

## WHAT IS THE MESSAGE OF 1 JOHN?

Gary W. Derickson

Within modern-day scholarship two distinct and disparate views have developed concerning the message of 1 John. They have arisen as a consequence of two variant perceptions of the purpose of the epistle. These are the Tests of Life (Salvation) and Tests of Fellowship (Practice of Life) views. The purpose of this article is to describe these views and how they are defended and to evaluate each view.

### TESTS OF LIFE VIEW

#### THE VIEW DESCRIBED

The Tests of Life view, the older of the two positions, commands the majority of scholarly support.<sup>1</sup> The basis of this view is the dominance given the purpose statement in 1 John 5:13 in determining the overarching message and controlling the interpretation of difficult passages. According to this view John's pur-

Gary W. Derickson is Assistant Professor of Bible, Western Baptist College, Salem, Oregon.

<sup>1</sup> Proponents of this view include Raymond Brown (*The Epistles of John*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982); 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 (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959–61); C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, Moffatt New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946); 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 Expository Study of 1 John," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (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); I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978); John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); and Brooke F. Westcott, *The Epistles of John* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966).

pose in writing the epistle was 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. These tests include doctrinal agreement with the apostles' teaching and submission to their standard of conduct, namely, loving the brethren and living righteously.

Eternal life, understood as a soteriological term, is the subject of the epistle, with Christian certainty serving as the dominant theme throughout the work. Salvation is the subject of the epistle's prologue in its focus on the "Word of Life" and the apostolic proclamation of "eternal life" (1:1-2).<sup>2</sup> With eternal life as its central subject, the epistle develops three tests by which members of the believing community can recognize that they do indeed possess that life.

These three tests of the Christian life are belief (truth), righteousness (obedience), and love. These indicate whether a person has eternal life, and is therefore in communion with God, or does not and is merely professing faith.<sup>3</sup> Passing these tests produces assurance of salvation, since there is a correlation between possession of life and production of fruit as evidence of eternal life.<sup>4</sup> John's purpose was not to cause his readers to doubt their salvation, but to find assurance in it.<sup>5</sup> Fruit can be used either to reveal

<sup>2</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 37; Calvin, *The First Epistle of John*, 231; Kenneth Grayston, *The Johannine Epistles*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 41; C. Haas, M. De Jonge, and J. L. Swellengrebel, *A Translator's Handbook on the Letters of John, UBS Helps for Translators 13* (London: United Bible Societies, 1972), 125; Hiebert, "An Exposition of 1 John 1:1-4," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (April-June 1988): 199; Stott, *The Letters of John*, 56, 58, 187; Rodney A. Whitacre, "Johannine Polemic: The Role of Tradition and Theology," *Society of Biblical Literature*, Dissertation Series No. 67 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 150.

<sup>3</sup> James M. Boice, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 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; Law, *The Tests of Life*, 5-7; Ray C. Stedman, *Expository Studies in 1 John* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1980), 338. Stott identifies his view with Law's three tests "by which we may judge whether we possess eternal life or not" (*The Letters of John*, 58).

<sup>4</sup> Epp, *Studies in the General Epistles of John*, 5-7; Law, *The Tests of Life*, 208; Alfred Plummer, *The Epistles of St. John*, The Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1894), 120; Stott, *The Letters of John*, 59-60.

<sup>5</sup> C. J. Barker, *The Johannine Epistles*, Lutterworth Commentary (London: Lutterworth, 1948), 80; Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, 123; Stott, *The Letters of John*, 187; Wilhelm Thusing and Alois Stager, *The Three Epistles of St. John and the Epistle of Jude*, *New Testament for Spiritual Reading*, trans. David Smith, ed. John L. McKenzie (New York: Herder & Herder, 1971), 98.

the absence of eternal life in an individual or to assure him of the presence of that life.<sup>6</sup>

John used "eternal life," "fellowship," "to know God," and "abiding" synonymously when describing the Christian.<sup>7</sup> Eternal life is a soteriological term, though quality of life is not completely removed from its meaning.<sup>8</sup> Κοινωνία ("fellowship") should be understood soteriologically so that "to be in fellowship" is equivalent to having eternal life, or being "saved."<sup>9</sup> Fellowship means participating and having partnership in the common possession of eternal life, not communion or relationships as one would expect in a family. Knowing God also refers to possessing eternal life (salvation), on the basis of John 17. Abiding is understood as reflecting the Pauline concept of being "in Christ" rather than that of walking in the Spirit. Therefore even the affirmations of 1 John 1:5-10 are tests of spiritual life.<sup>10</sup>

First John was not written with an evangelistic intent as was the Gospel of John.<sup>11</sup> But its purpose is related to that of the Gospel of John in that the Gospel was written so that the readers could have eternal life (salvation), whereas the epistle was written so that the readers could know that they have eternal life.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> MacArthur, *The Gospel according to Jesus*, 22, 33, 126, 178; Paul R. Van Gorder, *In the Family* (Grand Rapids: Radio Bible Class, 1978), 57-69; Stott, *The Letters of John*, 58; Homer, "Introduction to the Johannine Epistles," 47.

<sup>7</sup> J. L. Houlden, *A Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 65; Andre Feuillet, "The Structure of First John: Comparison with the Fourth Gospel: the Pattern of Christian Life," *Biblical Theological Bulletin* 3 (June 1973): 200; J. Ireland Hasler, *The Message of Life* (Greenwood, SC: Attic, 1949), 12; Greville P. Lewis, *The Johannine Epistles*, Epworth Preacher's Commentaries (London: Epworth, 1961), 48; Stott, *The Letters of John*, 58.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, 39; C. Crain, *Readings on the First Epistle of John* (New York: Loizeaux, n.d.), 13-14; Van Gorder, *In the Family*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> J. Allen Blair, *The Epistles of John* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1982), 25; Boice, *The Epistles of John*, 31; Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, 28; Donald W. Burdick, *The Epistles of John*, Everyman's Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1970), 22; Crain, *Readings on the First Epistle of John*, 37-39; Hasler, *The Message of Life*, 13; Lewis, *The Johannine Epistles*, 12-13; Stott, *The Letters of John*, 58; Van Gorder, *In the Family*, 19.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, 28; Darby, *Notes on the Epistles of John*, 13-14; Plummer, *The Epistles of St. John*, 120; Westcott, *The Epistles of John*, 298.

<sup>11</sup> G. S. Barrett, *The First Epistle General of St. John* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1910), 206.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 207; E. M. Blaiklock, *Letters to Children of Light* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1975), 103; Blair, *The Epistles of John*, 8; Maurice Bogaert, "Structure et Message de la Première Epître de Saint Jean," *Bible et Vie Chrétienne* 83 (1968): 35; Burdick, *The Epistles of John*, 91; Robert Cameron, *The First Epistle of John* (Philadelphia: Rowland, 1899), xii, 240; Epp, *Studies in the General Epistles of John*, 5-6; Grayston, *The Johannine Epistles*, 140; George E. Henderlite, *Notes on the First Epistle of John* (N.p., n.d.), 66; Hiebert, *The Non-Pauline Epistles and*

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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

The other purpose statements in 1 John are subsidiary to the primary purpose of providing assurance of salvation. Thus 1:3-4 and 2:1 are to be understood in reference to assurance of salvation.<sup>15</sup> These other purpose statements should be considered within the light of the overarching soteriological purpose.

#### THE VIEW DEFENDED

The principal argument used to support the Tests of Life view is the perceived relationship between John 20:31 and 1 John 5:13. As John 20:31 is a comprehensive purpose statement of the Gospel, so 1 John 5:13 serves a parallel role within the epistle.<sup>16</sup>

Revelation, 201; Horner, "Introduction to the Johannine Epistles," 47; Houlden, "Salvation Proclaimed: II. 1 John 15-20: Belief and Growth," *Expository Times* 93 (1981/82): 132-33; Lewis, *The Johannine Epistles*, 119; Plummer, *The Epistles of St. John*, 120; David Smith, "The Epistles of St. John," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 5:197; Stott, *The Letters of John*, 187; Henry C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 306; W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Apostle John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 231; William E. Vine, *The First Epistle of John* (Bangalore: Scripture Literature Depot, 1934), 156.

<sup>13</sup> Boice, *The Epistles of John*, 167; Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 632; Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, 122; Feuillet, "The Structure of First John," 211; Robert Govett, *Govett on I John* (Miami Springs, FL: Conley & Schoettle, 1985), 148; Plummer, *The Epistles of St. John*, 120; Stott, *The Letters of John*, 186; Bruce Vawter, "The Johannine Epistles," in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968) 2:411.

<sup>14</sup> Barrett, *The First Epistle General of St. John*, 206; Boice, *The Epistles of John*, 11; Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 91, 632; Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, 27; Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 2:83; Burdick, *The Epistles of John*, 91; Gordon H. Clark, *First John* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, n.d.), 160; Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, 133; Epp, *Studies in the General Epistles of John*, 99-103; Feuillet, "The Structure of First John," 211; George Goodman, *The Epistle of Eternal Life* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1936), 8, 57; Haas, De Jonge, and Swellengrebel, *A Translator's Handbook on the Letters of John*, 124; Henderlite, *Notes on the First Epistle of John*, 66; Hiebert, *The Non-Pauline Epistles and Revelation*, 201; Law, *The Tests of Life*, 405; R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of I and II Epistles of Peter, the Three Epistles of John, and the Epistle of Jude* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1966), 531; Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 243; Robinson, *Twelve New Testament Studies*, 126; Thusing and Stager, *The Three Epistles of St. John*, 97-98; Westcott, *The Epistles of John*, 188.

<sup>15</sup> Goodman, *The Epistle of Eternal Life*, 8; Hiebert, *The Non-Pauline Epistles and Revelation*, 200; Vine, *The First Epistle of John*, 17-19.

<sup>16</sup> Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 608; Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, 133; Feuillet, "The Structure of First John," 211; Goodman, *The Epistle of Eternal Life*, 7-8; Stott, *The Letters of John*, 86.

Brown, Cameron, and Feuillet develop their arguments for the parallel relationship of 5:13 to John 20:31 on the premise that 1 John was patterned after the Gospel of John.<sup>17</sup> They point to the similarities between the two prologues as well as key vocabulary and grammar.<sup>18</sup> Others holding the Tests of Life view do not see a parallel pattern between John and 1 John and so do not use this argument to defend the relationship of 1 John 5:13 to the remainder of the epistle.<sup>19</sup>

First John 5:13 states that John wrote the epistle so that his readers might know that they have eternal life. This view of the verse is proper because it is grammatically permissible and preferable. Ταῦτα ("these things") refers either to the preceding verses (5:11-12) or to the epistle as a whole.<sup>20</sup> In the Tests of Life view ταῦτα refers to the entire epistle because there is nothing within the context that necessarily limits its focus "to what immediately precedes."<sup>21</sup> Law, though seeing 5:13 as governing the whole epistle, admits that the immediate context of 5:11-12 is the referent, of ταῦτα, but he agrees with Marshall that it still sums up the entire epistle.<sup>22</sup>

Another defense of the Tests of Life comes from the use of "eternal life" in the prologue and conclusion, which indicates that it is the subject of the epistle.<sup>23</sup> Arguing for this pattern in Johannine thought, Bogaert points to the example of another inclu-

<sup>17</sup> Brown divides the epistle into the following sections: the Prologue (1:1-4); Part One (1:5-3:10): "The Gospel that God is light, and we must walk in the light as Jesus walked"; Part Two (3:11-5:12): "The Gospel that we must love one another as God has loved us in Jesus Christ"; and the Conclusion (5:13-21): "A statement of the author's purpose" (*The Epistles of John*, 124). Also see Cameron, *The First Epistle of John*, xii; and Feuillet, "The Structure of First John," 194-216.

<sup>18</sup> Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 124-25; Feuillet, "The Structure of First John," 198.

<sup>19</sup> Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, xxii-xxvi; Law, *The Tests of Life*, 5; Stott, *The Letters of John*, 61.

<sup>20</sup> Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 608; Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 243, n. 1; A. E. Brooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: Clark, n.d.), 142; and Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Die Johannesbriefe* (Freiburg: Herder, 1984), 273.

<sup>21</sup> Haas, De Jonge, and Swellengrebel, *A Translator's Handbook on the Letters of John*, 124; Plummer, *The Epistles of St. John*, 120.

<sup>22</sup> Law, *The Tests of Life*, 405; Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 243, n. 1; Stott, *The Letters of John*, 86; Clark, *First John*, 160; Vine, *The First Epistle of John*, 156. Bogaert, "Structure et Message de la Première Épître de Saint Jean," 35; Grayston, *The Johannine Epistles*, 140; Law, *The Tests of Life*, 184; Thusing and Stager, *The Three Epistles of St. John*, 7. Brown follows the same general theme when he posits an inclusion formed by John's use of ταῦτα γράφομεν; in 1:4 ("We are writing this") and ταῦτα ἔγραψα in 5:13 ("I have written this"), with 1:4 looking ahead and 5:13 looking back at the body of the epistle (*The Epistles of John*, 608). Though it is a different inclusion, it serves the same function.

sion which marks off the section of 1 John that addresses false teachers under the discussion of discerning spirits.<sup>24</sup>

John's frequent use of the word "know" argues for assurance of salvation rather than maintenance of fellowship.<sup>25</sup> This informs the meaning of other terms related to eternal life and assurance.

John's theology, it is argued, focuses on soteriological issues rather than sanctification. Thus key terms, including *κοινωνία*, should be understood soteriologically. Fellowship should be understood this way because it is used by John in a manner similar to his use of other terms in the epistle that are clearly soteriological. Since salvation is a necessary prerequisite for fellowship, John used the term in this soteriological sense.<sup>26</sup>

Some commentators see numerous purposes being worked out in the epistle.<sup>27</sup> But, as noted earlier in the description of this position, the majority of those who hold the Tests of Life view consider 1 John 5:13 as stating the overarching purpose of the epistle. Though the *ἵνα* clauses in 1:3-4 and 2:1 are recognized as purpose statements, they are viewed as secondary or subordinate to the purpose statement in 5:13.<sup>28</sup> Though fellowship and joy are recognized as purposes for John's writing, they do not control the interpretation of the remainder of the epistle but are related to the message of the introduction.<sup>29</sup> The purpose clause in 2:1 applies to

<sup>24</sup> Bogaert, "Structure et Message de la Première Epître de Saint Jean," 40.

<sup>25</sup> Blair, *The Epistles of John*, 8; Boice, *The Epistles of John*, 12-15; Robinson, *Twelve New Testament Studies*, 127; Stott, *The Letters of John*, 56-60; Thomas, *The Apostle John*, 233.

<sup>26</sup> Cameron, *The First Epistle of John*, 7-11; Epp, *Studies in the General Epistles of John*, 13.

<sup>27</sup> For example Strauss sees six purposes for the epistle, which are to proffer fellowship (1:3), promote joy (1:4), prevent sin (2:1-2), proclaim forgiveness (2:12), protect saints (2:26), and provide assurance (5:13) (Lehman Strauss, *The Epistles of John* [New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1962], 30-79). Thiessen sees four purposes: "(1) to enhance his own joy (1:4 . . .), (2) to keep them from sin (2:1), (3) to lead them into an assurance of salvation (5:13; cf. 2:12), and (4) to warn them against error (2:26)" (*Introduction to the New Testament*, 10). For the purposes of this study, only those which are introduced with a *ἵνα* clause are considered, namely, the purposes in 1:3-4 and 2:1, as they relate to 5:13. Thomas blends the various purposes into one summarizing sentence and says that the epistle teaches that "we are to have the fulness of joy because of our freedom from sinning, and this, in turn, comes from spiritual assurance" (*The Apostle John*, 233). Of note is his failure to mention fellowship.

<sup>28</sup> Law, *The Tests of Life*, 20, 405; Simon J. Kistemaker, *James and I-III John*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 237; Plummer, *The Epistles of St. John*, 120; Vine, *The First Epistle of John*, 156.

<sup>29</sup> Barrett, *The First Epistle General of St. John*, 29; Hiebert, "An Exposition of 1 John 1:14," 207-9; Law, *The Tests of Life*, 45-46; Plummer, *The Epistles of St. John*, 120; Smith, "The Epistles of John," 170; Stott, *The Letters of John*, 68-71.

the immediate context of 1:5-10 and addresses the question of how a believer is to deal with sin in his life, which is revealed by walking in the light.<sup>30</sup>

### TESTS OF FELLOWSHIP VIEW

The Tests of Fellowship (Practice of Life) view is rather recent in its development, with the earliest written representative being Guy H. King.<sup>31</sup>

### THE VIEW DESCRIBED

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.

The purpose of the epistle arises from the prologue, specifically from John's stated purpose in 1:3.<sup>32</sup> He wrote to promote fellowship horizontally between believers as well as vertically between them and God.<sup>33</sup>

This purpose statement, expressed by the *ἵνα* clause in 1:3, governs the message of the epistle.<sup>34</sup> The other purpose statements in 1:4; 2:1; and 5:13 are secondary to the overarching purpose of promoting fellowship between believers and between believers

<sup>30</sup> Cameron, *The First Epistle of John*, 38-41; Crain, *Readings on the First Epistle of John*, 53-59.

<sup>31</sup> Guy H. King, *The Fellowship* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1954). Other proponents of this view include C. C. Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1959); idem, "I, II, and 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 *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, New Testament, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 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).

<sup>32</sup> Hodges, *The Gospel under Siege*, 52-53; Ryrie, "I, II, and III John," 1466.

<sup>33</sup> Hodges focuses on the aspect of fellowship with the apostles rather than with God ("1 John," 833). Ryrie ("I, II, and III John," 1466), Roberts (*The Letters of John*, 24), and King (*The Fellowship*, 16) see the epistle as stressing fellowship with the Father, though not without including fellowship within the church body. Cf. Edward M. Curtis, "The Purpose of 1 John" (ThD disc., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1986), 162.

<sup>34</sup> Ryrie, "I, II, and III John," 1466; Curtis, "The Purpose of 1 John," 161.

and God the Father.<sup>35</sup> Hodges argues that 1:3 expresses the overall purpose of the epistle.<sup>36</sup> He says the three terms of address in 2:12-14 refer to all the readers rather than three groups of individuals differentiated by age or spiritual maturity.<sup>37</sup>

The controlling theme of fellowship is given in the purpose statement of 1:3.<sup>38</sup> Though it is not the subject of the prologue, fellowship, not eternal life, is the subject of the epistle.<sup>39</sup> This subject is then discussed in the various sections of the epistle.<sup>40</sup>

The tests given within the epistle enable the readers, understood as believers, to recognize when they are in fellowship with God in the sense of communion, not whether they are His children. The tests are not given to produce assurance of the possession of eternal life, of inclusion in God's family, but of the "functioning" of that life within the fellowship of God's family.<sup>41</sup> Performing according to these tests does not produce a knowledge of God in the sense of saving knowledge, but in the sense of a growing acquaintance that results from God's self disclosure based on the believer's obedience to His commands as revealed in the Upper Room Discourse.<sup>42</sup> Failing the tests indicates not an absence of salvation, but an absence of fellowship which must be restored.

In this view John differentiated between mature and immature believers.<sup>43</sup> The tests provided by John detail those areas wherein a believer must respond properly to have fellowship with God.<sup>44</sup> For example failure to walk in the light results in broken fellowship between the believer and God the Father, though not a departure from the "family."<sup>45</sup> Thus 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.

<sup>35</sup> Hodges, "1 John," 884; Judith M. Lieu, "'Authority to Become Children of God': A Study of 1 John," *Novum Testamentum* 23 (1981): 213; Mitchell, *Fellowship*, 16-17.

<sup>36</sup> Zane C. Hodges, "We Believe In: Assurance of Salvation," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 3 (Autumn 1990): 5.

<sup>37</sup> Hodges, "1 John," 890.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 881; Mitchell, *Fellowship*, 14; Pentecost, *The Joy of Fellowship*, 17.

<sup>39</sup> Ryrie, "I, II, and III John," 1466; Hodges, "1 John," 883.

<sup>40</sup> Ryrie, "I, II, and III John," 1465-66.

<sup>41</sup> Curtis, "The Purpose of 1 John," 135.

<sup>42</sup> Hodges, "1 John," 888.

<sup>43</sup> Curtis, "The Purpose of 1 John," 1-2.

<sup>44</sup> Hodges, "1 John," 884.

<sup>45</sup> King, *The Fellowship*, 17; Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, 341.

The fellowship of which John wrote was directed either Godward or among believers.<sup>46</sup> Pentecost represents the former understanding, while Hodges sees it promoted by John as horizontal in nature, specifically with the apostles.<sup>47</sup> Ryrie sees John's purpose as promoting fellowship with both God and the apostles.<sup>48</sup>

The terms of "fellowship," "abiding," "eternal life," and "knowing God" are related, though understood as describing aspects of the believer's relationship to the Father within His family. They develop John's doctrine of sanctification rather than regeneration. Fellowship should be understood in its natural sense as expressing relationship or communion, rather than merely possession of a common property. Abiding should be understood in the Pauline sense of walking in the Spirit rather than being in Christ. This is supported in part from the Johannine use of abiding in John 15, which need not be understood soteriologically. Eternal life refers to quality of life, as in John 10:10, rather than salvation. Knowing God is not equivalent to being saved, but is the result of walking with Him in fellowship.

A relationship between the Gospel of John and 1 John is identified by the Tests of Fellowship position. But this relationship is seen in the prologues of the two books rather than their conclusions. For example Ryrie says the prologue of 1 John 1:1-4 "correspond[s] to the opening eighteen verses of the Gospel and three verses of the Revelation."<sup>49</sup>

Though related to the Gospel, the epistle has its own distinct purpose. The epistle develops the concept of the believer's experience of eternal life in the way of fellowship with other believers and the Father, while the Gospel focuses on obtaining eternal life.<sup>50</sup> A parallel does not exist between the purpose statement of John 20:31 and that of 1 John 5:13. Rather, 1 John 5:13 is under-

<sup>46</sup> Grayston, though identified with the Tests of Life view, nonetheless identifies a key element in the definition of the Tests of Fellowship position when he proposes that "the writer" was promoting fellowship "between the two groups" (*The Johannine Epistles*, 33). Though Grayston interprets the majority of the epistle from the perspective of tests of spiritual life, his assessment of John's purpose as revealed in the prologue reflects the "fellowship" understanding of *κοινωνία*. Of note is his rejection of Johannine authorship, which he seeks to defend in part by suggesting that *Kou vla* is "non-Johannine language." Houlden, also holding to a Tests of Life view, notes that fellowship appears in John's writings only in the first main section of this epistle "and accords well with the Johannine concern for unity in the Christian body" (*A Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, 54). Thus he also sees *κοινωνία* being used in its broad sense of communion rather than soteriologically as another term for salvation.

<sup>47</sup> Hodges, "1 John," 883-84; Pentecost, *The Joy of Fellowship*, 17.

<sup>48</sup> Ryrie, "I, II, and III John," 1466.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*; Roberts, *The Letters of John*, 19.

<sup>50</sup> Mitchell, *Fellowship*, 13.

stood as a subpurpose, referring only to the immediate context, and being written in order to strengthen the readers' confidence in their fellowship with God through the confidence that results from assurance of salvation.

Assurance of salvation, if its teaching is not eliminated from the message of the epistle, is only a supporting aspect of the message. It is introduced late and discussed as a prerequisite to enjoying fellowship as a family member in God's household.<sup>51</sup> Assurance of salvation is a result of maintaining fellowship with God the Father.<sup>52</sup>

#### THE VIEW DEFENDED

In this view John introduced his subject at the beginning of his work, not at the end.<sup>53</sup> Since the epistle was written to be read aloud to a listening audience, John logically stated his purpose at the beginning of the writing. Johnson, though not writing a commentary on 1 John, offers an argument that strengthens the Tests of Fellowship approach to the epistle.

The subject is commonly introduced at the beginning of the text or in some shared context with the original readers. For communication to take place, the reader must understand what the author is talking about. If the author fails to introduce his subject somehow, then what he says has no relation to any subject in particular. Communication of a message is thereby thwarted.<sup>54</sup> He concludes from this that "an alert and perceptive reader will look for the subject in the beginning of the book."<sup>55</sup>

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.<sup>56</sup>

Fellowship is based on salvation.<sup>57</sup> Hodges says that John wrote in order to "assure his readers that, despite anything the antichrists have said, the believers do indeed possess eternal life."<sup>58</sup> Pentecost notes that, though a believer's misunderstand-

<sup>51</sup> Hodges, "1 John," 902; Ryrie, "I, II, and III John," 1477; Roberts, *The Letters of John*, 138; King, *The Fellowship*, 110.

<sup>52</sup> Mitchell, *Fellowship*, 17.

<sup>53</sup> Hodges, *The Gospel under Siege*, 52.

<sup>54</sup> Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 83.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Curtis, "The Purpose of 1 John," 156-61.

<sup>57</sup> Ryrie, "I, II, and III John," 1477.

<sup>58</sup> Hodges, "1 John," 902.

ing these truths does not affect his eternal destiny, it does effect his stay on earth. Further, without the comfort of the knowledge of one's salvation, the believer cannot "enter into the peace of God," that is, fellowship.<sup>59</sup> Thus it should be noted that the Tests of Fellowship view has no problem seeing a focus in the last section of the epistle on assurance of eternal life. But it must be seen as a subcategory of the broader subject of fellowship. One must be assured of his salvation in order to enjoy fellowship with God, and so John concluded his epistle by focusing on that issue.

In this view John 20:30-31 is not a comprehensive summary of the message of the Gospel of John. This verse refers to Jesus' signs after His resurrection, not the book as a whole. Jesus' resurrection rather than salvation is the referents.<sup>60</sup>

#### THE TWO VIEWS EVALUATED IS THE SUBJECT ETERNAL LIFE OR FELLOWSHIP?

Grayston's observation that I John argues a particular lifestyle that corresponds to eternal life not only expresses the view of the Tests of Life position well, but is quite valid. The subject of the epistle's prologue is not fellowship, but the apostolic proclamation of the "Word of Life" and "eternal life." Thus it is legitimate to see this as the subject of the epistle rather than fellowship, which occurs in a purpose clause rather than as an object of the verb. The subject of eternal life can be said to be introduced in the prologue along with the theme of fellowship.

#### THE TESTS ARE TESTS OF EITHER SPIRITUAL LIFE OR FELLOWSHIP

As noted, both views see the epistle as including three tests. Each view links those tests to their assumed subject. The problem with both views is that they run into logical problems when pushed to the limit. The Tests of Life view ends up holding that failure indicates a lack of life. Every Christian who is honest must admit to some habitual sin, whether great or small. Yet if the practice of sin or righteousness in 1 John 3 proves the presence of death or life, then one is forced to decide "how much is too much." Thus arguing that John intended these tests as indicators of the presence or absence of eternal life is both indefensible and dangerous. The question is legitimately asked, After giving such impossible tests as "proofs" of eternal life, how could John then say that he wrote to assure them of their possession of eternal life? The tests, if absolute and if proving the presence or absence of life,

<sup>59</sup> Pentecost, *The Joy of Fellowship*, 132.

<sup>60</sup> Mitchell, *An Everlasting Love*, 400.

can only cause one to doubt his salvation whenever he sins.

The same can be said for the Tests of Fellowship view. To support the position that a believer must pass the tests in order to be in fellowship with God, Hodges notes that the terms in 2:12-14 demand that John's readers be "genuine Christians" and that his purpose not be their assurance of salvation. If John wrote to believers and eternal security is accepted, then he must necessarily have addressed issues of fellowship among believers rather than issues of salvation, since none of the readers would need to be saved.<sup>61</sup> This argument has merit and is difficult to reject outright. Further, the Upper Room Discourse gives a strong support for this view, since Jesus addressed His disciples (with Judas absent) about issues of their relationship to each other and to the Father, much as is indicated in the prologue of I John. Jesus gave them the "new commandment" to love one another (John 13:34), which then became one of the tests in the epistle. The three occurrences of the test of love for the brethren are in 1 John 2:7-11; 3:10-24; and 4:7-5:5. Of note is the reference to this test being an "old commandment" which they had had "from the beginning." As love for other believers was not a test of salvation in the Upper Room, but one which proved their identity to "all men" as Jesus' disciples (John 13:35), it should not be seen as a test of salvation in the epistle. Thus love was indeed a fruit that indicated a relationship to Christ. But this relationship was that of a disciple, which Jesus later defined as "friend" (John 15:14-15). Also, "abiding" in John 15 is understood as referring to sanctification not soteriology. This works well for the first cycle of tests in 1 John 1 and 2. However, it does not work so well in chapter 3. Though the tests in chapter 1 determine whether one is in fellowship or not, the contrast between being in the family of God or the family of Satan in chapter 3 (as well as the mention of assurance of eternal life through proper confession in chapter 5) indicates that these tests do more than demonstrate fellowship alone.

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.

<sup>61</sup> Hodges, "1 John," 883.

## DO "THESE THINGS" IN 5:13 REFER TO THE ENTIRE EPISTLE OR THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT?

The strength of the Tests of Life view is that, while recognizing the place of 1 John 5:13 within the immediate context, it sees the verse as having a broader referent, namely, that of the epistle as a whole. Also this view seeks to identify the referent of **ταῦτα** without doing injustice to the context of the passage within which the term functions. **Ταῦτα** normally has a near referent.<sup>62</sup> Robertson relates the use of **ταῦτα** with **ἵνα** in 5:13 to John 15:11, and 17.<sup>63</sup> In both cases the term clearly refers to the immediate context. However, **ταῦτα** in these two verses cannot be used to shed light on John's use of **ταῦτα** in his epistle, since they occurred in Jesus' conversation and not as part of John's authorial comments. In Revelation 10:4 and 22:19 **τούτω** is also used in quoted speech. Thus a determinative pattern of use does not seem to be provided in other Johannine literature.

Curtis, who holds the Tests of Fellowship view, examined John's use of **ταῦτα** in 1 John and found that he used it three times to "express the content of what he was writing."<sup>64</sup> He noted that, though the term could be used to refer to either the previous or the following content, in 1 John 1:4 it is preferable to see it referring to what had just been written. 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.<sup>65</sup> Thus in 1 John **ταῦτα** seems to indicate a near referent rather than the entire epistle.

Does the relationship of 5:13 to its immediate context necessarily limit the meaning of **ταῦτα**? If 5:13 is functioning to link verses 5-11 with verses 14-21, as Marshall says, then it is necessarily tied to the immediate context and the weight of proof must fall on any who would attempt to broaden its scope.<sup>66</sup> That John used linking verses is evidenced by the difficulty that commentators have in determining the proper places to divide various sections of the epistle. The prime example is the problem of 2:28-3:1.

<sup>62</sup> H. E. Dana and J. R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 127.

<sup>63</sup> A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), 699.

<sup>64</sup> Curtis, "The Purpose of 1 John," 161.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 243.

Key terms in these verses serve to link the surrounding sections by providing a "bridge" from one to the other.<sup>67</sup> These include the verb μένετε in 2:28, which links it to 2:22-27 where μένω occurs five times, and Jesus' parousia in 2:29, which links it to 3:1-3 and His promised appearance. Brooke describes 2:28-29 as "transitional," since the verses are difficult to place in either section based on their content.<sup>68</sup> In the same way, 5:13 has transitional terms that link it directly to its immediate context and mitigate against its serving as a comprehensive summary of the entire book. Specifically ζωῆν αἰώνιον links 5:13 to verses 11-12, while εἶδητε links the verse to what follows in 5:15 and 19. This does not disallow the possibility that the verse could serve a double purpose. But it does indicate that the argument from grammar alone is not a sufficiently strong position to necessitate a view that the verse summarizes the entire epistle.

The argument that the epistolary aorist ἔγραψα in 5:13 means that John thereby referred to the whole epistle, especially when expressed as ταῦτα ἔγραψα, is also weak. Robinson agrees with Vine and Houlden concerning the meaning of ἔγραψα, that "the writer looks at his letter as the recipient will."<sup>69</sup> But does this mean that the writer was referring to the whole epistle? The presence of similar expressions in 2:1 (ταῦτα γράφω) and 2:26 (ταῦτα ἔγραψα), which clearly refer to their immediate context, mitigate against this.<sup>70</sup> The pattern John followed is that he used the phrase when summarizing a specific section of instruction.

#### IS 1 JOHN 5:13 PARALLEL TO JOHN 20:30-31?

Some argue, as noted earlier, that John's use of a summarizing purpose statement at the conclusion of his work is a stylistic feature characteristic of his writings and so the two verses serve parallel functions within the two works.<sup>71</sup> This argument depends on the Gospel of John so that, if John 20:30-31 cannot be defended as a clear purpose statement covering the full scope of the Gospel of John over against the Gospel's prologue, then neither must the statement in 1 John 5:13 refer to the entire epistle. Therefore two questions must be answered in evaluating this nearly

<sup>67</sup> Kistemaker, *James and I-III John*, 287.

<sup>68</sup> Brooke, *Johannine Epistles*, 64.

<sup>69</sup> Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 845.

<sup>70</sup> Hodges, "1 John," 902.

<sup>71</sup> Boice, *The Epistles of John*, 167; Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, 122; Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, 133; Feuifet, "The Structure of First John," 211; Goodman, *The Epistle of Eternal Life*, 7, 211; Govett, *Govett on I John*, 148; Plummer, *The Epistles of St. John*, 120; Stott, *The Letters of John*, 186; Vawter, "The Johannine Epistles," 2:411; Westcott, *The Epistles of John*, xxxix.

unanimous position held by the Tests of Life view. First, does John 20:31 actually serve as a comprehensive purpose statement for the Gospel? Second, if so, are the roles of 1 John 5:13 and John 20:30-31 similar? Mitchell, who holds the Tests of Fellowship view, proposes that John 20:30-31 refers only to chapter 20, with the signs being Jesus' appearances to Mary, the 10 apostles, and then Thomas.<sup>72</sup> Lenski responds well to Mitchell's position. He begins by arguing that the term "signs" refers to all of Jesus' works as well as His miracles and was linked to His discourses in the Gospel.<sup>73</sup> Further, the language of 20:30-31 seems to indicate, Lenski says, far more than the four resurrection appearances of Jesus, and the phrase "in this book" must refer to more than John 20.<sup>74</sup> This, along with John's description of Jesus' miracles as "signs," mitigates against Mitchell's position and argues for the whole Gospel being in view in 20:30-31.

However, does this necessarily require that the purpose statement be comprehensive, and therefore the controlling purpose for the Gospel? It can function in such a manner only if it can be demonstrated, that the contents of the Gospel can legitimately be summarized in all that 20:30-31 contains. And this cannot be demonstrated, since John said nothing in 20:30-31 about Jesus' revelation of the Father (John 1:18), which, as a major theme introduced in the prologue of the Gospel, is developed throughout the Gospel, and especially in the Upper Room Discourse. Rather than looking to John 20:30-31 as summarizing the purpose of the Gospel, one should look to the prologue wherein the contents of the entire Gospel are clearly introduced in seminal form.<sup>75</sup> Thus John 20:30-31 should not be viewed as the controlling, comprehensive purpose statement of the Gospel, but rather as a purpose statement secondary to the broader purpose of describing Jesus as the Word of God who reveals the Father, as well as being the One who gives life to those who believe in Him.<sup>76</sup> So the argument that 1 John 5:13 is a comprehensive purpose statement

<sup>72</sup> Mitchell, *An Everlasting Love*, 400.

<sup>73</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1943), 1394.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 1395; Frederic L. Godet, *Commentary on John's Gospel* (1866; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1978), 995.

<sup>75</sup> Feuillet, "The Structure of First John," 198-99; Stephen S. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), 93.

<sup>76</sup> A message statement for the Gospel of John is, "Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, reveals the Father and gives eternal life to those who believe in Him." This accounts not only for the role of the signs in revealing Jesus and describing truths concerning salvation, but also for His conversations with the Jews in John 5, 7, 8, and 10, and with His disciples in John 13-17 wherein He revealed the Father.

of the epistle because 1 John was purposefully patterned after the Gospel can be answered in part by recognizing that John 20:30-31 is not a comprehensive purpose statement for the Gospel and that the prologue of the Gospel of John presents more themes and reflects a broader purpose.

#### DOES THE SOTERIOLOGICAL EMPHASIS OF THE GOSPEL DETERMINE THE PURPOSE OF 1 JOHN?

Does the soteriological emphasis of the Gospel of John necessitate a soteriological emphasis for the epistle? Though John may have emphasized issues of regeneration in the Gospel, he was in no way obligated to continue that emphasis in his epistle.<sup>77</sup> In fact this becomes apparent in his two other epistles, which do not focus on issues of regeneration. Since they are recognized as having been written in the same period of John's ministry and reflecting a situation similar to that of 1 John, their emphasis on walking in the truth and showing hospitality to legitimate representatives of the church should inform the meaning of 1 John more than that of the more chronologically distant Fourth Gospel.

#### DOES 1 JOHN 1:3 GOVERN THE MESSAGE OF THE EPISTLE?

Some writers suggest that 1 John 1:3 presents the purpose of the epistle.<sup>78</sup> Curtis argues that *γράφω ταῦτα* ("I write these things," 5:13) introduces "intermediate purposes." He therefore says that 5:13 plays a subordinate role and that its *ἵνα* clause ("that you may know") is consequently also subordinate. But the *ἵνα* clause in 1:3 ("that you may have fellowship") is not limited in the same way.<sup>79</sup> Curtis fails to show that this is a trait in other Johannine writings. The occurrence of *γράψον . . . ταῦτα* in Revelation 1:19 does not follow the pattern of the epistle, since there the *ταῦτα* refers to all that follows, namely, the majority of the Book of Revelation. Also *ταῦτα . . . γέγραπται ἵνα* in John 20:30-31 would seem to mitigate against Curtis's contention, since John does not have another purpose statement within the Gospel, especially not in the prologue. Any purpose in the prologue must be found by inference rather than direct statement. Thus the argument for a pattern in the epistle is weak since this pattern cannot be demon-

<sup>77</sup> John's focus on regeneration is evident, not only from his extensive treatment of Jesus' teaching on salvation and faith, but also in the statement of John 20:30-31, which clearly serves to focus the attention of the reader on that aspect of the Gospel before concluding with the epilogue.

<sup>78</sup> Curtis, "The Purpose of 1 John," 161; Lieu, "Authority to Become Children of God: A Study of 1 John," 213; Mitchell, *Fellowship*, 16-17; Ryrie, "I, II, and III John," 1466.

<sup>79</sup> Curtis, "The Purpose of 1 John," 156-61.

strated elsewhere, and the evidence of the Gospel, which is similar in subject and pattern to the epistle, certainly stands contrary to his contention.

### CONCLUSION

The two views of the purpose of 1 John clearly differ in both their understanding of John's purpose for writing the epistle and the meanings he gave to key passages and terms. Whatever interpretive error each view makes can be linked to their perception of purpose and the influence that purpose is allowed to exercise over the interpretation of difficult passages.

A more recent development, which recognizes the place of both purpose statements in the message of 1 John, is reflected in the work of Smalley.<sup>80</sup> Rather than identifying salvation or fellowship as the one controlling purpose, he looks to the problems facing the church that are revealed through textual clues and sees the author "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."<sup>81</sup> Thus each is a purpose rather than the purpose. The word for fellowship (*κοινωνία*) is allowed its normal, nonsoteriological sense, while assurance of salvation is recognized as an issue addressed near the conclusion of the epistle.<sup>82</sup>

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. Further, it allows formulation of an understanding of the message of the epistle to grow out of all its affirmations rather than a single assertion. The influence of those purposes on their immediate contexts must be recognized and properly utilized in discerning John's intended meaning, while the message of the epistle as a whole, as introduced in its prologue, must be given its due place when approaching its other sections.

Interestingly this problem has arisen because I John is one of the few biblical documents in which the author stated his purpose in writing. Unfortunately John does it twice. Therefore both statements must be carefully considered in seeking to ascertain the message of 1 John.

<sup>80</sup> Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1984).

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 15. Others such as Brown (*The Epistles of John*, 632) see the same historical situation, but still find in 1 John 5:13 the dominant purpose and see the epistle as focusing on issues of eternal life rather than fellowship.

<sup>82</sup> Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 12-13, 289-91.

This material is cited with gracious permission from: y  
Dallas Theological Seminary  
3909 Swiss Ave.  
Dallas, TX 75204  
www.dts.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: [thildebrandt@gordon.edu](mailto:thildebrandt@gordon.edu)