

**An Introduction to John's First Letter:
The Epistle of Christian Certainty**

"These things have I written unto you who believe ... that you may know that you have eternal life (I John 5:13)".

I. Introduction 1:1-4

The apostles ("we") introduces us to the topic of the book, the message that Jesus revealed to them as he walked and taught for some three years. What He conveyed to them was the message of life, being the life-giving Word. He came to give them, and us, eternal life through His substitutionary death, substantiated by His very own resurrection to life. That life is described in the book with several equivalent terms: eternal life, fellowship, and abiding.

II. The Reality of Fellowship: Stated 1:5-2:2

We have argued that the book can be viewed as having two principal parts. Here the apostle tells us that knowing God, walking with God, or having fellowship with God, abiding in God is predicated on conformity with absolute righteous character of God.

John makes the point that we do not need to deceive ourselves about the presence of sin in our lives (Redeemer and now Advocate). God's standard of fellowship has been met and are being met by Christ. We can know that we know Him because Christ is righteous and we are in Him, His satisfaction for our sins through His sacrificial death on Calvary, and His constant advocacy for us. From the believer's sphere, assurance arises.

III. The Reality of Fellowship: Tested 2:3-5:20

Now, the apostle turns to tests or the evidence that we do have fellowship, that we do know Christ, though sin is present in all our lives. John's point seems to be that the miracle of fellowship with God is a life-changing experience. The effects of knowing God, as well as the knowing of Him, are grounds of assurance. Our experience with God and our works is grounds of assurance for us. Profession must match practice, not perfection! John lists five-fold evidence of a gracious work of God in our lives.

A. The Test of Obedience, vv. 3-17

An important evidence of God's great grace is a profound transformational change in our values (not as quickly our conduct).

Though we are certainly not perfect people (see Luke 1:5-6), the change

that new life, the incoming of kingdom life, the life of God, is dramatic. The world's value system suddenly seems empty, shortsighted, and impermanent. We have come to value God's perspectives of what is true, valuable, and enduring. The commandment to love one another willingly takes precedence over individualism, at least on our better days.

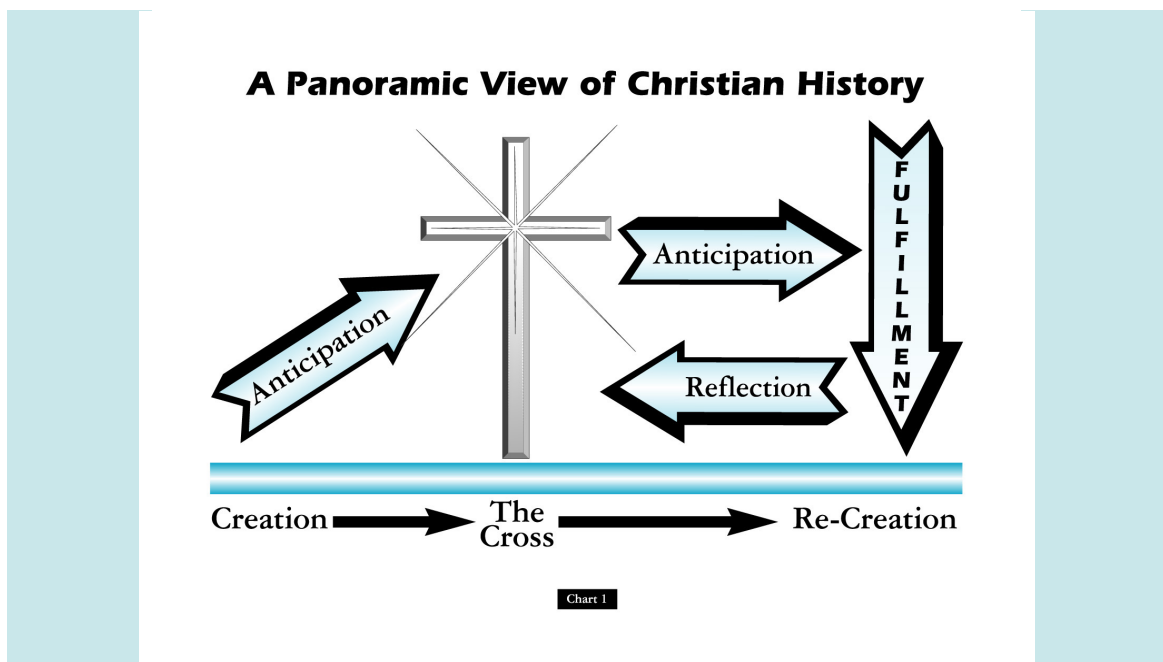
B. The Test of Fidelity to the Apostle's Teachings, vv.18-29

John's point in this section is that false teachers cannot sway true believers away from the apostle's teachings. Believers can sense error and are not enamored by it; the false teacher is found in John's concept of "last hour." We know that Christ ended an age and inaugurated a new one.

1. The Presence of false teachers: Stated, v. 18

John states the evidence; we are at the end of the age in that many false teachers, those who oppose Christ, will proliferate.

A difficult idea is John's concept of "last hour." We know that Christ ended an age and inaugurated a new one. The New Testament writers view the entire new period as the final days, because, after it, comes the eternal state where "time shall be no more." It may be helpful to note that the phrase appears without the article ("a last hour") signifying a general time, not a specific time.



It seems that some expected the eminent coming of the Lord (John 21:23, II Thess. 2:3 ["the man of lawlessness"]). "A last hour" can be any time since we do not know when the era will end. Then the Antichrist, the Beast, one who will seek to replace the Christ (Rev.

13), will emerge only to be crushed. Every “a last hour” that passes is a shadowed fulfillment of when “the last hour” will come. Opponents of Christ (antichrists) arise in every generation, and each prefigures the final one at the end of time.

2. The Failure of false teachers: Sustained, vv. 19-23

a. Their departure, vv. 19-20

1) Their origin, v. 19

These opponents of Christ are teachers that emerge within the churches. They left the church of their own volition but continued to have an unsettling influence. John writes that abiding in the apostle’s teaching is a sign of the truly faithful. Continuance is a test of reality. Several insights can be gleaned from this verse: (1) the evidence of being false is departure from the assembly of the saints. Counterfeits normally leave when they do not get their way, (2) the mark of the saint is perseverance, and (3) the church often is comprised of those who profess redemption and those who are merely enamored but whose motives are corrupt and corrupting.

2) The contrast, v. 20

It is quite possible that these false teachers claimed to have secret knowledge; John says that a true knowledge is known by all Christians (“you all know”).

The meaning of “anointing from the Holy Spirit” is the most difficult phrase in the verse. It is something that all Christians possess and it is granted by the Spirit. It seems to me that John is talking about the inward reception of the apostle’s message about Christ, regeneration, and eternal life given to every Christian by the Spirit. You might call it a “built-in spiritual instinct.”

In 2:27 the “anointing” is a knowledge that requires no instruction. I take it to be the Spirit’s witness to who Jesus is and what He accomplished for us on the cross; it is the inward reception of the gospel message. It may be the same as the reference to “seed” within us as seen in 3:9. We are told in 3:24 and 4:13 that the Spirit has been given to us. I take it that the meaning has to do with the Spirit’s ministry toward us and His redemption. It may be equivalent to “the seed” (3:9), again designated as the Spirit’s indwelling ministry. Also, there are hints that John is thinking about the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-35). If so, it supports the notion that Jesus inaugurated

Christ a new era under a covenant in His blood for God's people. "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and on their heart, I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people."

The "all" is intriguing; What do all the redeemed have knowledge of since Christians are quite divided over theology. In context, it seems to refer to the Christ and His redemption applied by the Holy Spirit.

b. Their teaching, vv. 21-23)

1) The apostle's confidence, v. 21

John's audience can discern between truth and error because of the teaching ministry of the Spirit.

2) The false teachers' error, v. 22

I take it that to deny Christ is to reject what John has stated in the prologue of his epistle. They deny that Jesus came from heaven to reveal to us the way of redemption and that Christ came to show us eternal life by being our righteousness through the shedding of His blood to appease a righteous God for our sins.

While Christ did come from heaven, according to the errorists, He was a historical figure, but His work was not to be the sinner's substitute, but the sinner's moral guide. Thus, they denied His redemptive role. Jesus, then, not the Christ! Thus, His uniqueness is lost; He was not the God/man.

3) The false teachers' doom, v. 23

Not to know God through the provision of Christ is not to know God at all. Jesus said it well, "I am the way, the truth, and the life no one comes to the father but by me (John 14:6)". See I John 4:2-3. Jesus came to reveal the Father (John 1:18), knowing the Father without the Son is an impossibility.

3. The Exhortation to Believers, vv. 24-29

The reoccurring word, "abides (5 times)," indicates the emphasis of the section. "Continuance in" the things of God is evidence of the possession of the things of God.

Moral instruction ("do") and certainty are not antithetical. When God ordains an end, He supplies the means (instruction). The means is the "anointing of the Spirit." The exhortation is considering the promise, not the cause. John is saying that he longs that these Christians do

not depart from the fundamentals of redemptive truth. However, what he seeks for them to avoid are the effects of momentary, temporal confusion. The danger is not the loss of salvation for these people, but the stifling result of embracing error.

a. To continue in sound doctrine, vv. 24-26

1) The exhortation, v. 24

The “you” is plural, so John is addressing believers as a corporate body.

The word “abide” means “to continue.” Here is John’s plea to remain in the teaching they heard from the apostles from the first day, the apostles having earned from the first day they heard Christ speak (1:1-3).

2) The message, v. 25

The message, the “promise,” is that eternal life, fellowship with God, is through Jesus Christ. A faulty understanding of Jesus leads invariably to moralizing redemption. If Jesus is not God in human flesh, He would not have qualified as our sin substitute; the resurrection is the proof that He qualified.

3) The reason, v. 26

There are many who would distort the message of the Savior.

b. To continue submissiveness to the Spirit, v. 27

A second safeguard against false teachings is not only the message that came from God through Christ and the apostles; it is the affirming, teaching ministry of the Spirit as well. Both are received at conversion.

There are some things we do not need earthly teachers to teach us. The “all things” is all things about the salvation that we possess in Christ.

c. To continue practicing righteousness, vv. 28-29

1) It provides confidence at His coming, v. 28

“Abide” is a command. John is writing to encourage them to walk closely with the apostle’s message (salvation is not the issue; it about avoiding regrets [“shame”]). Continuance in the message of the apostles through Christ about God will cause us to delight in the coming of Christ at the end of the age. We will not be subject to shame at His coming but hear a tremendous “Welcomed home!” from the Savior.

2) It gives us evidence that we are His, v. 29

That we do not follow the false teachers is evidence that we belong to Christ. We cling to the message of the apostles. To

“practice righteousness” is to continue in the apostle’s teachings. *Again, none of us are perfect; it is not about momentary failure. It about the general pattern or trajectory of our lives (1:6-2:2).*

Applications:

1. The fact that we continue being enamored with the gospel message, however maligned by those who think it foolish, is evidence that God has done a gracious work in our hearts (see John 6:66-68).
2. Leaving the apostle’s teaching has dire consequences. I believe it indicates that a person never received the Spirit’s teaching ministry and consequently is not a believer, nor ever has been. *Notice I did not say that leaving a particular church is a sign of unbelief.*
3. Eternal life is the promise held out to believers by God in the message which makes Him known; it is embodied, as has been made plain in 1 John 1:2, in the Son of God who is the center and circumference of the message.
4. A person has made a false claim who says he knows God and at the same time rejects the person and work of God’s Son. “There is no other name given among men whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:12).” Salvation is only through Christ, or it is not at all. To profess to know God the Father while rejecting the person and claims of His son, is to be ignorant of God the Father.
5. Actions are a true barometer of the validity of our confession when combined with perseverance. It is a false claim when we are without the evidence of action.
6. We can all thank God that our duty is receiving and His is doing!

Let those refuse to sing
Who never knew our God.
But servants of the heavenly King
May speak their joys abroad.

7. The greatest safeguard for our souls is to stay close to the gospel!