded against sin (cf Pro 18:10, "The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous runneth into it and is safe"). On the other hand, 'his seed' may mean the Divine nature or seed, in which case the meaning would be that the implantation of new life in the believer safeguards him from sin, overcoming the sinful tendencies of the old nature. This latter is the more probable interpretation, as it balances the reference in the first part of the verse to spiritual rebirth. This, then, says John in 10, is the test; the Divine seed in a man will produce righteousness, and where righteousness is not, God is not. The 'family' likeness is always unmistakable in true children of God.

37) 3:12-13

John's final word in 10 about loving one's brother leads him into a further consideration of what we earlier called the social test (see 2:7-11), and he now turns to the social issues and consequences of a true experience of the grace of God, just as in the previous verses he considers the moral issues. Love, says John, belongs to the essence of the gospel, and was from the beginning a central emphasis in the apostolic preaching. The words 'from the beginning' remind us of the real criterion by which to assess whether any particular emphasis is right or not. They are almost equivalent to an exhortation to get back to the Scriptures and test our doctrine in their light. The apostolic teaching and practice are the norm for us in all things. The reference to Cain suggests, however, that 'from the beginning' may mean going back even further than the birth of the New Testament Church. If this is so, John's point would be to show that from the beginning of revelation God has shown us, and warned us of, the terrible consequences of the failure to obey the law of love. When faith, that worketh by love, fails, this is what happens in human life. The reference to Cain is deeply interesting, and what John precisely means by it must be left until the next note. But in the meantime, we must see the significance of this reference to the Scriptures. In the deepest and fullest sense, the Christian must be a man of the Word, not merely reading and studying it, but living by it, and allowing all his attitudes to be formed and conditioned by it. This is the only safe way.

38) 3:12-13

The point of the reference to Cain and Abel is twofold. In the first place, this is the typical example of the want of brotherly love; and in the second place, the story when rightly understood explains the hatred which Christians must expect from the world. It expresses the hostility which that which is good must always call out in that which is evil. The righteousness of Abel stirred a malevolent jealousy and hatred in Cain which finally led to murder. This, says John, bears witness to the irreconcilable enmity between good and evil which, although the particular expressions of it may differ from time to time, is always present in the world. The Apostle links believers with Abel and the unbelieving world with Cain, and says that the world will always hate them because their righteousness is ever a rebuke and a challenge to the evil of evil men. This is worth bearing in mind: so often the world takes the opportunity of blaspheming the name of God because of the sins of the saints, and criticises them because of their failure to live up to their profession. But here is the opposite, and we should realise that there is a criticism and an opposition against Christian people that arises not because they are failing in their testimony but because they are not. There is one other point here. Love, John means to say, is to operate in such a context. There are no ideal conditions in which to live the Christian life. It is precisely in the darkness that the light has to shine, in the realm of hatred that love is to be shown. This is why conflict is so inevitable.

39) 3:14-15

Love for the brethren is here given as the unmistakable proof of the new birth. This, once more, is a categorical statement, so much so that John can say, "He that loveth not" (the words 'his brother' are not in the Greek) abides in death. In other words, love and life are equated and inextricably joined together in the thought of the Apostle. What love proves is that life is there, and he who does not love does not live. Stott suggests that 'love for the brethren' means that those who pass from death to life will hunger for Christian fellowship with other believers. It is in fact true that one cannot be a Christian in isolation; the word 'saint' is almost never found in the New Testament in the singular, always in the plural, and the fellowship of believers in love is one compelling sign of a Divine work of grace in their hearts. It was said of the early Church, "Behold how these Christians love one another". This almost technical phrase 'Love for the brethren', although referring to love between Christians primarily, does not of course mean that love for all men, whether believers or not, is not equally a fruit and evidence of the new birth. Indeed, in the context of the passage before us, love for those outside the faith is almost more in John's mind than the other. There may even be a suggestion in the text that it is a Christian duty to love and go on loving in spite of being hated by the world. In 15 the thought returns again to the story of Cain. The implication is that if a murderer has not eternal life in him, neither has one who hates, for he who hates is a murderer. This is elemental thinking, and it echoes our Lord's devastating teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:21, 22). How faithful John is to His Master!

40) 3:14-15

It will be useful to pause here a moment to think of something that the distinction between love for the brethren and love for all men raises in our minds. The fact that the Christian's natural habitat is in the fellowship of the saints should not mean that Christians are not to include among their friendships those who are unbelievers. This is to press the idea of separation to a false and wrong conclusion. How are unbelievers to learn of Christ and be influenced for Him except through the contact that believers have with them? Communicating the gospel to people involves communicating with them - the giving of love, as well as the word of salvation. The Scriptures are not silent on this subject. We may be in the world without being of the world. Paul teaches in 1 Cor 10:27ff that a believer may go to a dinner party at the invitation of an unbeliever, and this is certainly because he believes in the possibility of witness in such a context. Earlier in the same epistle (5:9, 10) he states the position simply: believers cannot contract out of association with unbelievers altogether without departing this life. Such statements ought to afford us helpful and necessary guidance in some of the thorny practical problems that face believers in their relationships with the world. It is a fact that the shibboleths and taboos of religious prejudice often have more influence on the actions and attitudes of Christians than basic, scriptural principles are allowed to have. The reason why they do not do certain things or go to certain places or functions is not so much that they are forbidden in Scripture as that such things are frowned upon by the particular evangelical world to which they belong. This not only leads to bondage, it also has the effect of effectively preventing Christians from having the kind of contact with outsiders that alone can lead to the possibility of evangelising them. Of course there are dangers in such association with the world, and we must watch our step, but Jesus did promise that we could handle serpents and drink deadly things without being hurt, when engaged in the service of the gospel (Mark 16:18). We must attempt great things for God in this sphere also, and not be afraid of the frowns of diehard and rigid legalists.

41) 3:16-18

John now defines love for us. The words 'of God' in 16 do not appear in the text and should be omitted. Love is shown in its real nature in Christ and what He has done for us. Its true heart is self-sacrifice, and it must show in us in the same sacrificial way. This is expressed by the Apostle Paul in his well-known words in the Epistle to the Philippians (2:5 ff): "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus Who...became obedient unto death...." Having underlined this, John next (17) gives a particular illustration of how it ought to work out in practice - the showing of compassion to the needy, which is a Christ-like thing. Stott quotes both Dodd and C.S. Lewis in this connection in words that are highly illuminating. Dodd says "Love is the willingness to surrender that which has value for our own life, to enrich the life of another". This helps to make clear to us why it is that love is such uphill work for the natural man; for to love means giving yourself away, and self-centredness hates this above all else. Lewis says: "It is easier to be enthusiastic about Humanity with a capital 'H' than it is to love individual men and women, especially those who are uninteresting, exasperating, depraved, or otherwise unattractive. Loving everybody in general may be an excuse for loving nobody in particular". It still remains true that the only real proof of love is that we show love, and showing love must have a concrete object, that is, it must be someone in particular. It is certain that we can deceive ourselves in this matter; loving 'feelings' are not enough. We must love in action and attitude (cf 2 Sam 9:1). Actions speak louder than words (18)!

42) 3:19-21

The 'hereby' in 19 seems to refer back to what has just been said in the previous verses, and to have been prompted by the phrase in 18 'in deed and in truth'. The existence of love is the objective proof of the reality of our Christian profession, and it is this that will assure our hearts concerning our salvation. The thought here is like that in Romans 5:4 where Paul says, "Experience (character, RSV) worketh hope" - that is, the existence of true Christian character is prima facie evidence that our claim to salvation is not false and misplaced. The word 'assure' in 19 has the sense of 'reassure', and the context is that of the doubts and condemnation of conscience which God's children sometimes suffer. The RSV makes 20 - rightly, we think - continue the sentence begun in 19b, and reads, "shall reassure our hearts before Him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts...." An extremely important issue is raised here. It is the fact that our hearts (consciences, NEB) may condemn us wrongfully. It is true, of course, that our consciences convict us of wrong - this is conscience's proper function as God's monitor in the soul - but there is such a thing as a morbid conscience in which Satan, the accuser of the brethren, can be at work, counterfeiting the voice of God within us, to our hurt and deception. John's word in 4:1 about trying the spirits whether they be of God has relevance here. This is in fact what we must do in order to verify whose voice it is that is speaking to us. More of this in the next note.

43) 3:19-21

The whole question of the voice of the accuser is one to which all too little attention has been paid in Christian teaching, but it is of the first importance that it should be dealt with in the lives of those who are afflicted by it. For not only does it become a hindrance to Christian usefulness, as John implies in 21, but also the more one yields to the false accusations the worse and more relentless they become. This is the point of a morbid conscience. The more you 'give in' to it, the more demanding it will become until there will develop the sense of 'always being in the wrong', and despair will follow. This, in fact, is one sure sign of the devil's activity. For the Holy Spirit's conviction is always with a view to bringing cleansing and renewal to us with consequent further usefulness in God's service, whereas Satan's intent is to drive us deeper and deeper into ourselves in morbid preoccupation until despair grips the soul. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit is not a spirit that nags us relentlessly, nor does He speak in harsh, strident tones, but rather gently and quietly; not in sudden, compulsive pressures, but with steady persuasiveness. It is all a question of getting to recognise Him when He speaks. "My sheep hear My voice", said Christ. If then, when conscious of the inner voice of conscience in our hearts, we have the feeling of being bludgeoned by the very vehemence of the conviction in such a way that no amount of 'obedience' to it or 'confession' to God seems to bring any kind of relief, we must learn that this is not the work of a loving God but the enemy of souls, and resist him, refusing to yield to his pressures. Take a stand, distressed believer, on the victory of Christ (cf Rev 12: 10, 11), dispute Satan's right to interfere with your life, and bid him begone!

44) 3:22-24

The trouble, of course, with such satanic attacks – and this is their purpose - is that they rob us of our usefulness in the service of God, particularly in prayer. It is not because the believer is bad or in the wrong, but because he is sick, that the quality of his effectiveness is thus impaired. To have a heart at rest in the confidence and love of God means that one great hindrance to prayer is forever removed from our lives. In 22, John is not suggesting that answers to prayer are given us because we are good, as a reward for keeping His commandments. But he does mean that keeping His commandments and doing what is pleasing in His sight are the necessary pre-requisites of prayer, in the sense in which the Psalmist says, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Ps 66:18). It is not a question of prayer being answered as a reward for keeping the commandments, but rather, the keeping of the commandments is an evidence of that fellowship with the Lord which alone makes answers to prayer a possibility at all. The commandments of God, ultimately considered, are not many, but one, and it is expressed in a twofold way in 23 - believing on Christ and loving one another. It is impressive to see how John unites all three of the 'tests' which he applies to Christian profession in this simple verse; believing on Christ, the doctrinal test, obeying the commandments, the moral test, loving one another, the social test. There is perhaps a lesson for us here, in the association of the verse with what is said about answered prayer. When belief is right, obedience instantaneous, and love exemplary, prayer will be answered and faith will wax mighty for Christ and His kingdom. 24 echoes our Lord's teaching in the Upper Room discourse (John 14-16) and the mention of the Spirit leads John into a new thought in the next chapter.

45) 4:1-3

The first twelve verses of this chapter are devoted to an elaboration of the twofold commandment in 3:23. "Believing on Christ" is treated in 4:1-6, while "loving one another" is dealt with in 7-12. (John, in spite of all that might be said to the contrary, is very systematic in his teaching!) His exhortation to 'try the spirits', and not believe every spirit indiscriminately, has very real relevance in relation to the question dealt with in notes on pages 45 & 46 (which see). It is incumbent upon all believers, particularly in matters of Divine guidance, for example, to test the 'intimations' that come to their spirits to ascertain whether it is the voice of God or that of an alien spirit that-is speaking to them. However, John is referring, not to matters of guidance, as such, but to false teachers, and it is the spirit speaking in these that are to be tested. We have an excellent example of what John means in Paul's words in 1 Cor 12:3, where he says that no man (however plausible and impressive his 'spirituality') calling Jesus accursed can be speaking by the Spirit of God. Here, John's assertion is wider; no man calling Jesus anything other than the Christ come in the flesh can be of God. The reference is of course primarily to the heretics of John's time who denied a true Incarnation and claimed that the 'Christ' came upon Jesus only at His baptism, and left Him before He died on the Cross. But John's word here is timeless, in the sense that it has relevance and application in every age, and certainly in our own, when false sects abound. "Put them to the test", implies John. "If they do not confess the Godhead of one Son, they are not of God". It is as simple and categorical as that. If Jesus is not God manifest in the flesh, there is no gospel, no true atonement, and no forgiveness of sins.

46) 4:4

Stott suggests that the word 'overcome' here should be taken in an intellectual rather than in a moral sense, with the meaning "you have not been taken in by the false teaching, but have seen through it". John does in fact mean this, but since an intellectual deception would inevitably have moral consequences, it is scarcely possible to speak of an intellectual victory without moral victory also. It is surely a moral triumph to have seen through false teaching and thereby keep oneself from its fateful consequences. The ground and source of the victory is the indwelling of God in the believer - "the life of God in the soul of man", to use the title of a famous devotional classic. This is a great word, and one may venture to say that the increasing realisation of such a tremendous truth would work a moral and spiritual transformation in the lives of believers great enough and far-reaching enough to bring a Pentecostal accession of power to the Church in our time. Well does the hymn say, "Think what Spirit dwells within thee", for in so doing it makes a plea that we should recognise the truth about ourselves as believers, and learn day by day to appropriate our position and our riches in Christ, and become what we are in Him. This is the answer, not only to the danger of false teaching and heresy, but to every temptation that could come against us, every weakness of which we might be aware, every adverse circumstance of environment or heredity that might beset us. Over against the worst that could be true of us by nature, there stands this mighty incontrovertible fact, that we are indwelt by One Who is greater than everything and everyone that can be against us.

47) 4:5-6

Here is a study in opposites, between the true and the false prophets, and those who hear and heed them. John is setting a norm by which to test truth and error, and that norm is apostolic teaching. The 'we' in 6 refers to the Apostles as Christ's appointed and anointed servants, not as John and his companions as individual believers. This is a deeply significant statement for us today, for the reason that apostolic teaching is enshrined in the Scriptures, so that the touchstone of truth and error becomes Holy Writ. Those therefore who receive it are of God, and those who do not aren't.

There is something else here also. John implies a correspondence between the message and the hearer. He means that if a man is fascinated and captivated by a message or preaching which is not true to the apostolic pattern, he reveals himself to be not of God. This should serve to teach us that the need for a spirit of discernment in Christian life, to learn that all is not gold that glitters, and all is not real or true that happens to be earnest and enthusiastic and spiritually plausible. Christians can sometimes be far too easily taken in, and impressed with the wrong things. As Spurgeon used to say, thunder is not lightning, but this is apparently a distinction that some Christians are not able to make. Try the spirits, says John, whether they are of God!

48) 4:7

From the first part of the Divine commandment, to believe on the name of Christ (3:23), John now turns to the second, loving one another. This is the third emphasis in the epistle on love (see 2:7-11, 3:11-18). In the first, love is related to light, and in the second to life, but now it is related to the Divine nature, and in 7-12, John gives us three truths about the love of God as inducements to brotherly love. First of all, in 7, 8 he says we are to love one another because God is love, and because loving establishes the family likeness and connection. John's categorical statement that "every one that loves is born of God" sometimes causes concern in people's minds. For of course the question of 'the good pagan' arises here. What of the man who 'loves' yet has nothing to do with Church or gospel, who may in fact deny the gospel? Do John's words apply to him? We must however beware of the danger of turning John's words round to make them mean 'love is God'. We must also remember that love, in the New Testament sense, is of God - it is not a natural attribute. Its character is self-giving; its opposite is self-regard. And it is surprising just how much of what is often called love has self-regarding motives behind it. Loving to be seen of men is not love; the giving of one's goods to feed the poor, philanthropy, or even martyrdom - these are not necessarily expressions of love. If love is possible only when self has been broken, and if self can be broken only by the cross of Christ, then nobody can love in the New Testament sense of the term outside the influence of the gospel. This is John's meaning here.

49) 4:7-8

There is another point of importance in John's words. Notice the exhortation, 'Let us love one another'. But if we are born of God, will not love 'come naturally' to us, as His children? Perhaps, but certainly not automatically. We must exercise it. This is the biblical position with every Christian grace. But this also raises questions in our minds.

To love should surely be a spontaneous thing; then why speak of it as if it were a duty? As if it could be 'turned on'? 'Turn on' is perhaps a good metaphor. You can turn on a tap and no water will come, because it is unconnected with the main. Only when the connection is made will 'turning on' be of avail. Connection with the source of love is the first necessity. Then, to love is to adopt a certain attitude to others; it is to be like Christ to them, and this is assuredly a matter of the will not of the feelings. This is a duty, whether we feel like it or not. And, depend on it, there will be times when we will not feel like it, and a battle will ensue. This is our problem - so often we lose this battle because there is a death we are not prepared to die. Think of loving, not the lovable but the unlovable. To adopt a certain attitude to them, to be 'like Christ' to them - this is what it is to love them. And this will also mean refusing to allow their attitude to us to dictate or influence our attitude to them. In this connection, we need to remember that loving and liking are not the same thing. Liking belongs to feeling and sentiment, and to a realm where there is correspondence and affinity and common interests. Affection belongs to feeling also, although indeed, as C.S. Lewis wisely points out, there need not be correspondence of aim, but often incompatibility, when we can see the good points in others and learn to appreciate something that is outwith our own run of experience. But love is quite distinct; it is commanded as a Christian duty God loves us not because we are lovable, but because He is love, and in this sense we also must be god like. And this is possible only when self is crucified. The command to love is a summons to take up the Cross and follow Christ.

50) 4:9-11

The second inducement to loving one another is that God loved us and sent His Son to be our Saviour. Here it is the historical manifestation of the Divine love that John emphasizes. It is worth remembering that when the New Testament speaks of God's love for us, it usually does so in the past tense - 'God loved' - not in the present. This does not, of course, mean that He does not love us now, but rather it underlines and draws attention to the fact that the Divine love has a historical focus, namely the Cross. The giving of the Son to die for the sins of men is the manifestation of love that eclipses all other. Now John makes this the basis of our loving one another, in this sense, that such Divine action lays upon us an obligation to act in like manner. If God so loved us, we ought so to love one another. John's teaching is very close to Paul's here, when he says in 2 Cor. 5:15, "He died for all, that we which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him Who died for them, and rose again". This emphasises again what was said in the previous note. Such a manifestation of love as we see in the Cross is the essence of self-giving, so to love necessarily involves the sacrifice of self. It is not possible to live unto oneself and love too. The one cancels out the other. O that we might fully understand the infinite moral obligations that the love of the Cross lays upon us as Christians! We ought to love one another!

51) 4:12

This is the third inducement to love one another. We are to love one another because God dwells in us, and His love is perfected in us when we love. This is the present contemporary 'incarnation' or 'reflection' of love. When we love, God is shown forth. This, it would seem, is the force of the opening statement in 12. God is the unseen, invisible One, nevertheless He may be seen by men in us His people, when we love. His indwelling in us, if it be real, surely cannot be hidden; if it cannot show, the whole mystery of the Divine dwelling in man is a false, fantastic delusion. No greater challenge for the believer is to be found in the whole epistle, for this is surely the crying need of the Church today, that it might 'show forth' Christ, by being indwelt in such an unmistakable way that people would be bound to see Him. Not that they might necessarily recognise Him at first; but they would certainly be conscious of an indefinable 'something' that would grip and impress, and lead to eventual recognition and encounter with a living Lord. This is the 'perfecting' of His love in us, that is, the fulfilment of His purpose for men in their salvation. A further thought arises here, by implication, and in association with the thought of self-giving in love. If the Church is the body of Christ, to manifest Him to the world, the idea of 'the body broken for the life of the world' inevitably follows. We, Christ's people, must become 'broken bread and poured out wine' for the blessing of men. It is when the body is 'broken' like Mary's alabaster box, that love is poured out to heal the brokenness of men.

52) 4:13-16

Stott points out that the two phrases 'God dwelleth in us' and 'His love is perfected in us' are now amplified in 13-21. This is further evidence of the hidden orderliness of John's mind. He leaves no loose ends dangling, but deals with them all, one by one. In our verses today, we should note the threefold emphasis on indwelling, in 13, 15 and 16. Furthermore, whereas in 12 John speaks of God's indwelling us, now he speaks of a reciprocal indwelling, He in us and we in Him. These are but two aspects of the one reality of our union with Christ, and echo our Lord's own teaching in John 15. The one is never true without the other. This double indwelling is also associated in the three verses with three ideas, the gift of the Spirit (13), confession of Christ (15) and dwelling in love (16). These are tests of the reality of the indwelling, and all three are linked together, and depend on one another. The proof that we dwell in God and He in us is that He has given us His Spirit; and the proof that He has given us His Spirit is that we confess Jesus as the Son of God, and love one another. The reference in 14 is to the preaching of the apostles ('we' refers to John and his fellow-apostles), and their witness to the truth of the gospel is matched by the Spirit's witness to its truth within our hearts - that is, the objective historical facts and the inward, subjective conviction of their truth, wrought in us by the Spirit combine to bring assurance and certainty to our hearts, particularly concerning the loved that God has for us. A much needed persuasion indeed, for it is sometimes one of the most difficult things on earth just to believe that He could really care for us, and that we matter to Him. God grant that by the Word and by the Spirit, such a persuasion might be wrought in our hearts.

53) 4:17-21

John now turns to the theme of perfect love, which he mentioned in 12, although now it is the perfection of our love for God, not His in us, as in the earlier verse. The 'herein' in 17 could be taken to refer to what is said previously in 16, in which case the meaning would be that love would find its fulfilment and consummation in the realisation of the mutual fellowship mentioned there. It is more probable, however, that it refers to what follows, in which case the perfecting of love is realised (a) in confidence before God in the day of judgment (17), and (b) love for the brethren (19-21). We look, then, at the first of these now, and deal with the second tomorrow. The word 'boldness' has as its root meaning 'boldness of speech', and this is graphically underlined in Christ's parable of the marriage feast, when it is said of the man who did not have a wedding garment that 'he was speechless' (Matt 22:12). It is emphasised also in Romans 3:19 when it is said of men in their sin that 'every mouth is stopped'. To have boldness - 'something to say' - on the day of judgment will be something indeed, but it will be all of grace. This is why there can be no fear in our hearts. When grace has wrought its saving work in us, we are clothed in Christ's perfect righteousness, and thus clad we may have perfect confidence in appearing before God, for as Christ is accepted of the Father, so are we in Him. The implied association between love and justification here should not be overlooked. The one is never without the other. A loveless state of justification is a contradiction in terms.

54) 4:17-21

Just as there is an intrinsic association between love to God and justification, so is there also between justification and love for our brother. A true work of justification always begets a love for the brethren in the heart. This also, says John, is a sign that our love for God is made perfect. In 19 the word 'him' is not in the Greek and should be omitted. What John is saying is that 'we love (in contrast to 'he that feareth' in 18) because He first loved us, that is to say, we are delivered from the natural fear of judgment that all men have by the fact of His love for us, which saves us and gives us the only sure ground of confidence at the judgment-day. But - and this is the important thing - we are saved to love, and he who does not love his brother (20) neither loves God nor is saved. Stott points out that John speaks of lying and lies in connection with all three of the 'tests' that he uses throughout the epistle - 2:4, 2:22 and here, and calls them 'the three black lies' of the epistle, moral, doctrinal and social. We may compare 20 with 3:17 to realise that 'not hating' is not the same as loving. To love one's brother is to let one's heart go out to him in compassion when he is in need. A tardy and reluctant crucifixion of hatred and animosity may fall so very far short of the kind of love John has in mind, and nothing so unwilling and hesitant will suffice either to fulfil our Lord's commandment or prove our love for God (21).

55) 5:1

Once again John turns to his 'tests' of true Christian profession, and in the opening verses of this chapter we see them intertwined and shown to be essentially linked with one another, the one validating the other. The thought in 1 flows from John's statement in 4:21 about love's two-way reference, Godward and manward. And first of all he underlines the fact that the new birth is at the heart of every evidence of true Christian experience. Faith, love and obedience all alike flow from this fundamental reality. This is seen clearly in 1, so far as faith is concerned, where the literal rendering is "Whosoever believeth...has been born of God", that is, the 'believing' is the evidence, and the result, of having been born again. (This is worth emphasising; faith is the gift of God, and is the first-fruit of newness of life, and not, as is often supposed the cause of the new birth). From this John goes on first to imply that the one who is born of God will surely love Him, then explicitly asserts that love for God will inevitably mean love for His children also. As the RSV puts it, "everyone who loves the parent loves the child"; and what is true on the human level is also true in the spiritual life. John thus establishes that where there is a spiritual affinity and relationship there will also be affection and love, and as the new birth brings us into both a relationship with God as our Father and with other believers as our brothers and sisters, we shall both love Him and them. This is our birthright and our family responsibility.

56) 5:2-3

John continues to emphasise here that the family relationship will unite love for God and love for His children. Indeed, truly to love God and keep His commandments will ensure that we shall love His children. It is rather wonderful to see how John combines his three basic principles so inevitably and inextricably. Believing in Christ, obeying God's commands, and loving one another, are almost interchangeable ideas in this passage! We should note particularly once again that loving God is not an emotional experience of mystical ecstasy, but a question of moral obedience - it is keeping the commandments of God, and this faithfully echoes our Lord's own teaching in John 14:15. Nor is it difficult for our love to express itself in obedience, for His commandments are not grievous. One is reminded of Jesus' words in Matt 11:28-30, "Take My yoke upon you... and ye shall find rest... for My yoke is easy..." The fact is, it is only in the contemplation of the yoke of Christ that it seems hard (remember the rich young ruler); taking it however leads to rest, and it is proved easy. This is what John means in 3b. His commandments are grievous only for those who do not want to do them. When the will to do them is there, all else will follow, and we shall prove that the will of God is good, acceptable and perfect (Rom 12:2). As the hymn puts it, "Love will make obedience sweet". It is a measure of how little we have understood the commandments of God that we should think of utter obedience to them in terms of irksome duty rather than delight and joy. But if we are ever to become Christ-like, will we not more and more breathe the spirit of Him Who said, "I delight to do Thy will, O God"?

57) 5:4-5

These verses serve to underline further why keeping the commandments is for the believer not an irksome duty hardly performed, but a joy. It is that the new birth gives men the victory in and over the world and every other power that would militate against the keeping of the commandments. John, however, says 'whatsoever' rather than 'whosoever' as we might expect, and his intention seems to be to emphasise not so much the believer as the power that has gripped and mastered him. As Plummer puts it, "It is not the man, but his birth from God, which conquers". John repeats the phrase 'overcometh the world' three times in these verses. There are two points to note here. First of all, he associates the overcoming with three different aspects of the believer's experience, first with his new birth, then with his faith, and thirdly with his belief in Jesus as the Son of God. That these are intimately connected is surely clear and reflect John's closely-knit argument in the previous verses. The second point is that there are two different tenses used in the three 'overcometh's. The first and third verbs are in the present tense, but the second is the Greek aorist, which speaks of a once-for-all act of faith, whereas the present tense conveys the sense of the continuous victory which is ours in Christ. The second reference is therefore to be taken as a definite act and exercise of faith, by which the victory which is ours in Him is realised in our experience at a given moment. It is all a question of appropriating repeatedly what is ours in the gift of God. The Christian life is made up of such a series of appropriations.

58) 5:6-9

We come in these verses to a deeply interesting and significant statement for which a number of differing interpretations have been given. The connection with what precedes them seems to be this: the theme of 5:1-5 has been 'believing that Jesus is the Christ', and now John tells us how that believing comes about, namely through the testimony that is given to the gospel. Thus, John now describes the nature of that testimony. There has been considerable divergence of view as to the meaning of the words 'water and blood' in 6; some, with Calvin and Luther, think the reference is to the two sacraments of the gospel; others, that the reference is to the blood and water from the side of Christ (John 19:34, 35). But it is more likely that what John has in mind is the baptism of Jesus in Jordan (the water) and the baptism of His passion on the Cross (the blood). To say this does not of course explain John's meaning, but it does provide the key. One commentator stresses the words 'he that came' as meaning in effect 'He that accomplished the mission entrusted to him by God', and adds: 'did so by water and blood'. That is to say, the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world, and He fulfilled this mission (a) in the waters of Jordan when He identified Himself with man in his sin, and (b) by the sacrificial death on the Cross. One has only to think of the content of the apostolic preaching in Acts (e.g. 10:36-43) to realise how they all emphasised precisely the life and death of Christ as constituting the saving gospel of God, and to conclude that this must be what John has in mind in the phrase 'by water and blood'.

59) 5:6-9

The next point about this passage is that 7 does not form any part of the original words that John wrote. Scholars are unanimous in pointing out that it does not appear in any ancient manuscript earlier than the fourth century. All the external evidence is against its inclusion. Its obvious reference to the Trinity would certainly have made it a central text for quotation by the early Fathers in their controversies on the Trinity with the heretics, but in fact none of the Fathers so much as mention it. We therefore take 8 as following immediately after 6, and see that the theme is the same, that of witness. John speaks of a threefold witness, that of the Spirit, the water and the blood, agreeing in one. The bearing of this witness is with a view to bringing men to faith in Christ. The witness of the Spirit is inward, in a man's heart and conscience, while the witness of the water and the blood is outward, coming to men through the spoken word of apostles, prophets, evangelists and teachers. It is they who proclaim the truth embodied in this phrase 'water and blood', and when they do, the Spirit adds His life-giving and prevailing testimony by which men are brought to a saving knowledge of the gospel. This united testimony is referred to by our Lord in John 15:26, 27, "The Spirit shall testify of Me, and ye also shall bear witness...." This is very wonderful, and worth pondering well. Nor is it all; there is something else to be said on this subject, to which we shall return in the next note.

60) 5:6-9

We have seen that the apostles preached that Jesus came 'by water and blood'. Now, what we must realise is that to say this is to put a certain interpretation on the historical facts of our Lord's life and death. And it is this apostolic interpretation that makes the historical fact of Christ into a gospel. Let us put it this way: To say "Jesus Christ died on the Cross" is to make a historical statement; and taken by itself there is no gospel in that. But to say, as the apostles went on to say, "Christ died on that Cross for our sins" is to place a certain interpretation on that death; and it is this that constitutes the good news of grace. It is this that should forever explode the fallacy that is often widely held, namely, that it is the fact of the Cross, not any theory about it, that is important for the Christian faith and Christian experience. But the fact of the Cross, as such, has precisely no significance at all as gospel. The whole point about the gospel is that it is an interpretation of the facts. The real issue is not whether we should have interpretation (theory) or be content with the simple facts, for interpretation there must be, before there can be any gospel; the issue is whether we adopt the apostolic interpretation of the death of Christ or another which is neither apostolic nor biblical. The tragedy of modernism is that it has scorned the apostolic testimony to the Cross and adopted others which are untrue both to Christ's Person and to His atoning work. It is little wonder that the Spirit's witness has been so lacking in the Church's testimony in the twentieth century.

61) 5:9

The New English Bible rendering of this verse is graphic and helpful: "We accept human testimony, but surely Divine testimony is stronger, and this threefold testimony is indeed that of God Himself, the witness He has borne to His Son". This brings out more clearly than the AV the fact that it is the witness of Spirit, water and blood that is from God, nay more, God's own witness to His Son. We should not miss the tremendous significance of this, for it means that when a man preaches a true biblical message, God Himself speaks in it, and it becomes the word of God to those who hear it. There is a significant testimony to the truth of this in 1 Thess 2:13, where Paul tells us that the Thessalonians received the word of God not as the word of men but "as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe". What an encouragement this, to those who preach and those who pray for them! With what holy and eager expectation should we come week by week to hear the Word of God! The truth is, however, that we are often so dull and weak in faith that almost the last thing in the world we expect is that God should speak, and none would be more surprised than we. But if this word is true, then the surprising thing would be not that He spoke but that He didn't. And when He doesn't, there is always some good reason, for He wills to speak to men, and wants to. He may be grieved away.

62) 5:10-12

The result of the Divine witness spoken of in the previous verses is faith in our hearts, and a basic inward assurance that we are Christ's. This inward, subjective witness corresponds to and answers the objective witness of the Spirit, the water and the blood, fulfilling the Divine purpose in having sent the Son into the world to be the Saviour of men. It is interesting to see in these verses how John equates 'believing on the Son' not only with 'believing God', but also with 'believing the record God has given concerning His Son'. This latter phrase underlines something very important, for it reminds us that true faith is always biblical faith, that is, anchored to the Scriptures and related to what the Scriptures say about Christ, never to non-biblical notions about Him. This in turn emphasises the importance of scriptural preaching, for not otherwise will real faith be born in men's hearts than through having made known to them the record God has given concerning Christ (11). The commentators point out that 'believeth not' translates the perfect tense in the Greek, and should read 'has not believed' denoting a past 'crisis of choice'. This should serve to remind us that unbelief is a deliberate refusal and disobedience of God's word and will, not an unfortunate disability that one is born with, like having no ear for music and being unable to do anything about it. It is this that gives force to John's blunt and categorical statement in 12 that 'he that hath not the Son hath not life'. Jesus once said, 'Ye will not come to Me, that ye might have life' (John 5:40). It was not that they could not; it was that they would not.

63) 5:13

These words are sometimes taken in a general sense, to mean that assurance of salvation comes basically from the written Word. And this is of course true; John's statement here may be worthily and fairly applied in this way. Resting on what God has said is the beginning of all true assurance and confidence in the spiritual life, although in fact assurance does not, and cannot, end there, for the inner testimony of the Spirit in our hearts necessarily follows to confirm that our trusting in the written Word is not in vain. At the same time, however, it should be clear that John has a more specific meaning here, for he is surely referring to the three 'tests' that he has been applying again and again through the epistle - the test of doctrine, believing that Jesus is the Christ; the moral test, keeping the commandments; the social test, loving the brethren. This, in fact, is what he has written, and this the way to know and be sure of eternal life. As Paul puts it in Rom 5:4, 'experience worketh hope'. We should not miss the implication of John's statement here, whether we take the general or more specific interpretation of the words. Eternal life is something men can know they possess. This is one of the basic realities in New Testament Christianity. The Christian hope of salvation is not a vague, uncertain prospect, but something utterly sure and certain, and it is not presumption to claim this certainty as our own. We ought to be able to, and what is more, God means us to do so.

64) 5:14-15

Again John turns to the thought of confidence (the Greek reads 'boldness') in prayer (see 3:21, 22). John is far from suggesting here anything like the modern misconception of prayer as a quick-fire, 'penny-in-the-slot' mechanism for getting from God the things that we want. We should look at prayer rather in this way; God is eager to manifest His power in the world, and work in grace and mercy. All He needs are hearts obedient to His will, and willing for it. When we are, He then has a channel through which His power can come to the world He longs to bless, and we then will begin to ask for unheard of things which God will surely answer because it is He Who has put it in our hearts to ask them. You see what has happened? When our hearts are utterly yielded to Him there comes a glad new awareness of what He wants to do in us and through us; prayer takes on a new meaning for us altogether, and instead of bombarding Him with our desires and our will, we find ourselves caught up in His grand sovereign designs and purposes. If this be the real meaning of prayer, then it is clear that we often waste a great deal of time through not waiting on God until we know what He will do. The trouble is that, even as Christians, we think like men, not God. It is when we begin at last to think like Him, that prayer takes wings and faith waxes mighty, and He is at last able to work through us.

65) 5:16-17

It is interesting and significant that when John turns to a specific example of prayer, he turns to the matter of intercession for others. For him 'asking' is not about our own needs, but about others. The words 'he shall ask' in 16 are not so much a directive from John to the believer as an expression of the inevitable reaction a true believer will show when he sees a brother falling into sin. What John means is that we owe it to one another as children of the same Father to have a loving concern for each other's well-being, whether material or spiritual. The pronouns in this verse (16) are somewhat ambiguous, and the commentators are evenly divided about identifying those to whom they refer. Some think that the 'he' must surely refer to God, since it is He alone that gives life and pardon. This of course is true, but on the other hand, it seems to do violence to the grammatical construction of the sentence to introduce a different subject for the second verb when the first obviously refers to the intercessor. In fact, it is legitimate to refer the 'giving of life' to the intercessor, since under God it is he who not only gains it for the sinner but also may be said to give it to him. We need not fear to adopt this striking interpretation when we recall that James makes the same point even more explicitly in his epistle (5:20), when he speaks of the believer 'converting' another and saving a soul from death. In the fundamental sense, of course, we know that it is God alone Who can save a soul and give life. The concern here is not to arrogate to a believer the power that belongs to God alone, but rather to stress the tremendous responsibility that lies upon him in his intercession and the life and death issues that are involved in it. The meaning of 'the sin unto death' must be left until the next note.

66) 5:16-17

It is not easy to discern what John means by the 'sin unto death'. The phrase however most likely belongs to a particular emphasis which we see in several parts of Scripture stressing the extreme seriousness of continued sin and its far-reaching, not to say eternal, consequences. Passages such as Hebrews 6:4-6, 10:26, 12:16, 17, 1 Cor 5:5, 11:30, underline how dangerous it is for believers to dabble in sin. In one sense, of course, all sin is unto death, for the wages of sin is death. But John is distinguishing between sins that may be forgiven and the sin that may put a man beyond the point of no return. One thinks naturally of our Lord's words about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, a sin for which there is no forgiveness, and it may be that John is referring to this. The death mentioned may be taken as physical or as spiritual death. In the reference in the Corinthian epistle mentioned above, certainly physical death is what Paul has in mind, and this warns us that there are some sins in believers which bring them to their death. God is more honoured in taking them out of the way than in healing and restoring them. We may recall the Old Testament teaching on the distinction between sins of ignorance and sins of presumption. All human sin is an admixture of ignorance and wilfulness, and one can visualise the possibility of sinful attitudes becoming more and more wilful and deliberate and presumptuous, and less and less partaking of the ignorance that makes sin 'forgivable' (see 1 Tim 1:13) until the possibility of forgiveness is past, and the irrevocable step has been taken which puts a man beyond the reach of the grace of God. This would be the 'sin unto death' concerning which John says, "I do not say that he shall pray for it". This is terribly solemn and frightening, but the references already quoted from various parts of the New Testament forbid us to dismiss the thought as if John did not quite mean what he said.

67) 5:16-17

An important corroboration of the interpretation given in the previous note may be found in the Old Testament, in Jeremiah 7:16, 11:14, 14:11, where the prophet is explicitly told not to pray for the people. In the experience of Judah there came a point beyond which God would have no more to do with them. They had by the persistence of their sins passed the point of no return, and nothing then would have availed to turn away the threatened doom. And nothing did; for the people of God were swept away into captivity in the judgment that came upon their 'sin unto death'. Obviously, such a sin may be committed by a believer or an unbeliever; but the 'end' of the judgment will be different in each case. An unbeliever can sin away his day of grace, as, for example, it would seem that King Herod did, for although there was a time when his spirit was stirred and brought under conviction through the preaching of John the Baptist, that conviction was resisted and quenched until finally, when he came face to face with the Son of God, Jesus had no word to speak to him. He had passed the point of no return. But a believer cannot finally lose his salvation; the Scripture makes this abundantly clear. Can he then not sin the 'sin unto death'? The answer is that he may do so by continued carelessness of spiritual things, and continued rebellion against the holy laws of God until, like the children of Israel of old, he becomes 'disqualified' (see 1 Cor 9:27) - not in the sense of losing his salvation, but of losing his reward, and being ashamed before Christ at His coming (1 John 2:28) and suffering loss as the fire tries his work (1 Cor 3:13), and in the meanwhile suffering the censure of the Lord's judgment in his experience (1 Cor 11:30). These are weighty and soul burdening issues indeed. Well might David pray, "Keep back Thy servant from presumptuous sins....then shall I be innocent from the great transgression" (Ps 19:13).

68) 5:17-18

John safeguards himself from any misunderstanding of his words by insisting in 17 that all unrighteousness is sin. It is as if he were saying, "Do not misunderstand me; when I distinguish a sin unto death I am not suggesting that other sins are not serious. All sin is serious, and must be treated so". It is in connection with this that he goes on in 18 to remind his readers of what he has already emphasised in 3:6,9, that those who are born of God cannot go on sinning (the tense of the verb is present continuous). The next phrase, "he that is begotten of God" is open to different interpretations, for it may refer either to the believer himself or to Christ. The critical word is 'himself'. Some manuscripts read 'himself', others read 'him'. The RSV and the NEB both take the latter reading as the correct one, and this makes the sentence read, "He that is begotten of God (i.e. Christ) keepeth him (i.e. the believer). This is probably the better and more accurate reading, although it is fair to point out that the Scriptures do speak elsewhere of the believer preserving himself (see 1 Tim 5:22; James 1:27; Jude 21; 1 John 3:3;). In the deepest sense, it is always God Who worketh in us this purifying and preserving work. It is perhaps significant that the above reference in Jude is followed closely by the great statement that "He is able to keep you from falling and to present you faultless...." (Jude 24). This is surely John's point here, and this is why he can be so confident that those that are born of God will not continue in sin.

69) 5:19

John is making a contrast here between the security of the believer and the plight of the world. The whole world, he says, lies in (the power of) the wicked one; but the believer is safe in the hand of God. The apostle's thought is very like the Psalmist's in Ps 91, "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most high shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty". This is the believer's safety, and no evil can touch him. There is almost a suggestion of the evil one trying unremittingly to assail the believer, but to no avail. One recalls Christian at the gate of the Palace Beautiful, where the two lions growled and roared at him, but could not harm him, being chained. There may also be an echo of the statement in Ps 105:15, "Touch not the Lord's anointed, neither do His prophets any harm". In stark contrast to this blessed state, the unbelieving world is said to 'lie' in the wicked one. For unbelievers, there is no struggle against the enemy (the battle, paradoxically, is reserved for those who have been set free) they lie quietly acquiescent in the devil's power. Here, as so often throughout the epistle, John is categorical in the contrast he presents; there is no middle way, it is either 'of God' or 'in the evil one', and benevolent neutrality is impossible. In this he simply echoes our Lord's own teaching, "He that is not with Me is against Me". It is as decisive as that!

70) 5:20-21

Again John deals with fundamental Christian positions here, in the third 'we know' in successive verses (18, 19, 20). This is the bedrock assurance that stands over against all alarms and all possible circumstances - we know that the Son of God is come. It is this that prompts Paul to say in Rom 8:38,39, "I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor....shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord". This is the sheet-anchor for the believer. When he can really say, "We know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding", nothing can disturb his faith. It is this assurance that the opponents of the Christian faith will never understand. So long as Christianity is thought of in terms of the possibility of rational proofs and philosophical probabilities, then arguments continue. But one does not waste time trying to prove what one knows, and the believer can afford to smile at the cleverest and most convincing 'proofs' given with the greatest force and persuasiveness by agnostics, humanists and others that the Christian faith is intellectually and logically impossible of acceptance; for he knows that Christ has come (the verb is in the perfect tense, denoting that the effect of His coming has remained), and that the understanding He has given of the unseen world is such as to remove the whole issue from the realm of argument or doubt. We know!

71) 5:20-21

The last phrase of 20 is very striking. Some scholars think it refers to God, but others, including both Calvin and Luther, maintain that the reference is to Christ, and if this is correct, then it is the most direct and most unequivocal reference in the New Testament to the deity of Christ. Nor should we be unwilling to follow this interpretation, for after all John's concern throughout the epistle has been to underline this fundamental truth. So far as he, and indeed the other apostles also are concerned, if Jesus is not God, then there can be no real atonement, and no salvation.

There seems to be a connection between the last words of 20 and what John concludes with in 21. The force of what he is saying is: "Be true to the One Who is the true God, and have no truck with any doctrine which detracts from His glory". The idols John refers to must surely be understood in the context of the rest of the epistle, as referring to the false teaching which was endangering the life of the Church. This was such as to require a decisive repulse, and John conveys this in the tense of the verb he uses. To know Christ as the true and living God makes it unthinkable that a man will have any association with what denies Him. He will inevitably want to shun all complicity with such things. And he will do so, decisively, and once for all. This is the force of John's words.

"What have we to do with idols
Who have companied with Him?"