

Does the Book of 1 John Present Tests of Fellowship or Signs of Life?

The Apostle John writes in a simple but authoritative style in which he describes two groups of people. One group is characterized by obedience, love and a righteous life; the other group is characterized by disobedience, hatred and wicked living. Bible students have differed in how they identify the two groups that John is describing. Some believe that John is making a contrast between those believers who are in fellowship and those believers who are not in fellowship. Others maintain that John is making a sharp contrast between those who have eternal life and those who do not (a contrast between the saved and the unsaved). These two views can be represented as follows:

Tests of Fellowship: A Contrast Between Those Who are in Fellowship and Those Who are Not	
The Person Who is in Fellowship:	The Person Who is Not in Fellowship:
1) Obeys Christ's Commands (2:3)	1) Disobeys Christ's Commands (2:4)
2) Loves the Brethren (3:14)	2) Hates His Brother (3:14b-15)
3) Practices Righteousness (3:7)	3) Does Not Practice Righteousness (3:10)
4) Does Not Commit Sin (3:9)	4) Commits Sin (3:8)

Signs of Life: A Contrast Between Those Who Have Eternal Life and Those Who Do Not	
The Person Who Has Eternal Life:	The Person Who Does Not Have Life:
1) Obeys Christ's Commands (2:3)	1) Disobeys Christ's Commands (2:4)
2) Loves the Brethren (3:14)	2) Hates His Brother (3:14b-15)
3) Practices Righteousness (3:7)	3) Does Not Practice Righteousness (3:10)
4) Does Not Commit Sin (3:9)	4) Commits Sin (3:8)

The Matter of Fellowship

There is no question that one of the themes in the book of 1 John is that of fellowship. Chapter 1 is brief and contains only ten verses, but the term “fellowship” occurs four times. John is writing so that believers might have fellowship and that they might have the joy that comes from such fellowship (1:4). Fellowship with God is broken by sin, and confession of sin is essential for restoration of fellowship (1:8-10). This is the necessary washing of the feet that our Lord so beautifully illustrated with His disciples in John chapter 13. Peter and the other believing disciples had already had their salvation bath and were completely clean, but then needed to have their feet repeatedly cleansed from the daily defilements of life (John 13:8-11).

I would hesitate, however, to make **fellowship** the major theme of the book of 1 John. The term fellowship is used four times in the first chapter but is never used in the rest of the book. The main reason John wrote this book is revealed in 1 John 5:13:

“These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; **that ye may know** that ye have eternal life.”

It is interesting to compare this with the stated purpose of why the Gospel of John was written:

“And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name” (John 20:30-31).

The Gospel of John was written so that men might believe and have eternal life. The book of 1 John was written so that believers might know that they have life. The Gospel was written so that the unsaved might believe and have life; the epistle was written so that believers might know and have assurance. Scofield wrote that 1 John was “written to Christians to give a foundation for assurance” (*Scofield Correspondence Course*, Vol. IV, p. 912).

It is not surprising then that one of the key words in the book of 1 John is the word “**know**.” It occurs 39 times (conveyed by two Greek words: *ginōskō*, 23 times and *oida*, 16 times). “Know” is a word of assurance. “And hereby **we do know** that we know him, if we keep his commandments” (1 John 2:3). “**We know** we have passed from death unto life because we love the brethren” (1 John 3:14).

So while it is true that “fellowship” is a prominent theme in chapter 1, it is not a dominant theme in the rest of the book. The main theme of the final four chapters seems to be that of assurance, with the Greek words for “know” being dominant.

The Tests of Fellowship Position

Theologically, there is validity to this position. A person who is in fellowship with God (abiding in Christ, filled with the Spirit, walking by means of the Spirit, etc.) is going to be obedient to Christ's commands and will love the brethren and will live a righteous life.

A believer who is not enjoying fellowship with God (not abiding in Christ, but rather quenching and grieving the Spirit) is going to be walking in the flesh. A believer walking in the flesh will certainly be disobedient, unloving and walking in sin. "Are ye not carnal, and walk as men?" (1 Cor. 3:3) This last quotation shows that a fleshly believer can walk just like an unsaved man. What a terrible testimony this person is, bringing shame to the Name of Christ. Lordship salvation men fail to recognize these sad realities and possibilities, but there are ample examples of "Lordship failures" in Scripture. In other words, there are many examples in the Scriptures of saved individuals who failed to obey and submit to the Lord at certain points in their lives. We could think of Lot, Aaron, Samson, Solomon, Asa and others. We could also look at our own walk with the Lord and find times when we failed to surrender fully to the Lordship of Christ.

If a professing believer is being tested with respect to communion with God, then present acts of disobedience, lack of love and committing sin would certainly indicate that this person is not having fellowship with God. However, we do not want to be blind to another possibility, namely that the person may not have eternal life and may have never entered into a saving relationship with Christ. Not everyone who claims to know God is truly born again.

The issue of this paper is not to show that the fellowship position is invalid when testing a believer's conduct, but to ask whether this is really what the Apostle John is talking about. Does he use language which contrasts a believer who has fellowship with a believer who does not, or does he use language which contrasts one who has eternal life with one who does not? Is John talking about fellowship or is he talking about salvation? Are the terms he uses descriptive of fellowship (or the lack thereof) or of salvation (or the lack thereof)?

On the chart found on the next page, we have a side-by-side comparison of the descriptions John uses to differentiate these two groups. As you look at this chart, ask yourself, is John making a contrast between a believer who is having fellowship with God and a believer who is not, or is John making a contrast between a saved person who belongs to God and an unsaved person who does not? The language John uses should be the key in deciding this issue.

Two Groups of People Contrasted

Keeping Christ's Commands	
This person knows God (2:3). He dwells in God and God dwells in Him (3:24).	This person claims to know God but is a liar (2:4).
Practicing Righteousness and Not Committing Sin	
He abides in Him (3:6).	He has not seen Him, neither known Him (3:6).
He is righteous (3:7) and born of God (3:9; 5:18).	He is of the devil (3:8).
He is a child of God (3:10).	He is a child of the devil (3:10). He is not of God (3:10). He is like Cain who was of that wicked one (3:12).
Loving the Brethren	
He abides in the light (2:10).	He is in darkness (2:9) and is blind (2:11).
He has passed from death unto life (3:14).	He abides in death (3:14) and does not have eternal life abiding in him (3:15). He is a murderer (3:15).
He is born of God and knows God (4:7).	He does not know God (4:8).

If someone described for you a person who did not know God, who is not of God (does not belong to God), who is a child of the devil like Cain, and who does not have eternal life abiding in him, would you conclude that he was describing a believer who is not enjoying fellowship or an unsaved person? The language used by John so obviously describes an unsaved person that it is hardly worth debating.

Looking at the chart as a whole, it seems to be a strong contrast between a person who is born of God and a person who is not, a person who has passed from death unto life and a person who has not, a person who is a child of God and a person who is a child of the devil, a person who knows God and a person who does not.

There is only one phrase on the left side of the chart which could be a term used of fellowship, and that is the expression "whosoever abideth in Him" (3:6). Abiding in Christ, as it is used in John 15, is certainly an expression which speaks of fellowship, being in a right relationship with Christ and being rightly connected to Him who is our Vine and our Life. We will discuss this important phrase later in this paper.

The language John uses seems to be contrasting two types of people, saved and unsaved, those who have life and those who do not. Since those holding to the fellowship position dispute this, let us examine these passages more closely.

Obeying Christ's Commands

The person who obeys Christ's commands knows [ginōskō] God (2:3). The person who does not obey Christ's commands, does not know God. Even though he claims to know God, his claim is false; he is a liar (1 John 2:4; compare Rev. 21:8). He does not really know God at all.

John makes it clear in his Gospel that knowing God and knowing Christ is the very essence of salvation: "And this is life eternal, that they might know [ginōskō] Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou has sent" (John 17:3). The person who knows God is the person who has eternal life; the person who does not know God does not have eternal life. We commonly use this terminology to refer to salvation, as in this example: "We are praying that this person might come to know the Lord." This is normally understood as a prayer for this person's salvation, not a prayer that he would be restored to fellowship.

The Lord Jesus, the good Shepherd, said concerning His sheep: "I am known of mine" (John 10:14). In other words, "My sheep know Me!" Even His wayward, out of fellowship sheep know Him.

Paul reminded the Galatians that before they were saved they "knew not God" but after they were saved they "have known God" (Gal. 4:8-9).

The Scriptures repeatedly describe unsaved people as those who do not know God:

"The world knew Him not" (John 1:10).

[To the unsaved Pharisees] "Ye neither know Me, nor My Father" (John 8:19).

"The world hath not known Thee (the Father)" (John 17:25).

"The world...knew not God" (1 Cor. 1:21).

"The world...knew Him not" (1 John 3:1).

"They profess that they know God [they claim to be saved], but in works they deny Him" (Tit. 1:16).

"Even as the Gentiles who know not God" (1 Thess. 4:5)

"In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ who shall be punished with everlasting destruction" (1 Thess. 1:8-9)

So when John refers to a person who does not know God, he is referring to an unsaved person, not a believer who is out of fellowship. An additional proof of this is found in 1 John 4:7 where the person who knows God is defined by John as the person who is "born of God." Thus, the person who does not know God has never been born again! Knowing God is not a term used to describe fellowship with God, but it is a term used to describe a person who is saved and regenerate, a new creature in Christ.

It is true that if a believer is in fellowship with Christ, he will grow to know the Lord more and more (2 Pet. 3:18). A carnal believer will have his growth in the knowledge of God stunted, but it would be wrong to describe him as someone who does not know God. Rather, it is the unsaved person who “hath not seen Him, neither known Him” (1 John 3:6).

1 John 3:6 and 4:8 speak of those **who do not know God at all**. They do not know Him and have NEVER known Him. The perfect tense in 1 John 3:6 indicates that the person has not known God in the past and this condition of not knowing God continues into the present. There is no such thing in Scripture as a true believer who at times knows God and at other times does not know God. A person either knows God and is saved or he doesn't know God and is lost. Whether or not a believer is at any moment enjoying a practical knowledge of God and walking in the light of the blessed Person of God is a separate question.

John teaches us in 1 John 2:3-4 that those who truly know God are those who keep Christ's commandments. Our Lord taught something very similar in John 17:5. Concerning His disciples He said, “I have manifested Thy Name unto the men whom Thou gavest Me out of the world; Thine they were, and Thou gavest them to Me, and **they have kept Thy Word.**” At first glance, this seems like a surprising statement because we can think of times when His disciples were not obedient to Him. Take Peter for example. Peter was certainly not obedient to His Lord when he denied Him three times. And yet if you were to look at the lives of the apostles as a whole, you would have to conclude that their lives were characterized by obedience, not disobedience. That is why Jesus, who knew all of their faults and failures, said of them, “They have kept Thy Word” (John 17:6). If you took a snapshot (a still picture) of Peter in his weakest moment, you would conclude that he was a disobedient believer and a Christ-denier. However, if you took a video of Peter's entire saved life, you would conclude that he was an obedient believer who boldly confessed Christ before men. Peter knew God and obeyed Him.

Loving the Brethren

It is hard to understand how anyone can misinterpret 1 John 3:14. The expression “passed from death unto life” is found in the Bible only here in 1 John 3:14 and in one other place, both authored by the Apostle John. The second place where this phrase occurs is in John 5:24: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth My word, and believeth on Him that sent Me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation [judgment], but is passed from death unto life.” This is one of the clearest salvation verses in the Bible. It has nothing to do with fellowship, except for the obvious fact that no one can ever have fellowship with the living God until they have passed from death unto life. But the verse pertains to salvation and obtaining eternal life, not to fellowship. The moment a person is saved he passes out of death into life! Paul describes this salvation event in these terms: “And you hath He **quickened**, who were **dead** in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1).

The Lord Jesus told us how a sinner can pass from death unto life, and it is by believing (John 5:24). John tells us how a saint can know that he has passed from death unto life (1 John 3:14). If a person is truly alive, there ought to be signs of life. This is certainly true in the physical realm. If a person is alive physically there are signs or indicators that this is true: a heartbeat and a pulse, movement, breathing, talking, etc. Medically these are called “vital signs.” If a toddler falls down the basement stairs, the parents are relieved to hear crying; to hear nothing at all would not be a good sign. John is simply saying that one of the signs of spiritual life is love for the brethren. If a person does not manifest love for the brethren, this could be an indicator that the person is unsaved. If the

person is saved, at the very least we would have to consider this person very sick spiritually, just like a person in a coma could be alive but show very few signs of physical life.

How can one have life without there being any signs of that life being present? If someone is dead, there are absolutely no signs of actual life present. But if someone is alive, regardless of how bad a shape he is in (e.g., someone in a comatose state), there is always some sign of life of some kind!

Just as there are signs of life, so there are signs of death: "He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer; and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him" (1 John 3:14-15). To not have eternal life abiding in you means that you were never saved; you never passed from death unto life. Once a person has eternal life abiding in Him, he can never lose it. Eternal life is the present and abiding possession of every believer (John 6:47). A believer out of fellowship can lose joy but he cannot lose eternal life (compare Psalm 51:12).

Cain is given as an example of a person who did not love his brother; indeed, he murdered him (1 John 3:10-12). What was Cain's problem? Was he out of fellowship or was he unsaved? John tells us that Cain was a child of the devil (compare 1 John 3:10). "He was of that wicked one" (1 John 3:12). Cain showed forth signs of spiritual death because that was his true state.¹

"I'm saved but I detest Christians. I hate being with them. I hate what they love and I love what they hate." Perish the thought! How could a blood-bought member of the body of Christ think of his brothers and sisters in Christ in such a way?

The person who is not loving the brethren is in darkness; he is not connected to the light (1 John 2:9-11). A true child of God is a child of the light: "For ye were once darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord, walk as children of light" (Eph. 5:8). A child of God has been called out of darkness into God's marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9). A child of the light may not always walk worthy of his exalted position and he may even walk in darkness for a time, but a defective walk does not change the fact of his position: "Now are ye light in the Lord" (Eph. 5:8).

The person who loves the brethren is born of God (he is a child of God) and he knows God (1 John 4:7). The person who does not love the brethren does not know God and has not been born of God (1 John 4:8). We have already discussed the significance of "knowing God." Here in verse 7 John equates knowing God with being born of God.

What clearer language could John have used to describe a saved person? The one who loves the brethren has passed from death unto life, abides in the light, knows God and is born of God. The one who does not love the brethren abides in death, does not have eternal life abiding in him, is in darkness and does not know God. Such a one is not saved. John could not use language any clearer than this.

¹Wilkin teaches that Cain was a saved man, even though he is described as "of that wicked one" (*Grace in Focus*, "Are Esau and Cain in Heaven or Hell?" Sept/Oct 2007 issue, published by the Grace Evangelical Society). Wilkin's weak argument is as follows: "Surely Adam and Eve, who met with the pre-incarnate Jesus in the garden, would have evangelized both Cain and Abel. If Abel believed, would it not be likely that his brother Cain would as well?" Just because Cain heard the message from his parents does not mean he believed it.

Doing or Practicing Righteousness

John tells us that the person who is practicing righteousness is righteous or justified (1 John 3:7). The term “righteous” must refer to the person’s righteous standing; otherwise the statement would be redundant. It would be like saying, “The person who is practicing righteousness is living a righteous life.” This would be obvious and would not need to be said. John is stating the fact that the one who lives a righteous life is righteous. How righteous is he? “Even as He is righteous” (3:7). He is just as righteous as Christ, a wonderful fact which can only be true of a justified person.

John also declares that every person who practices righteousness is born of God (1 John 2:29). He is not only justified but he is regenerated, a child of God. Notice that John does not say, “Every one who practices righteousness is having fellowship with God.” Again the issue is that of salvation, not fellowship.

The person who does not practice righteousness is “not of God” (3:10). Since the context of verse 10 involves distinguishing between those who are children of God and children of the devil, the expression “not of God” must be equivalent to “a child of the devil.” If he is not of God, then he does not belong to God, has not been born of God and instead belongs to the devil’s spiritual family, as did Cain (3:12). Abel was saved and his works gave evidence of this: “his brother’s [works were] righteous” (3:12). Cain was of the devil and his works gave evidence of this: “because his own works were evil” (3:12).

The trend of the life is in view. The new man, God’s seed, cannot sin. Therefore, although we still “have . . . sin” (1:8), the life should be righteous. If it is not, we must not expect others to believe our profession. This is James’s point of view. Neither should we believe the profession of one whose habitual life is unrighteous [C. I. Scofield, *Correspondence Course*, Vol. IV, p. 928.]

According to John’s black and white world, those who practice righteousness are saved and those who practice evil are lost. We shall talk about John’s style of speaking in black and white language later in this paper.

Committing Sin and Not Sinning

These are the verses which are most problematic because John describes people who do not commit sin (3:9) and who do not sin (5:18) and who cannot sin (3:9).

Lest John should be misunderstood, we need to keep in mind the clear teaching found in 1 John 1:8-10. These verses clearly state that believers have sin (that is, they have a sinful nature—v. 8) and that believers do sin (that is, they commit acts of sin—v. 10) and that believers need to confess their sins (v. 9). So whatever John is teaching in the rest of the book cannot contradict these revealed facts (and cannot contradict what each believer knows to be his own sad experience as he struggles with indwelling sin on a daily basis—Romans 7). Whatever John is teaching, he is not teaching sinless perfection.

John is, however, teaching that there are two groups of people with respect to committing sin. The group which commits sin is unsaved and the group which does not commit sin is saved. For example, the person who sins “hath not seen Him, neither known Him” (3:6) and is “of the devil”

(3:8). These are clear references to the person's unsaved state. The person who does not sin is the person who abides in Him (dwells in Him—3:6). In 1 John 3:8 and 5:18 this person is identified as the person who is “born of God,” a regenerate, saved person. Nothing in these descriptions suggests John is talking about fellowship, except the term “abide” which will be discussed shortly.

Two reasons are given as to why the saved person is not able to sin: 1) “for His seed remaineth in him,” (3:9) which most understand to be a reference to the believer's new nature; 2) “because he is born of God” (3:9). For the person who is not born of God and who is not a partaker of the divine nature, it is impossible to live a life free from the domination of sin. The only option he has is a life of continual and persistent sin. He is a slave to the indwelling sin which finds its source in his corrupt nature.

Abiding in Him—Position or Condition?

In the chart of page 4, there is only one phrase which could be reasonably understood as referring to fellowship rather than salvation. It is the phrase “abideth in Him” (3:6). The same Greek word is also found in 1 John 3:24, “dwelleth (abideth) in Him,” and in 1 John 2:10, “abideth in the light.”

It is readily acknowledged that “abiding in Christ,” especially as it is used in John 15 is a phrase which is synonymous with having fellowship with God. The phrase is also used in this way in 1 John 2:28, “Little children, abide in Him...”

While we recognize that the term can be used of fellowship with God, it is also used to describe a saved person. Compare the these two verses:

“Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not” (3:6).

“Whosoever is born of God sinneth not” (5:18).

Based on these two verses, it appears that John is equating “abiding in Him” with being “born of God” (being regenerate, being a child of God, being saved).

How can “abiding in Him” be used as a description of salvation? The answer is that every believer positionally abides and lives and dwells in Christ. We permanently abide in Christ and we dwell in Him. Positionally we are “in Christ” (2 Cor. 5:17; Rom. 8:1 and so many other passages). This is where we live and we can never again be outside of Christ, which is where we lived when we were unsaved (Col. 4:5). Our home is in the beloved one, perfectly accepted in Him (Eph. 1:6). We are forever permanently connected to our blessed Lord. This is different from our daily walk with the Lord where we can experientially abide in Christ or we can fail to abide in Him.

There is another phrase which John uses which seems to be speaking of our position in Christ. It is found in 1 John 3:24—“And he that keepeth His commandments **dwelleth in Him and He in him.**” We have already learned from 1 John 2:3-4 that the person who keeps His commandments is the person who knows Christ in a saving way. [To know God is to be born of God—1 John 4:7.] Therefore the phrase, “dwelleth in Him and He [dwelleth] in him” must be a description of a saved person who is born of God. It cannot be a description of a person having fellowship with God. One could argue that “dwelling in Him” or “abiding in Him” is used to describe fellowship in John 15, and this is true. But the last part of the phrase indicates that He (God) dwells in the believer. And the indwelling presence of God in the believer is a reality whether the saved person is enjoying

fellowship or not. We may grieve the Holy Spirit by our sin, but He is not going to leave us (Eph. 4:30). God's indwelling is permanent, and it is true of every believer whether he is in fellowship or not. It is even true of the carnal Corinthians (1 Cor. 6:19). He lives in us and we live in Him (Galatians 5:25).

The phrase "dwelleth in him and he [dwelleth] in God" is used in 4:15 of every believer, not just those believers who are in fellowship. Every saved person confesses that Jesus is the Son of God.

Finally, the Lord Jesus Himself has carefully defined this term. Compare these two verses:

"He who eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life" (John 6:54).

"He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in Me and I in him" (John 6:57).

Thus, the person who has eternal life is the person who dwells in Christ and Christ dwells in Him. This relationship is true of every saved person, including those who may walk in carnality. The Lord Jesus here used the phrase "dwelleth [abides] in Me" in a positional sense, a sense which is true of every one who possesses eternal life.

John's Abstract Style of Writing

John writes in a black and white style, without any shades of greys. As John presents the contrast between a saved person and an unsaved person, he sees one person keeping Christ's commands (white) and another person not keeping Christ's commands (black). There are no greys. We know that believers disobey God at times, but John sees none of this (even as our Lord saw no disobedience in His disciples, though it was obvious they had their failings—John 17:6).

John sees those who have passed from death unto life as loving the brethren (white) and he sees those who do not have eternal life as hating the brethren (black). We know that in our actual experience there are greys and there are believers who can be very unloving. Indeed, Galatians 5:15 speaks of believers biting and devouring one another!

John sees believers living righteously (white) and unbelievers living wickedly (black), as Cain lived. John sees those born of God as not sinning (white) and he teaches that those who sin are of the devil (black). And yet in chapter 1, John balances this out and clearly states that believers can and do sin.

The earlier dispensationalists understood that John's epistles have an abstract character. William Kelly wrote:

John is not here looking at modifications through circumstances, it is to be observed. He is not here looking at particular cases of unfaithfulness. John as a rule does not occupy himself with the details of fact. He looks at truth in its own proper abstract character apart from passing circumstances; and if you do not read John's writings thus, especially the epistle before us, I am afraid that there is little prospect that you will ever understand them.

Roy A. Huebner, an authority on the writings and theology of John Darby, added this:

We are partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). God's seed is in us: Whosoever has been begotten of God does not practice sin, because his seed abides in him, and he cannot sin, because he has been begotten of God (1 John 3:9). The "seed" refers to the new nature from God. It cannot sin; yet here we read that the person cannot sin: "he cannot sin." What is true of the nature is here predicated of the person having that nature. In practice the believer may sin. It is essential that the reader apprehend the abstract nature of John's epistles. . . . Thus, the apostle's expression [in many places] does not address the mixed condition we often find in ourselves. That is the solution to the apparent contradiction.

C. I. Scofield wrote:

It is exceedingly important to note that John habitually deals with the Christian as a child of God in an abstract and absolute way rather than as compassed with infirmity and still bearing about the old nature. He does not ignore the old man, but is not occupied with him. [*Scofield Correspondence Course*, Vol. IV, p. 914).

John presents the believer's conduct as if the believer only has a new nature; the failings of the flesh are not mentioned and are not in view. John's style is not unlike our Lord's style in some places. Consider Matthew 7:18—"A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit." If the good tree represents the saved person, then the Lord is seeing the person's conduct only in light of his new nature; the failings of the flesh are not in view. The fruit of the Spirit is in view, but we know as a practical matter of fact that a true believer may fail to walk in the Spirit and may manifest the works of the flesh. So both John and the Lord present a side of the truth, and a full understanding comes only as we weigh out all of the Scriptural teaching on the matter.

Bruce Anstey, in his book *The Epistles of John and Jude*, has an excellent section in which he explains the abstract style of John's writings:

The Apostle John writes in a unique way. The key to understanding his statements is to see that he views things abstractly. F. B. Hole defined the word "abstract" as follows: "When we speak abstractly, we purposely eliminate in our minds and utterances all qualifying considerations, in order that we may more clearly set forth the essential nature of the thing of which we speak" (*Epistles*, vol. 3, p. 161). Hence, we might say, "Cork floats." In stating that, we are speaking of what cork does characteristically. We are not taking into consideration that it could be submerged under water if we tied something to it to hold it there. Under normal conditions, cork floats. Similarly, John speaks of things in their essence—that is, as to what they are characterized by without referring to any specific person, thing, or situation. He examines the feature of life eternal by what normally characterizes it, not by what someone with that life does that is uncharacteristic of that life. Due to a poor state, these features may be obscured in us at times, but John does not take that into consideration as he views the features of that life.

J. N. Darby said, "All John's statements are absolute. He never modifies them by bringing in the difficulties or hindrances that we may have in the body. 'He that is

born of God,' he says in chapter 3, 'does not commit sin.' He is speaking there according to the very essence of the nature. The divine nature cannot sin. It is not a question of progress or degree, but he cannot sin because he is born of God....John always states it in its own proper absoluteness, according to the truth itself... We may fail in keeping it, but the Apostle does not give these kinds of modifications, but the truth itself' (*Collected Writings*, vol. 28, p. 214). Thus John speaks of believers optimally or ideally—that is, what they are when they walk in the power of the Spirit and in the enjoyment of life eternal. He does not see them as being anything less than that. He writes with no middle ground in the discussion. It is either light or darkness, life or the absence of life, love or hatred, etc. This must be kept in mind when reading the epistle.²

Conclusion

The book of 1 John deals with fellowship in chapter 1, but the main theme of the book is that of assurance, the key word being “know.” These things were written so that believers might know that they have eternal life (5:13). John, writing in his black and white style, presents a sharp contrast between the conduct of those who have eternal life and the conduct of those who do not. He deals with three significant areas of conduct: 1) obedience to Christ’s commands; 2) love for the brethren; 3) practicing righteousness and not sinning.

If a person truly has life, then there ought to be signs of life. If a person is lacking these signs of life and if he is manifesting signs of death, then he needs to do some serious soul searching to determine why he is living like an unsaved person. There are two possibilities: 1) He is unsaved and needs to pass from death unto life; 2) He is a believer but very sick spiritually, manifesting the works of the flesh. In either case, he needs to flee to Christ who alone can heal the sin-sick soul.

²Bruce Anstey, *The Epistles of John & Jude*, pages 11-12.