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A CALL BACK TO A TRUE COMMUNITY OF THE SPIRIT CENTERED IN CHRIST: A RE-EXAMINATION OF THE PURPOSE OF 1 JOHN

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BKC	Bible Knowledge Commentary
BSac	*Bibliotheca Sacra*
DTS	Dallas Theological Seminary
EBC	Expositor's Bible Commentary
Her	Hermeneia
NAC	New American Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NIVAC	New International Version Application Commentary
NovT	*Novum Testamentum*
NovTG	*Novum Testamentum Graece*
NTC	New Testament Commentary
NTI	D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
SIL	Summer Institute of Linguistics
SWJT	*Southwestern Journal of Theology*
TDNT	Theological Dictionary of the New Testament
TDNT	Theological Dictionary of the New Testament
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Preliminary Observations

First John, like other pieces of biblical literature, is intriguing to study. It features both positive as well as negative aspects. For example, referring to 1 John, Luther was once quoted as saying, "This is an outstanding epistle. . . . It has John's style and manner of expression, so beautifully and gently does it picture Christ to us."[1] But, as Kruse observes, "They represent an unhappy time in the life of the Christian communities involved; a time of dispute between believers involving both theological and behavioral concerns."[2] Marshall invites his readers to hear the Word of God through 1 John because "they form an excellent starting place for the student who wants an introduction to the theology of the New Testament."[3] But Johnson shows its readers the other side, for "they were written in the midst of one of the fiercest conflicts in first-century Christianity."[4]

In the same manner, 1 John is both encouraging as well as disturbing to read. Hiebert observes, "The forceful simplicity of its utterances, the grand theological truths it

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[1]Martin Luther, *Lectures on the First Epistle of St. John, LW* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1967), 30:219, quoted in Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, New American Commentary (NAC), ed. E. Ray Clendenen and others (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 22.

[2]Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1.

[3]I. Howard Marshall, *Epistles of John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 1.

[4]Thomas F. Johnson, *1, 2, and 3 John*, New Testament Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 1.

portrays, and the unwavering ethical demands of its teaching have made 1 John a favorite with Christians everywhere."[5] But looking closer at the warnings of 1 John (e.g., 2:18-27), the gravity of the situation becomes evident. It pictures a "church split" with its destructive ramifications. Thus the letters of John provide present readers with a "cameo of life" in the early church, teaching them both the potential as well as the problems of church life. It contains lessons that are applicable to all Christians in all churches in every generation.[6]

As a piece of ancient literature, 1 John has unusual characteristics also. Although it is often referred to in various commentaries as one of "the letters of John," it does not have the usual characteristics of a first-century letter.[7] The author himself is not named in the letter, giving rise to debates about its authorship.[8] In addition, its structure is difficult to discern.[9] Time and space prevents this writer from discussing many other important issues such as: (1) the chronology or sequence of 1 John in relation to 2 and 3 John,[10] (2) the acceptance and placement of 1 John in the canon,[11] (3) the so-called proto-Catholic

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[5]D. Edmond Hiebert, "An Exposition of 1 John 1:1-4," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (*BSac*) 145 (Apr-June 1988): 197.

[6]Kruse, *Letters of John*, 1.

[7]See William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude* (Edinburgh: St. Andrew, 1960), 3. Various theories concerning the genre of 1 John have been proposed. For example, Raymond Brown cites at least four options: a) universal religious tractate, b) circular epistle, c) homily, diatribe, informal tractate, pastoral encyclical, and d) commentary on the Gospel of John (*The Epistles of John*, Anchor Bible [New York: Doubleday, 1982], 86-91). More recently, Kruse uses the term "epideictic rhetoric" to describe the genre of 1 John (*Letters of John*, 29).

[8]For the view that John the apostle may not have written 1 John, see the extensive documentation of Brown, *Epistles*, 14-35, and C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, Moffatt New Testament Commentary (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1945), 50-71. For an excellent defense of the traditional view, see Kruse, *Letters of John*, 9-14.

[9]See Brown, *Epistles*, 116-29, for an excellent overview of various proposals. See also John Christopher Thomas' proposal in his article, "The Literary Structure of 1 John," *Novum Testamentum* (*NovT*) 40, no. 4 (1998): 369-81.

[10]For a non-traditional approach to the sequence of the letters of John, see John Christopher Thomas, "The Order of the Composition of the Johannine Epistles," *NovT* 37, no. 1 (1995): 68-75,

[11]For an excellent overview of the difficult process of acceptance for the Johannine letters as a whole, see Canon A. E. Brooke, *The Epistles of John*, International Critical Commentary, ed. Samuel Driver, Alfred Plummer, and Charles Briggs (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1912; reprint, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1980), 52-62.

tendencies of 1 John,[12] (4) the possible pre-sources [if any] of 1 John,[13] (5) the relationship of 1 John with the Gospel of John,[14] (6) the possible redaction of the Gospel of John in its final form, as the basis of exhortations in 1 John,[15] and (7) the possible existence of the so-called "Johannine school."[16] This study will deal partly with some of these issues in the course of examining the purpose of 1 John, but only to a limited extent.

But one issue that is important to the careful study of this epistle is its purpose. Boice gave would-be interpreters of 1 John good counsel when he said:

> It is possible to read a book without understanding the purpose for which it was written. . . . But it is not possible to study [1 John] without dealing with this primary question.[17]

Knowledge of John's purpose informs the reader's whole approach to the interpretation of this epistle. Kruse warns us that "anyone seeking to make sense of the Letter of John really needs to have a working hypothesis concerning the events which lie behind them."[18] This is crucial since the understanding of purpose will determine how one will interpret some of the controversial passages in 1 John (e.g. 1 John 2:2, 27; 3:6; 5:16-17).

But trying to understand the events behind 1 John is not easy. Kruse summarizes the difficulty as follows:

> Such a hypothesis involves historical reconstruction, and this in turn will have to be based on certain assumptions about literary matters. However, to some extent

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[12]C. Clifton Black II offers an excellent discussion of this issue in "The Johannine Epistles and the Question of Early Catholicism," *NovT* 27, no. 2 (1986): 131-58.

[13]For a detailed examination of possible sources for John's theology, see Dodd, *Johannine Epistles*, 21-56.

[14]See Brown, *Epistles*, 71-100.

[15]D. Moody Smith Jr., "Johannine Christianity: Some Reflections on its Character and Delineation," *New Testament Studies* (*NTS*) 2, no. 21 (1975): 222-48.

[16]See for example Oscar Cullmann, *The Johannine Circle*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1976), 87.

[17]James Montgomery Boice, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 11.

[18]Kruse, *Letters of John*, 1.

> the literary assumptions depend on decisions made in the historical reconstruction. The interpreter has no alternative but to work in a circle, while continually checking historical decisions against the literary assumptions and vice-versa.[19]

It is important, therefore, to study the purpose of 1 John by looking at both its literary contents as well as its historical background. However, its historical background can only be deduced, and only to a limited extent, from its literary contents. It would be a circular exercise for sure, as Kruse warns, but necessary to discover the original author's intended message. Scholars have already wrestled with this problem in the past, and have come up with at least three theories concerning the purpose of 1 John.[20] This writer believes that a fourth theory, one that takes into consideration the three prevailing theories but extends it further, can be a better alternative to the present theories. This theory is not entirely new, but justification for it is needed.

Statement of the Problem

According to Derickson, there are at least two named and accepted theories concerning the purpose of 1 John.[21] The oldest and the most widely held theory sees the purpose of 1 John as offering "tests" that would determine if a person has eternal life.

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[19]Ibid., 1-2.

[20]Gary W. Derickson offers a good overview of the current views so far ("What is the Message of 1 John?" *BSac* 150 [Jan-Mar, 1993]: 89-105). But he has identified only two prevailing views: the "Tests of Life" theory and the "Tests of Fellowship" theory.

[21]Derickson does not mention a third theory ("Message," 89). But this writer feels that a third theory, the "Tests of Orthodoxy" theory, must be identified as separate and distinct from the other two, because of its unique angle. See below for an explanation of this view.

This is called the "Tests of Life" theory.[22] According to this theory, the purpose of 1 John is "to encourage his readers, who were understood to be believers, to assure themselves of their salvation by verifying the validity of their profession through certain tests."[23] These tests include the following: (1) doctrinal agreement with the apostles' teaching, and (2) submission to their standard of conduct, namely, loving the brethren and living righteously.[24] True believers must pass these tests in order to assure themselves of true salvation.

The second prevailing, and most recent, theory is the "Tests of Fellowship" theory.[25] This is sometimes called the "Practice of Life" view.[26] Proponents of this view believe that 1 John was written to encourage believers to maintain fellowship with God and to provide assurance of that fellowship through tests of spiritual communion. John wrote to believers whose relationships with God were being questioned by false teachers "whose claims to a special relationship with God left common believers in doubt of their

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[22]Some of the proponents of this view mentioned by Derickson, include Brown, *Epistles*; John Calvin, *The Gospel according to St. John* 11-21 and *The First Epistle of John*, Calvin's New Testament Commentaries, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959-61); Dodd, *Johannine Epistles*; D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Non-Pauline Epistles and Revelation*, rev. ed. vol. 3 of *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1977); idem, "An Expositional Study of 1 John," *BSac* (April 1988 through July 1990); Robert Law, *The Tests of Life: A Study of the First Epistle of St. John* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1909; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969); John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988); Marshall, *Epistles of John*; John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (TNTC) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); and Brooke F. Westcott, *The Epistles of John* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966). See Derickson, "Message," 89.

[23]Derickson, "Message," 90.

[24]Ibid.

[25]According to Derickson, proponents of this view include Guy H. King, *The Fellowship* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1954); C. C. Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1959); idem, "I, II, III John," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody, 1962); Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege* (Dallas, TX: Redencion Viva, 1981); idem, *Absolutely Free!* (Dallas, TX: Redencion Viva, 1989); idem, "1 John," in *Bible Knowledge Commentary* (*BKC*), New Testament ed., ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983); J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Joy of Fellowship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977); John G. Mitchell, *An Everlasting Love* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1982); idem, *Fellowship* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1974); and J. W. Roberts, *The Letters of John*, The Living Word Commentary (Austin, TX: R. B. Sweet, 1968). See Derickson, "Message," 95.

[26]Ibid.

status."[27] In other words, according to this view, the purpose of John for writing is to assure the believers that they *do* have communion with God (that is, "fellowship"). Contrary to what those who left assert,[28] they are the ones who are truly walking "in the light," not the secessionists. He wants to assure them of their communion (or vertical relationship) with God, as well as their community (or horizontal relationship) with one another, and especially with the apostles, by giving them "tests" to prove it. They are to use these tests to determine the presence or absence of true κοινονια among themselves.[29]

These two prevailing views, the "Tests of Life" view and the "Tests of Fellowship" view, are part of a wider discussion involving "Lordship Salvation."[30] The "Tests of Life" view supposes that one can determine if a person is truly saved or not by applying certain "tests." If they fail the tests, then they are not true believers at all, even contrary to what they may in fact claim (cf. 1 John 1:8-10). On the other hand, the "Tests of Fellowship" view presupposes that no one can be legalistic about salvation. They may only apply the "tests" to determine whether a Christian is actually experiencing true communion with God or not. If a Christian is in communion with God, then it follows that he is also in communion with other Christians. His salvation is not questioned at all.

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[27]Ibid.

[28]From here on they will be referred to as the "secessionists" or "schismatics" (1 John 2:18-27).

[29]Ibid.

[30]It has been recognized by many commentators that this issue remains unsettled up to now. Is John referring to salvation by grace alone, with the issue of "fellowship" or an on-going relationship with God as the only major concern for believers after they are saved; or is he referring mainly to the righteous lifestyle that God expects among those who are truly saved? Both camps have agreements and disagreements concerning the theology of 1 John. See Charles P. Baylis, "The Meaning of 'Walking in the Darkness' (1 John 1:6)," *BSac* 149 (1992): 214-15. For additional insights concerning this wider issue, see Randall Gleason, "The Lordship Salvation Debate," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 27:1 (2003): 55-72.

But a third theory can be identified as well. This theory is not mentioned by Derickson or any of the other commentators, not explicitly at least. But most commentators refer to it without giving it a specific category. For example, Barclay, in his commentary, states,

> John wrote his great letter to meet a threatening situation and in defense of the faith. The heresies which he attacked are by no means altogether echoes of "old unhappy far off things and battles long ago." They are still beneath the surface, and sometimes they even still raise their heads. To study his letter will confirm us in the true faith, and will enable us to have a defense against that which would seduce us from it.[31]

Smalley also suggests that the purpose of 1 John is primarily an "appeal to the faithful for them to maintain the apostolic gospel, and secondarily, to refute and correct the heretical views of the secessionists."[32] According to him, "there are two groups of adherents whose understanding of the faith and its ethical implication was not only inadequate but also inclined to heterodoxy."[33] In other words, John's main concern in this epistle is to challenge the inroads of heretical teaching in his communities. The repeated occurrences of ἐὰν εἴπωμεν (1 John 1:6-10) are actually claims made by the false teachers, and not by John or any of his faithful followers.[34] John is therefore indirectly attacking them by his subtle use of the first person plural pronoun "we." He wants to test the validity of their claims by comparing it with what is really "of the truth" (or "by the truth," 1 John 1:6, as in the NIV). Thus, his objective is to show the secessionists that their "claims" are false. It would be appropriate to call this view the "Tests of Orthodoxy" view, because its focus

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[31]Barclay, *Letters*, 24.

[32]Stanley Smalley, *1, 2, and 3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), 28.

[33]Ibid., 26.

[34]Hiebert, "An Exposition of 1 John 1:5-2:6," *BSac* 145 (July-Sept 1988): 332.

is primarily on the secessionists who left the community. Akin seems to hold to this view as well, although not explicitly, when he says that

> John's purpose was to provide assurance by warning and instructing his readers against following the sin of the heretics in rejecting Jesus and claiming personal sinlessness. First John 1:5-10 (as an example) thus gives descriptive, universal maxims of the way of death and the way of life. In its original context these maxims are tests of true and false teaching in the first instance.[35]

The "Tests of Orthodoxy" view highlights the polemical aspect of John's purpose as primary. It would appear that John is focusing more on combating the heretics rather than encouraging those who were left behind in his communities. The idea of antagonism is recognized by advocates of the other two theories but they see it more as a secondary purpose.[36] The "Tests of Orthodoxy" theory uniquely sees polemics (that is, the defense of the faith) as the primary purpose of John in writing this epistle.

Each of these theories will be evaluated further in this study. Some initial observations and comments concerning the apparent weaknesses or incompleteness of current views must first be made for they show the need for this study. These weaknesses are only apparent for they all have strengths since each of them can be proven from the explicit purpose statements of 1 John.

Apparent Weaknesses or Incompleteness of Current Views

First of all, John seems to assume that his readers are already well "assured" in their salvation. The forty-two occurrences[37] of the verb "to know" in its various forms found throughout the epistle may suggest that John is affirming, not questioning, their

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[35]Akin, *1, 2, 3* John, 87.

[36]Ibid., 31-32.

[37]Ibid., 90.

settled convictions about their salvation (1 John 2:21). This "assurance" may be true even for those who may have left the communities because of doctrinal differences, if indeed John is echoing their "claims" in 1 John 1:6-10. The conditional sentences may suggest that John has some doubts concerning their claims, but his stress seems to be more on the positive side.[38] It would seem that he is more interested to confirm the right aspect of their claims rather than deny them entirely. Brown says, "[John] rarely rejects their claims outright; rather he criticizes the way they understand the implications of those claims."[39] Thus, John may be indirectly addressing an "early Gnostic" tendency in 1 John 1:6-10,[40] and may even be challenging it, although this common assumption will be challenged later in this study. Nevertheless he is more interested in clarifying the truth so that everyone else in his communities can make the right claim.[41] The assumption behind the "Tests of Life" view, that John wants to give "tests" to help his readers determine if they are truly saved, would appear to be weak or, at least, incomplete in defining John's overarching purpose, especially in light of 1 John 2:21. This does not mean that there are no "tests" in 1 John, only it is not sufficient to account for all the other more important affirmations in the epistle.

At the same time, the readers of 1 John seem to have a very strong bond with each other already. This may be inferred, for example, from the strong communal statement in 1 John 2:19, "They went out from *us*, but they did not really belong to *us*. For if they had

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[38]Ibid., 72.

[39]Ibid.

[40]This is the common assumption among many commentators. See, for example, the long excursus on Gnosticism in Brooke, *Epistles of John*, 33-43. He argues extensively that John may have these people in mind when he wrote his epistle. Some scholars, however, like Judith M. Lieu, disagrees with this assumption ("Authority to Become Children of God," *NovT* 23, no. 3 [1981]: 210-28).

[41]Brown, *Epistles*, 63-64.

belonged to *us*, they would have remained with *us*; but their going showed that none of them belonged to *us*." In other words, they may have a strong concept of "fellowship" already, even though it was being threatened or has been threatened in the past by false teachers or false believers (see 1 John 2:26). In addition, the clause ἵνα καὶ ὑμεῖς κοινωνίαν ἔχητε μεθ' ἡμῶν in 1:3 may indicate one of the primary purposes of John.[42] If so, the present-tense of the verb ἔχητε may indicate a present possession of that "fellowship" rather than a future wish for it (cf. the NIV translation: "so that also you *may* have fellowship with us" [emphasis mine]). As far as the secessionists are concerned, John may also wish to exhort them back to the true "fellowship" of the saints, if at all possible.[43] For these reasons, the "Tests of Fellowship" view may not be comprehensive enough to cover all the major assertions of John's epistle. The idea of "fellowship" is introduced in the prologue (1:1-3) as well as in the initial arguments of the author (1:6-7). It is therefore a necessary component of the overall purpose of 1 John. But in and of itself, it is not sufficient to account for all the other more important affirmations in the epistle.

In relation to the third theory, the "Tests of Orthodoxy" theory, it would seem misleading for someone like John to use "we" in 1 John 1:1-10, which normally would mean "we, the apostles, and you, our dear friends, and everyone else who might claim to be in the truth"[44] to mean instead "they" (or the secessionists only).[45] This seems to be the

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[42]There are four identified "purpose" statements in 1 John (1:4; 2:1; 2:26; 5:13). Each of these verses will be evaluated later in this study.

[43]See 1 John 5:16-17, where John seems to be suggesting that his readers should try to win those who have not yet totally left the truth. Perhaps John believes that some may still be won back through prayer.

[44]For other possible interpretations of the pronoun, see Raymond Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple – The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 102.

[45]This seems to be an unquestioned assumption by many scholars because of John's statement in 2:18-27. See, for example, Kruse, *Letters of John*, 61.

implication of this view and it is not characteristic of John at all. For instance, he has no problem using the term "false prophets" (ψευδοπροφῆται) to rebuke those who have the wrong "spirit" in 1 John 4:1, nor is he runabout in denouncing those who are liars (ψεύστης) in 1 John 2:22, or who are not walking "in the truth" (ψευδόμεθα) in 1 John 1:6-10, etc. There is evidence in the text that John would more often use the direct approach in dealing with the enemies of the gospel.[46] So it is better to read the "we" in 1 John 1:6-10 as referring to himself and to his readers, and to everyone else who claims to be in the truth, rather than just to the secessionists alone. For this reason, the "Tests of Orthodoxy" view seems to be incomplete in explaining John's overarching purpose. Not that there is no polemical tone in 1 John. But its prominence in most commentaries as the overarching purpose of 1 John seems unwarranted upon closer examination of the evidence.

Last, but not the least, the third class conditional phrase ἐὰν εἴπωμεν in 1 John 1:6, 8, 10 may indicate that John is envisioning the possibility of someone, or anyone, making a false claim.[47] He is not particularly limiting this possibility to the secessionists.[48] Even true Christians it seems can make such false statements, especially if they are not living in the truth, as John asserts. To say that a true Christian cannot possibly make such claims is based on an *a priori* conclusion.[49]

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[46]Compare, for example, the direct statement in one of the spurious documents called *3 Corinthians* (Lieu, "Authority," 212): "They say that no use should be made of the prophets, that God is not almighty, that there is no resurrection of the flesh and that the creation of men is not God's act, and also that the Lord did not come in flesh and was not born of Mary and that the world is not of God but of angels."

[47]According to A. T. Robertson, "the third class condition" refers to a "undetermined situation, but with the prospect of determination." In other words, "this condition states the condition as a matter of doubt, but with some expectation of realization" (A. T. Robertson and W. Hersey Davis, *A New Grammar of the Greek Testament* [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935], 353). Cited by Hiebert ("1 John 1:5-2:6,"332).

[48]Ibid., 332.

[49]Compare for example the scenario envisioned by Paul in 1 Cor 12:3, where someone in the church may actually say "Jesus be cursed." Such a person is definitely not being led by the Spirit. But that doesn't mean that he doesn't have the Spirit to begin with (cf. vv.1, 12-13).

In view of this initial appraisal of the three existing theories, it would seem that a more comprehensive theory, one that encompasses the existing theories and extends it even further to include other assertions in the epistle as well, is needed. This is the goal and purpose of this study.

Purpose of the Study

In light of the above apparent weaknesses or incompleteness of existing theories, there is a need to propose a theory that incorporates all the theories and extends them even more to include other more important affirmations in the epistle as well. The goal of this study is to re-examine the purpose statements in 1 John (1 John 1:4; 2:1, 12-14, 26-27; 5:13), as well as other statements made by the author in the epistle that might indicate his purpose to determine if a more comprehensive theory can explain John's overall purpose better. This examination suggests John's purpose for writing 1 John is to "call back his readers to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ."[50] This purpose statement accepts the other existing theories as valid, but extends them even more to include other more important assertions in the epistle.

This view agrees with the other views in that certain members of John's community have departed and have formed their own communities somewhere (1 John 2:18-27).[51] The call for a true Christ-centered community is based on a call to return back to the Truth, who is none other than Jesus Christ Himself (5:21). In other words, John wrote to appeal for a return to a Christ-centered community among all the believers in his

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[50]John wants his readers to remain in the truth, who is no other than Jesus Christ (1 John 5:19-20).

[51]There is a general consensus concerning this historical reconstruction even among the critical scholars.

oversight perhaps in view of the destructive "heresies" that were now slowly misleading and dividing many of them (1 John 2:26).[52] He does this by citing, confirming, and clarifying the gospel as it "was from the beginning," with all its specific implications, and corrections, for their Christian community.[53] He appeals to them as his children and as his friends (1 John 2:1, 7, 12-14, 18, 28; 3:7, 21; 4:1, 4, 7; 5:21) to remind them of the true gospel, which they have heard and accepted in the past through his or other witnesses' preaching and teaching in the area (1 John 1:1-4).[54] His intention now is to encourage them to remain in fellowship with Jesus Christ. He wants them to continue walking in the truth.[55] He—Jesus Christ—is the truth and the life (1 John 1:1; cf. 5:11-12), according to John. He is therefore the focus and the content of the gospel that has been rightly proclaimed by the original apostles from the very beginning.[56] His intention now is to encourage them to have true fellowship (or communion) with the apostles as well as with one another (v.4). This does not imply that 1:3-4 is the overarching purpose statement of 1 John, but it contains the essential aspects of the overall purpose statement which is a call to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ.

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[52]Alfred Plummer argues that it was Gnosticism, or at least its proto-Gnostic form, that bothered the communities of John (*Epistles of St. John*, Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools and Colleges [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1894], 120). Glenn W. Barker has an excellent rebuttal of this common assumption (*1, 2, and 3 John*, Expositor's Biblical Commentary [EBC], ed. Frank E. Gaebelein [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981], 293-96). See also Lieu, "Authority," 210-15.

[53]Even the delineation of the terms "righteousness" and "sin," if taken in their proper context can be understood from a communal perspective. See Julian V. Hills, "Sin is Lawlessness," *Common Life in the Early Church*, ed. Julian V. Hills (Harrisburg, PN: Trinity Press, 1998), 286-99.

[54]It is generally assumed that John ministered in Asia Minor, particularly in Ephesus, in the latter part of the first century, just prior to his death in AD 100. The Fourth Gospel may have been circulating in the "seven cities" as early as 85 AD. See Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 22.

[55]See Baylis, "Meaning of Walking," 214-28.

[56]Black makes a convincing case that the author of 1 John did not arrogate the right to interpret tradition all by himself. Instead, he sees the χρῖσμα as the Spirit-ability of every believer to interpret the tradition ("Johannine Epistles," 135).

John wants to remind his readers about the tradition that they have already received ("what" [neuter] was from the beginning, Ὃ ἦν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς).[57] His intention is primarily pastoral and only secondarily polemical. In other words, he does not primarily want to attack or rebuke those who have left his communities (2:18-27). It is true that he wants to thwart the ever-increasing threat of Satan to divide his communities through deception. Some have already been influenced by the Antichrist (singular) or the antichrists (plural). They are said to be "in this world" and have left the communities sometime earlier (1 John 2:18-19). They are now trying to influence those who were left behind (1 John 2:26). But this is not his main concern. John's concern now, it seems, is to unite all of them back to the Truth, Jesus Christ, so that they can become a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ. He is not so much interested in addressing the secessionists per se, or to take sides with the loyalists, as might be expected, but in healing the gap or the confusion that has been created by this dissension. In other words, he wants to restore the "fellowship" (κοινωνια) of the saints by calling everyone to a true [and right] belief in Jesus Christ, the Word of life (1 John 5:21). He knows that both camps are in danger of devouring each other, if they are not corrected fast, all because of their misunderstandings about Jesus Christ, the gospel, and all its implications.[58] It was time to set the record straight for everyone. John wrote 1 John exactly for this very purpose: to call them back to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ.

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[57]Akin makes a strong case for an eyewitness account based on the language of 1:1-4 (*1, 2, 3 John*, 58-61). More to the point, Kruse asserts that John associates himself with other firsthand witnesses (*Letters of John*, 61).

[58]This is similar to Paul's concern in Galatians 5:15.

Importance of the Study

If this thesis is correct, it encompasses the other three existing theories and provides a more comprehensive understanding of John's purpose for writing 1 John. The "Tests of Life" theory is partly right in that John wants his readers to confirm their assurance of salvation. At the same time, the "Tests of Fellowship" theory is also partly correct in seeing the need to verify the claim of true "fellowship" with God. More importantly, there is an assertion in 1 John for his readers to "test" the spirits if they are truly from God (1 John 4:1), which proves that the "Tests of Orthodoxy" theory is also partly correct. But alone and separated from each other, each theory is weak and incomplete. There is a need for a more comprehensive purpose statement that includes all of these together and extends it even more to cover other more important assertions in the epistle.

First John is indeed very relevant today. As Christians become even more hardened in their "self-categories,"[59] the body of Christ will continue to weaken in disunity. But those who might observe this problem might also suggest an unbiblical solution: "Let us all forget our differences, and let us all unite for the sake of love." The apostle John would not agree, even though he did emphasize "love" in this letter more than any other topic.[60] Disunity in the body of Christ is a disease that must be cured quickly. But unity

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[59] This the tendency of most churches and denominations, as well as Christians, to create divisions amongst themselves based on trivial or non-essential doctrinal arguments.

[60] Thomas, "Literary Structure," 369-81, suggests that 1 John has a chiastic structure with the call to "love one another" (3:11-18) as the central emphasis. More convincingly, "love," in one form or another, occurs forty-three times in the entire letter. See Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 176.

for its own sake, as an end in itself, and without the truth, is never glorifying to God. The only thing that can unify people into one body is Jesus Christ.[61]

If the thesis is correct in saying that the purpose of John is to call his readers back to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ, it helps to interpret 1 John better.[62] Although it is true that John is concerned with the false views of the secessionists (as in 1 John 2:22-23, for example), the common proposal that John has in mind *only* the framework of conflict between orthodoxy and heresy is incomplete.[63] For one thing, these terms, according to Lieu, imply "rigid categories" that were not yet in existence at that time.[64] Even Smalley is quick to clarify that "heresy [like orthodoxy] implies a doctrinal definition which made its appearance later than the formation of the NT."[65] More to the point, as Lieu correctly observes, "There is no specific reference to the secessionists in the early part of the letter."[66] They are only introduced half way through in 2:18-27, and only in relation to the Christological question.[67] Thus, it would be incorrect to say that John's purpose is *only* to defend the faith. By identifying the purpose as an appeal for a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ, the focus is once again redirected to the pastoral aspect of the text and to the community of faith where it surely belongs.

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[61]See for example Paul's call for unity in Eph 4:1-16 and Phil 2:1-11.

[62]Smalley says emphatically, "I remain more convinced than ever that the Johannine church itself (insofar as we can reconstruct its history) provides the key to the purpose, contents, and character of the Gospel and letters of John" (*1, 2, and 3 John*, 21).

[63]Lieu, "Authority," 211.

[64]Ibid.

[65]Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 25.

[66] Lieu, "Authority," 211.

[67]Ibid.

The call for a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ is an ardent call to all Christians today. First John can indeed heal many wounds as well as strengthen the unity of the Church by clarifying the true gospel as well as what it means to believe in it.[68] Sometimes threats from inside the Church can be greater compared with the threats coming from the outside.[69] Believers who have a distorted understanding of the "truth" can cause severe damage to the Church. Once infiltrated, the Church may start acting like pagans toward one another, as in the case of the Johannine communities (3:7-10). Instead of seeking peace, and loving one another, they may begin to hate each other, and be indifferent with each other, creating groups and parties that separate from each other and claim "truth" only for themselves.[70] This may have happened in the communities of the beloved apostle.

It is not wrong to make claims per se, provided, as John asserts, that our claims are based on the truth (1:6-10). But when are our claims are not in line with the truth, we divide the community of faith. The danger of spiritual pride is often found among those who claim to belong to the "truth," when in fact their claims are false. It is important, therefore, to go back to truth, as it was from the very beginning (cf. 1:1-4).[71] John is calling the believers in his communities to do this so that they can become a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ. At the same time, God is calling His Church

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[68]This writer shall propose an alternative structural outline for 1 John later in this study, based on these two concepts.

[69]Compare Paul's warning to the elders of Ephesus in Acts 20:29-31.

[70]See what happened in 1 Cor 1:10-17.

[71]The expression occurs in 1 John 1:1; 2:7, 13, 14, 24; 3:8, 11; 2 John 5, 6. See Kruse, *Letters of John*, 57.

to remain in the truth, so that they can experience a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ.

Limitations of the Study

The issues pertaining to the careful study of Johannine Christianity are legion.[72] Thus, there are limitations to this study. For one, this writer will already assume that John, the apostle, the son of Zebedee, who is one of the original Twelve apostles, wrote 1 John. Although some scholars question this basic assumption,[73] strong arguments for the traditional view are held by many.[74] This writer will also assume that the beloved apostle wrote the fourth Gospel and the other two letters of John, namely 2 and 3 John, and not some disciple or redactor.[75] This writer disagrees with Thompson, who, although admitting to the possibility of apostolic authorship for the Johannine epistles, and even for the Gospel of John and Revelation, would not categorically say that the apostle John wrote all of these canonical books. She declares with some hesitation,

> Of course the lack of *unambiguous* evidence for the apostolic authorship of the epistles does not disprove their apostolic origins, but neither does it settle the question. The possibility of apostolic authorship should not be discounted, but in view of the *ambiguous* evidence, exegetical decisions and interpretation should not be based on an *a priori* assumption of such authorship. With this disclaimer in mind, there is no reason not to designate the author of the epistles by his traditional name, "John." (emphasis mine)[76]

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[72]There is a general consensus among scholars that a group of house churches in and around Ephesus had the apostles John as their main influence. See for example Brown, *Community*, 25-34. But George Strecker's idea of an all-exclusive "Johannine school," which he adopts from Oscar Cullman (*The Johannine Circle* [Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1976]), may be too speculative. Compare also Smith, "Johannine Christianity," 222-48.

[73]Smith, "Johannine Christianity," 234. See also Brown, *Epistles*, 214-35.

[74]See for example, Marshall, *Epistles of* John, 42-47.

[75]B. F. Westcott states: "The writing of 1 John is so closely connected with the Fourth Gospel in vocabulary, style, thought, scope, that these two books cannot but be regarded as works of the same author" (*The Epistles of John* [New York: Macmillan, 1905], 30).

[76]Marianne Meye Thompson, *1-3 John*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, ed. Grant R. Osborne (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 20.

This writer agrees with Stott, who, after surveying the present evidence, and the scholarly debates coming from all sides, states,

> We conclude that both shorter letters (2 and 3 John) were written by the same person, and that this person was also the author of the first letter, who, we have already argued, had previously composed the Fourth [*sic*] Gospel. . . . It is impossible to study the Johannine problem if any of these four writings is isolated."[77]

Just the same, the issue of authorship is quite complex.[78] This writer assumes that John, the beloved apostle, and not some other disciple or follower, wrote 1 John.[79]

In addition, this writer will also assume the traditional order of the books, as accepted by the majority of conservative scholars.[80] Recently some critical scholars have questioned this traditional view.[81] Smalley, for instance, suggests that Revelation was actually written first, even before the fourth Gospel.[82] But the traditional view has been aptly defended by Brown and others.[83] Concerning the date of writing, Akin says

> Any determination for the date of these three letters is problematic. Usually, the relationship of 1 John and the Fourth [*sic*] Gospel is raised (which came first?), but again the evidence for making a judgment is at best inferential. Still, a reasonable reconstruction is at least plausible given certain textual clues, historical developments, and early church tradition.[84]

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[77]Stott, *Letters*, 29.

[78]For those who postulate different authors, see: Brown, *Epistles*, 19-30; Dodd, *Johannine Epistles*, 56-57; David Smith, *The Epistles of St. John*, Expositor's Greek Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 12-13. For those who see one and the same author, see Brooke, *Epistles of John*, 1-18; D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (*NTI*) (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), 876-81; W. F. Howard, "The Common Authorship of the Johannine Gospel and Epistles," *Journal of Theological Studies* 48 (1947): 12ff.; Marshall, *Epistles of* John, 32-42; and Stott, *Letters*, 20-28. Also see Brown's chart of similarities between the Gospel and 1 John (*Epistles*, 757-59).

[79]Johnson postulates that the followers of the beloved disciple edited and copied the fourth Gospel, and that one of them, the one known as "The Elder," (probably Lazarus?) wrote the epistles (*1, 2 and 3 John*, 2-3). This is plausible but speculative. See Guthrie, *NTI*, 241-71, for the refutation of this theory.

[80]For a good summary of the discussion of this issue, see Brown, *Epistles*, 30-35. Further elaborations can be read in Marshall, *Epistles of* John, 31-42.

[81]Example is Thomas, "Order of the Composition," 68-75.

[82]Ibid.

[83]Brown, *Epistles*, 30-46. See also Smalley, *1, 2 & 3 John*, 22.

[84]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 27.

He sets the date somewhere between AD 85 to 100.[85] This writer agrees with Smalley, who sets the date much later at 95 AD or so, in view of his assumption that the apostle John wrote these three letters at least a decade after he wrote the Gospel at around 85 AD, and before he died at around 100 AD.[86] The time frame of ten years or more would be sufficient to account for the possible misunderstandings evidenced in the epistle.

This writer is also assuming the existence of a "Johannine community" for the following reasons. According to Johnson, the letters of John, especially 2 and 3 John, are "incontrovertible evidence" for the existence of a Johannine community.[87] He also agrees with others that there may have been a "Johannine school"[88] or a "Johannine circle" as well.[89] According to Cullmann, the "Johannine circle" may have been characterized by "common community structures, missionary interests, polemic against false teachers, and the efforts to demonstrate the legitimacy of their own group."[90] Streker also adds that this trend was quite common even in antiquity.[91] But it would be safer, based on the textual evidence of the letters themselves, to just limit our understanding of this community as "a group of churches in fellowship with the apostle John."[92] Kruse offers this helpful clarification:

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[85]Ibid.

[86]There is a general consensus that the apostle died sometime in 100 AD, although other scholars place it earlier at 85 AD. But for a later date of 90-100 AD, see Johnson, *1, 2 and 3 John*, 4.

[87]Ibid., 2.

[88]R. A. Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998), 42-61.

[89]Cullmann, *Johannine Circle*, 87.

[90]Georg Streker, *The Johannine Letters*, Hermeneia (Her) (Minneapolis, MA: Fortress, 1996), 35.

[91]Ibid., where Streker cites examples such as the schools of Pythagoreans, the Stoics, the Essenes, of Philo, of Rabbi Hillel, and – in the Christian era – the Antiochene and Alexandrian schools.

[92]Kruse, *Letters of John*, 4-5.

> Based on the contents of the three letters, the way the readers are addressed, the language used, and the concepts involved, many scholars have concluded that these churches shared a common adherence to the sort of Christianity which is reflected in the Fourth [*sic*] Gospel. Such churches are believed to make up what is referred to as the *Johannine community* (emphasis mine).[93]

The assumption that John was writing specifically to this community *only* has been questioned in recent times.[94] Brown, for example, calls the Johannine community a "sect" within the larger Christian community.[95] Such a reconstruction is speculative at best, and may lead to false conclusions about early ecclesiology. Therefore, it is better to limit our assumptions concerning this community to a "loosely related house churches operating in or around Ephesus," who were in close fellowship with the apostle John and his fellow workers during the latter part of the first century.[96] It would be unwise, as Kruse cautions, to suggest that this group was so "hermeneutically sealed" that it excluded itself from all other Christian communities surrounding or beyond it.[97] Although the early church developed "in different ways in different places under the influence and guidance of different personalities,"[98] it remained united in faith and practice as a whole, especially in the first couple of centuries. Mission trips to and from each community were widely practiced (as evidenced by 2 and 3 John themselves). Based on the teachings of the Gospel of John, the apostle would not have tolerated such exclusivity if ever it existed (cf. Jesus' prayer in John 17).

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[93]Ibid., 4.

[94]See for example Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), chap. 1 passim.

[95]Brown, *Community*, 15.

[96]Kruse, *Letters of John*, 5.

[97]Ibid.

[98]Ibid., 4.

The working hypothesis concerning the background of this letter used in this study is as follows. Being the last surviving apostle, and after fleeing Jerusalem and transferring to Ephesus because of the war (AD 66-70),[99] John had to take over the mantle of leadership over several communities in Asia Minor until his death in 100 AD.[100] Some of these churches may have been founded by his fellow-worker Paul in the sixties.[101] But perhaps many of them were converted during his evangelistic mission trips in the area or more specifically through the fourth Gospel, which circulated earlier in the area in the early or late eighties.[102] Possible proof for this reconstruction of events, although not absolutely so, may be discerned from the way John addresses his readers as τεκνία μου at least eight times (2:1, 12, 18, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21).[103] This may indicate that he either sees them as his spiritual children or at least they regard him as their spiritual father.[104] He also uses concepts found in the fourth Gospel to clarify certain truths, indicating that his readers were well aware of his teachings.[105] Perhaps they were converted precisely

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[99]R. C. H. Lenski identifies the date as 66 AD (*The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John, and St. Jude* [Minneapolis, MA: Augsburg, 1966], 363).

[100]Plummer identifies them as "the Churches of Asia" (*Epistles of St. John*, 13). Lenski makes the suggestion, based on the letters of Peter, that John may be overseeing quite a large territory (*Interpretation*, 363).

[101]That John knew Paul and vice-versa would not be an issue of debate for many. Galatians 2:9 clearly indicates that they have met at least once.

[102]There is a general consensus among conservative scholars that the purpose of the Gospel of John is evangelistic (cf. John 20:31). See for example, Boice, *Epistles of John*, 12. Some even contend that the fourth Gospel is largely an apologetic for the Jews. See also J. W. Bowker, "The Origin and Purpose of St. John's Gospel," *NTS* 11:4 (1965): 398-408.

[103]This observation would be significant in light of my suggested outline later in this study.

[104]It is of course possible that he is just using terms of endearment that were familiar in Christian circles during that time.

[105]Brooke provides an extensive list of similarities between the Gospel and 1 John (*Epistles of John*, 302).

through his teachings.[106] He, and perhaps together with his trusted fellow-leaders,[107] took care of the pastoral welfare of these "loosely related" house churches which today are referred to by modern scholars as the "Johannine community."[108]

In the course of time, perhaps a decade or so from the time of the writing of the fourth Gospel,[109] certain misunderstandings began to circulate in and around the Johannine house churches.[110] It is difficult to try to identify in precise terms the persons or groups who perpetuated these misunderstandings.[111] Brown suggests that "the struggle is between two groups of Johannine disciples who are interpreting the Gospel in opposing ways, in matters of Christology, ethics, eschatology, and pneumatology."[112] Most of the groups that have been proposed were either non-existent yet at the time of the writing of 1 John (at least not in the "form" that most of the older commentators have proposed)[113] or too un-Christian for the first-century Christians to just easily accept.[114] It is better to

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[106]This can be seen in John's repeated appeal for what his readers know "from the beginning."

[107]The possibility that the apostle John may have been functioning as the lone "ἐπισκοπῆς" in Asia Minor is unlikely. As Black argues, the tenor and language of 1 John shows a more egalitarian approach to the conflict. In addition, the repeated use of the first person plural "we" indicates that John is thinking of others like him who are also fellow-witnesses ("Johannine Epistle," 139).

[108]For sure such a name was not in use at that time.

[109]Smalley, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 32.

[110]That the basis of these misunderstandings is the fourth Gospel is suggested by Smalley (*1, 2, & 3 John*, 24). Agreeing with Brown, he says: "To judge from the appeal which the writer of 1 John makes to the Fourth (*sic*) Gospel, it is reasonable to postulate further that the deviant views, both Christological and ethical, held by these members in John's circle stemmed from a distortion of the teaching which has come down to us in the Gospel of John itself."

[111]Various groups have been proposed: Judaizers, Gnostics, Docetists, and Cerinthianists. For a lengthy discussion of various options, see Brooke, *Epistles of John*, 41-49.

[112]Brown, *Community*, 23.

[113]For example, Barclay, *Letters*, 3-14.

[114]Most the suggested "opponents" were not even in existence until so much later (towards the latter part of 2d century). See Kruse, *Letters of John*, 15-26, and Brown, *Epistles*, 64.

simply identify them as misled Christians who either have too "low" a view of Christ (i.e., he is only human) or too "high" a view (i.e., he is totally divine).[115]

Smalley suggests that there might be as many as four distinct groups[116] in the Johannine churches: (1) the faithful followers of the apostle's teaching as it is found in the fourth Gospel; (2) those who followed the apostle's teaching in the fourth Gospel but with strong Jewish [or Ebionic] tendencies; (3) those who followed the apostle's teaching in the fourth Gospel but with strong Hellenistic (or Gnostic) tendencies; and 4) those who have separated themselves from the apostle's teaching because of irresolvable and irreconcilable doctrinal disagreements (either Jewish or Hellenistic).[117] These may have departed and have established their own communities, and were now inviting those who were left behind to join them (2:26-27).[118] Whatever the cause of these misunderstandings (and consequent church split), John's concern is how these misunderstandings are now affecting the present "fellowship" of the church.[119] He wants to call them back to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ. For one, he sees the disappearance of love[120] among believers (perhaps from all sides of the issue) as a crucial concern that he must now address.[121] The conflicts have now resulted in a literal split of the "Johannine community"

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[115]Smalley, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 23. Brown says, "Most scholars take for granted that the adversaries were believing Christians whose faith was different from that professed by the author" (*Epistles*, 52). See also Brown, *Community*, 25. But Smalley calls them "genuine, if uninformed, believers" (*1, 2, and 3 John*, 24).

[116]Brown suggests at least six (*Community*, 59-91).

[117]Ibid. But see Martinus De Boer's comments concerning Smalley's two-front theory ("The Death of Jesus Christ and His Coming in the Flesh," *NovT* 33, no. 4 [1991]: 326-46).

[118]Kruse, *Letters of John*, 59.

[119]I understand John to mean the church, as in Acts 2:42.

[120]The word love (ἀγάπη) occurs thirty-five times in the letter!

[121]Most commentators would limit this as a problem only of the secessionists. See for example, Kruse, *Letters of John*, 17. But John is obviously speaking, not to the secessionists, but to those who still remained in the communities.

(2:18-19), and each side is now making characteristic "claims" that are designed to exclude each another.[122] Brown suggests a more elaborate development of the problem: (1) Phase one, the pre-Gospel era; (2) Phase two, the Gospel era; (3) Phase three, the now-divided Johannine communities (at the time of the epistles); and (4) Phase four, the eventual dissolution of the two "Johannine communities."[123]

John's primary purpose, it seems, is to call believers back to a true Christ-centered community of the Spirit by outlining once again the true essence of the Gospel and its practical [ethical] implications. He is not interested in taking sides per se.[124] His intention is to unite them in the Truth, Jesus Christ. His strategy is to remind his readers of the Truth of the Gospel, which is centered on Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who truly came in the flesh (4:2), as it was taught from the very beginning. The rest of this study will now explore this alternative theory that encompasses, yet extends beyond, the current theories.

Procedures for the Study

As was mentioned earlier, there are at least three prevailing theories concerning the purpose of 1 John. Each theory will be stated and evaluated in Chapter 2. Particular attention will be given to the major γράφω statements in 1 John 1:4; 2:1, 26; and 5:13. In Chapter 3, the proposed theory will be stated, explained, defended, compared with existing theories, and evaluated based on its apparent weaknesses. In Chapter 4, the

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[122]Smalley thinks the error is only on the side of the secessionists (*1, 2, and 3 John*, 27). But Brown is more sympathetic. He says, "The question is not whether the secessionist views were a correct interpretation of GJohn [Gospel of John] or even an inevitable derivative of it, but only whether they represented a possible interpretation of GJohn or, at least, not a contradiction of it" (*Epistles*, 72). In his footnote he argues that it is possible for the secessionists to actually derive their theology from Gospel of John. In other words, according to him, the Gospel of John has already the "seeds of possible misunderstandings."

[123]Brown, *Community*, 24.

[124]Kruse is wise in saying, "The author's purpose, however, was not to correct the secessionists (the letter was not written for them), but to show his readers that the secessionist claims were false" (*Letters of John*, 27).

proposed theory will be tested by applying it as a tool to outline 1 John and as an interpretative key to interpret one section, 1 John 1:5-2:11. A summary of findings will be stated and applied to contemporary church life in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 2

AN EVALUATION OF EXISTING THEORIES ABOUT 1 JOHN

The Strengths of the Tests of Life Theory

As stated earlier, there are two named theories concerning the purpose of 1 John, and one unnamed theory, which this writer would like to call the "Tests of Orthodoxy" theory.[1] The first two have already been adequately evaluated and compared by Derickson.[2] Indirect allusions to the third view can be found here and there in various commentaries and journals, without being named specifically. For example, Lieu's comments concerning the present trends in Johannine studies allude to this view:

> It has become accepted practice to interpret 1 John within the framework of the conflict between orthodoxy and heresy. A discussion of the views of the heretics or false teachers occupies a substantial part of the introduction to most commentaries on the Johannine Epistles and opposition to them is seen as the *unifying theme* of a writing which otherwise appears disjointed and discursive (emphasis mine).[3]

This chapter now will examine each of these views in succession. The purpose of this chapter is to see the strengths and weaknesses of each view.

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[1]Barclay suggests a fourth but not widely held view: "John's object in writing is two-fold, yet one. He writes that the joy of his people may be full (1:4), and that they may not (2:1)." Why he disregards 5:13 is not explained (*Letters*, 15). But this writer has chosen to disregard this as a category in itself because it is not accepted by the majority of scholars as John's primary purpose for writing 1 John.

[2]Derickson does not mention the third option, but this writer will infer it from the writings of several commentators ("Message," 89-105).

[3]Emphasis mine. See Lieu, "Authority," 210.

Concerning the first view, the "Tests of Life," the following can be said. First, the proponents of this view see the purpose of 1 John as hinging upon 1 John 5:13. Based on this clause ἵνα εἰδῆτε ὅτι ζωὴν ἔχετε αἰώνιον the purpose of 1 John is said to be "to encourage his readers, who were understood to be believers, to assure themselves of their salvation by verifying the validity of their profession through tests of spiritual life."[4] This may not sound too positive, but as Kruse asserts, "the author's purpose was to bolster the assurance of his readers by the double strategy of showing the secessionists' claims to be false and showing his readers that they are in the truth."[5] Although this incorporates somewhat the "Tests of Orthodoxy" view because of its concern toward the secessionists, it's still under the category of the "Tests of Life" theory because it seeks to primarily test the believers to determine whether they are saved or not.

The first of these tests is the "doctrinal agreement" test. In other words, they are to determine if they have the right belief in the truth. "Right belief" is right belief in Jesus Christ who came in the flesh (4:2).[6] Boice clarifies it further by saying that this test is "theological" because "it is John's claim that no one [who] fails to believe that the preexistent Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, [who] became flesh at a fixed point in time and history and died for our sin, can be a Christian."[7] MacArthur clarifies this further by saying that "the doctrinal test that John gave relates to Jesus' deity and

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[4]Derickson, "Message," 90.

[5]Kruse, *Letters of John*, 27.

[6]Boice, *Epistles of John*, 14.

[7]Ibid., 15.

lordship."[8] As stated earlier, these statements can be seen as part of the whole Lordship Salvation debate and cannot be discussed much further in this chapter.[9]

The second test is the "moral test." In other words, a true Christian would be characterized by "practical righteousness."[10] This does not mean "perfectionism" like that taught by the secessionists,[11] although "perfectionism" of a different sort is taught by John in 1 John 3:5-6, as will be seen below.[12] The sort of biblical "perfectionism" taught by the apostle allows for the possibility of "sin" ("if anyone does sin," ἐάν τις ἁμάρτῃ 1 John 2:1-2), but the secessionist version is probably a misunderstanding of John 8:31-34:

> To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin."

This will be further examined later. For now the following can be said. In this passage, the statement καὶ γνώσεσθε τὴν ἀλήθειαν, καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια ἐλευθερώσει ὑμᾶς is in contrast with δοῦλός ἐστιν τῆς ἁμαρτίας mentioned before. The future indicative ἐλευθερώσει in verse 32 can easily be misunderstood as "perfectionistic" by those who subscribe to a distorted but "Johannine" type of Christianity.[13] It is not surprising, therefore, that the so-called "heretics" of the second and third centuries were prone to use the fourth Gospel as

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[8]MacArthur, *Gospel*, 219.

[9]But see Gleason, "Lordship," 55-72.

[10]Boice, *Epistles of John*, 14.

[11]See Brown, *Epistles*, 81-82. He mentioned 1 John 1:8, 10 as containing two slogans used by the secessionists. They seem to be deceptive, in the sense that they contradict the author's stated version of "perfectionism."

[12]Ibid., 83.

[13]Ibid.

a tool to justify their distorted theologies [or Christology].[14] According to Brown, orthodox writers did not cite the fourth Gospel as Scripture in the first part of the second century precisely because of this.[15] In view of this possible misunderstanding from the fourth Gospel, John may have been trying to clarify what "perfectionism" really means in this epistle. Thus, the epistle functioned like a "disclaimer."

The third test is the "social test." This is the test of "the Christian's relationship to other Christians."[16] Boice says, "Since God is love and since love comes from Him, anyone claiming to know God but failing to show love for others is either self-deceived or is attempting to deceive."[17] Once again, this is an either-or situation. Hiebert clarifies this test further by saying,

> The test (in 2:9-11) reveals that this individual "is in the darkness until now." His conduct nullifies his claim, and he is still in the realm of "the darkness" (cf. 1:5-6); he has never left it "until now." Though "the true light is already shining" (2:8), he has never had the transforming experience of passing from the darkness into the light.[18]

According to this view, the failure to meet these three tests indicates a false claim of salvation.[19] On the other hand, the passing of these tests produces an assurance of

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[14]Ibid., 65.

[15]Brown, *Community*, 24.

[16]Boice, *Epistles of John*, 15.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Hiebert, "An Exposition of 1 John 2:7-17," *BSac* 145 (Oct-Dec 1988): 424.

[19]Derickson ("Message," 90) cites the following as sources as expressing this view: Boice, *Epistles of John*, 14-15; Robert S. Candlish, *The First Epistle of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), 102; J. N. Darby, *Notes on the Epistles of John* (London: G. Morrish, n.d.), 22-27; Theodore H. Epp, *Studies in the General Epistles of John* (Lincoln, NE: Back to the Bible Broadcast, 1957), 47-48; Jerry Horner, "Introduction to the Johannine Epistles," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 13 (Fall 1970): 49; J. A. T. Robinson, *Twelve New Testament Studies* (London: SCM, 1962), 127; Robert Law, *The Tests of Life: A Study of the First Epistle of St. John* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1909; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 5-7; Ray C. Stedman, *Expository Studies in 1 John* (Waco, TX: Word, 1980), 338; and Stott, *Letters*, 58.

salvation.[20] According to Derickson, the purpose of John was not to cause his readers to doubt their salvation, but to find assurance in it.[21] But MacArthur categorically says, "The one who is truly saved cannot continue in a pattern of unbroken sin (3:6-10). . . [and] a true believer could never ultimately fail to overcome."[22] Thus, these "tests" are definitive of the presence or absence of eternal life in a person.[23] This is why it is called the "Tests of Life" theory.

In both the "Tests of Life" theory and the "Tests of Fellowship" theory the relationship of 1 John with the fourth Gospel is highlighted. But in the former, the difference between the Gospel of John and 1 John is that the Gospel of John speaks of "having" while 1 John speaks of "knowing" eternal life.[24] The similarity between them is evidenced by their common placement of purpose at the end of each book (John 20:31 and 1 John 5:13 respectively).[25] Akin has identified four purpose statements in 1 John based on the repeated use of the word γράφω in its various forms (1:4; 2:1, 26; 5:13), but he chooses 5:13 as "the governing purpose statement."[26] Hiebert agrees with this decision for "the purpose stated in 1 John 5:13 [is] looking back over the whole epistle, [and] indicates John's desire to ground his readers in the personal assurance of salvation."[27]

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[20]Again Derickson ("Message," 90) cites the following in favor of this view: Epp, *Studies*, 5-7; Law, *The Tests of Life*, 208; Plummer, *Epistles*, 120; and Stott, *Letters*, 59-60.

[21]Derickson, "Message," 90.

[22]MacArthur, Gospel, 219-20.

[23]According to Derickson, "Message," 91, John's familiar expressions such as "eternal life," "fellowship," "to know God," and "abiding" should all be interpreted in soteriological terms. They all mean "having eternal life" or "being saved."

[24]Ibid., 91.

[25]Ibid., 92.

[26]Akin, *1, 2, 3* John, 32.

[27]Hiebert, "1 John 1:1-4," 199.

According to Derickson, this particular relationship between John 20:31 and 1 John 5:13 is the principal argument behind the "Tests of Life" theory.[28] Several scholars have argued along this same line of thought.[29] The main presupposition behind their argument is the structural similarity between the two books. They usually come up with an extensive list of similarities between the two books to show that they are similarly structured, and thus have the same intent, that is, to reveal their purpose at the end of the book.[30] Thus 1 John 5:13 is seen as fulfilling the same role in 1 John as John 20:31 in the fourth Gospel. Looking at 1 John 5:13 in particular, the ταῦτα here is often interpreted to refer to the entire epistle, rather than to its immediate context alone (5:11-12).[31] Scholars who favor the "Tests of Fellowship" view disagree. Derickson, in defending this view in favor of its proponents, explains this argument:

> Though 5:13 contains a purpose statement, the grammar of the sentence relates it to the immediate context rather than to the epistle as a whole. John's use of γράφω ("I write") with ὅτι in the epistle argues for 5:13 being a secondary purpose statement, subsidiary to the purpose statement in 1:3.[32]

This will be discussed more below.

Another persuasive evidence for this view is the repeated occurrence of "eternal life" (τὴν ζωὴν τὴν αἰώνιον) in both the prologue (1:2) and the conclusion (5:13) as well

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[28]Derickson, "Message," 92.

[29]Ibid. Derickson cites the following scholars as following this line of thought: Brown, *Epistles*, 608; Dodd, *Johannine Epistles*, 133; Andrew Feuillet, "The Structure of First John: Comparison with the Fourth Gospel: the Pattern of Christian Life," *Biblical Theological Bulletin* 3 (June 1973): 211; George Goodman, *The Epistle of Eternal Life* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1936), 7-8; and Stott, *Letters*, 86.

[30]For example, Brown, *Epistles*, 124.

[31]Akin, *1, 2, 3* John, 204.

[32]Derickson, "Message," 98.

as in the body of the letter (2:25; 3:15; 5:11).[33] Also, John's frequent use of the verb "to know" (forty-two times in various forms which, according to the proponents of this view, must be seen as soteriological rather than merely ecclesiastical) argues for the concept of assurance as central to the purpose of John rather than fellowship.[34] Even the word "fellowship," according to Cameron, must be understood as soteriological, since it presupposes a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ.[35] Finally, according to the proponents of this view, phrases like καὶ ταῦτα γράφομεν ἡμεῖς, ἵνα ἡ χαρὰ ἡμῶν ᾖ πεπληρωμένη (1:4), αὗτα γράφω ὑμῖν ἵνα μὴ ἁμάρτητε (2:1), and ταῦτα ἔγραψα ὑμῖν περὶ τῶν πλανώντων ὑμᾶς (2:26) are only secondary to 5:13. Ταῦτα in 5:13 is seen as referring to the entire epistle; thus it is considered more comprehensive than the other purpose statements. Plummer adds:

> "These things" (ταῦτα) will cover the whole Epistle, and such is probably the meaning, as in 1:4; where St. John states the purpose of his Epistle in words which are explained by what he says here: there is nothing there or here, as there is in 2:26, to limit "these things" to what immediately precedes.[36]

The Strengths of the Tests of Fellowship Theory

The next theory is called the "Tests of Fellowship" theory. In this theory, the purpose of 1 John is seen not as assuring believers about their salvation, but in assuring them about their "relationship" (or "fellowship") with God, and consequently with one another. It follows then that John is also warning those who may not have a relationship

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[33]Ibid., 93. Derickson comments on Brown's idea of inclusion based on the use of ταῦτα in 1:4 and 5:13. He says, "Though it is a different inclusion, it serves the same function."

[34]Ibid., 94.

[35]Robert Cameron, *The First Epistle of John* (Philadelphia, PA: Rowland, 1899), 13.

[36]Plummer, *Epistles of St.* John, 120.

with God (the secessionists) not to deceive themselves, but that is a secondary purpose. Derickson explains,

> According to this view, 1 John was written to encourage believers to maintain fellowship with God and to provide assurance of that fellowship through tests of spiritual communion. It was written to believers whose relationships with God were brought into question by false teachers whose claims to a special relationship with God left common believers in doubt of their status.[37]

Unlike the "Tests of Life" view, which anchors its argument primarily on 5:13, the "Tests of Fellowship" view anchors its argument in 1:3.[38] They consider this verse as the overarching purpose statement of the letter.[39] "Fellowship" is defined here as the "relationship or communion between believers as well as between believers and God."[40] Hodges clarifies that the Greek word for fellowship (κοινωνία) "signified most simply some form of mutual sharing or participation by two or more parties."[41] It does not connote "salvation" per se.

Proponents of this view also believe that John's purpose is not related to assurance of salvation, but in the "growing acquaintance that results from God's self-disclosure" particularly in view of the Upper Room Discourse.[42] The tests are similar to the "Tests of Life" view, but failing the tests "indicates not an absence of salvation, but an absence of

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[37]Derickson, "Message," 95.

[38]Ibid. Derickson cites the following scholars as arguing this point: Zane C. Hodges, *Gospel under Siege* (Dallas, TX: Redencion Viva, 1981), 52-53; and C. C. Ryrie, "I, II, and III John," 1466. For a thorough evaluation of the views expressed by both sides of the "Lordship Salvation" debate, see Gleason ("Lordship," 55-72).

[39]Zane C. Hodges, "We Believe In: Assurance of Salvation," *Journal of Grace Evangelical Society* 3 (Autumn 1990): 5.

[40]Derickson, "Message," 95.

[41]Although he is reflecting on 1:6, his interpretation conforms with the Tests of Fellowship view, of which he holds. He cites Friedrich Hauck as the authority for this interpretation (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* [*TDNT*], ed. By Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley III [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1966], 797-98).

[42]Derickson, "Message," 96.

fellowship which must be restored."[43] Hodges clarifies this idea by means of a practical illustration:

> A son may have in him the life of an earthly father because his father begat him, yet if he makes his home at a distance from his father they will not be able to have shared experiences. In the same way, a Christian who lives at a moral distance from his heavenly Father loses the privilege of shared experiences with God. Walking in the light brings Father and spiritual child into the same moral realm and that realm itself becomes the foundational experience which they have in common. All other mutual experiences must be built upon this.[44]

In addition, failure is not absolute but relative only to spiritual maturity. According to Derickson, those who hold to the "Tests of Fellowship" view believe that "those who walk in the light, obey God's commands, hold sound doctrine, and love one another are *mature* believers. One who fails to follow the pattern provided by the apostolic band are *immature*, though saved (emphasis mine)."[45]

Similarly, the "Tests of Fellowship" theory sees a relationship between the structure of the fourth Gospel and 1 John. But this relationship is seen in the prologue rather than in the conclusion. For example, Derickson cites Ryrie's observation that the prologue of 1 John actually corresponds to the opening eighteen verses of the fourth Gospel and three verses of Revelation.[46] According to them, there is no one-to-one relationship between John 20:31 and 1 John 5:13.[47] Instead 1 John 5:13 is understood as a secondary purpose only, referring to the immediate context of 5:11-12, and not to the

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[43]Ibid.

[44]Zane Hodges, "Fellowship and Confession," *BSac* 129 (Jan-Mar 1972): 53. He is reflecting specifically on 1 John 1:7.

[45]Ibid. Undoubtedly, this argument is again larger in scope. See Gleason for a thorough analysis of the various views ("Lordship," 55-72).

[46]Derickson, "Message," 97.

[47]Ibid.

entire epistle. This results only from the maintenance of fellowship with God the Father and not vice-versa.[48] John 20:31, on the other hand, is only referring to Jesus' resurrection (recorded in the "Book of Signs" in the Gospel of John), and not to the whole book as suggested by some of the "Tests of Life" proponents.[49]

Some justify this interpretation of John's purpose based on literary analysis. For example, Derickson cites Elliot Johnson's theory concerning the common practice of biblical writers to state their subject at the beginning rather than at the end.[50] Though not speaking of 1 John, Johnson's theory may be applied to the letter as well.[51] At the same time, John's use of ἔγραψα . . . ὅτι in 5:13 is his literary way of introducing a secondary purpose. Thus ἵνα καὶ ὑμεῖς κοινωνίαν ἔχητε μεθ' ἡμῶν in 1:3 may be seen as the primary purpose, since it is being introduced by ἵνα rather than simply by ὅτι.[52]

The Strengths of the Tests of Orthodoxy Theory

Although not mentioned specifically by Derickson as an alternative to the two existing views, this view is expressed indirectly by many scholars. Brooke, for example, gives a lengthy discussion of his theories concerning the "false teachers" in his commentary, arguing that John may be primarily opposing various forms of early Gnostic groups, and probably even Judaizers (like those who opposed Paul).[53] He is careful to clarify, however, the following:

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[48]Ibid., 98.

[49]Ibid., 99.

[50]Ibid., 98.

[51]Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 83.

[52]For this observation, Derickson ("Message," 95) cites Edward M. Curtis ("The Purpose of 1 John," [ThD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1986], 156-61).

[53]Brooke, *Epistles of John*, 38-42.

> It is probably true that the writer never loses sight altogether of the views of his opponents in any part of the Epistle. But it is important to emphasize the fact that, in spite of this, the real aim of the Epistle is not exclusively, or even primarily, polemical. The edification of his "children" in the true faith and life of Christians is the writer's chief purpose.[54]

Nevertheless, he spends considerable time and space tabulating the various "heretical" views of John's opponents throughout his commentary. It's hard not to get the impression from him that John's main purpose is really to combat these so-called "heretics." Unlike him, however, Lenski is more straightforward in his assessment. He simply states, "This letter is plainly polemical."[55]

Among the more modern commentators, Barker holds to the "Tests of Orthodoxy" view, although again not explicitly, since he doesn't name this view as such. He says, "The writer provides tests by which the false teachers can be exposed and the faithful members of the community reinforced in their own confidence that they truly are the children of God."[56] Again, the combination of both the "Tests of Life" view and the "Tests of Orthodoxy" is apparent here. Johnson adds,

> The letters of John were called forth, therefore, by this crisis of the secession of false teachers. First John was written to address the heart of the conflict directly, refuting the heretical views of the schismatics and encouraging the remaining Johannine Christians to continue to be faithful both to the Elder personally and to his teaching.[57]

Under this view, the statements of John are not directed so much to the remaining members of his community but to the secessionists.[58] In other words, the apostle John is

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[54]Ibid., 27-28.

[55]Lenski, *Interpretation*, 364.

[56]Barker, "1 John," 299.

[57]Johnson, *1, 2 and 3 John*, 12.

[58]Most scholars, like Brown (*Community*, 36-47), would not use the term "heretics" to describe John's opponents. The reason has already been mentioned earlier.

raising issues to refute their heretical teaching, to correct and substitute it with orthodox teaching. Johnson identifies these issues as: (1) doctrinal (Christology and pneumatology), (2) ethical [love and sin], (3) spiritual [the claims of the opponents for a mystical and intimate relationship with God], and (4) political [struggles over the Elder's authority].[59] Thompson subsumes all these issues under one heading: *the nature and implications of salvation.*[60] She describes it in this way:

> Those who left the community – the "secessionists" – apparently held the view that those who were the "children of God" (1 John 3:1-2) attained spiritual status by being "born of God" (3:9-10) that not only delivered them from the guilt and power of sin but actually rendered them sinless. They claimed to be without sin and to have attained a state of perfect righteousness (1 John 1:8, 10). In this regard they were like Jesus (2:1-2; 3:2) and like God, whose children they were (3:1-3).[61]

Marshall basically agrees with this view when he said, "It seems likely that the claims which John denies at the beginning of the Epistle (1:6-10) represent those of the false teachers."[62] But he is careful to qualify his statement by saying, "[But] we should beware of supposing that every attitude which John condemns must necessarily be attributed to the false teachers, or that their teaching formed a coherent, complete system of thought."[63] Marshall is not so certain about other statements in 1 John, whether they are in fact strongly-held views of the secessionists or not. It is possible that they are just hypothetical statements that John may have heard people talk about. It is generally agreed

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[59]Johnson, *1, 2 and 3 John*, 5-6.

[60]Thompson, *1-3 John*, 15.

[61]Ibid.

[62]Marshall, *Epistles of* John, 15.

[63]Ibid.

that John is rebuking the secessionists in an indirect way by quoting their expressions or claims and then correcting them.[64]

Akin holds to this view when he states,

> In the context of this epistle, John must be aiming these statements against those who reject Jesus as the incarnate Son of God. These persons are, in reality, living in the state of death because eternal life is found only in this Jesus, the Jesus whose identity is the Son of God. John's purpose was to ensure that his readers not fall into the same sin as these heretics. Therefore he uses the inclusive "we" to apply his statements to them. It is a wise and effective rhetorical device at this early stage of the epistle.[65]

In summary, the "Tests of Orthodoxy" proponents see the primary purpose of 1 John as follows: John wants to offer "tests" that the believers in his communities can use to determine the orthodoxy of those who claim to be in the truth but are not (1 John 1:6-10). In other words, the "Tests of Orthodoxy" view sees "polemics" as primary in 1 John.

Apparent Weaknesses or Incompleteness of Current Theories

According to Derickson, the two current views concerning the purpose of 1 John are all about "tests."[66] The third theory is also a series of "tests."[67] In other words, John's purpose for writing is basically to provide "tests" to help the believers, either to "test" themselves or the false teachers or the secessionists, with regard to salvation or their experience of it (that is, their fellowship with God). This idea of "testing" is indeed found in 1 John, but each one, especially in isolation from each other, does not seem to

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[64]One good example of this approach is Kruse. He says, "The actual teaching of the secessionists can be inferred from the letters of John by a judicious mirror reading of the text." From here he begins to analyze the text of 1 John as referring almost entirely to the secessionist views (*Letters of John*, 16-27).

[65]Akin, *1, 2, 3* John, 71.

[66]Derickson, "Message," 89.

[67]See Dodd, *Johannine Epistles*, 33.

fully explain the overall purpose and consequently the other more important affirmations in the epistle.

The word "test" occurs once in 1 John 4:1 (δοκιμάζετε), in relation to testing the "spirits." The "Tests of Orthodoxy" view may be correct in identifying this as one of the purposes of John for writing the epistle, even though 4:1 is not technically a purpose statement.[68] The "spirits" are of course the "false prophets" that have gone out in the world.[69] The word "test" is used elsewhere in the NT, but twice only, and only in Paul's letters. It is used, for example, in 2 Cor 13:5 ("Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; *test* yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test?"[70]). Here Paul is instructing the believers to "test themselves" to see whether they are "in the faith" (ἐν τῇ πίστει) or, if applied to John's readers in 1 John, to see whether they are "in (the) truth" (ἐν ἀληθείᾳ).[71] But, the same exhortation is not explicit in 1 John. Instead, John simply exhorts his readers to "test [only] the spirits."[72]

In 1 Thess 5:21, the same form of the word occurs (πάντα δὲ δοκιμάζετε, τὸ καλὸν κατέχετε). This time Paul is admonishing the believers in Thessalonica to "test" everything and to hold fast to that which is good. Based on the context, the word πάντα (all things, accusative neuter plural) has to refer to προφητείας (v.20, prophesyings, accusative feminine plural), and not to τὸ πνεῦμα (the Spirit, v.19, accusative neuter

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[68]Derickson, "Message," 89-105.

[69]Dodd, *Johannine Epistles*, 99.

[70]All Biblical quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the NIV.

[71]The words πίστει and ἀληθεία are not exactly equivalent in both Pauline and Johannine literature.

[72]It's interesting that Akin identifies only four purposes in 1 John (*1, 2, 3 John*, 31-32): 1) To promote true joy in the child of God (1:4), 2) To prevent the child of God from committing sin (2:1), 3) To protect the child of God from false teachers (2:26), and 4) To provide assurance of salvation for the child of God (5:13).

singular). He is not commanding them to test the Holy Spirit; instead Paul is exhorting them to 'test" any supposed "prophecy" (or teaching) coming from the Holy Spirit.[73] Akin says, "Behind every statement is a spirit."[74] If it is Spirit-inspired, then they should hold fast to it; if not, they should reject it. This is similar to, if not the same as, John's exhortation in 1 John 4:1. Apparently, "prophecies" are also regarded as "teachings" in the early church.[75] So John here is clearly instructing his readers to "test the spirits," which is in agreement with the "Tests of Orthodoxy" view.

But it begs the question: Since John wanted his readers to "test the spirits," does he also want them to "test" themselves?[76] John may be alluding to his opponents in 1:6-10, by implying that they should "test" themselves, since, as he asserts, their claims may be dubious at best.[77] Thus, the "Tests of Life" view and the "Tests of Fellowship" view may be correct in reading this intent in 1:6-10.[78] However, Brown's precautionary remarks are worth reviewing here: (1) it is often possible that the views of an opponent may not be represented accurately or fairly by those who disagree with them [although it may be difficult to accuse an inspired writer like John of doing so]; (2) the interpreter cannot be sure also that all of the views that are opposed in 1 John are necessarily those of the secessionists [since John may be correcting wrong ideas no matter who held them]; and (3) not all of the favorable statements or the positive ones are necessarily not those of the

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[73]The whole issue of the legitimacy of the prophetic ministry even up to the present is not within the scope of this study.

[74]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 170.

[75]In 1 Corinthians 14:6 prophecies are equated with giving a word of instruction. This can also be inferred in 1 John 4:1-3.

[76]He could have used accusative pronoun ἑαυτοὺς (themselves) to indicate this.

[77]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 74.

[78]See Lieu's comments ("Authority," 210-11), concerning the ambiguity of John.

secessionists [John may be quoting them and agreeing with them instead; in other words, they may be the "right" assertions of the secessionist].[79] So the interpreter must be careful not to read too much in 1:6-10. The idea of "testing" is present but it may not be explicitly so.

Having said this, the assumption that 1 John is indeed polemical in the sense that (1) it argues against false teachings and beliefs, and (2) it seeks to rebuke those who teach or believe such falsehood must be accepted as a legitimate purpose.[80] But John's main concern is to emphasize the truth rather than just to correct the wrong teaching. In other words, his intentions are more pastoral than polemical. It would not be misplaced to assume also that he does not want the situation in 2:19 to worsen,[81] since his repeated exhortations to "love one another" may be indicative of his desire to call people back to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ.[82] However, the secessionists are aggravating the problem by trying to lead others astray (2:26). This may account for the blunt statement in 5:16 where John says, "I am not saying that he should pray about that," referring to some who have completely departed from the truth without hope of coming back (2:18-19).[83] It could also mean that they are misinterpreting the love commandment of Jesus to mean "love only those who agree with us."[84] Thus it's possible that they are even accusing John and his disciples of making the wrong claims about the truth and about

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[79]Brown, *Epistles*, 47-48.

[80]Ibid., 21-23, where Brown cites the "implied skepticism" of Pheme Perkins concerning the dismissal of the polemic aspect of 1 John as totally unrealistic.

[81]See Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 724.

[82]The word "love" occurs thirty-three times in 1 John.

[83]Whether they have completely lost their salvation or the assumption that they may not have been saved at all (as in 2:19) is not stated by John. But he alludes to such a possibility.

[84]See Brown's explanation (*Epistles*, 85).

love (cf. 1:6-10). Again, John may be making a "disclaimer" here to refute their accusation.

Thus, the idea of "testing" may not be sufficient to account for the overall purpose of 1 John, even though it's clearly present. More importantly, the logic of such "tests" may be dangerous, if taken to the extreme.[85] If the "tests" are applied consistently and honestly, who would remain unscathed? Many believers are quite unclear about their Christology even though they may love Him with all their hearts. Every true Christian is also aware of some habitual sin, whether known or unknown. Gleason offers this helpful balance:

> The Lordship portrait of a genuine disciple seems to ignore the biblical examples of those who did not always live lives worthy of a disciple. Peter denied Christ and John Mark turned back on his first missionary journey and yet both remained true disciples. The Scriptures gives other examples of poor disciples who hesitated to follow Christ (e.g., Joseph of Arimathea—John 19:38). True believers will always struggle with the demands of discipleship and therefore should not doubt the genuineness of their faith when they do.[86]

In addition, Christian communities, and even well-known Christian leaders, have fallen into severe conflicts with each other since time memorial. Does this mean they didn't have "eternal life?" Or does it follow that they were not in "fellowship" with God at all?[87] If John's purpose is to assure the believers, how can he accomplish this if the "tests" disqualify just about every Christian in his communities? Dealing with this problem, Derickson suggests an alternative view; one this writer would call the "Tests of Orthodoxy" view:

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[85]Derickson, "Message," 99.

[86]Gleason, "Lordship," 64.

[87]This is based on the interpretation of the "Tests of Fellowship" view.

> It is better to see these tests serving *both* purposes as well as enabling the discerning Christian to identify false teachers who also professed faith. Rather than tests to be administered to oneself, they were given by John to be administered to others who approached the community of faith. In this light the tests did more than produce assurance of salvation or demonstrate fellowship. They also served as standards by which men's teachings can be *measured* to identify whether they are servants of God or of Satan (emphasis mine).[88]

This view assumes that John's purpose is to protect the community, particularly those who have remained loyal to him and to his teachings, by providing them with "tests" to determine the orthodoxy of those who are claiming to be "Christian" teachers. Like the other two views, this view has weaknesses also. It is based on a "mirror reading" of John's statements, that is, they are assuming that "all the ideas and attitudes opposed by the author were held by his adversaries," which according to Brown is "complicated"[89] and "limited" at best.[90] The interpreter must assume *a priori* that John is indirectly addressing the false teachers in his statements in 1:6-10.[91] The term "orthodoxy" may also imply rigid categories that may not be so clear at this time.[92] Thus Brown can only speak of "secessionists" and not outright "heretics" in 1 John.[93] Lieu also adds this clarification:

> A general consideration is that the "orthodoxy vs. heresy" model is a tool which calls for considerable caution in its application to the New Testament period. The terms imply rigid categories whereas in the New Testament we probably only find the search for means of definition rather than their achievement, while as objective criteria used by the scholar to label the parties concerned they lead to an over-simplification of the situation and a tendency to see black and white contrasts where in fact boundaries cannot be so sharply drawn. This we shall

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[88]Derickson, "Message," 100. This is what this writer would call the "Tests of Orthodoxy" view.

[89]Brown, *Epistles*, 48.

[90]Derickson, "Message," 72.

[91]There is no consensus among scholars that 1 John is predominantly antagonistic. See for example Lieu, "Authority," 210-11.

[92]Ibid.

[93]Brown, *Epistles*, 70. He considers "heresy" as an anachronism if applied to 1 John.

> see to be the case in 1 John where the Johannine tradition is the common heritage of all concerned.[94]

In addition, the "Tests of Fellowship" view may also be weak from 3:1 onwards. John seems to be making a distinction between the children of God and the children of Satan, obviously a soteriological issue, not just a fellowship issue. If John is only interested in addressing "fellowship" issues only, why is he taking the time to talk about those who are saved and not saved in chapter 3?[95] Brown sees the "love commandment" as having as its basis the "Upper Room Discourse,"[96] where "love" is the "fruit" of our relationship with Christ.[97] But 1 John 3:15 states: "Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him." Obviously, John is not just interested in talking about "fellowship" per se but in "eternal life" also. Akin also says,

> The test of fellowship view is true in so much that Christians are those who continually live by faith in Jesus and confess their sins; yet John conceives of "fellowship" as more than just a temporal sort of fellowship. Christians are, by definition, those who have fellowship with God, which fellowship is guaranteed by the propitiation of Christ and his advocacy whenever their sins might appear to threaten that fellowship."[98]

Similarly, 5:13 cannot be set aside as an unimportant purpose statement by John, since he has included it toward the end of his letter. Its placement is too apparent to be merely

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[94]Lieu, "Authority," 210-11.

[95]John uses the term "born of God" to describe those who are saved in v.9.

[96]Brown, *Epistles*, 100.

[97]See especially John 15.

[98]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 88.

coincidental.[99] Thus this writer concurs with Akin in not identifying "The Tests of Fellowship" as the "exclusive" purpose statement.[100]

A careful study of the purpose statements in 1 John may prove to be helpful here. This writer will focus on three important statements (or four if we separate 2:26) that seem to indicate John's intentions for writing his epistle: 1 John 1:3-4, 5:13; 2:1 and 26.[101]

An Evaluation of the Purpose Statements in 1 John

1 John 1:3-4

John opens his letter with a paragraph that is "unusually involved and intense."[102] Blaney says, "It gives the impression that the author was so full of his subject, so overwhelmed by the truth he sought to express, that his thoughts became crowded and his expression complicated."[103] The four opening clauses are all direct objects of the verb ἀπαγγέλλομεν, which is not mentioned until verses 3 and 5.[104] According to Hiebert, the first one speaks directly about the "Incarnation of Christ," while the remaining three refers to the experience of the apostles as they traveled and ministered with Christ.[105] Dodd puts it this way: "The first clause of verse 1 may be referred to the pre-incarnate Logos, and the following three clauses to the incarnate Logos, that is to say, 'the Jesus of history,' who,

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[99]Ibid., 32.

[100]Ibid.

[101]The study of the purpose of 1 John cannot of course be limited to simply these three verses since other textual evidences must be taken into consideration.

[102]Hiebert, "1 John 1:1-4," 201.

[103]Harvey J. S. Blaney, "The First Epistle of John," *Beacon Bible Commentary* (Kansas: Beacon Hill, 1969), 10:349.

[104]Although verse 5 uses a different but synonymous word, ἀναγγέλλομεν (to announce).

[105]For an excellent summary of the possible interpretation of these clauses, see Hiebert, "1 John 1:1-4," 201-3.

as a Man among men, could be seen, heard and touched."[106] Either way, the whole "grammatical tangle"[107] can be seen as referring to Jesus Christ, as in the prologue of John's Gospel.[108]

The prepositional phrase περὶ τοῦ λόγου τῆς ζωῆς may also be seen as the introduction of the "central subject of the Epistle."[109] This "Word of life" is of course no other than Jesus Christ Himself, even if John may be focusing more on the "message" (the word, not *the* Word) rather than the Person Himself who is the content of the message (that is, *the* Word of Life).[110] But, from the Gospel of John, it is Jesus Christ Himself who ultimately gives life to everyone who believes (John 1:9, 12-13).[111] At the same time, although the name of Jesus Christ is not mentioned until verse 3, most scholars see the phrase τοῦ λόγου τῆς ζωῆς as referring to Him and not just to the message about Him.[112]

Upon closer examination, and more to the point, John is not so much informing his readers about his intentions for writing, but about the content of his[113] preaching (ἀπαγγέλλομεν).[114] The question needs to be asked: Should his "preaching" be equated

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[106]Dodd, *Johannine Epistles*, 2.

[107]Ibid., 3.

[108]The relationship between John's prologue and 1 John 1:1-4 is rightfully assumed by most scholars. See for example Kruse, *Letters of John*, 51.

[109]Hiebert, "1 John 1:1-4," 204.

[110]Ibid. Hiebert observes that both nouns have articles.

[111]See Dodd, *Johannine Epistles*, 5.

[112]Hiebert mentions Westcott, Dodd and Houlden as not holding to this view ("1 John 1:1-4," 204-5). They believe it refers to the message about Him and to Him personally, although generally they see a clear resemblance to the prologue of the fourth Gospel.

[113]I am not here discussing the whole issue about the use of the pronoun "we." For the view that the pronoun "we" stands for the corporate church, see Dodd (*Johannine Epistles*, 9-16). For the view that "we" stands for the apostle John representing the rest of the apostolic witness, see Hiebert ("1 John 1:1-4," 203).

[114]The habitual present tense of the verb ἀπαγγέλλομεν indicates a continuing practice. See R. W. Orr, "The Letters of John," *NTC*, ed. G. C. D. Howley (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969), 609. Dodd clarifies that the "Word of life" is the theme of the apostles' announcement (*Johannine Epistles*, 2).

with his "writing" of the epistle? Could John's purpose for writing at this time be also the same as his purpose for preaching—to declare the Word of life, who is no other than Jesus Christ Himself? John's preaching ministry is an ongoing activity, even while writing this epistle,[115] but his specific writing activity may refer only to this particular occasion.[116] Nevertheless the focus of his writing cannot be far from the focus of his preaching, even if in both occasions he may be talking about various other matters aside from Jesus Christ Himself.[117] The tense of both verbs ἀπαγγέλλομεν and γράφομεν in verses 3 and 4 are both in the present. It would seem to indicate that what John is in the habit of preaching is also now the topic of what he is about to write in 1 John.

The object of his preaching then, or its goal, is ἵνα καὶ ὑμεῖς κοινωνίαν ἔχητε μεθ' ἡμῶν. Hiebert thinks the και[118] is proof that although John's readers were not part of the original eyewitnesses, they were also being invited to participate in the "same spiritual fellowship with them" through their faith in the true Gospel.[119] But since ἔχητε is also in the present tense, it may well be taken to mean that John is affirming what they already have, that is, true fellowship with God and with His Son, Jesus Christ, and with one another. Consequently, he may already be affirming this fellowship rather than wishing for it (contrary to NIV: "so that you *may* also have fellowship with us" [emphasis mine]).

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[115]Orr, "Letters of John," 609.

[116]Even though γράφομεν (write) is also in the present tense, the context indicates a temporary activity that was going on at the time the author was speaking.

[117]Dodd agrees that the content of the announcement (the word of life) is no other than "that which was from the beginning" (*Johannine Epistles*, 30). Thus, the focus of the apostle's preaching is also the focus of his writing.

[118]There has been some question concerning και but Hiebert ("1 John 1:1-4," 203) cites Kurt Aland and others as affirming the strong textual evidence for its inclusion (*Novum Testamentum Graece*, 26th ed. [Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, n.d.]).

[119]Hiebert, "1 John 1:1-4," 207.

This agrees with 2:21, where John says, "I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth." Thus, their "fellowship" may well be the result of their acceptance of the Gospel in the past (cf. 2:7). Because of their initial and continuing faith, they may still have that same fellowship with God, with Jesus Christ, with one another, and with the original apostles and John, though it is now being threatened by the secessionists (2:26).[120] The noun ἡ κοινωνία cannot just mean a "horizontal relationship," because John himself clarifies that this fellowship is "with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ" (1:3). Thus, this κοινωνία must also be interpreted as being equal to having eternal life also in and through Jesus Christ (cf. the phrase τὴν ζωὴν τὴν αἰώνιον in verse 2).[121]

Since the apostle's preaching is not totally different from his writing, could the purpose of his writing be also ἵνα καὶ ὑμεῖς κοινωνίαν ἔχητε μεθ' ἡμῶν? Dodd believes this is so.[122] But Hiebert thinks verse 4 should be taken as a follow-through of verses 1-3, and that it contains "the goal of his letter." But, according to him, ταῦτα of verse 4 should not be read as referring to the entire epistle but only to verses 1-3. Nevertheless, verses 1-3 are also about the apostle's preaching, which is also about Jesus Christ.[123] So ταῦτα cannot be isolated from what follows in the rest of the epistle, since the apostle may also be referring to what he is about to write (ταῦτα γράφομεν ἡμεῖς). If properly related with the preceding context, verse 4 should mean that what he is about to write will also be what he and the other witnesses are in the custom of preaching, namely Jesus Christ, who

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[120]Ibid., 208.

[121]Akin, *1, 2, 3* John, 57.

[122]Dodd, *Johannine Epistles*, 6.

[123]Hiebert, "1 John 1:1-4," 209.

is the Word of life. This agrees with verse 5, where John says, "Καὶ ἔστιν αὕτη ἡ ἀγγελία ἣν ἀκηκόαμεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀναγγέλλομεν ὑμῖν." In other words, based on 1:3-4, the apostle may have two related goals in writing: (1) he wants the fellowship between him and the apostles and those who would read his letter,[124] and, together, between them and God,[125] which began when they first heard the Gospel, to be maintained and perhaps even reinforced especially now; and (2) He wants his or their joy to be made complete as they stand together in one Christ-centered communion (ἵνα ἡ χαρὰ ἡμῶν ᾖ πεπληρωμένη).[126] The possessive pronoun ἡμῶν may be interpreted as either "your" joy or "our" joy.[127] This is so because the focus of his writing will be the same as the focus of his preaching, namely, the Word of life, who is Jesus Christ, the source of all true joy and blessing, either for him or for his readers, and for everyone who believes (cf. John 1:16-17).

Jesus Christ would then be considered as the author's focused burden for the entire epistle. Only the verifiable and experiential truth about Jesus Christ as contained in the gospel can bring about true fellowship among people of various backgrounds, whether Jew or Gentile. That is why He is the only true content of their preaching. He is also their only passion and priority in preaching and writing, that is, He is the only reason why they

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[124]There seems to be no bias against the secessionist at this early point.

[125]Smalley thinks John doesn't seem to make much of a clear distinction between the Father and the Son (*1, 2, and 3 John*, 13). But see Akin for his rebuttal concerning the distinctiveness of persons within the Godhead (*1, 2, 3 John*, 58).

[126]Hiebert describes this as "that serene happiness, which is the result of conscious union with God and good men, of conscious possession of eternal life . . . which raises us above pain and sorrow and remorse" ("1 John 1:1-4," 210).

[127]There is some disagreement concerning the pronouns used. Some manuscripts have "your" while others have "our." Hiebert argues based on the more difficult reading ("our") and says: "This reading may be understood as a delicate personal touch referring to the writer personally, being 'similar to one the same author made in 3 John 4: I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth'" But he adds that "our joy" may also be understood "in an inclusive sense to include both writer and readers" ("1 John 1:1-4," 210).

preach and write continually in the first place.[128] And now the apostle is going to write about some matters that are consistent with what he and the other apostles have been preaching about before, namely, Jesus Christ, the Word of life. Just as his preaching before resulted in their fellowship with one another, and more particularly, with their fellowship with the Father and with His Son (v.3), so now it should be maintained and reinforced as he calls back believers to a true Christ-centered community once again. The result, as he hopes, will be common joy for all of them, joy that is not man-made but a joy that comes from God Himself through Jesus Christ.[129]

From this exegesis, the three current views about the purpose of 1 John are included in our thesis, and yet they are extended beyond the usual connotation of "tests," to include a pastoral call back to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ. John wants to bring about true fellowship and joy among the people of God under his care,[130] by focusing them back to faith in Jesus Christ, the source of true eternal life (1 John 5:11-12).

1 John 5:13

First John 5:13 is considered by Plummer and others as the primary purpose statement of 1 John.[131] This is because of the relationship of the fourth Gospel with 1 John, and vice-versa. Derickson summarizes the reasoning behind this assumption,

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[128]Hiebert says, "The sense of privilege and duty prompted their proclamation" ("1 John 1:1-4," 210).

[129]Dodd asserts, "It means that with the restoration of the threatened fellowship the church will enter into the joy of its Lord, according to His word" (*Johannine Epistles*, 9).

[130]Brown believes that *presbuteros*, a term used by John to identify himself in 2 and 3 John, indicates John's role as overseer of the communities referred to in 1 John, with some qualifications (*Community*, 100-101).

[131]Plummer, *Epistles*, xlv.

> The relationship of the Gospel of John and 1 John is evidenced by the similar fashion in which John stated his purpose near the end of each work. Since John 20:31 governs the message of the Gospel and 1 John 5:13 is used similarly in the epistle, the latter verse governs the message of the entire epistle, and not just that of the preceding paragraph.[132]

This view is also shared by other scholars.[133] The main assumption here is that John used the same strategy for 1 John as he did with his Gospel.[134] According to Plummer, "The Gospel is written to shew (*sic*) the way to eternal life through belief in the incarnate Son. The Epistle is written to confirm and enforce the Gospel; to assure those who believe in the incarnate Son that they have eternal life."[135] Akin also adds:

> First John 5:13 brings together the other purpose statements in a unified theme. Whereas the Gospel of John is written with an evangelistic purpose, 1 John is penned to provide avenues of assurance whereby a believer can know he has eternal life through the Son.[136]

In addition, ταῦτα, according to Brown[137] and Dodd,[138] should most likely refer to the entire letter, and not just to the immediate context (5:1-12). Other scholars disagree.[139] Derickson states that John 20:31 may indeed cover more than "The Book of Signs,"[140] but this does not mean, according to him, that this passage is the exclusive purpose statement

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[132]Derickson, "Message," 92.

[133]See Boice, *The Epistles of John*, 167; Brown, *Epistles*, 632; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, 122; Feuillet, "The Structure of First John," 211; Robert Govett, *Govett on 1 John* (Miami Springs, FL: Conley and Schoettle, 1985), 148; Stott, *Letters*, 186; and Bruce Vawter, "The Johannine Epistles," *Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 2:411.

[134]Derickson, "Message," 93.

[135]Plummer, *Epistles of St. John*, xlv.

[136]Akin, *1, 2, 3* John, 32.

[137]Brown, *Epistles*, 608.

[138]Dodd, *Johannine Epistles*, 133.

[139]See Brooke, *Epistles of John*, 142; Stott, *Letters*, 186. Law though seeing 5:13 as governing the whole epistle, admits that the immediate context of 5:11-12 is the referent of "these things" (*Tests of Life*, 405).

[140]Derickson, "Message," 103.

of the fourth Gospel.[141] The Prologue of the Gospel would most likely fulfill that purpose.[142] The first part of 1 John (1:1-4) may indeed be an important clue to the purpose of 1 John.[143] Those who hold to the "Tests of Life" view interpret ταῦτα to mean "the whole letter."[144] Akin, although saying in his introduction that he does not see this passage as the exclusive purpose statement,[145] cites it anyway as the definitive purpose statement because of the following reasons: (1) the author shifts to the first person singular pronoun ["I"] for the first time since 2:26; (2) the theme of assurance of salvation is one that appears frequently in this epistle; (3) many of the themes found in 5:13 are continued in 5:14-21 [e.g., know, eternal life, and Son of God]; (4) there is a close parallel between 5:13 and John's purpose statement for the fourth Gospel [20:31, as stated earlier]; (5) citing Brown, 5:13 constitutes an inclusion with the "we are writing this" in 1:4;[146] and (6) the grammar of the verse[147] indicates this is the main purpose of John.[148] He therefore concludes,

> John writes to those "who believe in the name of the Son of God" and not to the heretics who were deceiving God's people. This fact indicates that John was therefore writing not to persuade unbelievers of the truth of the Christian faith but rather to strengthen Christian believers who might be tempted to doubt the reality of their Christian experience and to give up their faith in Jesus.[149]

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[141]Ibid.

[142]Ibid.

[143]Ibid., 104, where Derickson disagrees with this idea.

[144]Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 243; Smalley, *1,2, 3 John*, 290.

[145]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 32.

[146]Sherman and Tuggy see an inclusion at 5:13 and 5:20, with both verses addressing eternal life through the Son (*A Semantic and Structural Analysis of the Johannine Epistles* [Dallas, TX: SIL, 1994], 100).

[147]John uses an epistolary aorist ἔγραψα. Smalley also maintains this is an indirect imperative, meaning John's readers "should have" confidence that they have (present tense) eternal life (*1, 2, and 3 John*, 290).

[148]Akin, *1, 2, 3* John, 204.

[149]Ibid.

It is therefore imperative that the use of ταῦτα in the Johannine literature should be examined closely. Upon investigation concerning the use of ταῦτα in other Johannine writings such as the fourth Gospel and Revelation, there seems to be no determinative pattern.[150] But according to Dana and Mantey, ταῦτα in the Johannine epistles usually refers to something near, either physically near to the person speaking or near in terms of its literary context.[151] This seems to be the case in 1 John. Ταῦτα occurs four times in 1 John, and each time it occurs with γράφω (to write). Interestingly, these are the only four purpose statements of 1 John (1:4; 2:1, 26; 5:13).[152] The word ταῦτα in 1:4 actually refers to verses 1-3 only, particularly to the "Word of life," who is Jesus Christ. This life is also called τὴν ζωὴν τὴν αἰώνιον in verse 2, which means that the apostolic preaching is centered upon Jesus Christ through whom eternal life is manifested and experienced. John proclaims this life so that there may be "fellowship" between the apostles and their readers. They can have fellowship with the apostles by continuing to believe in the same message which they have heard from the very beginning (2:24-25). But since, in view of the context, this is also what John wants to write about, as stated in 1:4-5,[153] ταῦτα in 5:13 may also look back and forward to the rest of the epistle, and not just to its immediate context.

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[150]Derickson, "Message," 101.

[151]H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 127.

[152]I have subsumed 2:1 and 2:26 as being secondary and less influential in determining the purpose of 1 John.

[153]See above exegesis of 1 John 1:3-4.

1 John 2:21 and 26

First John 2:1 and 2:26 are also important considerations regarding the purpose of John. Derickson says,

> The use of ταῦτα in 2:1 clearly has the previous verses (1:6-10) in view and not the epistle as a whole, especially since 2:7-8 is without a purpose clause and the specific object of γράφω is the new commandment. Further, ταῦτα ἔγραψα in 2:26 also has the previous paragraph and its teaching on false teachers as its referent. Thus in 1 John (5:13), ταῦτα seems to indicate a near referent rather than the entire epistle.[154]

This agrees with the use of ταῦτα in the Johannine epistles. But it's interesting to note that "sin" in 2:1, and in the rest of this epistle, is not just "sin" in general. In 3:4, John states that "everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness." But in verse 10 John wants to narrow the definition of "lawlessness" to mean "anyone who does not love his brother." Similarly, verse 23 says, "And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us." "Lawlessness," therefore, especially here in the context of 1 John, is no ordinary "law-breaking" as in Paul (cf. Romans 7:7-12), but a specific disobedience to the command stated in 3:23, that is, the failure to believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God who came in the flesh (cf. 4:2), in accordance with the truth of the gospel as it was in the beginning (2:2-3), and the failure to love one another, which was also taught from the beginning (cf. v. 11).[155] Thus, the purpose statement in 2:1, although specifically referring to the nearest context of 1:6-10, cannot be limited to that reference alone. John may also have in mind the whole of the letter as well, since, as in 1:3-4 and 5:13, John is thinking about Jesus Christ as the subject

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[154]Derickson, "Message," 101.

[155]See Hills, "Lawlessness," 294.

and burden of all that he wants to say in this epistle (1:1-3). So as with Derickson it can be concluded that ταῦτα in 2:1 and 26 would most likely have a closer literary referent (1:6-10 and 2:18-25), but from the context of 1:1-3 John is also referring to the entire epistle when he uses the word ταῦτα together with γράφω in 1:4, 2:1, 26, and 5:13.

In summary, 1:4 would have verses 1 to 3 as its most immediate referent, 5:13 would have 5:11-12 as its most reasonable referent[156] (although Derickson even suggests that ταῦτα may be linking 5:5-11 with 5:14-21, based on the common occurrence of "linking verses" found throughout 1 John[157]), 2:1 would refer to 1:6-10, and verse 26 would refer to 2:18-25. But, in each case, John's overall intention of proclaiming the centrality of Jesus Christ is his primary purpose (1:1-3). In other words, John wants to call back his readers to a true community centered in Christ. By themselves, and in isolation from each other, each of the "tests" views would be insufficient to account for all the more important affirmations of the book, as it shall be shown further below.

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[156]Marshall, *Epistles of* John, 243.

[157]Derickson says this is the reason why commentators have a hard time dividing the various sections of the letter. He cites 2:28-3:1 as an example ("Message," 101-2).

CHAPTER 3

A PROPOSED THEORY THAT ENCOMPASSES EXISTING THEORIES BUT EXTENDS IT EVEN FURTHER

The Theory Stated and Explained

Having examined the strengths and apparent weaknesses or incompleteness of the current theories concerning the purpose of 1 John, the proposed theory that sees John's purpose as "a call back to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ" shall now be examined. At least six aspects of this theory need to be explained at the onset.

First, the purpose of 1 John is basically a "call," not a "test," meaning it's an exhortation or an appeal to all the believers. Several evidences in 1 John may point to this observation. On several occasions throughout 1 John, terms of personal endearment are used repeatedly: (1) "dear friends" (ἀγαπητοί, brethren or beloved, 1 John 2:7; 3:2, 21; 4:1, 7, 11), (2) "my brothers" (ἀδελφοί, 1 John 3:13), and of course "my dear children" (τεκνία μου, 2:1, 12, 18, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21). The occurrences of these terms are too apparent to become mere coincidence. In addition, in each case, John seems to be making specific, important exhortations that are vital to what he is trying to communicate all throughout the epistle (2:1-2, 7-8, 12-14, 18-19, 28; 3:7-10, 21-24; 4:1-3, 4-6, 7-12, 5:21). John is addressing believers in his communities, exhorting them toward walking in

the truth, and loving one another.[1] Although he is thinking about his opponents also, his primary concern is to exhort the believers who have remained loyal to his teachings.[2] This does not negate the fact that there is a strong polemical tone in 1 John, as stated earlier. John's calls his opponents "false prophets" (4:1), a common eschatological term used to address deceivers of all kinds in the last days.[3] He is not afraid to rebuke anyone if necessary. But his primary intent is still pastoral.

Second, this call is a "call back," not an initial call. In other words, John is recalling his readers back to the fundamentals of the faith, particularly in reference to the person of Jesus Christ, and its corollary imperative of loving one another, because there is danger in abandoning this basic truth for a "lie" (2:20-23, 26). The phrase "from the beginning" or "since the beginning" occurs seven times in 1 John (1:1; 2:7, 13, 14, 24; 3:8, 11), indicating John's desire to point them back to what they have heard (1:5) and believed in (2:21) in the past. At the same time, the call to "remain" both in the truth and in the "anointing"[4] they have received (2:24, 27) is emphasized throughout the passage. The warnings "not to sin," as it was seen earlier, pertains not just to general "sin" per se, but to the sin of abandoning the truth (cf. 3:23-24). The warning in 2:15-17 may indicate also that some are already in the process of doing this.[5] More importantly, the affirmation

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[1]In commenting on 1:6-10, most commentators simply assume, like Hiebert ("1 John 1:5-2:6," 334), that John is clearly attacking the "views advanced by the false teachers." But nothing in the text indicates that. This is an inference that can be questioned, and has been rightfully questioned by Lieu ("Authority," 214). See also Brown (*Epistles*, 48-49), for his refutation of this toning down of antagonism in 1 John.

[2]Lieu cites John's ambiguous grammar in 1:1-4, where his language tends to be "congenial to the Docetics" rather than an outright attack ("Authority," 214).

[3]Ibid., 215.

[4]Akin sees the anointing as referring to both the Holy Spirit and the Word of God (*1, 2, 3 John*, 118).

[5]Ibid., 174, where the concept of "world" in 1 John refers particularly to John's opponents (4:1-6).

in 2:12-14 is John's way of persuading his readers to remain in the truth since they are able to do so already by God's grace.[6]

Third, this call is a call toward community or κοινωνία ("fellowship"). This word presupposes not just the secular idea of "something public" or "common to all," but true "spiritual brotherhood." Schattenmann defines it in this way:

> *Koinonia* in 1 John 1:3, 6, 7 does not refer to a mystical fusion with Christ and God [unlike Paul], but to fellowship in faith. Its basis is in the apostolic preaching of the historical Jesus, walking in the light, and the blood of Jesus which cleanses from all sin. It thus excludes the sectarian pride which denies the incarnation and misrepresents the character of sin.[7]

Lieu also adds,

> The Epistle opens with an emphatic declaration that its goal is fellowship – firstly between the author and his readers, and, through this, participation in fellowship "with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ" (1:3) with its corollary, the full experience of Christian joy, an eschatological gift made present (1:4). . . . A frequent theme in letter-writing of the period, fellowship is the obvious goal of any non-business letter; in a Christian letter, particularly within the Johannine tradition, this fellowship will naturally be extended to include a relationship with God (John 17:21-23).[8]

The word κοινωνία occurs four times in 1 John (all within 1:3-7). It occurs fifteen times elsewhere in the New Testament (thirteen times in Paul).[9] In secular Greek usage, it can mean "community,"[10] "having something in common,"[11] or having "common participation or sharing in something."[12] According to John, "fellowship" is the result of receiving the

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[6]Ibid., 100-107.

[7]Colin Brown and others, ed. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (*NDNTT*), vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 1:644.

[8]Lieu, "Authority," 212-13.

[9]Ibid. Also Kruse, *Letters of John*, 59-61.

[10]Brown, *Epistles*, 170.

[11]Marshall, *Epistles of* John, 104.

[12]R. Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 63-69.

Word of life, who is no other than Jesus Christ Himself (1:1-4). Thus, in John's understanding, this is also tantamount to receiving "eternal life" (1 John 5:11-12).[13] Akin cites Eichler who said, "To have fellowship with one another and with Christ is to 'know' Him (2:3) and to 'abide' in Him (v.6)."[14] Thus fellowship describes the unique quality of real brotherhood among Christians (cf. Acts 2:42).[15] This brotherhood is made possible and maintained in and through Jesus Christ (1:3). It is a picture of true unity, of mutual identification, and of sharing and participation or partnership in Christ. The basis of the conditional phrases in 1:6-10 is the truth of the Gospel as described in 1:1-3. To share in that is to share with the apostles that unique fellowship which is found in Christ alone. Such fellowship also results in true joy (1:4), which in turn is characterized by "complete satisfaction, a spirit of exultation, and a feeling of power and of strength [in Christ]."[16]

Fourth, this call is a call to a true fellowship, not a false one (1 John 3:11-20; cf. 1 Cor 1:10-12). John's desire to promote "truth" seems to be an important emphasis in this letter. Ἀλήθεια is mentioned at least nine times in 1 John. This may be an indication that it is an important concept for John and his readers. In 1:6 it is part of an unusual expression οὐ ποιοῦμεν τὴν ἀλήθειαν (literally, "not do the truth"). Thus, in 1 John, ἀλήθεια is more than an abstract term; it has practical consequences, too. In 1:8 the expression ἡ ἀλήθεια οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν seems to equate truth with Christ Himself (cf.

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[13]Akin says, "Fellowship with the Father and His Son, then, is essentially the same thing as having eternal life" (*1, 2, 3 John*, 57). See 1 John 5:11-12.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Schattenmann takes this word to mean "an essential part of the life of worship" and the fulfillment of the "Greek ideal of society" (*NDNTT*, 642).

[16]Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Fellowship with God – Studies in 1 John* (Wheaton, IL: Good News, 1993), 28-29.

John 14:6). In 2:4 a similar expression with a similar meaning can be seen (ἐν τούτῳ ἡ ἀλήθεια οὐκ ἔστιν [literally, "in him the truth is not"]). Again in 2:21, John says, πᾶν ψεῦδος ἐκ τῆς ἀληθείας οὐκ ἔστιν, indicating that John believed that his readers knew about the truth. Kruse sees the "truth" here as referring to the message mentioned in 1:1-4.[17] Earlier in this study, the purpose of 1 John in light of 1:3-4 was examined. It was concluded that John's purpose for writing is consistent with his purpose in preaching, which is to declare at all times the centrality of Jesus Christ, the Word of life (1:1-3).

In other words, the doctrine of the secessionists is not in accordance with the original message that they heard from Christ. They are now promoting a "lie." The passage in 1 John 2:22 confirms this interpretation (Τίς ἐστιν ὁ ψεύστης εἰ μὴ ὁ ἀρνούμενος ὅτι Ἰησοῦς οὐκ ἔστιν ὁ Χριστός; οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ ἀντίχριστος, ὁ ἀρνούμενος τὸν πατέρα καὶ τὸν υἱόν).[18] This could either be taken as an example of a "lie" or the "actual lie" itself that cannot come from the "truth" as it was from the beginning.[19] However, since the message in 1:1-4 is more than just a set of teachings, but referring to Christ Himself, it can also be inferred from this passage that the "truth" is none other than Jesus Christ (as in 2:22). Thus, John is calling the believers to come back and remain in the Truth, Jesus Christ, so that they may in turn experience a true community (or "fellowship") of the Spirit centered in Christ.

Again in 3:18 John says, "Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth." Kruse understands this to mean "love truly," as opposed to just

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[17]Kruse, *Letters of John*, 67.

[18]Also related to 1 John 1:5.

[19]Kruse, *Letters of John*, 67.

"love with words or tongue."[20] He adds, "Loving in truth is virtually synonymous with loving in action."[21] But the phrase ἐν ἔργῳ καὶ ἀληθείᾳ can be better understood as loving "in terms of action" and also loving "in terms of truth that is revealed in and through Jesus Christ."[22] In other words, the truth about love can only be understood and practiced in terms of what God had done in and through Jesus Christ, as it was taught from the very beginning (3:11). According to Kruse, John's statement in 3:19 looks back to verse 18. He says,

> John is reinforcing the exhortation to his readers not to close their hearts toward their fellow believers in need . . . so that they do not succumb to the meanness in their hearts and refuse to offer material assistance. This persuasion is to be undertaken 'whenever our heart condemn us,' that is, whenever their hearts object to the legitimate calls upon their generosity when they are in fact in a position to respond.[23]

Thus, the personal characteristic of "truth," more specifically in reference to Jesus Christ, and the real ("truthful") love that it demands, is here emphasized strongly.[24]

Fifth, this call is a call to a true fellowship *of the Spirit*. First John 3:9, 4:6 and 5:6 tell us that the truth is related to the Holy Spirit. He is the "seed" (σπέρμα) within the believer that keeps him or her from continuing in sin (3:9; cf. v. 24).[25] He is also τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς ἀληθείας in 4:6 ("the Spirit of the Truth") and at the same time τὸ πνεῦμά ἐστιν ἡ ἀλήθεια in 5:6 ("the Spirit is the truth"). Just as "truth" is personified in the Son

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[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Thompson, *1-3 John*, 106.

[23]Kruse, *Letters of John*, 141.

[24]Kruse says, "to belong to the truth appears to have personal overtones: it means belonging to God" (Ibid., 67).

[25]For other interpretations of *sperma*, see J. du Perez, "'*Sperma auto*' in 1 John 3:9," *Neotestamentica* 9 (1975): 105-10; Brown, *Epistles*, 408-11; and Kruse, *Letters*, 124-26.

(just like in John 14:6), he is also personified in the Holy Spirit.[26] In addition, John warns his readers of "false spirits" who teach "lies" in 4:1-6. He assures them in 4:4 that "the one who is in you (the Holy Spirit) is greater than the one who is in the world (the false spirits of v. 1)." Thus, the call of John is toward a true community of the Spirit, who is also the Spirit of truth (4:6).

Last but not the least, this call is a call to a fellowship that is *centered* in Christ. The use of the neuter pronoun ("that which," ὃ) in 1:1-3 focuses on the truth of the gospel, but it also centers upon Jesus Christ, who is the Word of truth and of life.[27] Akin says, "The message and the person ultimately cannot be separated. Each explains the other. The message about Jesus is intimately related to who Jesus is."[28] It can be assumed then, with Akin, that John here is "fighting a Christological heresy that involved the denial of the incarnation of deity, that is, the denial that Christ was the historical Jesus."[29] In other words, John wants to proclaim Jesus Christ again[30] as the Son of God, who came in the flesh (4:2) not for the purpose of converting them again as in his Gospel (John 20:30-31), but for calling them to remain in that truth (1 John 5:21). Lieu is correct in clarifying this issue:

> More specifically, the interpretation of 1 John from its opening verses in the light of its opposition to false teachers gives insufficient weight to the fact that there is no direct reference to the antichrists or schismatics in the early part of the letter or in connection with the moral debate. They are only introduced half way through in relation to the christological [*sic*] question (ii 18ff.), and it is therefore

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[26]Concerning the role of the Holy Spirit in 1 John, see Kruse (*Letters of John*, 151).

[27]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 51.

[28]Ibid., see note 13 for further explanation.

[29]Ibid., 54.

[30]This has always been his main burden even in his preaching and teaching (1:1-4).

> the christological [*sic*] statements which must bear the full weight of any attempt to define the heresy.[31]

Therefore, John wants his readers to remember this Truth (Jesus Christ), who was from the beginning (1:1-4; 2:20-23). His life-giving sacrifice and example should be the model of love among them (3:11-15) so that they in turn may experience a true community ("fellowship") of the Spirit centered in Christ.[32]

With this whole emphasis on "truth" as the basis of all of John's exhortations, where Christ is the focal point, and the true fellowship (κοινωνία) of the Spirit that would surely result if they follow his exhortations, John's purpose for writing 1 John can now be seen as calling back his readers to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ. Jesus Christ (the Word of life, the life who was manifested in the flesh, that is, who was seen, looked at, touched, and heard by John and the rest of the apostolic witness [1:1-4]) is the "Truth" that John wanted his readers to go back to, remain in, walk in, and consequently guard with all their hearts (5:21), so that they may experience a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ (1 John 5:21).

The Theory Defended

The theory proposed in this study is not entirely new or fresh. It has been mentioned in one way or another by various scholars, without being identified specifically as a purpose statement, and without being referred to as the "exclusive" purpose statement of 1 John. But it warrants a clearer definition and defense, if it is to be used as

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[31]Lieu, "Authority," 211.

[32]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 59, interprets 1:4 in the same way. He says, "the parallel structure of 1:3a and 1:4, both with a purpose clause introduced by 'that' (ινα), suggests that what is being proclaimed (v.3a) and written (v.4) is the same message." He infers that the same audience is in view in both the proclamation and the writing.

the overarching purpose of 1 John. Smalley, for instance, alludes to this when he saw the purpose of John as "recalling his divided community to the fundamentals of the apostolic gospel, and answering the heretical extremes of those who were taking too 'high' or too 'low' a view of the person of Jesus."[33] Kruse further comments,

> The author's purpose in [1 John 1:1-4] was to remind his readers of the origins of the gospel, that it was a message concerning 'the Word of life', and that this is what constitutes the basis of the fellowship they share and in which he wants them to continue. It may be possible, . . . that the author is also consciously correcting secessionistic [*sic*] distortions of the prologue of the Fourth [*sic*] Gospel, . . . especially by stressing that experience of the Word of life is mediated through the proclamation of the message that was entrusted to eyewitnesses, and not in any other way.[34]

In order to defend this thesis, that this call is the overarching purpose of 1 John—not negating or denying the existing theories but encompassing them and extending them to include what this writer believes to be other crucial statements of John in this epistle—the structure and contents of the whole book must be examined for support.

Many scholars have recognized the difficulty of analyzing the structure of 1 John.[35] This is probably partly due to the difficulty of identifying the "genre" of 1 John. Sloyan, for example, says, "First John seems the least letter-like in its lack of the identification of the sender or an address to any recipients except the nonspecific 'little children.'"[36] It also appears to be more of a "treatise sent broadcast" [*sic*] to the Johannine communities."[37] Others think it is a "universal tract," a "circular letter," a "homily," a

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[33]Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 15.1

[34]Kruse, *Letters*, 59.

[35]For an overview of some of the scholarly proposals concerning the structure of 1 John, see Brown, *Epistles*, 116-129, especially "Chart Five" on p. 764. See also Staden, "The Debate on the structure of 1 John," 487-502.

[36]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 37.

[37]G. S. Sloyan, *Walking in the Truth* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1995), 1.

"commentary of the Fourth [*sic*] Gospel",[38] or an "exposition paper" based on the correct reading of the fourth Gospel.[39] Perhaps, as it was mentioned earlier, the term "disclaimer" should be used. Lenski suggests that the structure of 1 John is like "an inverted pyramid or cone."[40] Akin thinks that all these various options can be categorized mainly into three: (1) traditional approaches, (2) discourse analysis approaches, and (3) rhetorical criticism approaches.[41] All three approaches have strengths and weaknesses, and cannot be adequately discussed in this chapter.[42]

Another reason for this difficulty is due to the presence of "linking verses" or "saddle texts"[43] throughout 1 John. Derickson points this out when he said that "John used linking verses [and this] is evidenced by the difficulty that commentators have in determining the proper places to divide various sections of the epistle."[44] In other words, John has the habit of using terms that connect passages with each other even though they are essentially talking about different things.[45] Thus it seems hard to find the exact literary markers that delineate each section clearly.[46]

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[38]This has been evaluated extensively by Brown, *Epistles*, 90-92.

[39]See Kruse, *Letters of John*, 28-29, for a helpful listing of possible options. He further suggests that 1 John can be categorized as "epideictic rhetoric."

[40]Lenski, *Interpretation*, 366-67.

[41]For an extensive analysis of these various approaches, see Kruse (*Letters of John*, 37-48).

[42]Akin (*1, 2, 3 John*, 46-48), for example, agrees that 1 John may indeed be categorized as "hortatory" and "epideictic rhetorical" literature. See also Smalley, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 23. Both of them concur with Brown's proposal, which states that 1 John is most likely modeled as the fourth Gospel (with its simple four-part outline). So he offers his own unique analysis based on both proposals.

[43]Akin mentions this and describes it as "classic Johannine," where the author ties together the material that comes before with the material that is to follow (*1, 2, 3 John*, 94).

[44]Derickson, "Message," 101-102.

[45]Often one topic will lead to another. But they are basically different topics. Ibid.

[46]This writer proposes that the eight occurrences of "dear children" may in fact be structural markers in 1 John.

Thomas has chosen to deviate from the traditional approach of topic outlining.[47] He uses rhetorical criticism to identify a chiastic structure in 1 John. He notices two glaring weaknesses in the various approaches suggested so far: (1) they do not pay sufficient attention to the clear literary markers that appear in 1 John itself, and he sees plenty of them; and (2) most of the outlines are imposed upon the text regardless of its actual content.[48] The result, of course, is a forced outline. He suggests instead a chiastic pattern for 1 John as follows:[49]

A Prologue – Eternal Life (1:1-4)

B Making Him a Liar – Walking (1:5-2:2)

C The New Commandment (2:3-17)

D The Antichrists (2:18-27)

E Confidence – Do not sin (2:28-3:10)

F Love one another (3:11-18)

E' Confidence – Keeps the commands (3:19-24)

D' The Antichrists (4:1-6)

C' God's love and ours (4:7-5:5)

B' Making Him a Liar – Testimony (5:6-12)

A' Conclusion – Eternal Life (5:13-21)

It would seem from this structural analysis that "loving one another" is "the most important issue for the Johannine community."[50] However, the common themes of eternal

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[47]For other options, see Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 37-47.

[48]Thomas, "Literary Structure," 369.

[49]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 42.

[50]Thomas, "Literary Structure," 373.

life and remaining (μενω) in the truth are also found in 3:11-18.[51] According to him, this concentric structure may be intentional since John may also be using it as a teaching tool.[52] Whether he is correct or not, the centrality and importance of "love" (fellowship), "eternal life" (life), and "remaining" (orthodoxy) are all intimately connected, thus arguing for a more comprehensive analysis of John's purpose. Interestingly, they are connected by a strong pastoral concern on the part of John, as Barker observes:

> [John's] deepest concern is pastoral. He desires to reassure, protect, alert and teach the faithful members about their life together as the people of God. To accomplish this, the writer shows that "from the beginning" the basis of the believing community is Jesus Christ. He is the one through whom fellowship with the Father and with the members of the community becomes possible. This fellowship is further defined as life in him and as eternal life.[53]

Another important observation is based on the literary and structural analysis of 1 John 2:12-14. Scholars are quick to notice that this portion of the epistle is unusual. Akin cites critical scholars who think that it is "a self-contained unit . . . [with] no connection whatsoever with the arguments before and after it" and, thus, suggesting a patch up work [a "parenesis"[54]] by some redactor or editor who may or may not be John.[55] He disagrees with this conclusion, however, and says instead,

> A closer examination of the text . . . reveals that there is a connection between 2:12-14 and the context in both directions and that there is a progression in the ideas that are discussed. The connection, however, is semantic [*sic*] rather than structural.[56]

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[51]Ibid., 374.

[52]Ibid., 381.

[53]Barker, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 299.

[54]Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 66.

[55]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 101.

[56]Ibid.

According to him, this "semantic" connection is the theme of assurance found in 2:12-14 and directly related to 1:5-2:11, where John wants to encourage his readers concerning their true status as children of God, as opposed to the secessionists who are making false claims. In the same way, 2:12-14 is directly related to 2:15-17, as an apt introduction to John's warning against loving the world. Nevertheless, the uniqueness of this section cannot be missed.[57] It would seem that John has intentionally written this part in a unique way (that is, it is "almost poetic"[58]) to communicate something essential to his argument. Smalley attributes this "marked off" quality of this section to three aspects: (1) there exists a strongly personal and direct address in these verses, unlike those in other parts of the epistle [note the repeated "I am writing," "I have written"[59]]; (2) John uses a quasi-poetic arrangement, which is quite unique in the epistle, and which may signal a purposeful intention; and (3) there seems to be an apparent difficulty in relating its contents with its surrounding context.[60] Smalley sees verses 12-14 as being connected to verses 15-17 in some way, but not clearly so because of the vocabulary.[61] But, he agrees that verses 12-14 anticipate the command in verses 15-17, as it was seen above.[62] His second observation, however, is worth considering more closely.

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[57]See Sherman and Tuggy, *Semantic Structural Analysis*, 39-40; and G. M. Burge, *The Letters of John*, NIV Application Commentary, ed. Terry Muck and others (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 112.

[58]See Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 101

[59]This is not reflected in the NIV translation.

[60]Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 66.

[61]Ibid.

[62]Ibid., 67.

Interestingly, most scholars have difficulty explaining the change of style in this section.[63] Akin sees the following issues as pertinent to this passage: (1) the change of tense between verse 13 and verse 14; (2) the identity of the three groups addressed; (3) the correct translation of ὅτι in this section (NIV translates it as "because" when it can also be translated as "that"); and 4) the repetition of the statements in verse 13 and 14.[64] Concerning the first issue, Akin thinks this is John's way of developing his argument.[65] The repeated phrase γράφω ὑμῖν (present tense) occurs three times from verses 12 to 13, but then it changes to the aorist (ἔγραψα ὑμῖν) in verse 14. Two basic presuppositions have been advanced to interpret this tense change: (1) John uses the present tense to refer to what he is now writing [1 John] and the aorist to what he has written before [most likely the fourth Gospel]; or (2) John is using both tenses to refer to 1 John, but is moving his argument forward more emphatically by changing from the present to the aorist.[66] Akin takes the second interpretation. Concerning the second issue, he suggests a two-group interpretation [τεκνία and παιδία referring to one group, and πατέρες and νεανίσκοι referring to another], rather than a one or three group interpretation, with some qualifications.[67] Concerning the translation of ὅτι, he favors a declarative interpretation ("that") rather than a causal one ("because").[68] Finally, concerning the fourth issue, Akin thinks it's for "emphasis" only, especially in view of what he is about to say in the rest of

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[63]Kruse, for example, completely disregards it (*Letters of John*, 87). So also Hiebert ("An Exposition of 1 John 2:7-17," *BSac* 145 [Oct-Dec 1988]: 427).

[64]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 101-2.

[65]Ibid., 102.

[66]Ibid.

[67]Ibid., 103. He thinks that we cannot make hard and fast distinctions about the meaning of the direct addresses.

[68]Ibid. He considers it a "exegetical fallacy" to assume too much of a distinction between the two.

the epistle.[69] However, he does not comment on why John chose to change his style into something "almost poetic" in the first place. In other words, why did John change his style of writing? Thompson makes this interesting observation:

> Because the Elder is probably quoting familiar, creedlike [*sic*] statements in 2:12-14, many translations (including the NIV) set these lines off to look like a quotation. Just as we might quote a hymn, creed or verse of Scripture to remind ourselves what we believe and to what we are committed, so here the author quotes these lines to serve just such a purpose. John cites the lines at this point to take his readers back to the beginning of their faith, and to remind them of what they have always believed. He has talked about the message that they have had from the beginning (1:1; 2:7), and now he summarizes its content at greater length. His readers are to remember who they are and what they have been given.[70]

Perhaps this is the reason why Smith, paraphrasing the apostle John, reads this section in this way: "I am not addressing you as unbelievers or casting doubt upon the sincerity of your faith. On the contrary, it is because I am assured thereof that I am writing this letter to you and wrote the Gospel which accompanies it."[71] He also says that this is most likely a "pause" in John's whole argument.[72] This observation is significant since it has been shown in this study that John's overarching purpose for writing 1 John is to call back his readers to true community of the Spirit centered in Christ. Culpepper, in reflecting upon this passage, sees John encouraging "the community of the faithful by assuring them that the benefits of the new covenant are theirs and warns them against the dangers that remain."[73] Similarly, Dodd says, "Our author therefore is echoing the central tradition of the Gospel when he addresses his readers as members of the people of the new covenant,

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[69]Ibid., 104. He sees the repetition as necessary in view of the almost poetic form.

[70]Thompson, *1-3 John*, 61-62.

[71]Smith, *The Epistles of John*, 177.

[72]Ibid.

[73]R. A. Culpepper, *1, 2, 3 John*, Knox Preaching Guides (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1985), 33.

whose sins are forgiven, who know the Eternal, and who have overcome the world."[74] Its unique style and its almost surprising break from the tone of the previous verses and the verses following it, seems to indicate its unique importance in assessing John's purpose. In addition, the tone of the verses is positive and declarative,[75] which may mean that John is writing to remind and assure them, not primarily to test them, even though that may be included in his intentions as well.

The Theory Compared with Existing Theories

It was shown above that our thesis is feasible in light of the overall structure of 1 John and the specific structure of 2:12-14. It has been shown also that the main emphasis of 1 John is more pastoral rather than antagonistic or polemical. This thesis needs to be compared with each of the current theories discussed above.

The Proposed Theory compared with the Tests of Life Theory

The strengths and apparent weaknesses of this view have already been discussed above. It is true that "eternal life" is the subject of the epistle, with Christian security serving as a dominant theme.[76] But as Derickson admits, "The subject of eternal life can [also] be said to be introduced in the prologue along with the theme of fellowship."[77] Thus, eternal life will not be the *only* concern of 1 John. In addition, eternal life can be seen as synonymous with "fellowship" and "knowing God," especially if 1 John is

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[74]Dodd, *Johannine Epistles*, 37.

[75]Akin interprets *hoti* as declarative ("since"). But NIV "because" implies a causal understanding (*1, 2, 3 John*, 103).

[76]Derickson, "Message," 90. Eternal life is mentioned both in the prologue as well as in the conclusion.

[77]Ibid., 99.

understood from the point of view of the fourth Gospel.[78] But John is "not obligated to continue that emphasis [or approach] in his epistle."[79] The difference between 1 John and the fourth Gospel is that the latter was written "so that readers can have eternal life," while the latter was written so that the readers "could know" that they have eternal life.[80] But this is based on our assumption that the two Johannine books, 1 John and Gospel of John, are similarly structured.[81] This is plausible. But, upon closer examination this may not be true at all. As it is, the contents of the Gospel cannot really be summarized in John 20:30-31.[82] Also "the pattern that John followed [in 1 John] is that he used the phrase [ταῦτα ἔγραψα] when summarizing a specific section of instruction," and not in summarizing the entire epistle.[83] Even the whole issue of "testing," as previously asserted, is weak or incomplete since it would be dangerous to assume that these "tests" absolutely prove the presence or absence of eternal life per se.[84] Taken together, these reasons make the "Tests of Life" theory insufficient to account for the overarching purpose of the entire epistle.

But if the purpose of 1 John is a call to a true community of the Spirit centered on Christ, the idea of "Tests of Life" can be included as part of John's purpose without limiting the purpose to the latter view. Indeed, John is offering "tests" to his disciples so that they can use them not just to themselves, but more so to others, "to identify [them]

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[78]Ibid., 90.

[79]Ibid., 104.

[80]G. S. Barrett, *The First Epistle General of St. John* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1910), 206.

[81]See Brown, *Epistles*, 124.

[82]Derickson, "Message," 103.

[83]Ibid., 102.

[84]Ibid., 99.

whether they are servants of God or of Satan."[85] Akin sees the possibility of applying the "tests" to believers, but he knows they will not fail. He says,

> Why did John say "if we" when he could easily have said "whoever" (as in 2:5) or "if anyone" (as in 2:1b) or "the one who" (using a substantival participle; as in 2:4, 6)? In light of 2:1a, John probably uses the inclusive "we" because his purpose was to apply these theological statements to his readers and himself. If John or any of his Christian readers were to fulfill these negative conditions in vv. 6, 8, 10, which for them would mean to deny Jesus Christ, they would suffer the inevitable effects described. The conditions are not stated as fulfilled, however, and John actually believes that genuine believers could never fulfill these conditions (e.g. 1 John 2:12-12, 21, 26-27; 5:4-5, 12-13, 18). These statements perform the function of prospective warnings.[86]

But Hodges, a proponent of "by grace alone" position in the Lordship Salvation debate,[87] argues that these conditions [stated in 1:5-2:11] are not entirely impossible for the true Christian. He explains,

> Naturally, the apostle does not affirm that he has, or will, make the false statement of this verse. But he does not deny to himself the possibility. The form of the Greek conditional clause rendered *if we say* is one which expresses a contingency that is, at least theoretically, capable of realization. It is true that some forms of theology regard it as *a priori* impossible that any Christian, much less an apostle, could ever make an assertion like this. But such theology finds no support in the straightforward statement of the text and, indeed, is guilty of an unrealistic view of human nature. . . . As a matter of fact, when correctly understood, the false claim of this verse is one of the easiest for even real Christians to make.[88]

Thus, applying the "Tests of Life" to believers is not inappropriate. More than that, applying the "tests" to the secessionists or the antichrists is even more understandable. But seeing the "Tests of Life" as the exclusive purpose statement of 1 John is untenable

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[85]Ibid., 100.

[86]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 71.

[87]Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989).

[88]Hodges, "Fellowship and Confession," 51.

since there are other assertions in the epistle. For example, there are other "tests" for other purposes in 1 John. That's why Derickson offers this helpful alternative:

> It is better to see these tests serving *both* purposes as well as enabling the discerning Christian to identify false teachers who also professed faith. Rather than tests to be administered to oneself, they were given by John to be administered to others who approached the community of faith. In this light the tests did more than assurance of salvation or demonstrate fellowship.[89]

In addition, the "Tests of Life" view does not fully explain 2:12-14, where John seems to be declaring that his readers are already well assured in their faith. Last but not the least, the "Tests of Life" view does not seem to account sufficiently for John's constant appeal for believers to come back to true community in Christ (2:7-11; 3:11-24; 4:7-21), as will be shown below.

The Proposed Theory Compared with the Tests of Fellowship Theory

The "Tests of Fellowship" theory, just like the "Tests of Life" theory, has many strengths and weaknesses. In the first place, John mentions the word "fellowship" right at the very beginning (1:1-4). This conforms to the usual pattern in ancient literature of stating the purpose for writing at the prologue of the letter.[90] But this assumption fails by examining 1 John where there are other purpose statements that can vie for prominence, and in the Gospel of John where John places his purpose statement at the end of the book and not at its beginning (John 20:30-31). It is true also that if "fellowship is based on salvation,"[91] one cannot enjoy "fellowship" with God or with other believers unless he or

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[89]Derickson, "Message," 100.

[90]Curtis, "Purpose," 161; Lieu, "Authority," 16-17.

[91]Ryrie, "I, II, and III John," 1477.

she is saved first.[92] But that puts salvation before fellowship, which is contrary to the view of the "Tests of Fellowship" advocates.[93] At the same time, the "tests" are given to "recognize when [the believers] are in fellowship with God in the sense of communion, not whether they are His children.[94] This accounts for the usual occurrence of immaturity among believers at whatever age.[95] But, 2:12-14 assumes that John's readers are already well assured of their relationship with God. Interpreting this passage as a three-group analysis of the Johannine community seems inconclusive.[96] So there may be no special need for "testing" in this area of their lives (cf. 1 John 2:21), even though for the secessionists this may be true. From this perspective also, eternal life will be understood as referring to the quality of life as expressed in John 10:10 and not to the possession of life in John 20:30-31. But, the two cannot be easily separated. In this theory, assurance of salvation will be seen as the "result" of "maintaining fellowship with God the Father."[97] But, the epistle questions the very possession of eternal life for those whose claims are spurious or inconsistent with the truth (1:5-2:11).[98] Finally, this theory also states that "1 John was written to encourage believers to maintain fellowship with God and to provide an assurance of that fellowship through tests of spiritual communion."[99] Applied to 1:6-2:2, it would then have to be interpreted to mean that John is laying down the grounds or

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[92]Derickson, "Message," 99.

[93]Ibid., 98.

[94]Ibid., 96.

[95]Curtis, "Purpose," 1-2.

[96]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 102-3.

[97]Derickson, "Message," 98.

[98]This paper will apply the new theory to this particular passage. See below.

[99]Ibid., 95.

conditions for true fellowship to exist between believers or between believers and God.[100] Thus, if a person claims to have fellowship with God[101] but, instead, walks (or lives) in darkness,[102] he is lying. Hodges clarifies this issue further when he says,

> John knew, as does every perceptive pastor, that Christians sometimes feign spirituality while *engaging in acts of disobedience* . . . A Christian who says he is in fellowship with God (who is "light") but is *disobeying Him* (walking "in the darkness,") is lying. Ten times John used darkness to refer to *sin* (John 1:5; 3:19; 12:35 [twice]; 1 John 1:5-6; 2:8-9, 11 [twice]).[103]

But such an interpretation focuses more on the first three negatives of the passage (1:6, 8, and 10) rather than on its positive affirmations. Although the conjunction δε occurs only once (v. 7), it seems clear that in each pair the second statement is the one that is emphasized (v.5). Besides, it is preferable to see 2:1-2 as being included in this section.[104] Thus, 2:1-2 is the author's main contention and these verses stress the positive. In addition, John's readers are the ones who are in line with the truth about Jesus Christ as stated in 1:1-3; they are not the ones to be "tested" per se. John says they "must test the spirits" (4:1), but not themselves, unless the "we" pronoun in 1:6-10 is taken to mean "John and his disciples." In other words, the "Tests of Fellowship" view does not fully take into consideration all the different and important affirmations of the epistle.

But if John's purpose is to call believers back to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ, then the "Tests of Fellowship" can be included as part of it. Since John

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[100]Hodges clarifies that it fellowship first with the apostles and then the result is fellowship with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ ("Fellowship and Confession,"51).

[101]Ibid. This is not interpreted by Hodges as referring to salvation.

[102]Baylis, "Meaning of Walking," 222, considers darkness as referring to "death" due to rejection of the truth, as opposed to "life" in the "light" or acceptance of the truth. For a helpful discussion of light and darkness in 1 John, see Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 64-71.

[103]Zane Hodges, "1 John," *BKC*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, 2 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1978), 2:885.

[104]See for example Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 62.

is interested in calling them back, he would have to define the "tests" that insure true "fellowship" or communion in the Church. But his concern is not limited to that since his ultimate desire is to see all of them back to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ. Thus, the other "tests" fall neatly in place, too, even the "Tests of orthodoxy" view, which is evaluated next.

The Proposed Theory compared with the Tests of Orthodoxy Theory

Finally, the "Tests of Orthodoxy" theory needs to be compared with the proposed theory of a call to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ. The "Tests of Orthodoxy" is actually the reverse side of the first two theories. As explained earlier, while the first two theories focus on "testing" the believers in relation to either life or fellowship, the "Tests of Orthodoxy" view focuses on the specific doctrines of the secessionists to determine whether they are "from God or from Satan."[105] The strength of this view can be seen in its outward focus. It is indeed dangerous to question the assurance of believers based only on their moral behavior. Gleason warns that "to doubt the salvation of every believer who seriously struggles with disobedience in his life leaves him vulnerable to the accusing work of Satan (Rom 8:32-33; Rev 12:10)."[106] But it cannot be denied that John assumes the possibility of a believer being deceived and, thus, being drawn away from the truth (1 John 1:5-2:11; 2:15-17; 5:16-17) even though he also affirms the fact that it is highly improbable that such a thing could happen given because of three reasons: (1) the ownership of God upon the believer (4:4); (2) the faithfulness of the

[105]Derickson, "Message," 100.

[106]Gleason, "Lordship," 65.

Son in keeping him safe (5:18); and (3) the power of the Holy Spirit, who keeps him from continuing in sin (3:9). The "Tests of Orthodoxy" view also highlights the clear command of John in 4:1 to "test the spirits." Thus, compared with the other two "tests" views, the "Tests of Orthodoxy" view is more explicit in this epistle. But as Lieu rightly asserts, "there is no direct reference to the antichrists or schismatics in the early part of the letter or in connection with the moral debate."[107] In addition, she questions the common approach of seeing specific "heresies" of the sort found in second century Gnosticism or Cerinthianism. She says,

> The desire to be able to label the opponents in precise terms probably accounts for the common tendency to identify docetism and Cerinthianism without adequate definition of either. The failure of the Epistle to polemize [*sic*] more explicitly against the components and corollaries of a gnostic [*sic*] system is not given serious consideration.[108]

Moreover, the verb ἔχετε in 2:20 is in the present tense, indicating a continuing possession of the χρῖσμα (anointing) that keeps believers from being led astray.[109] Οἴδατε (to know, v.21) is in the perfect tense, indicating a knowledge gained and completed in the past but still remains effective until the present. Although there is a possibility of being deceived, the χρῖσμα protects them.[110] Thus the threat of the secessionist may not be that significant compared with the resources that the believer has.[111]

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[107]Lieu, "Authority," 211.

[108]Ibid., 212.

[109]The word χρῖσμα can refer either to the Holy Spirit or to the Word of God. See Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 117-18.

[110]Akin says, "There is no need to be seduced by the esoteric teachings of the heretics who claim to have knowledge because real understanding comes only from the Holy One who gives it through His Spirit (*1, 2, 3 John*, 119-20).

[111]For a helpful discussion on the χρῖσμα, see Kruse, *Letters of John*, 109-10.

But, if the thesis of this study is accepted as the overarching purpose of 1 John, the "Tests of Orthodoxy" view easily fits in. The call to a true community of the Spirit asks for "tests" to verify the truthfulness of those who claim to be part of it. The community of the Spirit is a community founded on and maintained by the Truth, who is no other than Jesus Christ Himself (1:1-4). To compromise on the true identity and person of Jesus Christ is to break that fellowship at its very core (4:1-3). For John, there can be no fellowship between "light" and "darkness" (1:6). To reject Christ as the Son of God, who came in the flesh and who dwelt among men, is to go to the side of the "Liar," who is Satan himself (2:20-23; cf. 4:1-3). That is tantamount to committing "idolatry," which is what John warns about in 5:21. Thus, the 'Tests of Orthodoxy" view will fit in well with the overarching purpose of calling believers back to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ.

The Theory Evaluated for Weaknesses

Its Explicit Absence in the Epistle

The "call to a true community of the Spirit centered on Christ" is not mentioned explicitly in 1 John. This is its most apparent and glaring weakness. The "Tests of Orthodoxy" view has at least 4:1 as its explicit reference. But, if 1:5-2:11 is indirectly referring to the secessionists, plenty of references for this view can be seen. In the same manner, the word "life" is also found thirteen times in 1 John, and especially in 5:13, which is considered one of the "key" purpose statements of 1 John. Last, but not the least, the word "fellowship" is found four times (all in 1:3-7). That may be few compared with the "Tests of Life" references, but they are all found at the beginning of the letter,

which makes it a very explicit purpose statement. The call for a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ does not have a specific reference, at least, not one specifically in 1 John. But, each aspect of its broad coverage has several key references in 1 John. As it has been explained in the defense of the theory above, the idea of a "call" can be inferred from the many personal addresses found in the epistle.[112] The word "truth" is also found eleven times in 1 John (1:6, 8; 2:4, 8, 20, 21 [2x]; 3:18, 19; 4:6; 5:6). The word "community" is based on the Greek word κοινονια ("fellowship") and it occurs four times in 1:3-7, as it was stated earlier. References to the Holy Spirit can be found in at least eight places in 1 John (3:24; 4:1, 2, 3, 6, 13; 5:6, 8). Last but not the least, references to Jesus Christ can be found nine times in 1 John (1:3; 2:1, 22; 3:16, 23; 4:2; 5:1, 6, 20). Although these references do not by themselves prove that the thesis is correct, the overall idea, in its various parts, is found explicitly throughout 1 John.

Its Failure to Account for 1 John 5:13

First John 5:13 is considered by many to be the primary purpose statement of 1 John.[113] For example, Smith states,

> The purpose for which St. John wrote his Gospel was that we might believe in the Incarnation, and so have Eternal Life (20:31); the purpose of the Epistle is not merely that we may have Eternal Life by believing but that we may *know that we have it*. The Gospel exhibits the Son of God, the Epistle commends Him. It is a supplement to the Gospel, a personal application and appeal.[114]

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[112]The word "dear" followed by a term of endearment occurs about fifteen times in the NIV. Such frequency cannot be attributed to mere coincidence.

[113]For the list of advocates, see Brown, *Epistles*, 608; and Stott, *Letters*, 86.

[114]Smith, *Epistles of St. John*, 197.

Thus, many commentators concede that 5:13 plays a very important role in revealing John's purpose for writing 1 John. But, just as it has been stated earlier in this study,[115] "these things" cannot refer to something "very far" from this verse. It is better to find its referent in the nearer literary context (verses 11-12). Besides, it is not the only verse in 1 John that contains the verb γράφω. The verb is also found in 1:4; 2:1, 14, 21 and 26, and they are also considered purpose statements.[116] More importantly, it is found in 2:12-14, which as previously argued is weightier than 5:13 even though it does not contain a ἵνα clause. In addition, the purpose for any book cannot just be established by means of one or two verses. It must be confirmed throughout the whole book.[117] First John 5:13 does not contain everything that can be gleaned from 1 John. In contrast, 2:12-14 may contain and summarize most, if not all, of what the author wants to emphasize in this epistle (e.g. forgiveness [1:6-2:11], knowing Jesus who is from the beginning [1:1-3; 2:1-2, 18-27; 4:1-3; 5:6-12], overcoming the evil one [2:8, 15-17; 3:7-10; 4:1-6; 5:1-5], knowing the Father [1:5; 3:1-3; 4:7-21], being strong [or remaining in Him, 2:7-8, 18-27; 4:4-6; 5:18-21], the Word of God [the message] living in believers to help them overcome the evil one [1:1-3; 2:26-27; 3:7-10, 11-24; 4:4-6; 5:6-12], and the concept of *koinonia* as expressed by the terms of endearment such as children, fathers, and young men [1:4, 6-7; 2:9-11; 3:11-24; 4:7-21]).

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[115]See above in the subsection *The Theory Defended.*

[116]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 31-32.

[117]Derickson, "Message," 103.

Its Presumption about the Authorship of the Apostle John

Thompson warns those who might easily conclude that the apostle John, also known as the beloved apostle, wrote 1 John. She says, "The possibility of apostolic authorship should not be discounted, but in view of the *ambiguous* evidence, exegetical decisions and interpretation should not be based on an *a priori* assumption of such authorship."[118] If the apostle John is not the author of this epistle, then a different historical reconstruction may be possible. The author may be a disciple whose influence in the community is now being questioned by second-generation "heretics."[119] Consequently, he may be trying to appeal, based on the Johannine tradition, for the re-acceptance of his authority (cf. 1:1-14) while at the same time rebuking those who have questioned his authority in the first place. Such a reconstruction of the background events is plausible but speculative.

As it has been stated earlier, this study assumes that the apostle John, the son of Zebedee, who is one of the Twelve, wrote 1 John. If he is the true author, then it would be legitimate to reconstruct the situation based on information gleaned from this epistle and his other writings in the Bible, particularly the fourth Gospel, 2 and 3 John, and Revelation. But, if he is not, then much of what has been said so far may be incorrect or at least misleading, although the reconstruction of the events can still be based on the actual text of 1 John.[120]

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[118] Thompson, *1-3 John*, 20.

[119] But see Brown (*Community*, 94-97), who identifies a different author but still sees John's purpose as something similar to this writer's thesis.

[120] Ibid. Brown actually does this in his commentary.

The whole issue of authorship has already been discussed *ad infinitum* by various scholars.[121] Both the internal evidence and the external evidence can be used to prove or to disprove the authorship of John the apostle. Akin states what can be considered as the consensus among conservative scholars:

> Evidence both internal and external favors the view that the apostle John is the author of the three letters Christian tradition has attributed to him. The writing style is so close to that of the Fourth [*sic*] Gospel that common authorship clearly is *the best position to affirm*. The verdict of the early church was unanimous in its affirmation of John the apostle as author of the Fourth [*sic*] Gospel. The epistles of 2 and 3 John are obviously from the same pen as the author of 1 John. The author of that book claims to be an eyewitness (1 John 1:1-3). He writes with apostolic authority. Internal evidence suggests the author is now an aged man (cf. 1 John 2:1, 28; 3:7; 2 John 1; 3 John 1), which is in harmony with the early church tradition that John was advanced in years when he wrote. This evidence is more than sufficient to withstand those who would seek authorship of these letters or elsewhere (emphasis mine).[122]

Its Conspicuous Absence in Scholarly Writings

Derickson identified only two views concerning the purpose of 1 John.[123] He mentioned the "Tests of Life" view and the "Tests of Fellowship" view.[124] The third view is called the "Tests of Orthodoxy" view in this current study for the purpose of identifying and defining it as a unique view. The fourth view, the one suggested in this study, was not mentioned by Derickson explicitly, but in passing only.[125] Other scholars like Smalley, Akin and Kruse have alluded to it.[126] Scholars will probably continue to debate this issue

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[121]For various problems and options concerning authorship, see Brown (*Epistles*, 14-35).

[122]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 26-27.

[123]Derickson, "Message," 89.

[124]Ibid.

[125]Ibid., 105.

[126]Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 15.

until some consensus is reached in the future.[127] For now, as it has been stated earlier in this study, the three current views each have strengths. But not one of them in isolation can account for all the more important affirmations in the epistle. Derickson makes this insightful observation:

> Approaching the epistle in this way—from the perspective that the author's overarching purpose is not found in either purpose clause—allows each passage in the epistle to be interpreted without undue influence from either subpurpose (*sic*). Further, it allows formulation of an understanding of the message of the epistle to grow out of all its affirmations rather than a single affirmation.[128]

In summary, the tenability of any theory concerning the purpose of 1 John rests ultimately not on the acceptance of the majority of scholars, but on the evidence of the epistle itself.

Its Toning Down of the Secessionist Threat

The exact identity of the secessionists has been widely debated. Many scholars are of the opinion that John is combating "heretics" in 1 John. But recent scholars like Lieu[129] and others[130] have challenged this assumption. This study does not seek to negate the antagonistic tone of 1 John. But preoccupation with the secessionist question has somehow clouded insight into other more crucial affirmations found in 1 John. A wider perspective is needed. Hodges' comment on this question is insightful:

> It is probably a mistake to attempt to systematize the thought of the heretics whom John opposed in the letter. According to his statements, he had "many" false teachers in view (2:18; 4:1). There is no reason to think that all of them held exactly the same views. The ancient Greco-Roman world was a babel of religious voices, and it is likely that the readers were confronted by a variety of ideas.[131]

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[127]Derickson, "Message," 89-105.

[128]Ibid., 105.

[129]Lieu, "Authority," 211.

[130]Brown suggests various groups as possible candidates to this question (*Community*, 59-91).

[131]Hodges, "1 John," 881.

Its Similarity with the Tests of Fellowship View

The view proposed in this study sounds very similar to, if not the same as, the "Tests of Fellowship" view. This study has already examined and compared its thesis with the "Tests of Fellowship" view earlier. Although they sound similar, there is an essential difference between them. For one, the call back to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ does not emphasize the idea of "tests." It is included, but it is not primary. It is based on the assumption that John's primary purpose is pastoral. He seeks unity and fellowship based on the "truthful" revelation of Jesus Christ, the Word of life (1:1-3). In addition, the "call" theory is addressed not just to the group of disciples who stayed, but also to those who may be in the process of leaving or have already left (1 John 5:16-17). This inclusive perspective can be gleaned from Brown's analysis of the Johannine community during what he calls as "Phase Two" of its development. He says:

> As is apparent in the Epistles, the Johannine Christians tend to think of themselves as a communion (*koinonia*: 1 John 1:3). There is a strong sense of family within this communion, and the address as "brother" (with "sister" implied) is common because the members are all children of God. The maxim "Love one another" is the chief commandment (John 13:34; 15:12), and this love brings joy and peace to those who share the same vision of Jesus (15:11; 14:27). The exalted Johannine christology is not some abstract test of orthodoxy that has nothing to do with community living. If it is crucial to believe that Jesus is the pre-existent Word of God who has come from God and is of God, it is because then we know what God is really like—He really is a God of love who so loved the world that He was willing to give of Himself, in His Son (3:16; 1 John 4:8-9), and not merely send someone else.[132]

John, therefore, had the desire to heal the wounds of division in his communities. He wanted to call back those who may have departed or at least considering that option. He also wanted to call back the believers because their hearts may already be led astray by the

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[132]Brown, *Community*, 60-61.

secessionists (2:26). The appeals to "remain" (2:18-27) may indicate his desire to persuade them to stay and remain in the truth. He knew of those who have already left entirely (2:19), and he had no qualms designating them as those who are "of the world" (4:5) or as "false prophets (4:1). But, he considered the possibility that some may still be redeemable, even through prayer (5:16-17). In the end, he could only make one final appeal: "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols" (5:21).

Its Lack of Explanation for the Proto-Gnostic Elements in 1 John

The verb γινώσκω occurs twenty-five times in the epistle in various forms.[133] Some scholars have concluded from this evidence that John's main purpose is to assure his readers concerning their knowledge of their salvation, while at the same time questioning the "knowledge" of those who claim to know God through γνοσισ, alluding perhaps to Gnosticism or proto-Gnosticism.[134] This is especially so in view of 1 John 2:1-6 and 5:13, where John uses γινώσκω in relation to his purpose of writing. Interestingly, John does not use the cognate noun γνοσισ, a technical term that could have been used by his adversaries to defend their position.[135] This does not mean that he is purposely avoiding it, but he may be anticipating the possible misuse of the word.[136] Nevertheless, it is unlikely that John is dealing with the full-blown version of Gnosticism present in the late second century.[137] It is better to assume, with Brown, that John's so-called "enemies" are

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[133]The form of the word "know" is used forty-two times. See Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 90.

[134]Ibid., 32.

[135]Ibid., 90.

[136]Ibid.

[137]For his explanation concerning this improbability, see Brown (*Community*, 104-105). He sees the textual assertions to be highly incompatible with known Gnostic belief systems of the second century.

the "offspring of Johannine thought itself."[138] Still the thesis of this study does not deny that John may be dealing with various types of "enemies," some of whom may indeed be proto-Gnostics.[139] But, if this is true, it is secondary in John's mind. The main assertions of the text point to a more pastoral concern. Brown's hypothesis on what was happening at the time of writing of 1 John is helpful on this point:

> In my judgment the hypothesis that best explains the positions both of the author of the Epistles and of the secessionists is this: *Both parties knew the proclamation of Christianity available to us through the Fourth [sic] Gospel, but they interpreted it differently.*[140]

It is true that John "does not deny the main slogans of his opponents but qualifies them."[141] If so, the so-called "Gnostic tendencies" in 1 John may indeed be a misleading reconstruction. It would be better to understand the secessionist's point of view as stemming from, not infiltrating into, the Johannine understanding of the fourth Gospel.[142]

Summary

Although the proposed theory has several weaknesses, too, it does more justice to the overall evidence presented by the texts themselves. It seems to be the overarching purpose of 1 John, because of its broad coverage of all of the major affirmations and themes in the epistle. It also encompasses all three existing theories, and extends it beyond its usual scope, to cover all the other important assertions in the epistle. To see

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[138]Ibid., 107.

[139]For warnings against those who easily label any divergent NT thought as "Gnostic," see W. S. Vorster, "Heterodoxy in 1 John," *Neotestamentica* 9 (1975): 87-97.

[140]Brown, *Community*, 106.

[141]Ibid., 107.

[142]For a more thorough treatment of this hypothesis, see Brown's examination of the secessionists' position on several key issues. Ibid., 109-144.

John's purpose for 1 John as a "call to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ" illuminates the positive tone of the whole book. For quite some time now, only the negative aspect has been emphasized by commentaries.[143] This has limited the interpretation and application of 1 John to today's church life. The proposed theory gives fresh insights to the same texts if applied correctly, as will be shown in the next chapter.

[143]See Lieu, "Áuthority," 210.

CHAPTER 4

TESTING THE NEW THEORY

A Proposed Outline of 1 John Based on the New Theory

It has been mentioned above that most commentators find it difficult to outline 1 John. Three main approaches have been accepted so far.[1] In the traditional approach, the basic topic or subject divisions (even sources) must be discerned first through inductive analysis and then an overarching outline must be constructed.[2] Brown and others have tried to use this approach.[3] In the discourse analysis approach,[4] how grammar works on both the paragraph and discourse level is examined closely and then an outline is constructed.[5] Finally, in the rhetorical criticism approach,[6] the "chiastic structures" and other "literary devices" are identified to discover the structure of 1 John. Akin's approach is actually a combination of these.[7] The current study follows him closely, but with some differences consistent with its thesis.

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[1]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 37-48.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Brown, *Epistles*, 764.

[4]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 39.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Ibid., 42-44.

[7]Ibid, 46.

Using the proposed thesis as the overarching purpose of 1 John, and as the hermeneutical key to unlock John's intentions, three main headings are proposed for 1 John. Each heading is a "reflexive call" to believers to come back to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ. This approach seeks to identify the structure of 1 John through inductive topical analysis as well as grammatical and discourse level analysis. Special notice shall be given to certain statements introduced by the following addresses τεκνία μου, παιδία, and αγαπητοί.[8] These terms do not necessarily introduce the sections since they are found in the middle or sometimes at the end of some sections, but they are important in assessing the main affirmations of John in this epistle. The proposed outline is as follows:

Outline of 1 John

I. Let us all return to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ (1:1-4)

- A. Let us all return to the truth about Jesus (v.1).
- B. Let us all return to the truth about eternal life (v.2).
- C. Let us all return to the truth about true community (v.3-4).

II. Let us all live as a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ (1:5-4:21)

- A. Let us all live in His light (1:5-2:11).
- B. Let us all live as those who have overcome the world (2:12-17)
- C. Let us all live as those who already know the truth (2:18-28)
- D. Let us all live righteously (2:29-3:10)
- E. Let us all live in true in love for one another (3:11-24)

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[8]Akin, referring to Brown, says, "The use of these phrases also serves a rhetorical purpose, providing for a transition from one topic to another" (*1, 2, 3 John*, 75).

F. Let us all live with discernment (4:1-6)

G. Let us all live in the love of God (4:7-21)

III. Let us all remain as a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ (5:1-21)

A. Let us all remain united in God's testimony about Jesus (5:1-12)

B. Let us all help each other remain in Jesus (5:13-21).

The thesis of this study will now be applied to one of the sections in this outline (1:5-2:11) to see how well it explains the apostle's argument.

A Sample Exegesis of 1 John 1:5-2:11 Based on the New Theory

This section is entitled, "Let us all live in His light" (1:5-2:11). It is the first part of the second major division (1:5-4:21), using the outline above, which is part of a longer exhortation: "Let us all live as a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ" (1:5-4:21). This begins the main body of the epistle, with the prologue (1:1-4) and the conclusion (5:1-21) serving as *inclusio*.

Akin sees this as part of his second major division, but extends it up to 3:10 principally because of the recurrent formula Ὅτι αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ ἀγγελία ἣν ἠκούσατε ἀπ' ἀρχῆς, which is similar to 1:5.[9] Both mention the noun ἡ ἀγγελία but the modifiers are different. Akin considers the first part (1:5-3:10) as focusing more on the theme of "God is light," while the second (3:11-5:12) focuses more on the theme of "God is love."[10] He is careful to recognize that "there is not a hard break between 3:10 and 3:11. Indeed, there is a common link built around the theme of love that allows for a smooth transition

[9]Ibid., 153.

[10]Ibid.

between these two sections. The change is more for emphasis, even though a new subject matter is also introduced."[11]

This section continues on until 4:21, because the whole section is interconnected by "linking verses" or "saddle texts."[12] It is true that Jesus Christ is mentioned all throughout this epistle (1:3; 2:1; 3:23; 4:2; 5:6, 20), but chapter 5 seems to begin a new section dealing primarily with Him and God's testimony about Him.[13] This last chapter concludes the epistle. An apt title would be: "Let us all remain as a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ (5:1-21)." More specifically, the last two verses aptly conclude what John intends all throughout the epistle: He wants to call his readers back to a true community of the Spirit centered in Jesus Christ, the Son of God.[14]

It is true that 1 John 1:6-2:2 is interconnected because of the six conditional clauses, and it may point to one singular thought.[15] But the mention of the word "darkness" (σκοτία) in 1:5 and in 2:11 can also serve as an *inclusio* that defines a bigger section (1:5-2:11). The whole discussion from 1:6 onwards is based on John's pronouncement concerning the message: "This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." Literally, but less smoothly, it can be read as follows: "And this is the message [which] we have heard from him and are proclaiming to you [right now], that is, that God is light and darkness in him

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[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid., 94.

[13]Scholars who favor this view include Bruce (*Epistles of John*, 116), Plummer (*Epistles of St. John*, 110), and Westcott (*Epistles of John*, 176). These scholars, however, see this section as emphasizing faith.

[14]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 69.

[15]Ibid., 62.

[there] is none—no, none at all!"[16] The reversed construction of ἔστιν αὕτη may indicate "the absoluteness or permanence of the message."[17] From this declaration, John begins to weave his six conditional sentences in 1:6-2:2.

It has always been assumed that the inclusive "we" is a rhetorical device meant to hide John's true intent, that is, his real purpose is to "aim these statements against the heretics," who are his enemies.[18] But if John's primary purpose for writing is to call believers [whether they have remained loyal to him or not] to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ, then this "mirror reading" may not be necessary. Brown cautions those who are inclined to do this:

> I remind the reader that we are looking at them from the author's point of view when we call them adversaries, secessionists, or schismatics. If their writings had been preserved, I suspect that they would have claimed that the author and his group went out from *their* ranks . . . . Our only knowledge of them is derived from the assumption that they held the opinions which the author of 1 John argues, and such a mirror-image approach has many perils.[19]

Thus, taken together with the third class condition,[20] the "we" can mean that John is referring to some possible confessions that are contrasted with each other and that anyone can possibly utter, the first part (vv. 6, 8, and 10) being erroneous and the second part (vv.7, 9, and 2:1-2) being "truthful."[21] It would seem that John is not focusing on the negative confessions per se; instead, his main intent is to give the correct version of the

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[16]This writer's translation.

[17]Westcott, *Epistles of St. John*, 15.

[18]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 71.

[19]Brown, *Community*, 103.

[20]According to Akin, particularly in his note no. 121, "The common denominator in all such sentences is futurity, that is, the condition expressed in the *protasis* [the "if" clause] is contingent on any number of unfulfilled factors" (*1, 2, 3 John*, 71).

[21]Hodges, "Fellowship and Confession," 51.

claims. Although the conjunction δε occurs only once in verse 7, it may be supplied in each case from the context.[22]

The first declaration of John concerning the message is in 1:5[23] (ὁ θεὸς φῶς ἐστιν καὶ σκοτία ἐν αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδεμία). The double negative indicates John's strong assertion that in God there is "no lack of life at all!"[24] The metaphor of "light and darkness" has been examined by Baylis[25] and Akin.[26] Surveying the use of "light and darkness" in the fourth Gospel and in the Johannine epistles, Baylis concludes,

> In summary, walking "in the light" means receiving God's revelation of Himself through His Son, and receiving eternal life and forgiveness of sins. Walking "in the darkness," on the other hand, is walking in death, rejecting that revelation.[27]

This interpretation is consistent with 1:5 and especially 1:1-4, which is the summary of the "truth" as reflected in the fourth Gospel and now here in 1 John. John's point is that a Christian should not make such statements as those in verses 6, 8, and 10, without its proper delimitations as in verses 7, 9 and 2:1-2. Doing so is tantamount to living "in the [realm of the] darkness" rather than living "in the [realm of the] light." Instead, his readers should make confessions based on the truth that has been revealed and validated in Jesus Christ (cf. 1:1-4; thus 1:7, 9 and 2:1-2). It would be appear at the onset, that John

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[22]Akin makes a note that "First John 1:6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 represent five third-class conditional sentences in the Gk. The common denominator is all such sentences is futurity, i.e., the condition expressed in the protasis (the 'if' clause), is contingent on any number of unfulfilled factors. John is neither saying that he or his readers have or have not, are likely to or are unlikely to say or do the things expressed in the 'if' clauses." For the correction of the views expressed in older grammars (and followed by many commentaries) on the third class conditional sentence and the subjunctive mood, see J. L. Boyer, "Third and (Fourth) Class Conditions," *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (1982): 163-75. See Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 71.

[23]Ibid., 153. The second, as Akin observes, is in 1 John 3:11.

[24]Ibid., 69.

[25]Baylis, "Meaning of Walking," 214-21.

[26]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 64-71.

[27]Ibid., 222.

wants to see his readers to remain in the "light."[28] Later in 2:9-11 "darkness" will be seen as being synonymous with not "loving" others.

Immediately following this declaration in 1:5, John uses six conditional sentences structured in three pairs to communicate his desire to call his readers to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ. The first pair is found in verses 6 to 7: Εὰν εἴπωμεν ὁτι κοινωνίαν ἐχομεν μετ αυτου καὶ εν τω σκότει περιπατωμεν, ψευδόμεθα καὶ ου ποιουμεν τὴν αλήθειαν· εὰν δὲ εν τω φωτὶ περιπατωμεν ως αυτός εστιν εν τω φωτί, κοινωνίαν ἐχομεν μετ αλλήλων καὶ τὸ αιμα Ιησου του υιου αυτου καθαρίζει ημας ἀπὸ πάσης αμαρτίας. The significance of "we"[29] and the third class conditional form of the phrase, "If we claim . . . [then] . . . ." was explained earlier. But this passage must now be explained further. The word κοινωνίαν cannot just mean "most simply some form of mutual sharing or participation by two or more parties."[30] Kruse limits its meaning to just a "personal relationship with the author or with God and may, in 1:3 in particular, include the idea of commitment to a common task, that of the proclamation of the Word of life."[31] But the meaning of this word can only be understood in light of 1:1-4, where "fellowship" is related to "eternal life." To have "fellowship" with God[32] is also to have "eternal life." Thus, the topic being explored here is not merely horizontal relationships per se (contra Hodges) but also vertical. John says in effect, "If we (your teachers, and even you, our disciples) claim to be saved (already), and yet live (περιπατῶμεν) in rejection of the eternal

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[28]For a thorough analysis of the concept of "light" in 1 John, see Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 64-71.

[29]Brown posits the existence of a "Johannine school" (*Community*, 101).

[30]Hauck, "κοινωνια," 797-8.

[31]Kruse, *Letters of John*, 60-61.

[32]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 72.

life that is found in and through Jesus Christ alone, then (it follows) we are lying (ψευδόμεθα). We are not living the truth (οὐ ποιοῦμεν τὴν ἀλήθειαν)." In other words, "We are not obeying the true Gospel as revealed in Jesus Christ (cf. 1:1-4)."

John's focus is not on verse 6 but on verse 7: ἐὰν δὲ ἐν τῷ φωτὶ περιπατῶμεν ὡς αὐτός ἐστιν ἐν τῷ φωτί, κοινωνίαν ἔχομεν μετ' ἀλλήλων καὶ τὸ αἷμα Ἰησοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ καθαρίζει ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ πάσης ἁμαρτίας. The postpositive conjunction δε is an adversative particle that is rightfully translated by NIV as "but."[33] It begins the series of adversative pairs (6-7, 8-9, 10-2:2) where δε can be assumed in each case because of the context.[34] The phrase "we walk in the light" is modified by "as he is in the light." The condition that John proposes is this: If a person chooses to believe in the revelation of God through Jesus Christ (that is, "the light"), and thus experience "eternal life" in and through him (that is, "living in the light"), he or she, together with John and the rest of the apostles, and all other true believers in Christ (the inclusive "we"),[35] can then have "fellowship" (communion) with one another and with God.[36] It would result in daily "purification" (καθαρίζει) from all sins, whether known or unknown.[37] This purification is brought about not by one's own goodness, but by τὸ αἷμα Ἰησοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτου.

The second pair is found in verses 8 and 9: εαν ειπωμεν οτι αμαρτιαν ουκ εχομεν, εαυτους πλανωμεν και η αληθεια ουκ εστιν εν ημιν. εαν ομολογωμεν τας αμαρτιας

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[33]Dana and Mantey, *Grammar*, 244.

[34]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 71,

[35]For another but more limited view of "we," see Brown, *Community*, 102.

[36]There is a variant pronoun "him" in some of the manuscripts, which Hodges points out could mean "fellowship with God," rather than "fellowship with one another" ("Fellowship and Confession," 53). But 1:1-4 presupposes that fellowship with God is also fellowship with all those who believe in the revelation of eternal life in and through Jesus Christ.

[37]The word πάσης can also mean "every" or in "every" instance of sin (Rev 5:9) or "any" instance of sin (Rev 18:22).

ημων, πιστός εστιν καὶ δίκαιος, ἵνα αφη ημιν τὰς αμαρτίας καὶ καθαρίση ημας απὸ πάσης αδικίας. Once again John's exhortation is expressed in this second clause. The claim in verse 8, ἁμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν, seems to be "we have no guilt (of sin)"[38] not "we have no sin nature at all."[39] Can anyone claim such a thing? Again, the reconstruction of the situation behind this epistle would determine how one will interpret this verse. The common interpretation is that this claim is based on proto-Gnostic influences slowly permeating in the Johannine communities.[40] But, according to Smalley, this may just be a misunderstanding of the fourth Gospel.[41] Brown may be correct in saying that such claims are "clearly defensible from Johannine theology."[42] For example, a person with a "high" Christology may interpret John 1:29 to mean that the Lamb of God could render one "sinless." In 8:31-47, Jesus may be misinterpreted to say, "You will become 'sinless.'" These would surely be a misapplication of the teachings of Jesus, but it is "possible" to misunderstand such teachings.[43] If John's opponents were former members of his communities, as shown by 2:18-19, then their theology would be most likely, and fundamentally, "Johannine."[44] Perhaps this is the reason why John adds the phrase ἑαυτοὺς πλανῶμεν (present tense), to denote the possibility of being self-deceived while making a "half-truth" claim at the same time.

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[38]Brown, *Epistles*, 205-6.

[39]Westcott, *Epistles of St. John*, 23.

[40]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 74.

[41]Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 26.

[42]Brown, *Epistles*, 80.

[43]For other possible misinterpretations attributed to John's opponents, see Brown, *Community*, 124-27.

[44]By this I mean generally conforming to the teachings of the fourth Gospel.

If this is the true historical background of this text, John's aim would not be to cancel out the statements found in verses 8 and 10 per se (as if to say that to be "without sin" is *totally* impossible[45]). The deception is not in thinking that sin can be removed at all since this is already part of Johannine ethics.[46] The problem is in thinking that it can be removed apart from the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ (2:1-2). Therefore, his desire is to put the doctrine of "sinlessness" in its right perspective and to the right degree.[47] To claim that one is without guilt or that one has not sinned, apart from the atoning work of Jesus, is a theological fallacy, a self-deception (cf. 1:6, 8, and 10). But to believe in Jesus (that is, to walk in the light, v. 7), to confess ongoing sins (v.9), and to believe that Jesus' blood is sufficient for all our sins, and not just for ours but for the sins of the whole world (2:2), is to receive true forgiveness (ἀφιημῖ) and purification (καθαρίζω) from all[48] sins. So the result is similar, although not entirely the same as it will be shown below. At the same time, the method is different. In the former (the secessionist version), the claim is based on self-effort apart from the atoning work of Jesus (which is tantamount to "walking in the darkness"[49]). In the latter (John's version), it is based on the atoning, and "sin-cleansing" work of Jesus (which is tantamount to "walking in the light"). The end result is different also because John says,

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[45]Akin thinks this is the main problem with the heretics (*1, 2, 3 John*, 74). But John's contention with them is focused on the "light" vs. "darkness" contrast, and not on the pursuit of sinlessness per se.

[46]See for example John 8:31-34, where Jesus says "the truth will set you free" (Brown, *Community*, 125).

[47]Ibid., 126. Brown comments that the author of 1 John also teaches a form of sinlessness in 1 John 3:5-6.

[48]The adjective πάσης (all) is all inclusive of past, present and future sins. Hiebert says it is "continuous and comprehensive" ("1 John 1:5-2:6," 334).

[49]This presupposes the rest of the negative statements.

"But if anybody does sin..." (2:1b), which allows for the possibility of sin even though they are already "sinless" by the blood of Jesus (2:1-2), and even "purified" on a regular basis by that same blood (present tense, v. 7). Therefore, John wants his readers to find fellowship ("communion") in the truth that Christians can indeed experience "sinlessness" through Christ but not in the way of "self-effort" nor in the way of "absolute perfection" (that is, without the possibility of ever sinning). Rather, it is in the way of the "atonement" by the blood of Jesus (cf. John 1:29), which alludes to the need for Jesus to come "in the flesh" first in order to die (4:2) and the possibility of "sinless" Christians sinning again (2:1).[50]

In addition to the possibility of "self-deception," the one claiming verse 8 can also be guilty of "not having the truth" in himself or herself (καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν). In verse 6, John accuses those who may claim to be saved but are in fact "walking in darkness" as not "practicing" or not "doing" the truth. Since "darkness" is opposite the "light" in verse 5 and he (God) is *in* the light (v.7) and Jesus is the "true light" (2:8), then it follows that "walking in the darkness" is tantamount to "rejecting the revelation of God in Jesus Christ."[51] Here "the truth" is the one that is not *in* the one rejecting, not the other way around. Could there be a difference? Hodges explains,

> If then, in the absence of conscious sin, one is able to deduce the absence of any sin, the cross has not gripped him as it ought. When we feel that way, says John – be it ever so briefly – *the truth is not in us*. Not that we have not believed the truth, but rather that it is not interwoven into the fabric of our thoughts as it ought to be. It is not *in us* as a controlling force. For no man, in whom God's truth is fully at home, can say even for an instant, "I have no sin." To say that would be to

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[50]Brown, *Epistles*, 211.

[51]Baylis, "Meaning of Walking," 220.

> make oneself, for that same instant, without need for *the blood of Jesus Christ his Son.*[52]

Perhaps this is the reason why Hodges thinks it's impossible for us to take John's statements as referring to salvation![53] It sounds too threatening for John to say, in effect, that the person who is saying that "he is sinless" is in fact "not saved at all." But using the proposed thesis as the hermeneutical key, John's statement can be accepted as it is, simply a hypothetical statement that anyone (even a Christian) can or may try to say.[54] But the point here is not in its possibility per se, but in its incongruity with the true gospel (cf. 1:1-4). John wants to call his readers back to a true community of the Spirit centered in Jesus Christ by remaining in the truth of the message (as they have already heard from the beginning) and not as the secessionists are misinterpreting it.

Verse 10 introduces the next pair, but the adversative clause doesn't appear in the same form immediately. Instead it comes as a two-part assertion in 2:1-2, which will be explored below. Verse 10 says, ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι οὐχ ἡμαρτήκαμεν, ψεύστην ποιοῦμεν αὐτὸν καὶ ὁ λόγος αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν. The phrase "we have not sinned" (οὐχ ἡμαρτήκαμεν) looks similar with "to be without sin" in verse 8, so much so that Akin thinks they are synonymous.[55] But οὐχ ἡμαρτήκαμεν is in the perfect tense indicating that John is referring to something more than just "we have no sin" (ἁμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν, in v. 8), which is in the present tense. Verse 8 presupposes that a person is claiming to be without sin on a regular or continual basis. But verse 10 means a person is claiming to

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[52]Hodges, "Fellowship and Confession," 55-56.

[53]Ibid., 51.

[54]The third class conditions allows for both possibilities. See Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 71.

[55]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 74, note 129.

"not have sinned at all since they came to know Jesus Christ and experienced his anointing."[56] Is this possible? Can a Christian, even someone from the Johannine tradition, have a basis for such a claim? We have already seen that such a misunderstanding is possible. Jesus Christ himself was once quoted as saying, "Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?" So the secessionist may be thinking also along the same line since he believes that (1) he is already in Christ and, therefore, (2) Christ has already set him or her free from all sin (cf. John 8:31-32). Could this be the right historical background for this statement? It is difficult to know for sure, but it's plausible based on the presuppositions assumed in this study. John's intent, once again, is to call his readers back to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ. Whatever the underlying theological presuppositions behind such claims, John's purpose in 1:6-10 is to focus his readers to its correction, which is found in 2:1-2. The passage is therefore primarily pastoral.

Several insights relate to the meaning of this passage. This is John's first major exhortation because of the formula τεκνία μου. He says, first of all, Τεκνία μου, ταυτα γράφω υμιν ίνα μὴ αμάρτητε. The phrase ταῦτα γράφω ὑμῖν refers to the immediate context, which is 1:6-10. The plural ταῦτα may cover everything, but mainly focusing on the negative aspects of the preceding verses.[57] In other words, he wrote those warnings so that they would not sin. By implication, he wants them instead to walk in the light (v.7), and to confess their sins (v.8). His desire is not so much to correct his opponents, but to call them back to the truth. The "truth" is that we should live in the light, that is, in

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[56]Kruse, *Letters of John*, 70.

[57]There is no grammatical reason why it should only cover the positive statements of John.

God's revelation of eternal life in and through Jesus Christ. This means Christians are to be honest about themselves, about sin in particular, and about their need for daily cleansing through the blood of Jesus (v.7).[58] Akin is correct in saying, "The truth . . . is nothing other than the truth God has revealed in Jesus (1:8, 10; cf. John 14:6)."[59] Thus, to reject Jesus is to be in "darkness." In other words, those who are continuing to reject Jesus Christ, who is the "true light" of God (1:5; cf. 2:8), are not "doing" or "practicing the truth" but are in fact living in "darkness."

John's purpose for writing verses 6 to 10 is ἵνα μὴ ἁμάρτητε. The mood is subjunctive and the tense is aorist, referring most likely to its near possibility at any time.[60] John, like all other biblical writers, was a realist. He knew sin is always just around the corner, even for those who are in the "light." He could have used the imperative of prohibition, if he meant his readers were already "sinning" as he wrote.[61] But he made an appeal in view of the possibilities of 1:6-10. His main intention is reflected in the second part of the verse, which is a conditional sentence (καὶ ἐάν τις ἁμάρτῃ, παράκλητον ἔχομεν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν δίκαιον). The conjunction και (taken by NIV as adversative) clearly connects this clause with what precedes it, thus favoring the view that, in each pair since verse 6, John is focusing on its alternative correction. The third class condition ἐάν τις ἁμάρτη relates back to the possibility of μὴ ἁμάρτητε in verse 10. He encourages his readers by saying, παράκλητον ἔχομεν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν δίκαιον. The verb ἔχομεν is in the present tense, indicating an ongoing possession of a

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[58]The tense of the verb "purifies" is present.

[59]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 72.

[60]Dana and Mantey, *Grammar*, 170.

[61]Ibid., 175.

παράκλητον. This word is translated together with πρὸς τὸν πατέρα as the "one who speaks to the Father in our defense." It is found only here in 1 John but four other times in the fourth Gospel. It is found nowhere else in the entire NT, and not at all in the LXX.[62] But in the fourth Gospel, the παράκλητον is the Holy Spirit (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). Here it is Jesus Christ (2:1). The basic meaning of the word is that of an "advocate," or one who speaks in behalf of someone (not necessarily meaning an "attorney" in the modern sense, but more of a sponsor).[63] John encourages his readers that if ever they do sin, and that is not a remote possibility, they have a "sponsor" (παράκλητον) who can speak on their behalf before the Father. This "sponsor," however, is no ordinary person. He is identified as Ιησοῦν Χριστὸν δίκαιον. Akin translates this last phrase as "Jesus the Christ . . . . being as He is righteous," which emphasizes the efficacy of Christ's intercessory ministry.[64]

John's encouragement to his readers does not stop in 2:1. He adds, καὶ αὐτὸς ἱλασμός ἐστιν περὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν, οὐ περὶ τῶν ἡμετέρων δὲ μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ περὶ ὅλου τοῦ κόσμου. The conjunction και, once again, is omitted by the NIV. This is unfortunate because there is a clear connection with the preceding verse. The phrase "atoning sacrifice" translates the Greek word ἱλασμός, which refers to "the removal of sins through a sacrifice."[65] This word is found only twice in the NT and both of them are in 1 John (2:2 and 4:10). It occurs six times in the LXX and in every case, except Amos 8:14,

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[62]Kruse, *Letters of John*, 72.

[63]Kenneth Grayston, "The Meaning of Parakletos," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 13 (1981): 70-75, 79-80. The word can also be used in a legal context, but only as a sponsor, who is in the position to influence, and who speaks favorably of someone who is accused.

[64]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 80.

[65]Kruse, *Letters of John*, 73.

it means the removal of guilt due to sin through a sacrifice.[66] It is not certain whether the word includes the idea of placating God's wrath against the sinner or just removing the "uncleanness". Thus, there is an ongoing debate concerning whether ἱλασμός is an "expiation" (removing the guilt only) or a "propitiation" (placating God's wrath also).[67] In view of the context of 1 John, it is better with Marshall and other conservative scholars to accept both meanings.[68]

A more important consideration is John's added phrase: οὐ περὶ τῶν ἡμετέρων δὲ μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ περὶ ὅλου τοῦ κόσμου. Scholars continue to debate the exact implication of this clause.[69] It is better to take this, as with Akin, as indicating "atonement" that is "universal" in probability and provision but "limited" in its actual appropriation.[70] But what is even more important is John's intent in adding this phrase. Having wisely delineated what a true Christian stance should be with regard to sin (1:6-10), and accepting the possibility of sinning on the part of the true Christian who is supposedly living in the "light," John encourages his readers by assuring them of a "sponsor" who can speaks adequately and effectively on their behalf, but pleading their case, so to speak, and appealing for mercy and forgiveness. At the same time, this person is also the "expiation" and "propitiation" for their sins as the atoning sacrifice not just of some sins, but of the sins of the whole world! Such a staggering pronouncement indeed! After confronting their wrong ideas about "sinlessness," John comes back full force with the true idea of

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[66]Ibid.

[67]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 82-83.

[68]Ibid., 83-84.

[69]For an overview of the scholars in this debate, see Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 84, especially note no. 168.

[70]Ibid.

"sinlessness" based on the truth; that is, God is able to forgive and cleanse completely any sin that we might commit through the blood of Jesus Christ—the Righteous One, the παράκλητον, and the atoning sacrifice par excellence! This shows that John is truly interested in calling his readers back to the truth that is found in Jesus so that they can all enjoy His wonderful blessings (forgiveness and justification) as a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ (cf. John 1:16-17).

Furthermore, 1 John 2:3-11 is still part of this whole argument about living in the light. The initial phrase καὶ ἐν τούτῳ is sadly not reflected in the NIV. Instead, the abrupt expression, "We know that we have come to know him" is used in verse 3. But the original Greek phrase presupposes a clear connection with 2:1-2 through the use of και, although with an additional argument pertaining to knowing God through obedience to his commandments.[71] The prepositional phrase ἐν τούτῳ seems to refer to the conditional clause "if we obey his commands" rather than in the preceding assertions.[72] This means the reality of "knowing" God (perfect tense, ἐγνώκαμεν) is manifested and predicated through the person's daily obedience (τηρῶμεν, present tense) to God's commands. It is a "test" that one truly knows God.[73] Thus, the "Tests of Life" view, the "Tests of Fellowship" view and the "Tests of Orthodoxy" view all come into the picture in this part of the passage. It is possible therefore to take this verse either as another aspect of the original message that John the apostle has heard from Jesus (1:1-4, 5), or else as an aspect of it that must now be delineated further by John. He continues to use the same

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[71]Ibid., 89. He thinks και should be translated as "now" to introduce a new topic.

[72]Brown, *Epistles*, 248-9.

[73]Strecker, *The Johannine Epistles*, 40.

metaphors of "light and darkness" and "lying and doing truth" in 2:3-11. Thus, he may be saying in effect, "We know (in the present) that we have to come to know (perfect tense) Him (that is, God who is "light," 1:5, the "source of life") if we are obeying (presently) his commandments."

The plural form ἐντολὰς occurs six times in 1 John, while the singular form ἐντολὴ is found only twice (2:7; 3:23). In 3:23, the ἐντολὴ is spelled out. John says, καὶ αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ ἐντολὴ αὐτοῦ, ἵνα πιστεύσωμεν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους, καθὼς ἔδωκεν ἐντολὴν ἡμῖν. This is reminiscent of Jesus' words in Mark 12:29-31, the so-called "Greatest Commandment," but with the change of verb from "love" to "believe," also a change of object from "the Lord your God" to "Jesus Christ," and a change of another object from "neighbor" to "one another." "Loving one another" is to be understood according to Jesus' command in John 15:12 ("to love each other as I have loved you").[74] It is a sure sign, and a "test," of the true "knowledge of God" if a believer continues to obey the command to trust in Jesus Christ and to love his brothers and sisters in Christ as himself in order to experience a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ. This command is really the summary of all of God's commandments (cf. Mark 12:28). Again, care must be taken that we do not press the application of these "tests" too far.[75]

Verses 4 to 6 must also be interpreted together. John says, Ὁ λέγων ὅτι Ἔγνωκα αὐτόν καὶ τὰς ἐντολὰς αὐτοῦ μὴ τηρῶν, ψεύστης ἐστίν καὶ ἐν τούτῳ ἡ ἀλήθεια οὐκ ἔστιν. Ὁ λέγων ὅτι introduces a direct quotation Ἔγνωκα αὐτόν that can be uttered by

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[74]Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 46.

[75]See Derickson, "Message," 99.

any person especially by someone from the Johannine tradition. The words of Jesus to Philip in John 14:9 immediately come to mind. This is a truth statement that can be distorted by someone who does not fulfill its implication, which is καὶ τὰς ἐντολὰς αὐτοῦ μὴ τηρῶν. Consequently, such a man is ψεύστης ἐστίν καὶ ἐν τούτῳ ἡ ἀλήθεια οὐκ ἔστιν (literally, liar he is and in him the truth is not).

Once again, the focus of John is in verses 5-6, Ὃς δ' ἂν τηρῇ αὐτοῦ τὸν λόγον, ἀληθῶς ἐν τούτῳ ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ τετελείωται, ἐν τούτῳ γινώσκομεν ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐσμεν. According to Akin, ὃς δ' ἂν τηρῇ αὐτοῦ τὸν λόγον is a nominative absolute and needs to be set apart from the rest of the verse.[76] He translates it as "but whoever keeps his word" (without the "if" conditional particle). Thus, with Kruse, verse 5 may be read literally as "whoever keeps his word, truly in this one the love of God is perfected."[77] The NIV translates it as a conditional sentence ("But if anyone obeys his word") but it is actually a declarative statement. Perhaps the translators of NIV were trying to follow the flow of thought or at least the form of 1:6 onwards where conditional sentences have been employed by John to compare and contrast the "truth" with the "lie." The word ἀληθῶς is reminiscent of John's common usage of it in the fourth Gospel (1:47; 4:42; 6:14; 7:26; 7:40; 8:31; 17:8) and introduces a declaration to be accepted and believed. The verb τηρῇ is in the ongoing present, thus indicating a lifestyle of obedience, and not just an occasional submission to God's will. According to John, whoever does this shows by his lifestyle that the love of God[78] and has truly fulfilled its purpose (τετελείωται, perfect

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[76]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 92-93.

[77]Kruse, *Letters of John*, 79.

[78]Ibid., 80. Kruse takes this to mean "our love for God," but it can be taken either way as "God's love for us," which is also the basis of our love for God (cf. 4:10).

tense) in him or in her. In other words, the "message" has not become useless or nullified in their lives (cf. 2 Peter 1:8-9). Instead, it has accomplished its work of producing the "true knowledge of God" in the believer. Truly the believer can then say with assurance, "I know him" (v. 4).

Verse 5b says, ἐν τούτῳ γινώσκομεν ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐσμεν. The prepositional phrase ἐν τούτω is not reflected in the NIV. It could either refer to what was stated before (v. 5a) or it could refer to what follows (v. 6). The context seems to indicate that this phrase "foreshadows" the following statement (v. 6) and describes how we can ascertain whether a person is "in him (Christ)," "in the light" as in v.6-10, or the one who "knows" him as in 2:3-4.[79] Verse 6 says, ὁ λέγων ἐν αὐτῷ μένειν ὀφείλει καθὼς ἐκεῖνος περιεπάτησεν καὶ αὐτὸς [οὕτως] περιπατεῖν. Again, similarly to 1:6-10, a hypothetical statement is claimed, that is, "I [truly] live in him." The verb μένειν (to remain) is in the present tense and pictures an ongoing action because of it meaning.[80] In view of the context above, "remaining" in him is synonymous with (1) having "fellowship" with God and with His Son, Jesus Christ (1:3); (2) "walking in the light as he is in the light" (1:7); (3) "doing the truth" (1:6); (4) "having the truth inside of us" (2:4), and (5) "knowing him" truthfully (2:3).[81] This reverts back to verse 4 where the hypothetical statement "I know him" has also been stated falsely.

John completes his assertion in verse 6 with the words ὀφείλει καθὼς ἐκεῖνος περιεπάτησεν καὶ αὐτὸς [οὕτως] περιπατεῖν. Literally, this should read, "must himself

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[79]Ibid., 81.

[80]Ibid.

[81]Ibid. Kruse even adds here "having the Holy Spirit."

[the believer] walk as he [Jesus] walked."[82] The name "Jesus" was supplied from the context by the translators of NIV. Kruse agrees and offers this paraphrase:

> Those who keep God's commands may have assurance that they are people who know God; those who claim to know God while not obeying his commands are liars; those who say they live in God must walk as Jesus walked, that is, keeping God's commands to them as Jesus obeyed God's commands to him.[83]

Thus, the life of Jesus becomes the model for the kind of life that a true believer must exhibit. But could this be possible? If John's purpose is to call the believers back to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ, this statement is one of the clearest exhortations toward that ideal. The context indicates how a believer can walk (or live) as Jesus walked (or lived). First of all, there is a clear obligation toward action, as indicated by the word ὀφείλει.[84] The pronoun ἐκεῖνος is referring to Jesus Christ, as the context indicates and as NIV rightfully translates. The phrase καθὼς ἐκεῖνος περιεπάτησεν contains a constative aorist verb, which summarizes the entire life and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ.[85] But could John mean that we are to do everything that Jesus did while he was here on earth? The word περιπάτεω occurs in 1:6 where it refers to "walking in darkness," that is, rejecting the revelation of God in and through Jesus Christ, who alone brings eternal life. Again, it occurs in verse 7 where it shows the positive side of the argument; that is, we must "live" in the light just as He (God) is in the light. This refers to accepting the revelation of God through the Gospel of Jesus Christ (1:1-3) whereby we can have fellowship with God and with one another (v.4). In view of the

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[82]Ibid.

[83]Ibid., 82.

[84]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 95, considers this a "debt."

[85]Ibid., 94.

context, περιπάτεω must refer not to "living" like Jesus in terms of doing everything He did while he was here on earth, but in living "in the light" just as he did. This goes back to the assertion made in 1:5, which has been clarified further in 1:6-2:2. Walking like Jesus is, therefore, synonymous with "living in the light" or walking with God as the Source of eternal life. Such a "walk" was revealed principally in and through the life of Jesus Christ (1:2) when he was in the flesh (cf. 4:2). John keeps on returning to that same message, which was from the very beginning, which he has heard from Jesus Christ Himself (1:5), and which he now proclaims to his readers in the Johannine community to call them back to a true community of the Spirit which is centered in Christ.

The vocative 'αγαπητοί, which begins verse 7, indicates an important clarification of John's exhortations so far. It is also a part of the structural pattern and strategy of 1 John. Every time this occurs, John makes an important assertion or a clarification that makes clear what he means in his exhortations (cf. 2:7; 3:2, 21; 4:1, 7, 11). This formula can be seen as introducing a new topic or a new section. Akin is correct in saying that this verse "continues and amplifies the thought that was begun in v. 6."[86]

Verse 7 reads, 'Αγαπητοί, οὐκ ἐντολὴν καινὴν γράφω ὑμῖν ἀλλ' ἐντολὴν παλαιὰν ἣν εἴχετε ἀπ' ἀρχῆς· ἡ ἐντολὴ ἡ παλαιά ἐστιν ὁ λόγος ὃν ἠκούσατε. Literally, it should be translated as "Beloved, not a new commandment I write to you but an old commandment which you have been holding on to from the very beginning." The verb εἴχετε (to hold) is in the imperfect tense, to indicate a continuing experience of holding on to something in the past. This refers to the one true gospel, which was from the very

[86]Ibid., 95.

beginning (1:1-3). This "old command" is also called "the message which you have heard." The command is "old" (παλαιὰν) only in reference to being from the former time or the earlier time, not in the sense of being "useless" or "worn out."[87] The aorist verb ἠκούσατε indicates the fact that they have heard it in the past, with no exact timing as to the actual "hearing." Together, the whole phrase can be understood as a call to go back to the truth of the message that was proclaimed from the very beginning, a reference once again to 1:5.

But verse 8 seems to indicate a contradiction: πάλιν ἐντολὴν καινὴν γράφω ὑμῖν, ὅ ἐστιν ἀληθὲς ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ ἐν ὑμῖν, ὅτι ἡ σκοτία παράγεται καὶ τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινὸν ἤδη φαίνει. Commentators interpret "new" here as referring to John 13:34, where Jesus says, "A new commandment I give you: Love one another."[88] It is "new" in the sense that it is how Jesus called the command to love one another in John 13:34, but it's basically the same message, which is "old" as far as the readers of John are concerned since this is what they have heard from the very beginning from him or from other apostles (1:1-3).

But, the "new" can be better understood from what follows, ὅ ἐστιν ἀληθὲς ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ ἐν ὑμῖν, ὅτι ἡ σκοτία παράγεται καὶ τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινὸν ἤδη φαίνει. The adverb πάλιν (literally, again, or "on the other hand" NASB, "yet" NIV) in verse 8 indicates a clarification of what John has just said in verse 7. Therefore, verse 8 really clarifies the "old" in relation to the "new." The phrase ὅ ἐστιν ἀληθὲς (which is true) alludes back to the theme of "truth" as revealed in and through Jesus the Christ, which has been the topic of discussion from 1:1 up to the present. So the "old" is now "new" in the

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[87]Ibid., 96.

[88]Kruse, *Letters of John*, 82-83.

sense that its "truth" is now being clarified in or by Jesus. The "truth" of the "old commandment" (that is, the message they have heard from the very beginning) should now be understood in view of (1) how Jesus walked ("in him"), and (2) how they are now to walk ("in you"), which is both "in the light" where "God is light." The NIV paraphrases this verse by adding "seen," which is not really in the Greek but which reflects John's meaning exactly.[89] Literally, it should read: "which (thing) is true in him and in you," with the preposition εν preceding both pronouns to produce two equal prepositional phrases. Their relationship is defined by και, indicating its "truthfulness" both directions.[90] So John is calling his readers to unite in the truth of the "old" message. God is light, and all true believers should live in the light since living in the light is living like Jesus, who is also now the true light that gives light to the world (cf. John 1:4-9; 8:12; 9:5; 12:35-36, 46; 1 John 2:8).

The added causal clause ὅτι ἡ σκοτία παράγεται καὶ τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινὸν ἤδη φαίνει clarifies further verses 7 and 8. John mentions "darkness" (ἡ σκοτία), once again to indicate that he is still talking about the same issue that he began in 1:5. He will not finish this until verse 11 where he will mention the word "darkness" one more time. The "darkness" (which is primarily the realm of rejection of God's revelation in and through Christ) and its corollary result, a sinful world (2:15-17), is presently passing away (παράγεται) slowly like a man passing by a person or a place (Matt 9:9, 27; 20:30).[91] Even more importantly,[92] the true light is already shining in the darkness. The "true light"

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[89]Ibid., 83. Perhaps he alludes to the whole christological issue being debated in John's communities.

[90]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 96.

[91]Kruse, *Letters of John*, 84.

[92]The και seems to be emphatic (Dana and Mantey, *Grammar*, 250-51).

is an unusual construction (literally, it should read "the light the true"). It refers to Jesus Christ, who is the topic of all this discussion from 1:1 until here.[93] Now He is called the "true light," alluding to his perfect divinity (cf. 1:5). His light (or his life) is now being manifested in the world through his children, who are now called to "live in the light." The NIV translates the last phrase as "the true light is *already shining*," indicating a linear present tense. It is slow but sure. Darkness is passing away but the light is *already shining*![94]

Verses 9 to 11 resumes the discussion that was digressed temporarily at verses 7 to 8. Verse 9 introduces the third anonymous "whoever claims" statement[95] in this section (2:3-11) after the "we claims" of 1:6-10. In verses 6 to 10, the claims were the following: (1) "We are in fellowship with him" [v. 6]; (2) "We are without sin" [v. 8]; and (3) "We have not sinned" [v.10]. These claims have all been clarified and corrected in verses 7, 9 and 2:1-2. In verses 3-11 of chapter 2, the claims were (1) "I know him" [v. 4]; (2) "I live in him" [v. 6]; and now (3) "I am in the light" [v. 9]. The first two "whoever claims" have already been clarified and corrected by John (vv. 3-6). John made some further clarifications concerning the "old command" in verse 7-8. Now he intends to clarify and correct one last claim: "I am in the light" (v. 9).

Verse 9 begins with this statement: ὁ λέγων ἐν τῷ φωτὶ εἶναι καὶ τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ μισῶν ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ ἐστὶν ἕως ἄρτι. The noun ὁ λέγων is of course the same with verse 4 referring to an anonymous hypothetical speaker. It is not necessary to conclude

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[93]Kruse, *Letters of John*, 84.

[94]Ibid.

[95]Ibid.

that these are the exact statements of the "secessionist"[96] for there is nothing in the text to indicate that these were their exact words. But it can be inferred from a reconstruction of the historical background, which is "complicated" and "limited."[97] Nevertheless, if John is calling his readers to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ, the statement can be accepted as it is, and attention can be given to determine what he really wants his readers to understand. The faulty claim is not that "I am in the light," but that "I am in the light and yet (in my heart) I hate my brother." This seems to be the meaning and the contention of verse 9, for no one might say outright that he [actually] hates his own brother in the faith. Also, the claim brings the discussion full circle back to the original message in 1:5. The one who is claiming or doing this, at the same time, is ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ ἐστὶν ἕως ἄρτι. The word "still" translates ἕως ἄρτι (literally, "until now"). The phrase ἐν τῇ σκοτία reminds us of all that is inconsistent with the message in 1:5. This time it is narrowed to one specific sin, τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ μισῶν (literally, the brother of his [or he] is hating).

It is interesting that now "sin" is being defined here "relationally" and "horizontally." Hills may be correct in interpreting "sin" in 1 John as a "communal act" and not just as a forensic liability.[98] If "doing right" is equivalent to "loving his brother" (3:10), does it follow that "sinning" and "being in darkness" are equivalent to "hating his brother" (2:9-11)? This seems to agree with the proposed thesis that John's primary concern is to call back his readers to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ.

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[96]Ibid.

[97]See Brown, *Community*, 103.

[98]Hills, "Lawlessness," 294.

The "sin" he is so concern about is one that breaks up the body of Christ into bits and pieces of falsehood. The word "falsehood" signifies the polemical emphasis of 1 John. John is addressing "falsehood" or "the lie" because it disrupts true fellowship or communion in the Spirit. He addresses this falsehood by calling them to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ.

Again, we must ask whether John is referring to the secessionists when he said anyone "who . . . hates his brother" in verse 9. Not necessarily so. But they may be included as those who may possibly think in this way. It is not a necessary inference for understanding John's intention in this verse. The intention of John, it seems, is to point out to everyone (those who have stayed as well as those who have strayed) the "truth" that is found in Jesus Christ. Kruse suggests that the secessionists may only "hate" the apostle and those who follow him, and not those who are on their side.[99] Or, he may be referring to some of his readers who "hate" those who have left the community. Either way, "hate" is inconsistent with the claim "I am in the light." John says, in effect, that they are still "lost" (or in darkness) if that is the case (ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ ἐστὶν ἕως ἄρτι). This is not necessarily a statement of fact, but a warning.[100]

Again, verse 10 says, Ὁ ἀγαπῶν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ φωτὶ μένει καὶ σκάνδαλον ἐν αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν. The participial phrase ὁ ἀγαπῶν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτου, which serves as the nominative subject of this sentence, is the exact opposite of the person in verse 9. Instead of "hating" his brother, he "loves" him. This person "lives" (μένει, literally, "is living," present tense) in the light (ἐν τῷ φωτι). This is the "truth" that

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[99]Kruse, *Letters of John*, 85.

[100]Ibid.

clarifies verse 9 and reverts back to what has been stated earlier in 1:5-2:2. The next clause is problematic. Scholars debate whether the pronoun in καὶ σκάνδαλον ἐν αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν is masculine ("him") or neuter ("it"). Kruse favors the masculine because the neuter translation is redundant.[101] But Akin thinks the neuter is a better option since (1) the nearest antecedent is "light" (τῷ φωτι); (2) there seems to be a parallel in John 11:9-11; and (3) the one who hates his brother is said to be still in the darkness.[102] In view of the definition of "sin" in this context as also "relational" and "communal," it would be best to take the former option, as in NIV. The second problem involves σκάνδαλον (literally, "that which causes sin or gives occasion for sin"). Does it refer to the person himself who is stumbling or to others whom he might cause to stumble? The NIV translation takes the former option: there is nothing in him to make *him* stumble (emphasis mine). Some scholars agree with this interpretation.[103] But the normal usage of this word is often with reference to its effect upon others.[104] So this verse is probably best paraphrased in this way: "There is nothing in him that is a cause of sin (or scandal) to others," where "sin" here is understood to mean "breaking the spirit of fellowship in the body of Christ."[105] This is consistent with the proposed theory that John's main purpose for writing is to call his readers back to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ.

Finally verse 11 states, ὁ δὲ μισῶν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ ἐστὶν καὶ ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ περιπατεῖ καὶ οὐκ οἶδεν ποῦ ὑπάγει, ὅτι ἡ σκοτία ἐτύφλωσεν τοὺς

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[101]Ibid., 86.

[102]Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 99.

[103]Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 62.

[104]Take for example John 6:61; 16:1; Rev 2:14.

[105]Brown, *Epistles*, 275.

ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτοῦ. The contrastive particle δε once again differentiates what has just been stated in verse 10, and reverts back to the problem of verse 9. The same statement is made but with some additional clarifications. The person who hates his brother is in the "darkness" (which has already been stated in verse 9), but now he is said to be walking (περιπατεῖ, present tense) *in* it (contrary to verse 7); therefore, he may never have had a "true understanding" of the message from the very beginning (οὐκ οἶδεν, perfect tense, the reverse of 2:3), nor at the present time (ποῦ ὑπάγει). The first clause, ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ περιπατεῖ, clearly alludes to the first discussion in 1:6-10, which is about "walking" or living. The second clause, οὐκ οἶδεν ποῦ ὑπάγει, reverts back to the discussion in 2:3-6, which is about "knowing." But the last clause, ἡ σκοτία ἐτύφλωσεν τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτου, which is introduced by a causal conjunction ὅτι (because or since), goes back not just to verses 9 to 11, but full circle back to 1:5, where John says, "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." The verb ἐτύφλωσεν is in the aorist tense, indicating a point of action in the past. The perfect tense would be expected, if John wanted to stress the "Tests of life" view against his opponents. The imperfect tense or even the present tense would be expected, if he wanted to stress the "Tests of Fellowship" view or the "Tests of Orthodoxy" view. The verb form appears only twice in the NT, here and in 2 Cor 4:4. There, as here, the focus is not on the "time of blinding" but in the "fact of the blinding."[106] Although, in 2 Cor 4:4, Paul is referring to the "god of this world" who has "blinded" unbelievers, John blames the "darkness" for the effective cause of "blindness." Once again, the discussion comes full circle to what John intends. He uses the aorist to call attention to the "blinding power" of darkness so that his readers may once again come

[106]Dana and Mantey, *Grammar*, 193-94.

back to the unifying and cleansing power of the "light" (2:8). He has delineated the negatives of various claims and suppositions in order to call his readers back to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ. The true message, as it was from the beginning, is the key that would restore their fellowship or communion with God and with one another. This message is none other than Jesus Christ Himself (1:1-3).

Summary

The thesis of this study has been applied to a section of 1 John to see if it would explain John's arguments better. It was shown that John's purpose throughout the letter is to call his readers, whether they are those who stayed or those who strayed from the Johannine communities, back to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ. In this particular section, John's intent of calling his readers back to the true gospel was accomplished by delineating the implications of some claims that might be uttered by anyone who does not fully understand their implications. The result of such misunderstanding is significant since it renders such claims as distortions of the truth. Consequently the one making such claims ends up not just misrepresenting the gospel but also remaining in "darkness." John's desire is not so much to refute the claims but to clarify them, to put them in their right perspective, and to delineate their implications. Thus, this study has shown that John's purpose of calling his readers back to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ is a better and more comprehensive purpose statement than the other three purpose statements which, if taken in isolation from each other, are weak and incomplete in themselves.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Scholars have tried to identify the purpose of 1 John through grammatical analysis, literary analysis, form analysis, contextual analysis, discourse analysis and rhetorical criticism. They have come up with at least three theories: the "Tests of Life" view, the "Tests of Fellowship" view, and the "Tests of Orthodoxy" view. The "Tests of Orthodoxy" view has not been specifically named in the commentaries as a prevailing theory concerning John's purpose, but it has been frequently alluded to by some scholars to warrant a separate category. This study has also proposed a fourth plausible theory which is "a call to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ." This is also not clearly identified in the commentaries, but it is alluded to by scholars who have seen the apparent weaknesses or incompleteness of the prevailing theories. This theory does not negate the other theories for each of them has strengths found in the texts of 1 John. Rather, it encompasses and extends them further to include other more important affirmations in the text such as: (1) John's constant pastoral appeal (or "call") to his readers; (2) his insistence upon true fellowship ("community"), which must be of the Spirit of God (3:24) and not of the "spirits" of this world (4:1-6); (3) his central insistence upon the core of the message given to them from the very beginning, who is none other than Jesus Christ Himself (1:1-3); and (4) its corollary imperative, to love one another as Christ has loved them (3:11-24). This purpose statement is primarily pastoral in nature and

inclusive in its intent. John's purpose for writing 1 John is to call everyone to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ and it incorporates the "Tests of Life" view, the "Tests of Fellowship" view, and the "Tests of Orthodoxy" view.

The earlier views have based their interpretations on a specific reconstruction of the historical events that occasioned the writing of 1 John, particularly the possible "inflow" of foreign teachings or "heresies" coming from proto-Gnostics or their first century counterparts. But such theories cannot be verified exactly in the text. John's enemies may indeed be proto-Gnostics, but they may very well be also Johannine believers who have adapted a misinterpretation of some of the more crucial theologies of the fourth Gospel. Such misinterpretations have led them to denounce certain essential elements in the Johannine gospel, which threatened the very fabric of their *koinonia* with one another and with God Himself.

John's purpose may be partly focused on the secessionists who have done this and who are in fact doing this at the time of his writing (2:18-27; cf. 5:16-17). But, his main concern is to heal the gap and the wound that has been created. His primary purpose is not to refute the secessionists concerning all their claims, wrong as they are, but to bring them all back to the truth, if at all possible. He wants to call them, as well as everyone else, to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ. John's call is for true κοινωνία based on the original gospel message (1:1-3; 2:18-27). He is confident that they will withstand the pressure to give in because of the anointing that is in them (2:12-14). But, he warns them against "false spirits" who are still in the world (4:1-6). The key is to remain in Jesus Christ. Thus, his call to them is persistent and personal for he knows that only faith in Jesus Christ can overcome the "world" (1 John 5:1-5).

Today many churches are weak, not so much because they lack good programs or resources, but because they are not in the Truth and are not obeying the implications of that Truth, which is love for one another. Many are indifferent when it comes to their presuppositions and claims. They claim to be in the light, and yet they walk in darkness rejecting Jesus Christ who is the light. Some claim to be in Him and yet they continue to hate their brothers and sisters in Christ. Others claim to have no problems with ongoing sin and yet they live in sin even as they speak. Believing the truth and living the truth are two sides of the same thing. Those who claim to be in the light must walk as Jesus walked (2:6).

The enemy continues to divide the Church and the church needs to be discerning of its errors (4:1-6). The Church is not immune to the possibility of misunderstanding the truth of the gospel. The Spirit continues to call people back to a true community of the Spirit centered in Christ through the writings of the apostle John. They need to be reread and studied afresh to understand his concerns. His final warning and appeal sums it all up: "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21).

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