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The Johannine Epistles

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The Johannine Epistles

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The *Epworth Preacher's Commentaries* that Greville P. Lewis edited so successfully in the 1950s and 1960s having now served their turn, the Epworth Press has commissioned a team of distinguished academics who are also preachers and teachers to create a new series of commentaries that will serve the 1990s and beyond. We have seized the opportunity offered by the publication in 1989 of the Revised English Bible to use this very readable and scholarly version as the basis of our commentaries, and we are grateful to the Oxford and Cambridge University Presses for the requisite licence and for granting our authors pre-publication access. They will nevertheless be free to cite and discuss other translations wherever they think that these will illuminate the original text.

Just as the books that make up the Bible differ in their provenance and purpose, so our authors will necessarily differ in the structure and bearing of their commentaries. But they will all strive to get as close as possible to the intention of the original writers, expounding their texts in the light of the place, time, circumstances, and culture that gave them birth, and showing why each work was received by Jews and Christians into their respective Canons of Holy Scripture. They will seek to make full use of the dramatic advance in biblical scholarship world-wide but at the same time to explain technical terms in the language of the common reader, and to suggest ways in which Scripture can help towards the living of a Christian life today. They will endeavour to produce commentaries that can be used with confidence in ecumenical, multiracial, and multifaith situations, and not by scholars only but by preachers, teachers, students, church members, and anyone who wants to improve his or her understanding of the Bible.

Ivor H. Jones

PREFACE

The gospel and epistles of John constitute a distinctive and remarkable group among the writings of the New Testament. They represent a concentration of thought about Christ and the Christian life expressed in the simplest language and reflecting basic human needs and aspirations. In previous work I have concentrated on the way the gospel portrays Jesus, Johannine christology. This commentary is the fruit of the stimulus and challenge I have found in interpreting the epistles. It is designed in turn to make that stimulus and challenge more readily accessible for the common reader.

In conformity with the more general focus of the series I have refrained from including direct reference to the works of other scholars in this field and critical discussion of their work. Those aware of current issues will recognize both my dependence on the work of others and my own independent suggestions for different interpretations.

I should also like to acknowledge the stimulus I have received from hearing preachers expound the epistles and from having opportunity to do so frequently myself. In particular I should like to thank Revd Ian Tozer and Revd Brian Richards for reading the original draft of the manuscript and for making comments. I take full responsibility for the text in its present form.

I have endeavoured as far as possible to use inclusive language in the exposition, but have not extended this to reformulating quotations from the Revised English Bible upon which the commentary is based. Occasionally I offer alternative or more literal translations where the finer points of interpretation have demanded them.

Interpreting the epistles in the modern world is not easy, if we are to attempt something more than atomistic selection of pet texts and themes. The interpreter must wrestle with what appears to be a preoccupation by the writer(s) with internal community issues and with a seemingly dogmatic exclusivity with regard to those who do

not conform. I have endeavoured in this commentary to give full weight to such issues and to argue that the message of the epistles can come to life for us beyond the confined concerns of their situation only by taking that situation seriously. My hope is that this commentary will contribute to making such encounter possible.

Perth, Western Australia
March 1992

INTRODUCTION

God is love. This most precious gem of Christian faith is found in the Johannine Epistles (I John 4.8,16). In the same terrain we find similar jewels: *God is light* (I John 1.5); *If we confess our sins, he is just and may be trusted to forgive our sins and cleanse us from every kind of wrongdoing* (I John 1.9); *The message we have heard from the beginning is that we should love one another* (I John 3.11). Such treasures of Christian conviction have come down to us embedded in the crust of human experience. It is a terrain of stress and brokenness, of large blocks which have shifted, of fractures and the emergence of new forms.

We may be happy simply to contemplate *God is love* embroidered on the book mark or set within a favourite hymn. This commentary, however, is an invitation to explore it and other precious gems within the complex setting of their origins, preserved for us in part in the Johannine epistles. Such exploration is its own reward; it also enables us to appreciate such gems afresh today.

I John: Its Composition and Structure

On the surface our biblical map tells us we have before us three epistles or letters by John. A closer examination shows us the name 'John' is missing from all three. Only the second and third are letters, and they are scarcely a page in length, one papyrus sheet each. I John sounds like a letter in parts; the author frequently refers to the act of writing: *I have written* or *I write* (e.g. 2.1,12–13). But it lacks the usual format of a letter of ancient times. It begins without naming the author, the addressee and giving a greeting and ends without the usual personal salutation. It is not a letter in the usual sense. It reads much more like an address written to be read to a community or

congregation by someone other than the author. It is one of the earliest preserved sermons of Christianity.

When we examine its structure in detail, we find a clear Opening (1.1–4) and Closing (5.13–21) and, in between, the main body of the address (1.5–5.12). Within the main body we can detect blocks of material. The author has employed common techniques used to enable hearers to know where one section ends and another begins. All ancient writings were written to be read aloud. Writers built indicators into their materials as aids for the listener. These include the technique of repeating at the end of a section the same theme and images as those used at its beginning. For instance, in the first major section, 1.5–2.11, both 1.5–7 and 2.9–11 use the imagery of living or walking in the light or in the darkness. This technique is commonly called inclusion, since it is a way of enclosing (Latin: *inclusio*) the material of a passage within a framework of a clear beginning and ending. It told the listener when one major section ended and another was about to begin.

Frequently the author ends one section with just a hint of the theme of the section to follow. In 2.11, for instance, we find that the author goes beyond the imagery of walking in light or darkness to add: *the darkness has made him blind*. This begins the preparation for the section to follow, which, after the further transitional material in 2.12–17, commences in 2.18 and runs to 2.27. Its concern is with false teachers (2.18–27). Similarly 2.27 ends with the exhortation: *Dwell in him as he taught you do do*. 2.28 immediately picks up the theme of indwelling: *Even now, children, dwell in him*, and will go on to expound how dwelling in him and being children of God enables the believer to avoid sin. I will call this the technique of transitional hints. The same technique is particularly well illustrated in John 14.

Occasionally, as in 2.28, the author pauses to address the hearers directly, *Children*. This can indicate the beginning of a new section, as it does here. Similarly, *My dear friends*, in 4.1 introduces a new section, which runs from 4.1 to 5.12 and begins and ends with the issue of right belief about Christ and the evidence for it. But such direct address need not function as a marker in this way; it does not, for instance, in 2.12–13.

Beside looking for signs of inclusion, transitional hints and direct address, I have sought also to assess coherence of content in proposing sections and smaller segments of material within them. One of the major difficulties in knowing where one section or segment ends and another begins, is that the author is frequently repetitive and

that his thought often seems to proceed in a spiral. Similarly he also shows a marked preference for grouping material in threes (for instance, the three *if* clauses in 1.5–2.2, and the threefold address to *children, fathers,* and *young men* in 2.12–14). But should we look for that as a major determining factor in the structure? I have identified a threefold structure in Part One (1.5–2.17) by including the transitional material in 2.12–17. The pattern of threes is quite pervasive here, right down to many of the formulations of individual verses. But the same does not apply so neatly to the epistle as a whole, nor to its other major sections.

Within the commentary I have explained in more detail my reasons for dividing the material as I have. I have been aware that my own assessment stands beside and in part in dependence upon the efforts of others in this regard. At many points I have been aware that I could have justified more than one option. Only some of the structures are visible; I have identified the following contours.

I John in Outline

THE OPENING: 1.1–4 A statement of authority and intent

THE MAIN BODY OF THE EPISTLE: 1.5–5.12 Assurance and warning

PART ONE: Fellowship, obedience, and forgiveness 1.5–2.17

I 1.5–2.2 Being forgiven or false – *If we . . .*
1. 1.5–7 Living in light or darkness
2. 1.8–10 Confessing or denying sin
3. 2.1–2 Christ atoning for sin

II 2.3–2.11 Being obedient or disobedient – *Whoever says . . .*
1. 2.3–6 Keeping God's commands
2. 2.7–8 The new and old command
3. 2.9–11 Living in light or darkness

III 2.12–2.17 Being confident and cautious in the world
1. 2.12–13a *I write to you children, fathers, young men*
2. 2.13b–14 *I have written to you children, fathers, young men*
3. 2.15–17 *Do not set your hearts on the world*

PART TWO: The danger of false teaching 2.18–27
I 2.18–21 The antichrists and the Christian *chrisma*
  1. 2.18–19 The secession
  2. 2.20–21 The anointing assures knowledge
II 2.22–25 Denying the Father and the Son or dwelling in them
  1. 2.22–23 The antichrist denies the Father and the Son
  2. 2.24–25 The Christian dwells in the Father and the Son
III 2.26–27 The deceivers and the Christian *chrisma*
  1. 2.26 Those who mislead
  2. 2.27 The anointing teaches knowledge

PART THREE: Christian life-style in practice 2.28–3.24
I 2.28–29 Not being ashamed when Christ comes
II 3.1–18 Being God's children
  1. 3.1–3 The promise entailed in being God's children
  2. 3.4–10 Two life systems, the work of God and the devil
  3. 3.11–18 Two contrasting sets of behaviour
III 3.19–24 Being able to approach God with confidence

PART FOUR: The witness of the Spirit 4.1–5.12
I 4.1–6 Right confession and true discernment about Christ
II 4.7–5.4a Right living: Love, the sign of God
  1. 4.7–11 Loving one another, the mark of God's children
  2. 4.12–16 The unseen God dwelling in the true believer
  3. 4.17–18 Love removing fear of judgement
  4. 4.19–21 Loving the unseen God and the seen believer
  5. 5.1–4a The child of God loving God's children
III 5.4b–12 Right confession about Christ and its evidence

THE CLOSING: 5.13–21 Final Instructions and Encouragement

I 5.13 The epistle's aim: reassurance
II 5.14–17 Approaching God in prayer
  1. 5.14–15 Praying to one who hears our requests
  2. 5.16–17 Praying about people who go astray
III 5.18–21 Standing on God's side against the evil one
  1. 5.18 Being able not to sin, untouched by the evil one
  2. 5.19 Belonging to God's family, not to the evil one
  3. 5.20–21 Knowing the true God; avoiding idolatry

I John: Its Issues and Concerns

The Opening and Closing already give important clues about the concerns of the author. He sees fit to summarize these with the parting words, *Children, be on your guard against idols* (5.21). A few verses earlier he speaks ominously of people who have committed the unforgivable sin and put themselves beyond redemption (5.16–17). This is rough terrain. The Opening of the letter reveals a concern with the reality of the revelation in Christ. He was seen, heard, and even felt by the witnesses whose authority the writer represents (1.1–2). Those who have placed themselves beyond redemption have denied this reality. Along with it they have denied themselves any further access to the *common life* (1.3), to the fellowship with the Father and the Son and with fellow believers, and so to the life which Christ the Word made flesh has brought (1.1–2).

The author is writing about events and issues already familiar to his hearers; we do not share their knowledge. But from within the main body of the epistle we can discern some of the main lines of concern. The most concrete is in 2.18, where the author refers to the departure of members of the community, whom he now labels *antichrists*. He appears to refer to the same group in 4.5. There, as in the previous reference, we find him accusing them of not believing rightly about Christ. What they believe can, on his assessment, no longer be called Christian; it is false teaching and false religion; hence his parting salvo about *idolatry*. They worship a false god.

These false teachers, who according to 4.5 enjoy some popularity in *the world*, deny *that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh* (4.2) or that he came *with water and blood* (5.6). For them he came *by the water alone* (5.6). Even a surface reading of these texts enables us to identify here a major break in the terrain and a significant shift in the substance of belief on the part of those who have abandoned the community. These teachers claim the inspiration of the Spirit for their views (4.1–3). The author warns the hearers against such claims, urging that the original confession about Christ should be used as a measure. In the Opening he is claiming that tradition is on his side. He encourages the hearers to stand firm on this basis of what they received *from the beginning* (2.24) and to trust the genuine anointing of the Spirit which is theirs (2.20,27).

The danger of false teaching is clearly a theme in the Opening and Closing, in Part Two (2.18–27) and at least in the first and last

segments of Part Four (4.1–5.12, especially 4.1–6 and 5.4b–12). It is possible to read the rest of the epistle as if it deals with something quite separate and unrelated. This is surely false. But it is equally false to imagine that behind every verse, under every stone, we should find traces of the rift.

The author is writing to a community which has experienced schism. He is not writing to those who have left. He writes for those who remain. Part of what he says relates to this event; he reassures the hearers of the soundness of their position against any claims to the contrary by the false teachers. But part is addressing their ongoing needs. It is not always easy to discern what takes its structure from the rift and what belongs more to the overall contours of general concern.

Part One (1.5–2.17) is strongly reassuring about forgiveness and challenging about the command that Christians should love one another. But each positive statement has its negative counterpart. There are those who confess their sin; there are those who deny it. There are those who obey the command; there are those who disobey. The sharp contrast may be a rhetorical device. The author is fond of formulating parallel statements which contrast with one another. What is being said has universal application and the author doubtless intends it in this way. But, regularly, he also links the universal to the particular situation facing his readers. Those who walk in darkness are also those whom darkness has blinded, according to 2.11, and this begins the prelude to the discussion of false teachers.

The author engages in rhetoric in the repeated threefold address to the community in 2.12–14, as *children, fathers,* and *young men*. But this reinforcement of the readers' own stance also allows us to see marks of the struggle. The conquest of the evil one, for which the young men are praised, relates directly elsewhere to the resistance against false teaching (4.4; 5.4–5). That evil one represents the idolatry against which the Closing warns (5.18–21).

The warning against *setting* their *hearts on the world* (2.15–17) contains no direct reference to the false teachers. It is universally applicable and doubtless reflects common preaching of the day. Nevertheless, as 4.4–5 shows, the author reckons these false teachers to belong to *the world*. The warning against *the world* in 2.15–17 therefore almost certainly also includes a warning against them and so forms a fitting transition to Part Two, which deals directly with the danger they pose.

Part Three (2.28–3.24) is concerned to encourage the hearers to live

their lives in a way that will enable them to stand with confidence on the day of judgement. The truths expressed here are again universal. There is no concern with the false teachers in the joyful anticipation in 3.1–3 about the promised hope of believers. It is different, however, in the series of contrasts which follow. There is a twofold focus. On the one side is the exposition of Christian life as system of right living understood as love. It begins with God's own loving and issues in the fruit of a loving life in anyone who stays in relationship with God. This works in basically the same way as its opposite, where evil deeds betray evil connection. This much is of universal application and doubtless understood so. But another focus seems to have in view behaviour which has occurred directly within the community: failure to love fellow-Christians, including failure to share in time of material need (3.17).

If Part Two focussed on belief and Part Three on behaviour, Part Four (4.1–5.12) combines both. Already 3.23, at the conclusion of Part Three, had summarized the issues thus far: *His command is that we should give our allegiance to his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as Christ commanded us.* In Part Four the first (4.1–6) and last segments (5.4b–12) are concerned with right belief against the claims of the false teachers. Wedged between these is a block which argues the centrality of love to God's being and so to the life of the Christian. It uses the fulfilment of that love in us as the sign that we truly belong to God. Failure to believe rightly about Christ as God's Son and failure to love one's fellow-Christian go hand in hand as the signs of deceit and falsehood (4.15,20).

It is in this remarkable block of material that we find the precious gem: *God is love* (4.8,16). Born out of the stress and strain of a community in conflict, this statement and the truths which surround it are timeless. But their setting is not timeless. It is about the pain of lovelessness within a community.

Failure to believe rightly in Christ and failure to love belong to the same stratum of thought. In both the issue is failure to take the human side, the earthed, concrete reality seriously. Not to take Christ's reality in flesh and blood seriously goes hand in hand with not taking our own human flesh and blood seriously. Not taking our own flesh and blood seriously means not loving ourselves and not loving one another. It reflects a spirituality unconcerned with the concrete issues of human living and human relationships. Beneath the surface seems to lie religion which denies value to much of life. It is idolatrous; it is not the religion of God, the Creator.

By contrast, the author reaffirms the reality of Christ's coming in the flesh, as he had in the Opening. This coming was an expression of God's loving (4.9–10). To believe this and to let its reality make its impact upon us means that we, too, become engaged in such loving. Believing such love enables a person to be confident before God, knowing victory over fear, and to obey the command to live a life of love towards others. The author espouses a system of living which begins and ends in love. It is a system which includes all of life. Abandoning this system and all its stands for is, for the author, choosing to worship another god. Worse than that, he believes it is go down a path from which there is no escape and so to become one for whom it is pointless to pray (5.16–17).

I John: Its Abiding Significance

The heat of conflict and the stresses and fractures which resulted have left us an epistle of mixed contours. It limits itself to the context of strife within the church, but has produced precious stones which have shone their truth universally. The centrality of love, instead of fear, in understanding God has to be one of the author's main achievements in expounding the meaning of Christian tradition. His understanding of Christian life as a balance of the command to love and the enabling to love, arising out of our relation with God who loves, deserves to stand beside Paul's great expositions of love as the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5.22–23; I Cor. 13; Rom. 8.1–4).

The same rich understanding has produced odd statements about Christians not even being able to sin (3.9; 5.18) in contrast to others where the grain runs the other way, promising forgiveness for the Christian who sins (1.9; 2.2,12; 5.16). The position taken in this commentary is that the severity of this conflict is lessened when we probe beneath the structure of each saying. More disturbing is the author's abandonment of hope for those who have surrendered their faith for the way of false religion. He shares it with other contemporaries, like the writer to the Hebrews. In time, through great struggle, such hopelessness would give way to a wider understanding of grace in the church, which had its beginnings already in the New Testament in the story of Peter who denied his Lord.

The intense preoccupation with Christians loving or not loving

one another has led some to see in I John a document of sectarianism. It represents on this reading a retreat from universal love, a narrowing of focus, the self-indulgence of a small group intent on its own survival. It is possible to construe I John in this way. It means attributing a very limited understanding to statements about God's sending his Son, so that they apply now only to the chosen ones. This was no initiative for the world. *Saviour of the World* in 4.14 is merely a formal designation and Christ's initiative to *atone for our sins, and not ours only but the sins of the whole world* (2.2) a traditional flourish.

I prefer to attribute the author's narrowed focus to his own intense preoccupation with the particular situation he addresses. His words about love remain totally within the concerns of relations within the Christian community. He knows this love is also for all humanity (2.2; 4.14), but everything he says here relates only to Christians loving fellow-Christians. That was what was at stake. In describing the nature of this love the author shows that he understands it as open, expansive and affirming of flesh and blood, and so also of all God's creation. It is rooted in his understanding of God as loving in this way. The flourish of 2.2 and the formula of 4.14 are well grounded in the author's intent and not stones which have rolled from higher places. They are important indicators of belonging to a wider structure of thought. It would be quite wrong to deduce from this that on the broader front he would understand the gift of love and the command to love one another as applicable only to Christians. The gem is just waiting there to be lifted!

I John and the Gospel according to John

The first epistle of John is not an island to itself. It bears striking resemblance to the gospel according to John. There we find many of the same features. Both writings commence in a similar way with reference to the Word. Both show a preference for referring to God as Father and Jesus as Son. Both speak of God sending his Son for us. Both understand the role of Spirit primarily as that of teacher. Both share a wide range of favourite vocabulary, including: life, eternal life, light, truth, knowledge, being born of God, laying down one's life for someone, love, dwell in, witness, commands, seeing God, believing; and on the negative side: sin, death, darkness,

falsehood, liar, being born of the devil, hate, the world, the evil one, judgement. The parallels are particularly strong in speeches and discourses of Jesus, where a similar style of repetition, contrasting parallels, use of imagery, techniques of inclusion and transitional hints prevails.

Most of the parallels are confined to similar turns of phrase such as living or walking in darkness or in light (1.6–7; 2.10–11; John 8.12; 11.9–10; 12.35, 40) or belonging to the truth (2.21; 3.19; John 18.37). In some instances we probably have a direct allusion to the text of the gospel. Thus the allusion to the *new command* in 2.7–8 echoes Jesus' 'new command' of John 13.34–35; the promise that prayers would be heard (3.22; 5.14) repeats a similar promise from Jesus in John 14.13,14; 15.7,16; 16.23–24; and the Opening of the epistle echoes the prologue with its imagery of the Word, life and light. Direct allusions are, however surprisingly few.

Some of the closest parallels are to be found in John 15–17, where similar themes abound. There, too, we find a concern for unity and for mutual love over against a world that hates the believer. Many of the features of this landscape are recognizable. These include the motifs of mutual indwelling (15.4–7), of Christ's words dwelling in the disciples (15.7), of dwelling in love (15.9–10), of assurance of heard prayer (15.7,16; 16.23), of the Father's love and of dwelling in that love (15.9), of keeping Christ's love command (15.10), of fulfilment of joy (15.11), of loving one another (15.12,17), of Christ laying down his life as the sign of that love (15.13), of the world's hatred (15.18), of belonging to the world (15.19).

The density of parallel motifs here is not to be explained only by the fact that similar concerns are being addressed. It reflects a similar origin. The parallels in John 15–17 are closer to I John than any other part of the gospel. This becomes all the more significant when we recognize that these chapters belong to the more recent stages of the gospel's composition and have been interposed to break the natural sequence between 14.31 and 18.1. They represent an expansion of Jesus' words to his disciples, the Christian community, probably in the light of a new situation which has arisen. They do not indicate that major doctrinal error has occurred in the community; they do, however, reflect a situation when division was calling for a renewed commitment to unity and mutual love.

If we look for possible indications within the gospel of doctrinal dispute, we find few. Significantly, those which are found, belong to the most recent stages of the gospel's composition. The clearest

instance is 19.34–35, where the author makes a special point of underlining the reliability of his evidence that this was a real human body which really died. Perhaps at this latest stage of editing, 1.14's famous statement 'the Word became flesh', was read as making the same claim, though originally it was not penned against controversy. Perhaps 6.53–54, with its emphasis on consuming flesh and blood in the eucharist, and 20.24–29, Thomas's groping confirmation of the reality of Christ's resurrection reflects similar concerns, but this is disputed.

The presence in the latter stages of the gospel's composition of the concerns and of language characteristic of the first epistle suggests that the epistle was written at or shortly after the time of the final version of the gospel. For some this would indicate that one author, having completed the final editing of his gospel, penned the epistle a short time later. Leaving aside the thorny question about whether a single hand worked on the gospel from beginning to end, there are sufficient indicators to suggest that this will not adequately explain the authorship of the epistle.

Comparing the first epistle with the gospel, we find both similarities and differences which are striking, precisely because of those similarities. The gospel proclaims the coming of the Son who has been sent in love from the Father to make the Father known. Because he represents the Father he is the light of the world, the bread of life, the resurrection and the life, the way the truth and the life. The underlying model is that of the revealer, sent from above. To believe in him is to receive life, eternal life. His coming has brought judgement to the world. Response to him on earth is a choice for life or death, light or darkness.

When we turn to the epistle we find that the saving work of Christ is presented in a way which, unlike the gospel, does not depend primarily on the revealer model of the envoy sent to make the Father known. Rather salvation comes because the Father sent the Son to perform an act of atonement. It is this act of laying down his life which is central to the author's understanding of what achieved salvation. The gospel writer knows this tradition, even uses the same technical language for self-giving, but never makes it a central theme. The possible exception is John 1.29, but even there it stands in isolation and is open to a wide range of interpretations. In other words, the author of the gospel and the author of the epistle have a different understanding of how Christ brought salvation to us. The

latter does not use the revealer/envoy model which is so central to the gospel.

In this way the author of the epistle is closer to the more traditional emphases present in Paul's epistles, I Peter, Hebrews and Revelation, than is the evangelist. It has also been noted that there are other significant minor variations between the two when speaking of Christ. Both share the Greek word, *parakletos (advocate)*. In the gospel it refers to the Spirit (14.16,26; 15.26; 16.7–15) and also, by implication (in 14.16), to Jesus on earth as they exercise primarily a teaching role of bringing comfort and challenge to the disciples and to the world; whereas in the epistle it refers to Christ in heaven in his role as intercessor for his own before God (2.1).

Similarly, terms associated with Christ in the gospel, like *light*, in the claim: *I am the light of the world* (8.12; 9.5), appear in the epistle as attributes of God: *God is light* (1.5). Altogether, the epistle gives far more emphasis directly to God in relation to humanity than it does to Christ. Belief about Christ has been brought so much to the fore by the confrontation, that *it*, or rather *he*, has become the central focus, as a comparison between the opening words of each writing makes clear.

Many have seen a significant contrast between the two in the area of traditional expectations associated with the end of the world. In the gospel the focus is upon moving now from death to life through faith. In the epistle the emphasis on the future is preserved more strongly. The false teachers are evidence that the author and his hearers are living in the last days (2.18). The judgement day has yet to come and sets the tone for present Christian commitment (2.28; 4.17). Christians look forward to transformation when they will be transfigured to be like Christ (3.2). In the gospel there are very few such references. Resurrection on the last day reads like an appended formula in 6.39,40,44 and 54; judgement by Jesus' word is maintained in 12.48; passing from death to life in 5.24–27 overshadows, but does not obliterate, the tradition about future resurrection in 5.28–29; it finds its echo in the epistle's promise that those who love their fellow-Christians have passed from death to life (3.14). But while the gospel upholds the traditional expectation, in the epistle it plays a much more central role.

The gospel and the epistle almost certainly share the same community and tradition. But they reflect different stages of that community's growth and most probably also different authors. The main body of the gospel reflects disputes with Judaism and doubtless

preserves material from the days when the two were very close. The rift evident in the gospel is the rift with the synagogue. The blocks have moved. In Jesus' speech against the Jews in John 8 the author employs the sharp tools of excision and exclusion. They are of the devil; they belong to the side of falsehood; they refuse the truth. In the epistle the ground has shifted. The opponents have become people from within the community itself. Of issues with Judaism there is no trace. The conflict centres now not on the truth that is in Jesus, but the truth about him.

Similarly we find none of the gospel's concern to claim the Jewish heritage, the fulfilment of Old Testament patterns. Relations with Judaism and comfort and reassurance for Christians coping with their estrangement from that heritage are not the issue. The use of the Cain and Abel story in 3.12 is purely illustrative. The heritage to be claimed is not that of the Old Testament, but that of Christianity itself.

I John and the Community Tradition

The material shared with the gospel may derive as much from the community as directly from the gospel itself. We must not think of the gospel as standing in isolation from the community, as though its one author alone had its distinctive language and turn of phrase or its ways of speaking about Christ. The gospel, itself, claims the gift of the Spirit as inspiration for its representation of Christ and assures that this gift was the promise to all disciples (14.26; 16.7–15). Gospels were written to be read aloud in the community. So much of the fourth gospel depends on a knowing community for its subtle use of language and irony to have effect. There is no reason to think that only one of its members could write in the characteristically 'Johannine' style. The common Johannine tradition reflected in the gospel and the epistle preserved many traditions known elsewhere. The Johannine church is an unusual feature on the landscape, but still attached to mainland. The promise of answered prayer (3.22; 5.14; John 14.13,14; 15.7,16; 16.23–24), for instance, is an old tradition (Matt. 7.7–11; Luke 11.9–13; Mark 11.24). The expectation of an antichrist (2.18) belongs to those expectations of the last days such as are portrayed in Revelation and Mark 13. The hope of future

transfiguration (3.2) reflects a similar world of thought. The acclamation that God loved and sent his Son into the world, famous from John 3.16–17, and present in I John 4.9–10, belongs to an old tradition, present also in Rom. 8.3,32; Gal. 4.4 and in variant form in Gal. 2.20; Eph. 5.1,25. The image of Christ's death as atoning (2.2; 4.10) and of his blood as cleansing (1.7) reflect common traditions.

The understanding of the Spirit primarily as teacher reflects the same world as the *paraklētos* sayings of the gospel; the image of the *anointing* (2.20,27) reflects baptismal tradition also evident in Paul (II Cor. 1.21–22). Discerning spirits was a task confronting many in the early church, as already Paul showed (I Cor. 12.10). The confessions of faith, *Jesus is the Christ* and *Jesus is the Son of God*, were widely used and have become, for the author, a shorthand for right belief about Jesus. Both the gospel and epistle share the tradition about people not being able to see God, but apply it differently, the gospel to Christ's revelation (1.18), the epistle to the revelation in the believer (4.12). The words about *the world* in 2.15–17 represent a common stock of traditional ideas shared also with Judaism. The notion of *love* as something which is to be *brought to perfection* in the believer (2.5; 4.12,17) is one the author shared with others of his time and is found also in Clement's first *Letter to the Corinthians* (49.5; 50.3) and in the *Didache* (10.5–6; 11.7).

The author is conscientiously not an innovator; he is battling with innovators. It is not surprising, therefore, that we find he makes so much use of traditional material. He stands on what was there *from the beginning* (1.1; 2.7,24; 3.11). Some have sought to trace more elaborate blocks of material which the author has used, drawn from Christian, sometimes even non-Christian, sources. The contrasting parallelisms invite speculation as to whether they may have existed independently at some stage. Is the excursus on love in 4.7–10 such a piece? Or does it merely reflect the author's self-conscious style? The most carefully worked piece, the repeated threefold address to *children, fathers,* and *young men* (2.12–14) is clearly the author's composition. This probably applies also to the work as a whole.

The epistle also shows significant similarities with II and III John. This commentary includes these two letters and they deserve to be considered in their own right. After discussing them individually I shall return to the possible relationships among all three, including any further light they may shed on the first epistle.

II John

The so-called second letter of John, unlike the first, is an actual letter and follows the usual format of a letter. In that standard format the letter commenced by naming the writer and the addressee and giving a greeting, and ended with words of farewell (for greater detail see the commentary on II John). In outline II John has the following structure:

1–3 Introductory greeting
4 Affirmation of relationship
5–11 Body of the letter
  5–6 An exhortation to mutual love
  7–8 The deceivers
  9–11 The strategy of not offering hospitality to deceivers
12 Parting words affirming the relationship
13 Passing on of greetings.

The writer identifies himself, as in III John, as *the Elder*. This seems to be a special designation by which he is known and respected; it may also reflect his age and possibly his holding the office of elder, but primarily it goes beyond these. The addressee, *the Lady chosen by God*, is probably not an individual person, but stands for a Christian community, in the same way as the final greetings sent from the *children of* her *sister* (13) reflect the greetings of one congregation by another.

The concerns of the body of the letter are announced in the words with which the greeting concludes: *in truth and love* (3), but in reverse order: exhortation to mutual love (5–6) and warning about those who deny the truth about Christ (7–8) and a strategy for dealing with them by refusing hospitality (9–11).

The letter bears close resemblance to I John and repeats a number of its themes in the same order. The motif of *truth* and how one *lives* (4) echoes I John 1.5–8 and 2.3–6. The concern with keeping *the command we have received from the Father* (4) also reflects the concerns of I John 2.3–6. This *command* is then expounded as *not* a *new command*, but as *the one we have had from the beginning* (5–6), in part, reflecting I John 2.7–8 word for word. Following the sequence of the first epistle (2.11b–17 and especially 18–27), the writer goes on to warn of the *deceivers . . . people who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist* (7–8). Again we find the language of the corresponding section of I John (*antichrist,*

deceiver), but at this point also a strong correspondence with other passages concerned with the false teachers, especially 4.2: *every spirit which acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God*. The correspondences continue in v. 9: *anyone who does not stand by the teaching about Christ, but goes beyond it, does not possess God; he who stands by it possesses both the Father and the Son*. Here we find echoes both of the section in the first epistle dealing with the false teachers (2.22–23) and of the corresponding section which concludes it (5.11–12).

The extent of correspondence calls for explanation. It might be the one author abbreviating his own work or simply following a similar train of thought with similar formulations. It could be that this letter was penned before the first epistle and formed the basis for the expanded version found there. Within I John the exhortations read well as an address written to a community. But in II John there is an artificiality in the way the exhortations stand somewhat unmediated in the text, suggesting that they are a deliberate summary designed to allude to the first epistle as something known to the readers.

In assessing the relationship between the two writings much also depends on how carefully we read II John's description of false teachers: those *who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. Any such person is the deceiver and antichrist* (7). Many assume that these must be the same false teachers as those identified in I John. They, too, were denying *that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh* (4.2). The difficulty with this assumption is that II John 7 does not speak of people denying Jesus Christ *coming* in the flesh. The *coming*, here, must refer either to his *coming* in the present or to his *coming* in the future. It cannot refer to his coming in the past. This is a major obstacle for those wanting to equate the two texts. The commentary will survey arguments to the contrary and argue their inherent weakness.

The most natural way of understanding the text is to read it as referring to those who deny that Christ is coming back to appear in flesh on earth. The hope for Christ's return to reign on earth for a thousand years was relatively widespread, especially in Asia Minor where most locate the Johannine communities. It was also hotly disputed. Movements had arisen denying the need for such a hope. These would include, at least, the early gnostic groups who saw salvation in terms of escape from the material world. They might also include groups, who, like the Corinthians Paul addresses in I Cor. 15, had adopted the more common Hellenistic understanding of the

human constitution and of the world, where the truly valuable lay less in the physical and material than in the spiritual and invisible. To such groups, holding out for the hope that Christ would appear again as a human being in flesh and blood, was to be unduly bound to primitive Jewish and Jewish Christian understandings of the world. It seems that in early Jewish Christian tradition hope for a thousand-year-reign of Christ, a more literal fulfilment of messianic expectation, was strong, as was the belief that the returning Christ would appear with his wounded body to shame those who had rejected him.

Potentially both the first epistle and the second letter could be dealing with the same kind of group, but the issues are different. This fact, together with the artificial character of both the section echoing I John and the impersonal addressee, *Lady chosen by God*, seem to indicate the following: the letter had been penned by someone within the Johannine community in deliberate imitation of I John to claim its support in fighting a new issue with false teachers. The author had recognized that the issue facing the author of the first epistle was different from, and yet related to, his own. For it was those who were willing to deny the reality of Jesus' flesh and blood who would also want to deny his appearance in such flesh and blood in the future.

By implicitly appealing to the first epistle for support, the author is aligning himself with the authentic tradition of his community. He couches his epistle in general terms, choosing to address the communities which concern him under the symbolic guise of the *Lady chosen by God* and retains the same anonymity appropriate to his purpose in the final greeting from *the children of her Sister* (13). He also writes in the name of a known bearer of that authority, *the Elder*. This will become clearer as we consider III John.

III John

The so called third letter of John reflects the same structure as that of II John with minor variations.

1 Opening
2–4 Affirmation of relationship

5–12 Body of the letter
  5–8 Appreciation and encouragement of hospitality
  9–10 The report of Diotrephes's inhospitality
  11–12 A request to follow good examples and accept Demetrius
13–14a Parting words affirming the relationship
14b Greeting and passing on of regards.

The Opening is brief, but its pattern is reflected word for word in II John, except for the different addressee. Here the addressee is a real person: Gaius. The parting words (13–14a) find an almost exact correspondence in II John 12. Unlike II John, III John makes reference to concrete events and specific individuals and groups.

The author, *the Elder*, writes to Gaius (and presumably others around him) in the capacity of his (perhaps, their) father in the faith. He writes in appreciation of hospitality shown to missionary envoys who have returned to their home congregation and are about to set out again. He is also concerned about the contrasting attitude of *the congregation* where a certain Diotrephes has succeeded in pressuring the congregation to refuse the written request from *the Elder* for similar hospitality to be shown.

Grounds for the refusal seem also bound up with accusations made against *the Elder*. These are not specified; nor, it seems, does Gaius know of them. Nor are they such that the author sees the need to defend himself. This makes it unlikely that they are of serious doctrinal nature. On the other hand, he is concerned enough to write to secure the same good treatment for his emissaries at the hands of Gaius, obviously in the light of potential pressure not to do so from Diotrephes and his congregation. He sends the letter probably with Demetrius, who is suitably commended.

This fascinating letter is like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle on which many important lines of the picture intersect. If only we could see where they join the picture as a whole! What relation do they have, if any, to broader contours of the Johannine terrain? Such connections fall largely into the category of guesswork. Are Gaius and his mentor, *the Elder*, those excluded in accordance with III John's strategy? Are they the false teachers of either II John or I John, feeling grossly misunderstood? Would the early church really have preserved such correspondence from both sides of the conflict? Is Diotrephes one of the false teachers? Or is the conflict about leadership authority, a growing independent local leadership increasingly unwilling to operate with the old system of travelling authorities? This seems

more likely, as we shall argue in the commentary, but we cannot know with any degree of certainty. One thing is clear: the letter addresses a concrete situation and has all the hallmarks of genuineness.

The Gospel according to John, I John, III John, II John

If in III John we have an item of correspondence penned by someone called *the Elder*, what relevance does this have for our discussion of II John? It is most probably the following: the writer of II John not only imitates I John, thus allying himself with known Johannine tradition. He also both writes in the name of *the Elder* of III John and imitates its framework. In doing so he appears to proceed also on the assumption that the author of the first and third epistle are one and the same, *the Elder*. He evokes their authority in dealing with a new threat to the faith.

Such means of appealing to the authority of prior tradition were common. Among the letters attributed to Paul the Pastoral Epistles (I and II Timothy and Titus) are widely held to fall into this category and many, myself included, would include Ephesians, Colossians and II Thessalonians in this category. Most assess II Peter similarly and many also include I Peter, James and Jude. Already within the Old Testament there are significant bodies of literature appealing to a prior authority. They include much of the wisdom literature appealing to Solomon, the Pentateuch (Genesis to Deuteronomy) appealing to Moses, and much prophetic material attributed to the prophet whose oracles form the core collection (e.g. Isaiah, Jeremiah). More distant parallels are to be found in the so-called apocalyptic writings which made bizarre appeals to ancients such as Abraham, Enoch or even Adam; in Hellenistic literature where Plato, for instance, voices his views in the role of Socrates; and in the gospel tradition, where the words of Jesus continued to be heard through the medium of creative expansion inspired by the Spirit.

The dating of the epistles is an unanswered question. Some would see III John as the earliest of all, earlier even than the gospel. This is possible. I am more inclined to see in it a reflection of struggles over church leadership style (and not false teaching) at a time when the issues of I John are not a preoccupation and the issues of II John have

not yet arisen. I see II John as the most recent, for the reasons given above. I John, probably also by *the Elder*, if the assumptions of the writer of II John are right, was written shortly after the final stages of the redaction of the fourth gospel. In its redaction the gospel is beginning to reflect the problems of disunity which would culminate in the split of I John 2.18.

The main body of the gospel lays itself open to being used to justify a picture of Christ who is not truly human, especially when people lost sight of its dramatic redrafting of the story of Jesus as a celebration of faith through techniques of irony, misunderstanding and concentrated symbolism. *The Elder* may have been involved in the redactional process, but is unlikely to have been the primary author of the gospel, which I would still see as the earliest of the Johannine writings. I do not consider the similarities which exist with the Revelation of John sufficiently significant to posit anything more than a distant affinity with the Johannine community.

If the gospel in its final form belongs to the late 80s or early 90s, the first epistle probably follows shortly after, while III John was penned some time after these events and II John in the early decades of the second century when we know controversy of Christ's real coming to reign on earth was a subject of dispute. It may well be that we owe to its author the preservation of III John from the oblivion which was the fate of most brief letters of its kind. Gradually, both II and III John made the journey from the category of letters whose authenticity was disputed into the accepted body of the canon of the New Testament.

As far as authorship is concerned, I consider it likely that *the Elder* and *the Elder John* with whom tradition identifies him (largely in dependence upon Papias) are one and the same. But he is not to be confused with John, son of Zebedee, nor with the author of the fourth gospel, nor with the Beloved Disciple, all three of whom belong in the story of the Johannine community.

The reconstruction attempted here makes best sense of the landscape as I view it and takes its place beside those of others who have stood on similar grounds and seen things differently and from whom I have learned. The short bibliography identifies a selection of major recent commentaries and studies. Within this commentary I have explored as much as possible a broad range of reconstruction options. However, what the texts actually say, the texture of the ground we stand on, is always much more significant than what scholars moot lies over the horizon of the visible. I have sought nevertheless to

relate these writings and the issues they face to what we know of wider Christianity of the time. Those issues still abound and it has been my experience, and I hope it will be shared by those who use this commentary, that the God whose Spirit moved over the brokenness of that terrain still addresses us with love and with challenge in ours.

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COMMENTARY

THE FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN

THE OPENING: 1.1–4 A statement of authority and intent

The first letter of John does not begin like a letter at all. Instead it begins with a declaration of intent (1.1–4), which concludes: *We are writing this in order that our joy may be complete* (4). This *joy* will *be complete* if the hearers share with the author in *a common life, that life which we share with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ* (3).

Already two things are clear, which make themselves felt throughout the writing: the author and those he represents are passionately involved in the issues at stake. At a personal level *joy* and pain are at stake. This is not an exercise in abstract speculation; it is engaged pastoral care. And secondly, the heart of that concern is community, *common life*. This *common life* is community with God through Christ and especially community of Christians with one another; and the two are related.

Stemming from this concern for community is both the emphasis on mutual love and the insistence on correct belief as the basis of that common life. The understanding of community here is not of 'anything goes', where a boundless tolerance embraces a universe of conflict and pretends it does not exist. It is one based on the reality of Jesus as the source of life and on the priority of love. Where this understanding of community says 'yes' and where it says 'no' will become apparent as we follow the writer into the concerns he expresses in the main body of the epistle. But already in the opening section there are important hints about these concerns.

The opening words, *It was there in the beginning*, would have reminded the readers of the first words of scripture, *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*. They would have also recalled those majestic first words of the gospel which had come into being in their community: 'In the beginning the Word already was. The Word was in God's presence, and what God was, the Word was.' The author is not about to peddle novelty or propagate new teachings such as those which have torn the community apart. He aligns

himself firmly with the original and authentic message attested in scripture and in the preaching of the gospel from the beginning.

When he uses the phrase, *from the beginning*, he is probably also thinking of the beginning of time, when the Word was in God's presence and active. *The Word* in the statement, *our theme is the Word which gives life*, suggests this. The effect of linking Christ with the beginning of creation is the same here as it is in the gospel. It reminds us that in relating to Christ we are relating not to some distant heavenly mythical figure, but to the one who in his human life gave expression to what lies at the centre of reality and its source. He is the Word through whom the universe came into being.

In its symbolic shorthand the gospel gives expression to this by declaring him to be the world's life and light (8.12; 9.5; 14.6), the source of life, bread and living water (4.10–14; 6.35; 7.37–8). This perspective persists in the epistle with the slight change that the author emphasizes more explicitly that ultimately God is that life and light and truth. In the light of this there is no sense of conflict when the author moves from the perspective of the beginning of time to the perspective of the beginning of the message about life, for it was in the midst of creation and human history that this life was made visible.

What the author stands for goes back to Jesus. People had heard it, . . . *seen it* . . . , . . . *look upon it*. They had also *felt it with* their *own hands* (1.1). At this point we detect a concern to say something not only about when the message originated, but also about how it originated: in a real Jesus, who was not a mere phantom or spirit disguised in human form. He was real and his message has just as much reality about it. It concerns real human relations. Nothing is left out. It is not confined to adventures of the inner life, ecstasies of the soul, or heavenly charisma. Here appears to lie one of the major weaknesses of the new teaching which had split the author's community: it undermined the human reality of who Jesus was and so undermined the application of being Christian to the whole of life. Unreality about Jesus goes hand in hand with unreality about life.

Keeping a hold on the tradition passed on from the beginning is not keeping a hold on tradition for tradition's sake. It is the way the author tries to centre the community back onto its basis, its point of reference. In the face of disaster facing the community's faith and confidence he appeals: back to square one! In making this appeal he takes his own ministry as a bearer of that tradition very seriously, so seriously that in this opening section he three times repeats the claim

to represent the authentic tradition of those who saw and heard Jesus. His enthusiasm defines for us an important function of the ministry of the Word: to be a bearer of the authentic tradition about Jesus and to be personally involved, finding *joy* fulfilled in that ministry.

There is a strange ambiguity in the way the epistle begins. What does *It* refer to in the words, *It was there from the beginning?* We might have expected *He*, referring to Jesus as the Word. The claims are to have *seen* and *heard*, even *felt* or touched, Jesus. Yet the words, *our theme is the Word which gives life*, or in more literal translation: *concerning the word of life*, could also mean: 'our theme is the life-giving message.' This message could be *It*. In the first words of the following section we read: *Here is the message which we have heard* (1.5). But, again, according to 1.2 it is *life* itself which is *visible* . . . seen . . . , and to which *testimony* is given: *This life was made visible; we have seen it.*

Is *It* Jesus, the message or the life? Jesus is central to the author's thinking; Jesus' achievement has been to bring life; but the major focus in the opening and in the epistle as a whole is the substance of the message. The substance of the message implies both Jesus the person and life as the promise. This explains the impersonal *It*. What the gospel is and what it means continues to dominate in what follows and reflects the challenge to its meaning and substance being mounted by those whom the author dubs *antichrists* (2.18,22).

This largely explains also the slightly different emphasis between the opening words of the first epistle and the gospel. Echoes of the gospel passage have long been recognized in the opening of the epistle and are evident in the following words and phrases: *beginning . . . we have seen . . . the Word . . . life . . . made visible . . . testimony . . . was with the Father . . . Father . . . his Son Jesus Christ.* They continue on into the following verses: *light . . . darkness . . . truth.* But in the epistle the focus is on the authenticity and authority of the Word as message, whereas in the gospel the focus is on the Word as Jesus.

I see no indication of disapproval here, either of the gospel opening or of alleged use of it by the new teachers, as some suggest. The absence of references to the Word's involvement in creation, his identity as God, or his earthly glory should not be read as hints that author is trying to dampen down such emphases. Rather he makes use of the familiar opening of the gospel to underline his claim to represent the authentic and original message. His opponents might well have attempted to read the gospel's opening in a way that

bolstered their position, but the opening of the epistle does not read like a subtle attempt to modify specifically this gospel text or its interpretation. The battle lines are drawn in 1.1–4 more generally on the claim of the authentic and original against the novel and counterfeit and of the real Jesus as the source of life against the timeless spiritual Christ of the opponents.

Ultimately it is about life, eternal life, which, for the author is always life now in relationship with God, with Christ, and with fellow believers. It is a life which entails the future and the spiritual; yet it is primarily not time and place which is its focus, but a quality of being with and for others. In the words, *that you may share with us in a common life* (literally: 'that you may have *koinōnia* with us'), the Greek word, *koinōnia* may be translated 'fellowship, communion, community, participation', or 'sharing'. This reflects a holistic understanding of salvation which also defines for us the proper role of the church as the place where such relationship is made possible. Any breaking of such fellowship is for the author a denial of the life of the gospel. One might wonder at his response both to the church and to its divisions today.

THE MAIN BODY OF THE EPISTLE:
1.5–5.12 Assurance and warning

PART ONE: Fellowship, obedience, and forgiveness
1.5–2.17

In the first major section of the epistle the author is concerned to spell out the implications of *the message* referred to in 1.1–4. In particular he concentrates on how people should *go on living* (1.6), now that they have become Christians. Within the broad sweep of 1.5–2.17 we can detect distinct units of material which form subsections.

Beginning from the far end, we recognize in 2.15–17 the theme of Christian caution about world value systems. 2.12–13a and 13b–14 consist of a set of two groups of three statements to three different groups. They encourage the hearers in a way that also summarizes some of the author's major concerns. From 2.12 onwards the author seems already to be preparing the hearers for the major issue of the next section, 2.18–29, which deals with conflict in the community.

This is less the case with 1.5–2.11, which stands more on its own. We see this already in the way in which it ends in 2.9–11 as it began in 1.5–7, with the theme of living in the darkness or in the light. It was a common device in the ancient world to indicate to listeners where a section began and ended by repeating at the close the images or ideas with which the passage began. Only the very last verse draws the further implication that darkness has made some blind, and so goes beyond the theme of the passage to flag the theme of conflict over false teachers which will follow.

Between 1.5–7 and 2.9–11 we can also detect subsections. 2.7–8 deal with the old and new command, but relate also very closely to 2.3–6, which also have commands as a theme. They are both linked together with 2.9–11 by the repetition three times of *whoever says* or *claims* (2.4,6,9), so that I shall treat 2.3–6; 2.7–8, and 2.9–11 as one block.

Similarly I shall treat 1.5–2.2 as one block on the basis of a string

of three negative and three positive sentences beginning with the words, *If we . . .* (1.6,7,8,9,10; 2.1). Only the last of these varies the form, having *But if anybody . . .*, but the pattern is impressive enough to give a certain unity to the whole passage. At the same time we also recognize three subgroups within 1.5–2.2, just as we did in 2.3–11. 1.5–7 speak of living in light or darkness; 1.8–10 of denying or confessing sin; and 2.1–2 of the saving activity of Christ for his own people and for the world as assurance for believers who have sinned. At the centre of this threefold structure of 1.5–2.2 is 1.9, the promise of forgiveness for those who confess their sins.

In outline, therefore, we detect in 1.5–2.17 the following structure, remarkable for its pattern of threes:

I 1.5–2.2 Being forgiven or false – *If we . . .*
1. 1.5–7 Living in light or darkness
2. 1.8–10 Confessing or denying sin
3. 2.1–2 Christ atoning for sin

II 2.3–2.11 Being obedient or disobedient – *Whoever says . . .*
1. 2.3–6 Keeping God's commands
2. 2.7–8 The new and old commandment
3. 2.9–11 Living in light or darkness

III 2.12–2.17 Being confident and cautious in the world
1. 2.12–13a *I write to children, fathers, young men*
2. 2.13b–14 *I have written to children, fathers, young men*
3. 2.15–17 *Do not set your hearts on the world*

It belongs to the practical nature of this epistle that the author immediately applies *the message* of *the Word which gives life* (1.1) to the way people live. This message is the implied point of reference or starting-point for reflection throughout the epistle. Words similar to those of 1.5 recur in 3.11, where the author again calls the readers back to their foundations: *The message you have heard from the beginning is that we should love one another* (similarly: 2.7,24).

Here in 1.5, immediately after the opening, the author gives *the message* a pointed application: people who do not try to live out their faith are just living a lie. And for those who do try to do so there is comfort and assurance.

I 1.5–2.2 Being forgiven or false – *If we . . .*

1. 1.5–7 Living in light or darkness. The opening declaration (1.1–4) has established that the original and authentic Christian message came through the real historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, and has been passed on by reliable witnesses. The author underlines once more the chain of tradition, including his own place in it: *this is the message we have heard from him and pass on to you*. The message is the basis for belonging both to God and to the Christian community. This is the author's chief concern. In the main body of the epistle which begins in 1.5 he teases out what this really means.

In what is a summary rather than a quotation he formulates *the message* in these terms: *God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all*. He varies this in 1.7 when he says that God *himself is in the light*. He is urging Christians, likewise, to *live in the light* (1.7). We find a similar use of the images of light and darkness in the passage which matches the opening to this segment, namely, 2.9–11. This, in turn, helps us understand what the author means by light and darkness here.

Living in light or darkness means behaving in two opposite ways. To live in the light means keeping God's command, above all, the command to love (2.10; also 2.7). To live in the darkness is to hate (2.9). It is also not to know where one is going (2.10) and to be blinded (2.11). This *light* must represent love (which is how the author summarizes the commands), knowledge (because those in the light can see where they are going), and something which enables rather than disables or blinds people.

We should not be surprised, then, to find the author also saying at a later point, *God is love* (4.8,16), just as he says here: *God is light*. To say *God is light* or *God is love* is not to define God, as if we were to read *light is God* or *love is God*. Rather it is to say that God's way of being is threefold: to love, to give knowledge and to enable people to live and love in the light of that knowledge. Therefore to live in the light, for the author, means to live out love and to believe rightly. These twin concerns, love and right belief, dominate the epistle and they are closely connected through the third aspect of God's action: enabling. We are enabled to love because we believe rightly about what God has done through Jesus, or, to use his own words: *We love because he first loved us* (4.19).

While *God is light* and *God is love* cohere closely, 'God is spirit', which we find in the gospel (John 4.24) is a saying of a different kind.

It emphasizes that God is the kind of being which cannot be limited to particular holy sites, such as Jerusalem and Mount Gerizim.

While love and right belief dominate the epistle's understanding of light and darkness, the first hearers would doubtless have had further associations of thought linked to the images. They might have recalled how the stories of Jesus in their gospel picture him declaring more than once 'I am the light of the world' (John 8.12; 9.5). The gospel's opening, already alluded to in I John 1.1–4, also said of the Word: 'In him was life and that life was the light of mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never mastered it' (John 1.4–5). It continues with the light imagery, speaking of John the Baptist's witness to it and of Jesus' coming as light into the world (John 1.6–9).

In the gospel it is above all Jesus who is portrayed as the light and the life and the truth, as he represents on earth God who sent him, whereas the writer of the epistle prefers to save such imagery directly for God. The end effect is the same. Both identify Jesus as the point where the light definitively broke through into human history.

Some readers would probably have recalled the strong link between the ideas of light and glory. People often pictured God as dwelling in dazzling glory and unapproachable light (e.g. I Tim. 6.16). There was no little speculation about the shapes that glorious light took, from flames enveloping a heavenly throne to a celestial temple built from walls of fire (e.g. I Enoch 14). Visions of the last day included descriptions of resurrected bodies shining like stars in the heavens (e.g. Dan. 12.3; Matt. 13.43) and of a new Jerusalem whose sole radiance was to be God himself (e.g. Rev. 21). Perhaps the author entertained such hopes, but his notions of light and darkness are also firmly earthed in the concrete reality of human relationships.

For many the use of such language would have been familiar from their traditional background. In much of Judaism of the time, including the Qumran community which produced the Dead Sea Scrolls, it had become common to refer to one's own as those who lived (literally, walked) in the light, especially in the light of the sacred law of scripture, and to refer to outsiders as the children of darkness (e.g. the Community Rule 3.17–21). Christian groups also adopted this imagery (e.g. Col. 1.13–14; Eph. 5.6–8). But even outside of Judaism and Christianity such imagery was common and indeed finds parallels in most religious traditions of the world.

It may be used in extraordinary ways, including the notion that human beings encapsulate a spark of light, trapped in their physical

body as in a cage, so that salvation entails coming to know about this, believing it, and looking forward to death, when, like a bird, it would fly back to its home in the realm of heavenly light. Such belief was characteristic of the gnostic movements which emerged about this time. Their message was about *know*ledge (or *gnō*-ledge), hence their name, *gnos*tics. But if this had been an option for some of the readers, it is not the way the author uses the imagery.

For him the focus of the Christian gospel is not a future place or spiritual sphere, not a guarantee of security or a gift for ecstasy, but a relationship that is ongoing. It has implications for every area of life. To be *sharing in God's life* (1.6) is to be involved in loving, as God loves, and that is something concrete which affects the way we relate to one another. Cutting the God-aspect off as something which belongs in a separate compartment of living and then living with people in ways that take no notice of love is a blatant contradiction. Then *Our words and our lives are a lie* (1.6). The readers might have recalled the words of the gospel where Jesus describes the devil as 'a liar and the father of lies' (John 8.44). The author probably intends to convey the idea that such living is a deliberate deception.

By contrast, when we live in the love sphere, knowing what God has done for us in Jesus, and trusting love to change us and enable us, then we shall not only find life in such light; we shall also experience the fellowship only to be found where people are committed to loving one another. We shall *share a common life* (1.7). And within that love sphere we shall benefit from the healing and life-enabling effects of Jesus' whole ministry, summed up in his death on the cross. *The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin* (1.7).

Once again we have here an instance of the author linking the beginning and end of a passage by a common theme. In this case the section is 1.5–2.2 and the link is Jesus' atoning death (1.7 and 2.2). We shall consider this theme more in detail when we look at 2.1–2.

2. 1.8–10 Confessing or denying sin. Already in 1.5–7 we have had two *If . . .* statements, one negative (1.6), one positive (1.7). In 1.8–10 we have three more, with the positive one coming in between two negatives. The two negatives are very similar: *If we claim to be sinless, . . .* (1.8) and: *If we say we have committed no sin, . . .* (1.10). So also are the consequences in each case: *we are self-deceived and the truth is not in us* (1.8) and: *we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in us* (1.10).

Having God's *truth* or *word in us* is not primarily knowing about

God's truth. It is taking in its meaning and benefits. Not to do so means not letting the message penetrate through our being, not letting it come alive in us. When we close ourselves off to the message that God loves us, we are giving higher priority to something else in our lives. There is another god. We are denying our own reality as God sees us in the interests of serving that god. God comes to us in our state of sin and guilt with love; God offers love to us as we are. But we refuse to face our failure and our sin and we fight off that love by denying that we have sinned (1.10) or that we are in a state of guilt (1.8).

When we do this, argues the author, we are also denying God. It is even worse. It is as though we are saying: 'God, you lie about this love. You cannot love me like this.' *We make him out to be a liar* (1.10). Effectively we declare God to be his opposite, the devil, 'the liar and father of lies' (John 8.44). In fear of love people writhe desperately and sometimes strike out murderously against love itself. The cross of Christ not only reveals love; it reveals love's murder.

By contrast, *if we confess our sins, he is just and may be trusted to forgive us and cleanse us from every kind of wrongdoing* (1.9). This text is not only the central pivot of the structure of 1.5–2.2; it also represents the heart of what the author is saying. For there is no need to hide our reality, no need for pretence or posturing before God or others to win approval. God *is just and may be trusted*.

When the author describes God as *just*, he does not mean justice in an impartial sense. That would offer us no hope at all as sinners! Rather, God is *just* as the one who remains faithful to his commitment to us, a commitment made in Christ and which can *be trusted*. This is firmly rooted in the biblical tradition (Deut. 7.9; Isa. 45.21). Love is the ongoing way that God relates to us. It is a knowing love which sees our reality and understands it with perfect judgement. It is not a love which pretends about us in order to love us. On the contrary, it faces us constantly with the truth about ourselves and does so with the compassion which seeks to make us whole again. It seeks to convert *every kind of wrong doing* (1.9) into every kind of loving.

This conversion process happens because of an ongoing relationship with a compassionate God. But there are dimensions to 1.9 which are too easily lost, when we understand *confess* exclusively to apply to private prayer or, at most, to the formalized corporate confession of the liturgy. The word translated *confess* most naturally means making a statement in public. It is the same word used when we read of confessing Christ in the world (e.g. Rom. 10.9; Mark 8.38).

This suggests a dimension of shared intimacy and openness belonged to the author's understanding of Christian community. He would have been at home in John Wesley's class meetings where such open confession was encouraged. There is enormous potential for ongoing conversion where groups committed to love and not judgement become places where people can share openly of their ongoing spiritual journey.

The author seems confronted with some who had taken the opposite course of spiritual elitism, denying their fallibility and avoiding honest vulnerability about their need for loving and sharing. This seems more likely than that the author is merely employing rhetoric and speaking of hypothetical possibilities. The rest of the epistle reflects a situation where the author clearly assumes that some are behaving in ways which amount to hate and not love and are holding out against the author's claim that their deeds and doctrines are wrong. These doubtless include those who have separated themselves from the community (2.19). This is more likely than that the author has in mind flagrant immorality of a more general kind within the community. Of this there is no indication elsewhere in the writing.

It is striking that some of the author's later statements seem almost to reflect the attitude taken by his opponents, especially the claims that those who are born of God do not and cannot sin (3.6,9; 5.18)! We shall discuss these in detail later. The present passage, however, assumes that the author would not deny that Christians sin. The author is being realistic. When they sin, however, they have no need to pretend, but are free to face their sin, find forgiveness and continue their commitment to not sinning. Believing in love makes this possible. Believing in one's own infallibility or faultlessness makes facing failure and accepting forgiveness a threat.

3. 2.1–2 Christ atoning for sin. The author interrupts his train of thought, before proceeding with the final *If . . .* statement. He has been emphasizing forgiveness for believers who sin, so much so that he is anxious not to give the impression that he would see sin as a normal part of Christian life. That would be to give the wrong impression altogether. *My children, I am writing this to you so that you should not commit sin.*

As a, perhaps the, senior authority in the community family, he often addresses the hearers directly as *children* (used also by Jesus of the disciples in John 21.5). He is aware of his responsibility and

anxious not to mislead. However, the reality is that Christians will sometimes turn from the way of love. But when this occurs, they are not to live a lie and pretend it never happened. They can be honest with themselves without fear. The appropriate response is the confession referred to in 1.9. In 2.1–2 the author supplements this assurance with the comforting knowledge that Jesus Christ takes a direct interest in our situation.

When the author explains this by saying that Jesus is *one who is acceptable to God and will plead our cause with the Father,* he is using the language of the courts. The single Greek word, *paraklētos,* translated here by *one who . . . will plead our cause,* was the word used for a legal advocate. Jesus is an *acceptable* or *just* advocate before God the judge. This idea is slightly different from what we find in Hebrews, where Jesus prays for us as our high priest to help us not to sin (2.18; 4.14–16; 7.25). In I John it is a matter of helping those who have already sinned.

The gospel of John applies the word *paraklētos* to the Holy Spirit (14.16, 26; 15.26; 16.7). There it carries with it the meaning both of advocate and of encourager or helper. The gospel also implies that Jesus was the first *paraklētos,* referring to his past activity on earth especially as the bearer of comfort and encouragement to the disciples (14.16). Our author, however, is using the word primarily in the legal sense and is speaking of Jesus' present activity in heaven as advocate for believers before the Father.

In contrast to the author of the gospel, the writer of the epistle also lays great emphasis on the death of Jesus on earth as a sacrifice for sins as the ultimate source of forgiveness past and present. The evangelist also knew such traditions (e.g. 1.29), but preferred the simplicity of seeing forgiveness and life as directly the result of hearing and believing Jesus' word (e.g. 15.3). The author of the epistle makes such traditions paramount, so much so that some have speculated that perhaps his opponents deny this aspect of the faith, but for that I find insufficient evidence.

The author may be using the imagery of atoning sacrifice in 2.2 in a very general way without specific allusion to Old Testament models or to particular theories about how sacrifices achieved their effects. As far as the latter are concerned, it is questionable whether in the practice of sacrifice the original rationale for the undertaking was always consciously present. It is doubtful, for instance, that the notion of sacrifice as feeding a god or appeasing an offended deity (propitiation) was always present. Propitiation imagery is sometimes

present, but more often sacrifice, particularly within Judaism, seems to have been understood as making the removal or cleansing of sin possible, without a strict rationale which implied some kind of deal or transaction.

The imagery of sacrifice enabled early Christianity to give expression to the impact of Christ's death. The deaths of righteous martyrs were felt not to be meaningless; their righteousness more than covered any blemishes in their own lives and produced as it were a surplus of benefit for others. Sometimes this might be for the nation as a whole, as in the case of the Maccabean martyrs slain in the revolt against a godless tyrant. They could be described as offering themselves as sacrifices (IV Macc. 17.21–22). The suffering and death of the righteous servant depicted in Isaiah 53 would cover the sins of many.

This pattern of thought soon provided a way of explaining the abundance of benefits which flowed from Jesus' life. From the early affirmations, such as we find in I Cor. 15.3–5, that 'Christ died for our sins', Christians developed a wide range of imagery which portrayed Jesus' death as bringing atoning benefit for others. This included use of some imagery which related to sacrifices which originally had no reference to sin, such as the so-called sacrifice of the Passover lamb and the covenant sacrifice.

The most daring use of sacrificial imagery is found in the epistle to the Hebrews, where the author parallels Christ's sacrifice with the sacrificial rite performed by the high priest on the Day of Atonement (Heb. 9.1–14, 24–28). It makes Christ both the high priest and the victim. It is possible that Paul had already made some use of Atonement Day imagery in Rom. 3.25. It may lie behind the imagery here in I John (also 4.10), but this is far from certain.

The linking of the picture of Christ as advocate in heaven in 2.1 with Christ as sacrifice on earth in 2.2 suggests that the author thought of Christ's advocacy as including an appeal before God to what he had already achieved through that sacrifice. A similar notion may also be present in Hebrews if the imagery of the Atonement Day ritual is being taken over in such a way as to suggest that Jesus, the high priest, in some sense, enters the heavenly sanctuary with his own blood, to appear before God on our behalf (Heb. 9.24; 2.17). The blood, perhaps sprinkled blood (Heb. 12.24), serves to represent before God (and the world) the finished achievement of atonement. In a similar way the author of Hebrews and our author seek to ground

the confidence of believers in the effectiveness of that once for all event.

It became in some circles an almost standard confession of faith to describe Jesus' death as a sacrifice for sins. This has become true of the author, who sets this much more to the forefront of his explanations, than does, for instance, the author of the community's gospel, who clearly knew such traditions, but never gives them such prominence. Ultimately all such traditions see in Christ's death the culmination and climax of what was true in his life: the expression of God's self-giving love for all.

In one of the few brief references to the world outside the Christian community with its conflicts, the author adds that this atonement was for sins, but: *not ours only, but the sins of the whole world* (2.2). This spills over beyond the immediate concern of the passage and may represent traditional material. On the other hand, it is significant that the author includes it, since with 4.9,14, it leaves a trace of the wider theology which must embrace the author's application of love to the Christian community, if the latter is not to fall into the sectarian narrowness of love only for one's own. In its tradition the author's theology can only stand up if it remains connected to the divine initiative of love which reached beyond its own sympathizers to an undeserving and lost world (as John 3.16). Such was the meaning of God's sending the Son.

II 2.3–11 Being obedient or disobedient – *Whoever says . . .*

After 2.2 the author moves from considering what people have done in the past, the issue of guilt and confession, to what they do in the present. The past and the present belong together. If I will not face the reality of my own guilt, I will more than likely not face the reality of my present responsibilities. Both ways I am practising deceit (1.8 and 2.4). Both ways I am choosing to live in darkness (1.6 and 2.9–11). Thus both in theme and in imagery this section, 2.3–11, and the previous one, 1.5–2.2, are closely linked. They also have a similar repetitive pattern of contrasting two opposing ways of life. In 1.5–2.2 it is by the series of *If . . .* statements; in 2.3–11 it is by the claims introduced by the three *Whoever . . .* statements (2.4,6,9).

1. 2.3–6 Keeping God's commands. The claim to know God may be a claim to self-importance and power. Belonging to those who know God is then belonging to an *élite* of special people over against

others who do not know God and are therefore inferior or second-rate. In every age there have been those who make their religious knowledge a matter of pride and use it to exclude or despise others. The author addresses this danger probably not just because it is as general possibility also within his community, but because it was actually happening. His wisdom in confronting it in his situation is available to us as we confront it in ours.

In commenting on 1.5–7 I mentioned the gnostics whose very name reflects their special claim to knowledge. Perhaps the group of Christians whom the writer of this epistle has in mind belong to an early developing form of gnosticism. His remarks are now directed towards the readers themselves, both to reassure and to warn them.

The evidence of knowing God is not verbal claims but a particular life-style characterized by keeping God's commands. Jesus made the same point, using the imagery of a tree: 'You will recognize them by their fruit . . . A good tree always yields sound fruit, and a poor tree bad fruit' (Matt. 7.16–17). Within the epistle and within John's gospel we look in vain for detailed lists of *commands*. The focus is not obedience to a complex set of rules, so that our effort to be good becomes the proof that we know God.

As the author repeats his assertions in different words, we see that *keeping God's commands* is the same as being *obedient to his word* (2.5). It also means living *as Christ himself lived* (2.6). That is comprehensive! But it is not seen as obedience to many rules and regulations. The following segment, 2.7–8, speaks of one single old and new command; and 2.9–10 make it clear that the command is none other than the command to love.

This becomes evident also when we consider 2.5: *whoever is obedient to his word, in him the love of God is truly made perfect. The love of God*, here, most likely means love which comes from God, rather than our love for God. If it meant the latter, it would be speaking of the perfect way of loving God as obedience. When we understand *the love of God* as God's love for us, then the verse is speaking of God's love reaching fulfilment in our lives, the evidence for this being when we keep his word, above all, his command to love. It becomes very close, then, to 4.19: *We love because he loved us first*.

Throughout the epistle we find a close connection between God's loving us and our loving others and there is strong evidence that this is more than our following God's example. It has also to do with God's love enabling us to love. 3.9 speaks of *the divine seed (sperma)*

enabling us not to sin. *The love of God* means therefore the love which comes from God and is God's kind of loving.

Any claim to know God which does not understand the centrality of God's love is misled from the very beginning. This is the logic of the author's position. God is loving; therefore to know God must result in lives that are loving. The author has very clear ideas about God and also about what it means to know him. Knowing God includes knowing about God but goes beyond it. The alternative phrase the author uses in 2.6 is *to be dwelling in him*.

The language of *dwelling in* or being *in him* (2.5) occurs frequently in the epistle. It is the language of intimacy and relationship. To relate to God in this way means to allow God's reality to affect our reality, to be open to God and God's transforming love. The same language may also be applied to God's relationship to Christ and Christians' relationships with one another. It is another way of speaking of the *common life* which the author has identified in the opening as the goal of his endeavours with the readers (1.3).

2. 2.7–8 The new and old command. The author concluded 2.6 with the words, . . . *must live as Christ himself lived*. These words set the scene for the present section which deals with the new command which was, as 2.8 puts it, also *true in Christ's life*. They illustrate the author's fondness for the technique of transitional hints, of ending one section with words which introduce the next.

With *Dear friends* the author addresses the readers directly, just as he had in 2.1. The effect there was to draw them away from concentrating on the immediate subject matter of the epistle so that they could pause for a moment to reflect on the possible ramifications of what he was writing. There he alerts them to possible misunderstandings. Here in 2.7, the effect is, again, to have the readers reflect on the process.

The author is saying: I do not want you to see what I am writing as some new or novel idea I have dreamed up. His caution is doubtless motivated by the claims of his opponents to new truth. We find the same caution in II John: *Do not think I am sending a new command; I am recalling the one we have had from the beginning: I ask that we love one another* (5). These words are written with a view to those who *go beyond* the established teaching about Christ (9).

The words, *an old command which you have from the beginning; the old command is the instruction which you have already received* (I John 1.7) recall the opening words of the epistle: *It was there from the beginning*.

The focus in this context is on the fact that the command formed part of the original Christian message which the readers received. *The beginning* refers primarily to the beginning of their faith journey. Throughout the epistle the author appeals to the readers to remain with what they have been taught and not to be carried away by what he sees as novel doctrines and teachings.

Verse 8 begins abruptly in the Greek: 'Again a new command I write to you'. The abruptness is somewhat obscured in the REB which reverses the order of the sentence. To move from emphasizing that the command is old to asserting that it is new is a striking transition. Almost certainly the author has in mind the saying of Jesus in the gospel: 'I give you a new commandment: love one another; as I have loved you, so you are to love one another' (13.34). This is confirmed by the parallel passage cited above from II John 5. Even so it leaves open the question what exactly the author meant by old and new.

One possibility is that the old command refers to its Old Testament origins in *the beginning*. But *from the beginning* more naturally refers to the original preaching of those who evangelized the community. If *old* refers to the command which belonged to the original Christian message, then it must refer at the same time to the command which Jesus gave. This would explain the paradox of the old command at the same time being the new command.

Yet the author is also arguing that the command is new, *because the darkness is passing away and the true light already shining* (2.8). This need not conflict with what has been said, for it is because of Christ that the new age of light has begun. Christ brought about this process of change as something new, and his command is the instruction for those who live in the light. In other words, the author understands his own reasons for describing the command as new to be precisely the reasons why Jesus himself designated it as new. This receives some confirmation in the closing words of the verse: *and it is true in Christ's life and in yours*. The point here is that Christ lived in the light of the new age and his life was characterized by love. The same is to apply (be *true*) for you. The thought echoes Jesus' own words: 'as I have loved you, so you are to love one another' (13.34). For a discussion of the use of this and related passages by the author of II John, see the commentary.

3. 2.9–11 Living in light or darkness. The light/darkness imagery has already been reintroduced in 2.8 and so forms the transition to

this, the final section of 2.3–11. The imagery also recalls 1.5–7 with which the body of the epistle begins. The overall effect is that 2.9–11 form a climax in which the author comes directly to the point. Had there been any doubt about what constitutes the command, it now becomes clear. It is the command to love. Its opposite is hate.

Claims to know God (2.5), to dwell in God (2.6) or to be *in the light* (2.9) have no cogency as long as we have no love for fellow-Christians. They reveal themselves as deceit. Such a person *is still in darkness* (2.9). Correspondingly, those who love show that they are in the light.

The author is concerned with what has gone on within the believing community. With that as his focus, he addresses the matter of love among *fellow-Christians* (literally, *brothers*). We should not read his words about this particular problem community as implying that he sees love as a matter of relevance only among Christians, as though love for fellow human beings does not belong within his theology. The fact that he notes in 2.2 that Christ died not only for our sins but also *for the sins of the whole world* indicates his awareness of the broader perspective. The truths about God and love which emerge in the crucible of his community's particular conflict serve also our wider concerns of humanity, precisely because they have been argued on the basis of the way God is, in his relating to the world. At most one could suggest that the author failed to see such implications, but it is more likely that thoughts of his immediate agenda left room only for hints of the wider reality.

The author also expands the imagery of light and darkness by introducing the motif of a *cause of stumbling* (10). This might mean that a person walking in the light does not cause others to stumble. More naturally it would mean that people who walk in the light are not liable to stumble themselves, because they can see where they are going, *whereas anyone who hates his fellow is in darkness: he walks in darkness and has no idea where he is going, because the darkness has made him blind* (11).

While the imagery favours taking the verse to refer to people losing their own way and stumbling, there may well also be some sense present here of such people causing others to stumble. This would cohere with other passages in the epistle which envisage false teaching as a stumbling-block to the community, a theme to be taken up in 2.18–29.

The notion of blindness is common in both Jewish and Christian writers where authors seek to explain obstinacy and disobedience

toward God (e.g. Isa. 6.10; Matt, 13.13–15; John 12.39–40). Sometimes the use of the imagery takes account of blindness as a condition for which the blind person is not responsible in an ongoing sense. Usually there is a peculiar mix of judgement and responsibility. God may be seen as causing the blindness, while at the same time people are to blame for their condition of not seeing. In our passage the matter is much clearer. Not God, but darkness has blinded their eyes and yet even here the blind are not victims. Their darkness is self-inflicted. It remains an open question whether the author might have contemplated the possibility that they could recover their sight. In the heat of the situation he seems rather to assume that they have gone their way for good and no return is envisaged. Theirs is the unforgivable sin (see further on 5.16).

The climax not only draws together the implications of what has preceded. In characteristic fashion for the author, it overshoots the mark, introducing the notion of a much more serious situation: permanently disabled persons who are going about, not knowing where they are going and by implication leading others astray. We are being prepared for 2.18–29. But first the author invites the readers to step back and contemplate what he has been doing to this point (2.12–14).

III 2.12–2.17 Being confident and cautious in the world

At this point in the epistle the author draws the readers aside from the argument which he has just brought to a climax and whose continuation he has just hinted at. He wants to reflect with them on what he has been doing. He does so initially in two sets of three statements about the reason of his writing (2.12–13a and 2.13b–14). In 2.15–17 he returns to the argument, preparing for the next main section which runs from 2.18–29.

1. 2.12–13a *I write to you children, fathers, young men*
2. 2.13b–14 *I have written to you, children, fathers, young men*

There are two closely parallel sections here and I shall treat both together. This will also enable us to recognize and evaluate the few differences which exist between them.

The author has already addressed the readers as *children* (Greek: *paidia*) in 2.1. Here he uses a different Greek word (*teknia*), but there is no significant distinction. At first sight the most natural reading is to understand *children* to be addressing the readers as a whole, as it

does in 2.1. But immediately we find the author also addressing *fathers* and *young men*. Should, then, the use of *children* be seen as referring not to all readers, but to a single group, beside the other two? The preferred interpretation of recent commentators, that *children* refers to the readers as a whole and *fathers* and *young men* to two groups within the community, breaks the neat symmetry of threes which seems present here and is identifiable in other parts of the early section of the epistle. On balance, then, it would seem preferable to opt for an interpretation which understands the author envisaging three groups.

In considering the three groups I shall take into account both sets of threes. The *children* are probably those relatively new to the faith. Accordingly the author reassures them of the basics of the gospel which they have heard. These basics may have been called into question by the opponents. The author writes to these young Christians because he has no doubt about their status. They have their sins forgiven (2.12) and they know God (2.13b).

When he turns to the *fathers*, we find a change of focus. They *know him who is and has been from the beginning*. Both statements (2.12 and 2.14a) are identical. While they are speaking of Christ (rather than God) as the one who *has been from the beginning*, there may be some sense here that the *fathers* have also been with the community from its beginning. They would, then, be the more senior and older members in the group (not necessarily elderly; seniority in age was reckoned to begin around 40 years of age!). They are not simply senior in age, but the older men who, also by virtue of their age, have been significant links with the tradition which formed the community. A certain ambiguity exists in use of the term elders, which originally would have included people senior in age as well as status. Neither here nor in the ascribed author of II and III John, *the Elder*, have we to do with the office of *elder* which had begun to appear in some regions of the church (e.g. Acts 20.17; 21.18; Titus 1.5).

Who then are *young men*? Part of their description is identical: *they have conquered the evil one* (2.13b and 2.14b). On the second occasion there is an expansion: they are *strong; God's word remains in* them. When we look more widely in the epistle for the imagery of overcoming, we find the same Greek word (*nikaō*) used in the context of conflict with the opponents (4.4; 5.3–5). Those who *overcome* the world are those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God (5.5). The two most explicit references to the opponents' doctrinal error occur in the immediate context of these verses (4.2; 5.6).

There is strong ground for seeing the young men as those who held up against the erroneous dissidents. That they are *strong* is much more than the author's play with the literal image of strong *young men*. They are strong because *God's word remains in* them. That is, they have held to the faith. Why, though, should young men have been those to have fought and won the victory? Probably because it was from among the ranks of the young men that the new divisions arose. The challenge to the senior and established leadership came on more than one occasion from a new generation of leaders. This would be the pattern in Corinth to which Clement addressed his first letter.

If we see here a reference to the faithful young men who resisted the innovations of their peers, then we can recognize more clearly the transition to what follows both in 2.15–17 and in 2.18–29. 2.18–29 addresses the matter of the division directly. 2.15–17, however, is often seen as an awkward more generalizing interruption. On this interpretation this is far from the case. 5.5 talks about overcoming the world in the context of holding out against the false teachers. 4.5 tells us that they belong to the world and that the world listens to them. 2.15–17 is, then, already oriented towards the theme of 2.18–29, in urging the community not to love the world, as, he implies, the opponents do. This also explains why the *young men* are the third group and why their description is expanded on the second occasion in the way that it is.

The repetition of two sets of statements to three groups, the first introduced by *I write* and the second by *I have written*, has puzzled commentators. It is unlikely that *I have written* refers to a previous letter, whether one of the other exstant epistles or a lost one. The similarity of the grounds for writing in each set suggest that the same one writing is being referred to and that it is the present epistle. The content (knowing the one who is from the beginning, forgiveness of sins, overcoming the evil one) relates closely to what has been said so far in I John and to what immediately follows. The change from *I write* to *I have written* may signify no more than a stylistic variation while repeating the same statements for emphasis. At most the past tense in the second set reflects a looking back over what has been written, including the words *I write*, which are now in the past. While nothing so strikingly repetitive recurs in the epistle, the author shows himself fond of going over the same ground more than once.

Finally, some have questioned whether these are statements giving the ground for writing (*I write..because*) or whether they indicate the

substance (*I write..that*). The Greek, *hoti*, could mean either. The effect of the latter would be to have the author telling the readers that their *sins have been forgiven*, that they *know him who is and has been from the beginning*, and so on. The tone of reassurance in the letter thus far does not seem directed towards a readership doubting these things, but rather towards surety for the ongoing Christian life. This makes *because* the better translation. Similarly it would seem strange to write to the *young men that* they *have overcome the evil one*. He writes because they have overcome the evil one and he now intends to build up their self-confidence.

3. 2.15–17 *Do not set your hearts on the world*. At first sight these verses appear to have little relation to what precedes or follows. They deal with loving the world. Any link with the young men overcoming the evil one (2.14) is not at first apparent. Similarly the warning of 2.18, *Children, this is the last hour*! seems only loosely to connect with 2.17 which speaks about the world passing away. As we shall see, the connection is much closer than these observations indicate, but first the verses must be considered in their own right. They do, indeed, look as if they may have been drawn from more general preaching about the world and it is likely that the author intends that they be understood in this way.

The world is pictured as a value system. The author is not using *the world* here as it is used in John 3.16, where it clearly refers to the people who inhabit planet earth (similarly, it use in 2.2). *What is in the world* means not people but values. These are spelled out in 2.16, in a typical pattern of three, as *all that panders to the appetites or entices the eyes, all the arrogance based on wealth*. A more literal translation of the Greek is: 'the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, boastfulness about livelihood'.

The image of *the world* is of life where God does not rule. It is the godless world, such as Paul describes in Rom 1.18–32. Paul and our author reflect here also the common Jewish view which attacked the world outside their own as one dominated by immorality. Frequently sexual immorality comes high on the list as a sign of human depravity. Both 'desire of the flesh' and 'desire of the eyes' could have this as their main focus.

It was not that natural sexual desire should be shunned. Jews and Christians revered an Old Testament which saw sexuality as God's gift in creation. The objection was where these had come to rule people's lives in a way that dehumanized them and others, where

others were exploited and used as things. Ancient societies also had carefully defined boundaries for sexual behaviour and these were hedged about with sacred and symbolic worth. This was certainly so in Israel and transgression of these boundaries was seen to strike at the society as a whole and to be an affront against God. Both the flouting of such provisions, and the exploitation and violence often entailed in such exploitation, made sexual immorality, so defined, one of the major symptoms of godlessness.

It is not clear, however, whether the author meant only sexual immorality. He may also have been thinking of abuse of other natural human appetites and desires, such as in gluttony and greed. Greed seems more directly present in the third element: boastfulness about livelihood. 'Boastfulness' or 'pride' may refer to an attitude resulting from one's livelihood or life-style (so REB: *arrogance based on wealth*) or, more probably, it refers to boasting *about* these. Either way, its effect is to put oneself above others, by implication, to put others down. It is usually more than that, because it includes the immorality of exploiting, or at least of not caring for, others. Later the author makes his position very clear: *If someone who possesses the good things of this world sees a fellow-Christian in need and withholds compassion from him, how can it be said that the love of God dwells in him?* (3.17)

The opposite of God is greed and exploitation, behaviour which destroys society. This is the way of the world and continues to dominate the value systems of modern-day societies, especially where the ultimate motivational force appealed to in public and private life is fulfilment of some, if not all, of the three attitudes highlighted by the author. To recognize this need not reflect a ghetto or sectarian mentality, as sometimes attributed to the author and his community. It is to believe in the abiding value of love in which human desires and needs are met without exploitation and violence.

Ultimately this kind of life-style is rooted deeply in the author's theology: God is loving. That is also his confidence that those who abide in God in this way *will remain forever*. For the rest, living for immediate self-indulgence is a temporary aberration. The author doubtless looks towards the total transformation of heaven and earth due at the last day and can envisage this as likely in the near future (so: 2.18!). Nearly two millennia later the time-frame may have altered, but the issue of conflict of value systems remains.

The author would expect his readers to affirm the broad truth of 2.15–17; but he would also want them to recognize in it a reference to their present conflict with those who have wrought havoc and

division in the community. Later he will affirm that the one who is in the readers is *greater than the one who inspires the world* (4.4) and go on immediately to identify his opponents as people who, along with their teaching, *belong to the world,* to whom also the world listens (4.5). In 5.3–5 he will speak of those who overcome the world and immediately link this to the conflict over false teaching. The implications are sufficiently clear: the opponents are ranked now as belonging to the world and its system. Through 2.15–17 he is setting a clear distance between himself and his readers, on the one hand, and the opponents, on the other, before, in 2.18, directly addressing the crisis which has occurred. 2.15–17 is familiar teaching in general about the world, but in this context it is being made to serve as a transition to the discussion of the opponents. It has the effect of placing them on the values map and encouraging the readers to remain with the author.

PART TWO: The danger of false teaching
2.18–27

In this section we have the first concrete reference to the false teachers. The passage falls into three parts:

I 2.18–21 The antichrists and the Christian *chrisma*
1. 2.18–19 The secession
2. 2.20–21 The anointing assures knowledge

II 2.22–25 Denying the Father and the Son or dwelling in them
1. 2.22–23 The antichrist denies the Father and the Son
2. 2.24–25 The Christian dwells in the Father and the Son

III 2.26–27 The deceivers and the Christian *chrisma*
1. 2.26 Those who mislead
2. 2.27 The anointing teaches knowledge

The first and last parts correspond, as often happens within the epistle, reflecting a common stylistic technique of the times which enabled the hearer to know when a section was coming to its conclusion. Another familiar technique is evident in the author's introduction of the theme of the next major section by using the words, *Dwell in him,* in the last verse. Some would extend the passage

to include 2.28–29, as does the REB. One could argue that the theme of Christ's coming would then match the coming of the antichrist in 2.18, but 2.28–29 are already developing a different theme: how Christians should live together in the light of Christ's coming. We have here much more than the usual transitional hint of the theme of the next section; we have its beginning.

I 2.18–21 The antichrists and the Christian *chrisma*

1. 2.18–19 The secession. From the vantage of his seniority and authority the author addresses the readers directly: *Children*. To him they were all *children*, even though earlier he had recognized three groups with *children* as the most recent converts. Probably this reflects his own foundational role in the community's origins. The direct address also has the effect of calling their attention to a new concern, that of the false teachers. It had already been hinted at in what preceded. Now the author addresses the subject directly.

It was almost a commonplace of Jewish and Christian belief that the end of time would be characterized by major conflicts. The emergence of false teachers to lead people astray is a frequent element in predictions of the last times. Already Deuteronomy speaks of false prophets who will arise (Deut. 13.2–5; 18.20). According to Mark 13.22 Jesus predicted the appearance of 'impostors..claiming to be messiahs or prophets'. The community at Qumran understood its leader's conflicts with the figure called the Wicked Priest in this light.

At the same time major conflicts, particularly those relating to the end of time, frequently involved figures who were larger than life. They represent the forces of evil doing battle against God and the forces of good. Mythical sea monsters and dragons or heavenly renegades like Satan, Mastema or Belial, mount the final assault on the armies of light. Frequently, as in Daniel and Revelation, animals represent enemy nations.

Our author assumes that the readers are familiar with a figure called the antichrist. This term, which occurs in the New Testament only in the letters of John (I John 2.18, 27; 4.3; II John 7), seems to be a natural development within early Christian thought to describe the leader of the evil side in the last days. It was sufficiently familiar for the author to give the idea a creative twist which brought it away from being speculation about the climax of history and related it directly to the readers' own situation.

The author joins two streams of expectation: the appearance of false teachers and the coming of the antichrist. What emerges is the claim that the false teachers are themselves antichrists. 2.22–23 will show that to call the false teachers *antichrists* is particularly appropriate, given that it is precisely their teaching about *Christ* which, the author argues, is false.

It is not that the author is merely making use of categories associated with the end of the age and abandoning their traditional sense. On the contrary, he is arguing that the grave crisis which is to confront the world has come and is manifesting itself in what has happened in the community.

In one of the few concrete references to the situation which lies behind the epistle the author tells us in 2.19 that these *antichrists* had once been members of the community and had left. There had been a split in the community. II John 7 has often been read as describing the same event when it says: *Many deceivers have gone out into the world, people who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. Any such person is the deceiver and antichrist*. More likely it refers more generally to the emergence of false teachers and not to the particular schism of 2.19. See the commentary on II John for further discussion.

The author comes to terms with this split by asserting that they could never really have belonged. They were not real Christians in the first place. We may be sure that they would have seen things quite differently. They were claiming to be Christians and to have the right understanding of who Jesus was, which, from their viewpoint, taught a much more divine Christ than the one the author espoused. He describes them in 2.26 as *those who would mislead you*.

2. 2.20–21 The anointing assures knowledge. The author's next move is to reassure the readers. The group who had left were almost certainly calling into question the faith and integrity of those who remained behind. 4.7 tells us that *the world listens to them*. This may indicate that they were a sizeable group enjoying success in mission. Popular and successful churches frequently claim such success as God's seal of approval.

The author comforts those left behind: *you have been anointed by the Holy One, and so you all have knowledge* (19). At the conclusion of the passage he returns with the same reassurance: *the anointing which you received from him remains with you; you need no other teacher, but you learn all you need to know from his anointing* (27). The word translated *you have been anointed* (literally: 'you have an anointing') and *anointing*, is

the Greek: *chrisma*. There is an obvious play on words in the Greek. The opponents are anti*christ*; the believers have *chrisma*. Originally, *the Christ* (Greek: *Christos*; Hebrew: *māšîah*, anglicized as *Messiah*) means *the anointed one*. The (true) Christians share Christ's anointing. He, too, was *anointed by the Holy One*. There is, however a little uncertainty here. *The Holy One* might refer to Christ, as it does in John 6.69. 2.27 speaks of the *anointing* coming *from him*, the one in whom believers are to dwell and who is to come in judgement (28), which many take as Christ, rather than God.

But what does *chrisma* mean here? It could refer either to the event at which, either in a literal or symbolic sense, they were anointed. Or it could refer, literally or symbolically, to the substance, the anointing oil, with which they were anointed. There is evidence from the late second century on that a literal anointing with oil took place in some branches of the church, usually in association with the event of baptism. Paul speaks of Christians being anointed by God (II Cor. 1.21), but it is far from certain that a literal anointing is in mind. According to Luke 4.18, Jesus used the words of Isa. 61.1, 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me,' to describe his own calling. There it refers back to Jesus' baptism and the descent of the Spirit, but not to any literal act of anointing with oil.

Whether or not a literal act of anointing with oil is envisaged, the primary focus of the present passage seems to be empowerment to discern, which derives from an event in the past. That event in the past is most likely what may in the broadest terms be described as conversion, which includes the complex of the following elements which were usually seen as one event and which often individually function as shorthand for the whole event: coming to faith; submitting in baptism to God's cleansing; receiving the Spirit. Within this complex, *anointing* seems most likely to refer to the receiving of the Spirit. In end effect, the author would most probably not have made a fine distinction between the event of anointing and the means (here: the Spirit).

The readers are being encouraged to remember what happened at their initiation and to claim its effects, above all, the continuing presence of the Spirit. The Spirit is not directly mentioned, either in 2.20–21 or in 2.27, but the usual association of ideas linked with anointing in early Christian tradition, such as we find in Luke 4.18, above, make it most probable. This is particularly so when we examine the function of the continuing *chrisma*. It does here what the *advocate* (the *paraklētos*), *the Spirit of truth*, is promised to do in the last

discourses of the community's gospel. It teaches the believers and enables them to know the truth about Jesus (20–21, 27; John 14.16–17, 26; 15.26; 16.12–15).

We find here echoes of the new covenant promise of Jeremiah 31.34: 'No longer need they teach one another, neighbour or brother, to know the Lord; all of them, high and low alike, will know me, says the Lord.' This is particularly so in 2.20: *you all have knowledge* and in 27: *you need no other teacher, but you learn all you need to know from his anointing*. The author is, of course, thinking of the false teachers. In no way has he abdicated his own teaching role! He understands his own teaching as the work of the Spirit. No doubt his opponents would have argued similarly: theirs was the true knowledge taught by the Spirit. How are we to discern the truth of competing claims to the Spirit? The author will return to this issue in 4.1–3.

II 2.22–25 Denying the Father and the Son or dwelling in them

1. 2.22–23 The Antichrist denies the Father and the Son. Knowing the truth also means being able to recognize falsehood (21). Having reassured the readers of the rightness of their beliefs, the author turns to the position of his opponents. But at this point we look in vain for specific detail. As in 2.15–17, he employs general assertions to attack their position. The readers will know the particular beliefs under attack. We have to reconstruct them from the hints left behind in the epistle (see the discussion in the commentary on 5.6).

Jesus is the Christ was the widespread standard confession in early Christianity. To deny this was to deny the truth. In the author's view what the opponents taught about Christ effectively denied this confession. It is fairly obvious that the opponents themselves would not have seen themselves denying that Jesus is the Christ. They saw themselves as Christians, better Christians, than the author and his community. But when they said, *Jesus is the Christ*, they meant something different from the author.

For the author their belief was tantamount to denying Christ and that was tantamount to denying God. This position put them in league with those who oppose God; they are *antichrists*. Any falsification of who Christ is means, for the author, a falsification of who God is; and, conversely, a true acknowledgement of Christ is at the same time a true acknowledgement of God. The author's understanding of

God is thoroughly Christ-centred, rather than derived from abstract speculation. It is an earthed picture of God: God in Jesus Christ.

2. 2.24–25 The Christian dwells in the Father and the Son. As we shall see, the false teachers were in some way loosening the connection with earthed reality and that showed not only in their belief about Christ, but also in their attitude towards the earthly realities of living in relationship with other human beings. This concern had shown itself already in the opening words of the epistle which stressed the tangible reality of the Word (it had been *from the beginning* and been *seen..heard..*and *felt*). Now those opening words come flooding back as the author exhorts them to *keep hold of what* they *had heard at the beginning* (24). Here and there (1.2) the promise is *eternal life* and it is to be had in *the common life . . . shared with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ* (1.3). Here the *common life* is described as dwelling *both in the Son and in the Father* (2.24), a term expressing intimate belonging.

III 2.26–27 The deceivers and the Christian *chrisma*

1. 2.26 Those who mislead
2. 2.27 The anointing teaches knowledge

These verses function as a summary and I shall treat them together. They indicate that the false teachers have not abandoned the community altogether. They are trying to subvert it, to convert it to their own ways. Much of this section has already received comment in the discussion of 2.18–21 to which it corresponds. It reassures the readers again about the veracity of what they believe. On its own it looks like a very subjective claim: my anointing teaches me what is right; I need no instruction from anyone!

Yet, set within the epistle as a whole, it is hedged with safeguards. What is right is also what has been passed on from the beginning, for which the fathers, and the author, in particular, are guarantors. It is also inseparably linked with the person Jesus of Nazareth as the one who came in the flesh and with an understanding of God as primarily loving. All this is assumed as indisputable truth to which the Spirit will bear witness. It is the Spirit of this Jesus and this God who is at work in the believer. The author is far from offering a warrant for free-wheeling speculation about faith and life-style. In the following section he will connect life-style and dwelling in Christ more closely together, so that the one is seen to flow from the other.

PART THREE: Christian life-style in practice
2.28–3.24

Having assured the readers about their beliefs and warned them about the dangers threatening from their former community members who had opted for an alternative way of understanding the faith, the author moves to address the matter of Christian life-style. Throughout this passage the issue of life-style is two-edged: it encourages the readers to follow the right way and it enables them to recognize the way of sin which characterizes the opponents.

The thrust of both this and the previous passage is summarized in 3.23: *we should give our allegiance to his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as Christ commanded us.* This comes within the final section, 3.19–24. This corresponds to the opening section of the passage, 2.28–29, and together both function as a framework for the discussion about life-style, setting it within the overall context of being accountable before God at the judgement. Within this structure, 3.1–3 highlights the promise entailed in God's love for the believer: we shall be transformed to be like Christ. 3.4–10 contrasts two life-styles, seeing each as the fruit of people's relationship with God or the devil. 3.11–18 expounds the concrete behaviour which characterizes each life-style in terms of how we share our resources. 3.19–24 moves back to the issue of recognition and reassurance about belonging to God and summarizes the thrust of the letter thus far. The pattern is as follows:

I 2.28–29 Not being ashamed when Christ comes

II 3.1–18 Being God's children
1. 3.1–3 The promise entailed in being God's children
2. 3.4–10 Two life systems, the work of God and the devil
3. 3.11–18 Two contrasting sets of behaviour

III 3.19–24 Being able to approach God with confidence

I 2.28–29 Not being ashamed when Christ comes

These opening verses both introduce and summarize the entire section. They set the readers' focus on the climax of history. This is not new. It had already been alluded to in 2.18 (*the last hour*). There it concerned the coming of antichrist. Here it concerns the coming of Christ and the Christian's readiness. The assurance of readiness

lies in Christian life-style. There are two aspects to this readiness: dwelling in Christ, which includes both right belief and right relationship with Christ; and doing what is right. The rest of the passage will spell this out and enable us to see the connection. For right behaviour flows from right relationship; the two are inseparable. This is a holistic understanding of Christian life. The check for Christians if they are to be confident before God is: is the connection working? is there a flow from faith to practice? The passage assumes not only that faith and practice ought to go hand in hand, but also that one's relationship with God (or the devil) is itself a transforming relationship. Practice is both a requirement beside faith and a fruit of faith. This notion of dynamic transformation underlies the initial reflection on God's love for his children in 3.1–3.

II 3.1–18 Being God's children

1. 3.1–3 The promise entailed in being God's children. As usual the author has signalled the motif of this section in the last lines of the previous one: *is his child* (2.29). Now he expands this motif. His first thought is love, God's love. Constantly we find the author begins his theology with this axiom. It is such great love because *the Father has bestowed* it *on us in calling us his children* (3.1).

Behind this statement is an awareness that no human being has a claim to be God's child. The author is not operating within a framework of thought which sees all God's human creatures as his children by virtue of their creation (as, for instance, Acts 17.28). Being God's child in I John means being given a privileged relationship which one does not naturally deserve. As the Old Testament could speak of Israel as God's child and its members as God's children as an act of special grace (Hos. 11.1; Exod. 4.22), so Christians came to see their special covenant relationship with God in family terms (John 1.12–13; Gal. 4.6–7). They had become God's children; they had been adopted into God's family.

Within the context of the Jewish understanding of God as Israel's father, Jesus spoke of God in most intimate terms as his Father, and his address of God with the familial Aramaic *abba* was preserved in the earliest records as his own special term which believers would now come to share (Mark 14.36; Rom. 8.14–16). Inevitably imagery of becoming God's children by adoption drew to it imagery of birth and rebirth, familiar to the religious thought world of the day and a

common image in many religions and cultures to describe passages of initiation. The community's gospel had already spoken of being 'born again' (John 3.3, 5) in relationship to Christian initiation. The imagery reappears in the epistle (2.29; 3.9; 4.7; 5.1,4,18).

The author reassures the readers that they are indeed such children of God, comforting them with the observation that rejection by the world is only to be expected because it does not recognize God (similarly: John 14.17; 15.18–21). There is however much more to say.

Not only are believers God's children; they can also look forward to even greater promise in the future. To reassurance about their present status the author adds the promise of future transformation. *What we shall be has not yet been disclosed* (3.2). The author is not obsessed with possessing knowledge about the future; his focus is love and change in the context of relationship, not possession and power. But to give some form to this future hope the author draws upon the traditional imagery of future resurrection.

Already the book of Daniel had described 'the wise leaders' on the day of resurrection as shining 'like the bright vault of heaven' (Dan. 12.3). Jesus' discussion with the Sadducees concluded with the statement that the resurrected righteous will be 'like angels in heaven' (Mark 12.25). Similarly Matthew's gospel describes angels, the future righteous and the transfigured Jesus as shining like the sun (28.3; 13.43; 17.2). Paul writes of transformation in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet of those who remain on earth alive at Christ's coming (I Cor. 15.51–52). In Philippians he writes that 'Christ will transfigure our humble bodies, and give them a form like that of his own glorious body' (Phil. 3.21).

The idea was widespread that the spiritual resurrection body would be of a special kind similar to that of angels and to Jesus in his heavenly form. Here in 3.2 the author explains the process of transformation as the result of our seeing Christ as he is. Paul uses a similar notion in II Cor 3.18, but applies it already to transformation taking place in the present. The link between the reality of Christ and the process of change is important both for future promise and for the present.

I have interpreted 2.2 in accord with its REB rendering as a promise of seeing Christ. The Greek is ambiguous. It simply refers to seeing *him as he is* and might refer to God. This would allude to what was traditionally held to be impossible for mortal human beings to do and survive: to see God (Exod. 33.20). The author will remind his readers of this in 4.12 and 21 and the gospel proclaims that it is in

Christ that we finally see God (1.18; 14.9). The Jewish philosopher and teacher, Philo of Alexandria, was fond of interpreting the name 'Israel' to mean 'one who sees God' and, like much spiritual mysticism after him, spoke of seeing God (the *visio dei*) as the ultimate human aspiration. Jesus had promised that those 'whose hearts are pure . . . shall see God' (Matt. 5.8). This is closer to what we have in I John, since it, too, is speaking of a promise for the end of the age.

Whether referring to seeing Christ or seeing God, the underlying idea seems to be that the glorious light coming from the one who is seen causes the seer to glow or shine with light. Moses' shining face is the best example in the Old Testament (Exod. 34.30; compare also II Cor 3.7–11). It has left its mark on the New Testament account of the transfiguration of Jesus (Mark 9.2–3; and especially Matt. 17.2). Whether the promise of being *like him* refers to God or to Christ, ultimately, makes little difference. Christ himself shines with the Father's glory, according to the gospel (John 13.31–32; 17.1–2, 5) and elsewhere it is common to speak of him as God's image or reflection (Heb. 1.3; Col. 1.15; see also Rom. 8.30). Christian hope is ultimately to share God's life and light.

There are additional difficulties in translation, reflected in the alternative REB offers as a footnote. The difficulties do not substantially alter the overall thrust of the verse. It still centres on the notion of a future transformation in the presence of Christ.

Our author moves to the present in 3.3, signalling the theme of what follows: *As he is pure, everyone who has grasped this hope makes himself pure*. Human effort is important here (*makes himself*), but we should not lose sight of the effect of Christ's purity (or, possibly, God's; see the discussion above) in motivating and enabling that process to take place. The author holds together human effort and divine enabling, just as he holds together future and present change. To be *pure* as Christ (or God) is *pure* finds its best explanation in what follows. It is not asceticism or withdrawal, but generosity in love.

2. 3.4–10 Two life systems, the work of God and the devil. The concluding verse of the previous section (3.3) announces the theme of 3.4–10: the need to live a *pure* life as Christ (or God) is *pure*. This, in turn, echoes the conclusion of the opening segment of the passage 2.28–3.24 as a whole: *God is righteous..everyone who does what is right is his child* (2.29). In 3.4–10 the author contrasts two life-styles or systems of living.

He begins by identifying sin as breaking God's law (3.4). The point

of this is that sin is much more than an act of wrong. It is ultimately an act of wrong against God. It is relational. God is about trying to remove sins from the world (3.5). That was the point of Christ's coming. So to be on the side of sin is to be against God.

The author looks at behaviour as belonging to a system of relationships, where the relationships we are in affect the way we behave. This is true of sin. It is also true of right living. In 3.6 he relates behaviour directly to whether a person *dwells* in Christ or not. The fruit of an ongoing right relationship with God is to be on God's side in what God is about. It is to do right. Where such fruit is not in evidence, there cannot be a right relationship with God: *the sinner has neither seen him nor known him* (3.6).

In 3.7–10 the author expands this basic principle. He begins by pointing out that being *righteous* has nothing to do with formal or technical status. It has to do with how one lives, whether one *does what is right* (3.7). The author has in mind other approaches, probably those of his opponents, who claim some status for themselves independent of this and are pressuring the readers to follow their approach.

He is not isolating righteousness as merely a matter of deeds. We see this by his addition: *as Christ is righteous* (3.7). In other words he remains with the view which treats behaviour as the fruit of a system at the basis of which are relationships, in this case a relationship with Christ who *is righteous*. Here we should see Christ's righteousness as much more than setting an example. It sets the tone for the system, enabling it to produce righteous behaviour in others.

Equally, sinful behaviour, he says, shows that a person belongs to the sin system of the devil. Here he uses the image of family: the person sinning is *a child of the devil* (3.8). That person is affected by and helps maintain the 'family system' of the devil. The devil has always been against God and so produces among those who are caught in his system the fruits of such an attitude: sin, which, as 3.4 pointed out, is directed ultimately against God. The author repeats also the thought of 3.5: *the Son of God appeared for the very purpose of undoing the devil's work* (3.8). Here the author now applies the family imagery to the righteousness system: if the sinner is the *child of the devil*, then Christ is the *Son of God*.

Common to Christianity of the time and much of Judaism, the devil or Satan represents personally the forces of evil. Sometimes people thought of the devil as the leader of an army of devils or demonic powers. According to the gospels Jesus cast out demons

through exorcism and spoke of the final demise of the devil and his angels (Matt. 25.41). Mostly, New Testament writers focus just on the single figure of the devil as incorporating all that opposes God. There is no evident enthusiasm for speculation about the devil's entourage as we find in some writings of the period. Mostly the imagery is restrained. Paul, who offers the most extensive treatment of the subject of evil, seems even to prefer a more impersonal representation of evil. In Romans he prefers to speak metaphorically of death and sin (especially in Rom. 5–8; compare also I Cor. 15.25–26, 54–56).

Nevertheless, even for Paul, we must assume belief in a personal devil. Such belief raised questions of the origin of such a being. There were many speculations at the time based on Genesis 6 about the devil as a fallen angel, but these leave only little trace in the New Testament. The New Testament image is much more developed, however, than the one we find in Old Testament writings such as Job 1–2, where Satan is a regular member of Yahweh's heavenly court, functioning as an accuser (the meaning of 'Satan'). He was as such 'the Satan'. In the Johannine writings the devil is a point of reference for explaining negative responses to God, but never in a way which absolves individuals of their own responsibility. In the present passage the devil is presented as the personal reference point for a relationship system which produces behaviour which is sinful. He is described elsewhere in the epistle also as *the evil one* (5.18–19).

3.9 begins by making what seems, at first, an outrageous claim: *no child of God commits sin* and concludes by taking this claim, it seems, to an extreme: *indeed because he is God's child he cannot sin*. The author will make similar claims in 5.18: *no child of God commits sin; he is kept safe by the Son of God, and the evil one cannot touch him*. Such statements seem to stand in direct contradiction to what the author has already written in 1.5–2.2, where on two occasions it explicitly mentions that Christians will sin and that, if they do, there is provision for their forgiveness (1.9; 2.1). Similar assumptions are present later in the epistle, for instance, in 5.16–17, immediately before the claim cited above (5.18), which seems to assert the opposite.

We should not rule out the possibility that an ancient author might have contradicted himself – modern writers and preachers frequently do! We may want to ameliorate such a conclusion by noting that the author was addressing different contexts and that such apparent inconsistency arises because on one occasion he is thinking of

Christians who have sinned and on the other he is warning them not to.

But such explanations fail, to my mind, to understand what the author is doing here. As we have already seen, the author is thinking in systems. One system produces one kind of harvest; the other, another kind. The two systems are opposed. Thinking in systems we can use them in two ways: to say that this harvest proves this relationship exists; or to say this relationship must produce this harvest. It cannot be otherwise. We are dealing with the way of thinking also present when Paul speaks of the harvest of the Spirit and the works of the flesh in Galatians (esp. 5.16–25; similarly Rom. 8.1–14).

Instead of speaking directly of the Spirit as enabling this process to work, the author writes: *no child of God commits sin, because the divine seed remains in him* (3.9). This somewhat daring imagery, which does not square with modern physiology, suggests that the generative seed (Greek: *sperma*), the sperm, not only leads to the birth of the child, but somehow remains in the child. We might translate this into the presence of the DNA blueprint or the like. The image should not be pressed, but the point is clear. Not only is the believer a child of God; within each believer there is a dynamic operating which enables them to do right and makes it impossible for them to sin.

This remains the case as long as the person is a child of God. The problem with this is that it is describing a process in isolation. The process is real; it is not a flight of fancy or mere theory. For it expresses what is at the heart of the gospel: love begets love; a good tree produces good fruit; love is the fruit of the Spirit. It describes a reality. But it is a reality which coexists with other realities. Paul addressed this complex of realities when he argued that Christians should become what they are. They have been set free for new life; now they need to walk in that new life (Gal. 5.16; Rom. 6.1–13). With Christ they died in sin: in the same way they must reckon themselves 'as dead to sin and alive to God, in union with Christ Jesus' (Rom. 6.11).

The author has been describing two life-styles based on systems. The wider reality is that the Christian may choose to break the connection with the system of right living. That means getting our relationship wrong with God and so producing corrupt fruit again. The author expresses himself in terms of systems and relationships. That is why love is such a frequent motif. It is also why he constantly defines being Christian in terms of loving, dwelling in or being in God. He is not concerned with legal definitions, for instance, about

whether when we sin we retain a listing, so to speak, in the heavenly books. He is concerned throughout with relationships. Past achievement or status means nothing if there is no ongoing relationship.

We might wish that he had said more, and what I have done is to attempt to fill in the gaps. Here he is describing a widely recognized process of spiritual growth and fruitfulness and pitting it against its opposite. Without the wider context the statements appear extreme. Within it we see him identifying a potential reality which is there for us to grasp. Clearly he is aware that believers will sin.

The stark way in which he contrasts the two systems could lead us to believe that we are forever moving from being children of God to becoming children of the devil and the reverse, but this is unlikely. As in Paul's writings, we should probably assume an awareness on the part of the author that there is a distinction between Christians sinning and seeking the forgiveness available within the relationship and those who abandon the relationship altogether. The focus is much more on attitude and resultant action than on isolated instances.

The marriage analogy may help us here. There is a difference between conflicts and failures which are commonplace in struggling with the relationship and the decision to dissolve it altogether. Certainly such a distinction appears to lie behind the author's reassurance about the availability of forgiveness (1.9 and 2.1), on the one hand, and his assessment of the fate of the opponents, on the other, who, in his view, have abandoned the path altogether. We shall return to the latter issue in discussing 5.16–18.

The final verse of the segment opens the door still further to enable us to see what the author is driving at: *anyone who fails to do what is right or love his fellow-Christian is not a child of God* (3.10). The focus is clearly on ongoing behaviour and attitude rather than a single incident. With the words, *love his fellow-Christian*, the author prepares the reader for the theme of the following segment, where such love is shown to entail practical caring at the level of helping to meet one another's basic needs.

The system way of thinking about life-style is holistic because it embraces the entire connection from God to concrete practicalities of justice and care in the community. It coheres with the author's understanding of Jesus who is the Son of God but who came in the flesh. The understanding of life-style and the understanding of Jesus both belong inextricably together. On both accounts the author's

position is diametrically opposed to the less holistic approach of the opponents.

3. 3.11–17 Two contrasting sets of behaviour. In 3.11 the author appeals to the original message of the gospel, as he has at the beginning of the epistle: *The message you have heard from the beginning*. Here that message is spelled out as: *we should love one another*. This is the new and old command alluded to in 2.7–8. It is repeated in 3.23 in the summary of the section 2.28–3.24. It has its parallels in Judaism (e.g. Testament of Gad 6.1) and forms a primary theme of Jesus' last words to his disciples in the community's gospel (John 13.34–35; 15.12, 17).

For contrast the author alludes in 3.12 to the archetypal figure of Cain, the murderer. The story of Genesis 4.1–16 had long become a symbol of human evil in Judaism, and early Christianity shared this heritage (e.g. Jude 11). This is the only Old Testament story alluded to in the epistle. It will have been familiar to the readers. Cain is stereotyped as *a child of the evil one*. The author identifies him as belonging to the system of evil, just as in 3.9 he had spoken of *the child of God* who cannot sin. In other words the murderous act is the fruit of his distorted relationship with God.

The grounds for this act lie, according to the author, in the fact that *his own actions were wrong, and his brother's were right* (3.12). This is a deduction from the comment in Genesis 4.4–5, that 'the Lord regarded Abel and his offering with favour, but not Cain and his offering'. Probably the immediate reason for giving this explanation is that it also fits the conflict between the community and those who have abandoned it. Their *actions were wrong*, whereas those of the author and his community *were right*. The opponents were *wrong* in that they had distorted the truth about Jesus and they were *wrong* in abandoning their fellow-Christians.

The connection between the opponents and *the world* is evident in 4.5. This same connection was also apparent in 2.15–17. The author understands the opposition from the opponents as belonging within the overall hostility of the world system against the system of God. According to the community's gospel, Jesus had warned of such alienation in similar words: 'If the world hates you, it hated me first, as you know well' (John 15.18). There he was speaking of persecution, probably from the Jewish community. Here *the world* also includes former community members.

Echoes of the gospel continue in the following verse: *we know that*

we have crossed from death to life, because we love our fellow-Christians. According to John 5.24, the person who puts trust in Jesus 'has eternal life . . . does not come to judgement, but has already passed from death to life'. The gospel writer portrays Jesus' gift of life as bringing to fulfilment all those hopes of people which had focussed on future judgement and resurrection. To all intents and purposes these cataclysmic events expected at the end of history had happened in the life of the believer. The life of the age to come, *eternal life*, was theirs now. When these events finally took place at the close of history, they would merely confirm what was already an established reality.

The author turns the gospel's language of celebration of life to the situation of conflict. The same assertion stands: they, the author and readers, have *crossed over from death to life* (3.14), but, to remove any ambiguity, the author cites the only evidence for such a claim that has validity: *we love our fellow-Christians* (3.14). If that is absent, any claim to have eternal life, or to have passed from death to life, is mere rhetoric. Paul argued similarly in the famous love chapter of I Corinthians 13. Speaking in tongues, performing miracles, possessing great knowledge and wisdom, exercising enormous generosity, all meant nothing if love was absent.

We see the author's way of thinking in systems when he adds in 3.14: *Anyone who does not love is still in the realm of death* (literally: 'dwells in death'). If the fruit being displayed is bad, there must be something wrong with the system. The relationship with God is askew. Lovelessness belongs in the system where life is not being affirmed. Love begets love and lovelessness begets lovelessness. Like Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, the author sees murder and hate, or the nursing of anger (Matt. 5.22), as belonging to the same continuum. All such activity and all such attitudes are destructive of other human beings, whereas the love which God gave in Christ creates life and raises people out of such death. People who hate no more have such life dwelling in them than a murderer has (3.15).

In 3.16 the author makes explicit what had already been implicit in the preceding discussion: *This is how we know what love is: Christ gave his life for us.* Love is not an abstraction. Nor is it another word for sectarian loyalty. It is the self-giving expressed in Christ's coming and giving himself up for the sake of all. The community's gospel records Jesus' words to his disciples: 'There is no greater love than this, that someone should lay down his life for his friends' (John 15.13). The writer of the epistle is probably thinking both of Jesus's

coming and of his death as a sacrifice for sins, a theme more prominent in the epistle than in the gospel.

In the light of Christ's love, the Christian is under obligation to show the same kind of love. The arena of conflict is the Christian community and therefore the author formulates this obligation as love for fellow-Christians, rather than as love for the world. But the logic of his position means ultimately that we should express to all people the same love which God has shown them in Christ. Here, he expresses our part in terms of obligation, but elsewhere we see that this should not be seen in isolation from the system's way of thinking. Ultimately what we ought to do is also what we are enabled to do.

In 3.17 the author grounds his argument in a practical example: it makes no sense to claim that God's love is flowing through you, if you close yourself off to the needs of fellow human beings, when they experience poverty. *How can it be said* of such a person *that the love of God dwells in him*? It is also possible to take the phrase, *love of God*, to refer to love for God. Can I say, I love God, and then neglect others in need? It is more probable, however, that it means God's own loving. The issue is whether the love flows in such a way as to produce fruit. Absence of fruit suggests there was never a flow in the first place.

Possessing *the good things of this world* means having worldly wealth and possessions. The word translated here as *good things* is translated *wealth* in 2.16 in the expression *arrogance based on wealth*. The author clearly considers it possible for Christians to possess wealth, but makes it clear what attitude should accompany it. Wealth, like love, is for sharing. Possessed and not shared, it becomes the possessor; and the possessor joins the system of lovelessness which is tantamount to murder in the human community.

In this practical example, the author may only be offering a striking illustration to stress the general point; or he may be alluding to a feature of the conflict with the opponents, which appears to be in mind in this segment of the text. Possibly, along with their wrong doctrine, went a neglect of those in material need. This would fit their overall approach which seems to have been to relegate the material side of Jesus to insignificance. Such lack of compassion has its echoes in the Corinthian community where failure to share food with the needy was making a mockery of the Lord's Supper (I Cor. 11.17–32). It looks as though the wealthier in the community of I John belonged to the secessionists, the poorer to those left behind.

The concluding verse of the segment summarizes its message: *Children, love must not be a matter of theory or talk; it must be true love which shows itself in action* (literally: Children, let us not love in word or tongue, but in deed and truth). It looks back, but also looks forward. It offers with the word *true* or *in truth* a transition to the following brief segment which speaks of belonging *to the realm of truth* (3.19).

III 3.19–24 Being able to approach God with confidence

The section 2.28–3.24 began with the exhortation that the readers so live that they could stand with confidence at the judgement day. It ends on the same note. The previous section ended with the catch-word *true* (or *truth*). In 3.19, *This is how we shall know that we belong to the truth*, refers back to 3.18 which spoke of love not only in words but in action. *We belong in the realm of truth* (literally: we are of the truth), when we have the evidence showing in our behaviour. That is our reassurance: we can see it happening. For the author, *truth* cannot be separated from behaviour, as if it referred only to correctness of belief. *Truth* includes right belief; but it also includes rightness of lifestyle. Both belong inextricably together.

The author presses the point even further. Not even conscience (literally: heart) should stand in the way of such confidence. This assumes conscience may deceive in much the same way as feelings may deceive. Faith means trusting in God's love and making ourselves available for its action despite what we may feel. Faith cannot be based on feelings. Nor should its criterion of authenticity be absence of struggle. A troubled conscience or mind may coexist with a life of faith.

By shifting the basis for confidence from human feelings and inner harmony to hard faith facts about God and behaviour, the author is boycotting a common religious trend, then and now, to make inner human experiences the criteria of spirituality. There is a certain defiance of popular religion in his stand and it probably grew out of conflicts with his opponents. They had probably laid claim to superior spiritual experiences, perhaps charismatic in character. The opening verses of the following chapter suggest they appealed to the Spirit for their authority. If their focus had been their own experiences, putting themselves in the centre, the author sees Christian life as a continuum, a system, which begins with God loving and ends with

people loving. If their reassurance and confidence was focussed on the Christian in the middle, the author's is focussed on both ends: God and behaviour. We can trust God (3.20) and we can read action (3.18–19).

It would be wrong to read this passage as devaluing *conscience* or our thoughts and feelings altogether. They may be a guide, but their quality as guide will be determined by the quality of the person who is being guided. The author is not operating with an idealistic notion of *conscience* as somehow representing the voice of God within. He has not even used the Greek word most commonly translated *conscience*. He operates rather with the notion that our thoughts and feelings are part of our own system of awareness which may well be misinformed and misguided. There is also a touch of realism in the author's obvious appreciation that Christians may well at times have to struggle with unresolved tensions within their personalities which have their origin somewhere other than God. There is a profound comfort in the assurance that *God is greater than our conscience and knows all* (3.20), because this God is the God of love and compassion and may be trusted.

The Greek also allows this statement to be turned on its head: if our conscience condemns us, God will do so, too, and that is far more serious, for God is greater than our conscience. The words, *reassure ourselves* (literally: persuade ourselves), would need to be translated to give the sense: 'persuade ourselves of the danger we are in'. But the wider context suggests that not fear, but reassurance is the focus of the passage. For 3.19 the REB footnote offers a further alternative translation for the very awkward Greek original: *we convince ourselves . . . that God is greater than our conscience*. The difference in meaning here is minimal.

The author perseveres with the notion of *conscience* (literally: heart) in 3.21, to argue that, *if our conscience does not condemn us, we can approach God with confidence*. This may mean that only those with untroubled minds can have confidence before God, which seems to run contrary to the spirit of what has just been said in the previous verse. It is much more likely that the author sees himself as having given the reassurance to those with troubled minds which will enable them to come with confidence before God. That has been his aim all along. He wants the readers to be reassured against the taunts and criticisms of those who have left the community and seek to undermine their position.

The theme of *confidence* echoes 2.28, where it referred to the final

day of judgement. Here in 3.21 the focus is similar, though the setting envisaged is not the final day of judgement, but the present relationship with God. The word translated *confidence* (*parrhesia*) includes the notion of boldness, of not being afraid to speak up in someone's presence. Something of this is reflected in the following verse which uses a promise, probably already well known in the community and already attested a number of times in the gospel. It expresses a degree of intimacy in divine human relations: we can *obtain from him whatever we ask, because we are keeping his commands and doing what he approves*. Its clearest parallel is in John 15.7: 'If you dwell in me, and my words dwell in you, ask whatever you want and you shall have it' (see also I John 14.13; 15.16; 16.23, 24, 26; 1 John 5.14–15).

It would be quite perverse and contrary to the spirit of what the author has said about possessions to interpret this as a promise about wealth. The promise should not be read from the perspective of the 'give me what I want' mentality of the Western world. In John 14.13, its first occurrence within the writings of the community, it comes in the context of Jesus' promise of equipment for the disciples to do the work of mission. In its earlier forms, such as, 'Ask and you shall receive' (Matt. 7.7), it focusses on the generosity of God's caring about our needs, just as parents care for the needs of their children (Matt. 7.9–11). The author's community seems also to have used the saying primarily as reassurance of God's care for his own as they exercise their ministry.

However, it may be that here, as in Matt. 18.19–20, the focus lies more on judgement: in response to request God enables the community to perceive right and wrong teaching, right and wrong behaviour. Motifs of judgement are present in the context and, if we read 3.22 in this way, it relates much more closely to the agenda facing the author and his readers. They are the ones who are *keeping his commands and doing what he approves* (3.22) and so are worthy to be given that kind of leadership, clearly of crucial importance in the face of the crisis facing the community. A similar context of judgement is present where the promise next occurs (5.14–17).

3.23 draws together the concerns of the dual focus of the author's concern in the epistle so far, right belief and right action: *we should give our allegiance to his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as Christ commanded us*. To *give..allegiance to* (literally: 'believe in') includes belief about the commitment to Christ. The issue of right belief is about to emerge again strongly in the following chapter, so that its mention here picks up a theme from the previous sections and

functions as a transition to the next. The command to *love one another* is more directly a summary and conclusion of 2.28–3.24.

As in the last discourses of Jesus with his disciples in John 14–16, so, here, *command* and *commands* have less to do with lists of commandments, of which we find scarcely any in the gospel or the epistle, and much more to do with relationship and attitude. It is as though a standard Jewish phrase, keeping the commandments, has been transferred into this Christian community's vocabulary as shorthand for doing God's will. Doing God's will is seen primarily as living in relationship with God, believing rightly about Jesus, and making sure that the love of God is not only received but passed on in concrete behavioural expression. That is why the author associates it so closely with the intimate relationship language of dwelling in God and God dwelling in us. The argument of the whole section has been that the fruit of love is the evidence of the relationship of love and that the two aspects belong inseparably together.

Opening the door to a new exploration of the theme, the author concludes this section by noting the role of the *Spirit* as the one who enables us to know that God dwells in us: *Our certainty that he dwells in us comes from the Spirit he has given us* (3.24). Chapter 4 will explore, in turn, the criteria for assessing people's claims that they have the Spirit's authority.

PART FOUR: The witness of the Spirit

4.1–5.12

In the final major section of the epistle, 4.1–5.12, the author expounds the meaning of *allegiance to his Son* (3.23) and reasserts the centrality of love for understanding God and the Christian life-style. 4.1–6 identifies the importance of right belief about Jesus as the criterion for identifying what is the witness of the Spirit and what is the spirit of error which belongs to the world and which characterizes the opponents. This corresponds to what we find in the concluding passage, 5.4b–12, where the author expounds the faith which overcomes the world as the one which includes right belief about Jesus. To this the Spirit bears witness.

Within the framework of 4.1–6 and 5.4b–12 the author includes five

further sections. 4.7–11, which begins and ends with the command to love one another, makes love the primary characteristic of the *child of God*. It corresponds, in turn, to 5.1–4a, where the motif, *child of God*, returns in an exhortation that we love the children of God. Between 4.7–11 and 5.1–4a we have three further segments. Again, the first and last of them correspond: both 4.12–16 and 4.19–21 use the motif of seeing God in order to press for a life-style which makes God known (and visible) through acts of love. 4.12–16 begins and ends with the theme of God dwelling in us. Finally, at the centre of the passage we have 4.17–18, which sets love in contrast to fear at the heart of faith's expectation of the judgement day.

The pattern appears as follows:

I 4.1–6 Right confession and true discernment and Christ

II 4.7–5.4a Right living: love, the sign of God
1. 4.7–11 Loving one another, the mark of God's children
2. 4.12–16 The unseen God dwelling in the true believer
3. 4.17–18 Love removing fear of judgement
4. 4.19–21 Loving the unseen God and the seen believer
5. 5.1–4a The child of God loving God's children

III 5.4b–12 Right confession about Christ and its evidence

I 4.1–6 Right confession and true discernment about Christ

In 3.24 the author mentioned the Spirit as the basis for Christian certainty. In 4.1–6 he addresses a problem: many people claim the Spirit inspires them; whom are we to believe? Almost certainly the author has the claims of the opponents in mind. He encourages the readers to develop a critical and discerning approach toward matters of belief. Christian faith does not mean leaving the intellect behind. Our author has no place for a naive acceptance of whatever feels good or seems inspiring at the time. Not what feels good nor what is popular and commands a large following governs his assessment of the work of the Spirit.

In encouraging the readers not to *trust every spirit*, but to *test the spirits*, the author is using *spirit* to refer to the power or energy which is inspiring a particular utterance on a particular occasion. Paul writes in I Cor. 14.32: 'It is for prophets to control prophetic inspiration;' literally: 'the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets.' Paul and our author share the same world of thought. In this world of thought,

even when speaking of the activity of the Spirit of God, people used the word *spirit* in two ways. It referred to the Holy Spirit generally; it could also refer to the Holy Spirit active on a particular occasion. It was not unusual for people to use the word *spirit* to refer to the inspiring force behind any such event, and to speak, then, in the plural of the spirits of events, even when they were sure it was the one Spirit behind all events. The sense, then, of *test the spirits, to see whether they are of God* is: check each occasion or utterance claimed to be inspired, to see whether this is really so.

The obvious reason for exercising such discernment is that there will be false claims. The author understands these, too, as spirit-inspired, but the spirit inspiring them is not the Spirit of God. It is an evil spirit. He has already spoken of *the evil one* (2.14) and of *the devil* (3.8–10). Here, he may be thinking of further evil spirits, demons, or he may be using *spirits* in the same way as we have explained above to describe manifestations of the one evil spirit, the devil. The author shows little interest elsewhere in the epistle in identifying a plurality of evil beings in the universe. He is much more concerned to identify the two opposing systems and thus to enable his readers to *distinguish the spirit of truth from the spirit of error* (4.6).

Understanding the passage within its own world of thought in this way is much more convincing than to take *spirits* in some modern sense as the equivalent of 'attitudes' or 'approaches' or to see in *spirits* just a general reference to individual human beings as *spirits*. Rather the author understands *spirits* as beings or forces and their manifestations in the world. The *spirits* are at work in individual human beings, inspiring them. This is very clear when we see how the author relates his warning to the concrete situation facing the readers.

There are many false prophets about in the world. Literally: 'Many false prophets have gone out into the world' (4.1b). The author shares the common understanding of the time that prophets are people who speak on the basis of inspiration. Recognizing which prophets are true and which are false becomes an important task in any religion which claims such inspiration. Deuteronomy sets out criteria in terms of whether what prophets predict comes true (Deut. 13.1–5; 18.15–22). Jeremiah complains of the prophets who proclaim a false hope of security (Jer. 14.13–16; 23.25–40).

Early Christian preaching warned of false prophets who would appear at the end of the age. Mark 13.22 warns of 'impostors..claiming to be messiahs and prophets'. Matthew 7.15–16 warns of 'false prophets, who come..dressed up as sheep while underneath they

are savage wolves. You can recognize them by their fruit.' They will prophesy, drive out demons and perform miracles in the name of Jesus (Matt. 7.22). The danger from such false prophets lies in the fact they claim to be speaking the truth in the name of Christ and exercise impressive ministries. Usually they understand themselves to be Christian.

The author is aware that already in his time the phenomenon of false prophets was widely established. 'Many..have gone out into the world,' that is, they have come out of Christian communities. The author puts the false teachers who have left his own community in the same category. Earlier he had called them *antichrists* (2.18, 22). They have gone out into *the world*. He will expand on their connection with *the world* in 4.5.

Already in 2.22 the author has told us that *he is the antichrist* who *denies that Jesus is the Christ*. There he did not spell out what such a denial entailed. Here, and in the corresponding passage, 5.6, we have some detail. We shall discuss their understanding of Jesus more fully when dealing with 5.6, but it is clear from 4.2 that the opponent's position entailed a belief about Jesus which denied his coming *in the flesh*. This coheres with the emphasis which we have already noted in the opening verses of the epistle: the Word appeared in such a way that people could see, hear and touch or feel him. Here, as in 5.6, this relates to how Jesus Christ has *come*.

The translation, *acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh* (4.2), is by far the most natural and doubtless reflects the author's intention. It is possible to construe the Greek so that it reads in translation: 'acknowledges that Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh' or 'acknowledges Jesus Christ come in the flesh.' The former option would have relevance if the opponents had somehow differentiated between *Christ* and *Jesus* and denied their identity. The latter might be taken as just a more elaborate way of saying: acknowledging or confessing Christ. The parallel with 5.6 suggests this is no mere stylistic elaboration. It suggests that the manner of coming is the primary matter of dispute rather than the direct identity of Jesus and Christ. We shall comment further on this in dealing with 5.6.

The closest parallel in wording to the present passage is found in II John 7: *Many deceivers have gone out into the world, people who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. Any such person is the deceiver and antichrist*. We either have the same author, or one close to him, writing to address the same kind of situation; or we have a different author using this passage from I John to address a new

danger which has arisen. There is a striking difference. II John refers most naturally not to Jesus Christ as having come in the flesh, but to his *coming in the flesh*. The most natural reading of the Greek suggests what is being referred to here is the future coming of Jesus. We shall discuss the matter further in the commentary on II John.

The words, *no spirit is from God which does not acknowledge Jesus* (4.3), recalls Paul's words to the Corinthians: 'No one who says, "A curse on Jesus!" can be speaking under the influence of the Spirit of God; and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord!" except under the influence of the Holy Spirit' (I Cor. 12.3). There, Paul is challenging the Corinthians that some of their behaviour as Christians was tantamount to cursing Jesus rather than blessing him. Here in I John, the author is also challenging unloving behaviour, but this goes hand in hand with wrong belief.

The words, *acknowledge Jesus* (4.3) are short for *acknowledge that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. The spirit of antichrist* (4.3) or *the antichrist* (2.18) reflected a traditional expectation in the community. The author has already identified the false teachers who have left the community as *antichrists* (2.18, 22). Here in 4.3 he returns to this traditional theme. The danger facing the readers belongs to the ultimate danger expected to confront the Christian community in the world.

In 4.4 the author uses the language of victory. The REB translation *mastery* somewhat obscures the connection with 5.4–5, where it translates words from the same Greek word group (*nik-*) as *overcomes, victory, victor*. The connection is important. The same word appears in 2.13 and 2.14, where REB translates it *conquered*. In all three contexts, 2.13–19, 5.4–6, and here in 4.4–6, we have the same Greek word and the same association of ideas: right belief about Jesus enables the believer to overcome the threat posed to it by the world in the person of false teachers.

The readers are on God's side. *They belong to God's family* (4.4). The *false prophets* who have left the community doubtless pose a major threat to the community and seek to undermine the members' confidence in the teaching of their leaders. The author reassures them, just as he had in 2.20 and 27, by reminding them that they have the true Spirit. They can hold out against the pressure of these false teachers by trusting the message they have received from the beginning about the real Jesus and his very earthy command to love.

By contrast the opponents have gone the way of the world. Doubtless they, themselves, would not have seen it that way. They

had probably formed their own community and were successfully carrying their own kind of mission in the world. Maybe the words, *and the world listens to them* (4.5), indicate such success in mission. Maybe the author is simply reinforcing his assertion that their beliefs are a sell-out to the values of the world. The author does not elaborate how this is so, but it is quite possible that he sees their denigration of Christ's flesh and their neglect of practical love as symptoms of the world system of self-indulgence. Religion without justice, spirituality without engagement in the flesh and blood issues of life, is, from the author's perspective, just another form of worldly self-indulgence.

The comforting words of 4.6 could read like the worst kind of self-congratulation: we know we are right! But in the context of the epistle as a whole they must be seen as giving expression to a confidence which rests not on arrogance or status, but on belief in love. Ultimately the author depends for his authority in this not on narrow sectarian self-assurance, but on belief that God is loving and God's loving reaches human flesh. That conviction extends to the confidence that people in touch with this God of love will inevitably respond positively to the preaching of the community. Whoever is for the gospel of love will be for this community; and whoever is against such love will reject it. As long as the community remains faithful to its received tradition, response to it will be a reliable criterion in measuring *the spirit of truth* and *error* (4.6).

The belief that God's love earths itself in human reality in Christ and continues to seek such earthing in human community is a constant underlying feature of the author's argument. The transition, therefore, to the full-blown exhortation to love, which follows in 4.7–11, is not unexpected.

II 4.7–5.4a Right living: love, the sign of God

1. 4.7–11 Loving one another, the mark of God's children. In 4.7 *My dear friends* translates the Greek *agapētoi;* in what immediately follows *let us love* is the Greek *agapōmen; love* is *agapē;* and *who loves* (literally: 'loving') is *agapōn*. The repetition of the same word group in the Greek of 4.7 is striking. *Love* constitutes the foundation of the author's thinking about God and Christian community. The command to *love one another* has already been noted above in 3.23

and has been expounded in practical terms in 3.11–18. It is the *old* and *new command* of 2.7.

It is not a command in isolation, but one which flows from a relationship. We would love one another *because the source of love is God* (4.7). This is more than an exhortation to follow God's example in loving. It makes a direct connection between our loving and God's loving. The author immediately expresses this connection by saying that *everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God* (4.7). Again, this is more than a matter of identification, as if we were still dealing with the need for criteria about who is and who is not a child of God. Rather, as in 3.7–10, the author is assuming the connection between our love and God's love within a dynamic system, where love produces love. There, too, he expressed it by identifying the believer as *child of God* and arguing that this relationship enables the Christian to love. Here he adds that the loving person *knows God*.

That *the unloving know nothing of God* (4.8) is almost so by definition, *for God is love*. This does not mean *love is God*; but it does mean that when the author thinks of God, he first and foremost thinks of God as loving. And, more than that, he sees such loving as a manifestation of God's being. He seems not to think of loving independent of God. Another way of saying this would be to describe every act of loving as a work of the Spirit. This is a love theology and a love spirituality. It calls to mind Jesus' persistent tendency to address the issue of God, and God's relationship to people, by telling stories about human love and generosity, the most famous instance being the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15.11–32.

The author's love theology is centred on his understanding of Jesus. What is love? Love is action by one person for another person. Supremely, the author identifies such action in God's initiative: *this is how he showed his love among us: he sent his only Son into the world that we might have life through him* (4.9). In this formulation, repeated with variation in 4.10, the author draws upon a tradition which also found its way into the gospel in the famous John 3.16: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who has faith in him may not perish but have eternal life.' It is found also in John 3.17. It appears in one of its earliest forms in Rom. 8.3 and Gal. 4.4 (see also Rom. 8.32 and Eph 5.1). In some forms of this tradition 'only' in the expression 'only Son' takes the form of 'beloved' (Mark 12.6) or 'his own' (Rom. 8.32).

Underlying all the variants is the special character of the Son as the object of the Father's love as well as his being sent into the world.

There is where love begins, in the relationship of Father and Son. It then expresses itself in an initiative to give life to others: *that we might have life through him* (4.9). Love and life are the opposite of hate and death. We find the same combination of thoughts in 3.13–17. Love is about enabling people to live and share in a life-giving relationship with God.

In 4.10 the author underlines the primary direction in which love flows: from God to us. It is not primarily about our loving God. That is our response; but, where that is made primary, love becomes the description of a human behaviour and attitude and loses its dynamic causal dimension. It becomes a word to describe our devotion and too easily produces a religion where love for God and love for neighbour are seen as two different things. Religious devotional life and practical care become divorced.

Where, however, with the author, we begin with the realization *not that we have loved God, but that he loved us* (4.10), we see that our loving is a participation in the loving which first came to us and enabled us to love. As we are involved in God's love for the world, we are already worshipping and our closeness to God in action will enrich also our expressions of love for God.

God *loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to atone for our sins* (4.10). In this version of the saying about God's initiative in sending Christ the author focusses particularly on Jesus' death. Already in 2.2 he refers to Christ's atoning work. There we noted that he probably means us to understand sacrifice in very general terms: as there were sacrifices for sin in the Old Testament order, so supremely Christ's sacrifice deals with sins. There is no indication that he is thinking here of any particular sacrifice, such as the sacrifices of the Day of Atonement or the Passover lamb which had come to have atoning significance.

The author concludes this section as he began it: by referring to the primacy of God's love, by addressing the readers as *dear friends*, and by repeating the exhortation to *love one another* (4.11). The context of these deliberations is the situation of the epistle. It addresses a Christian community. The author remains almost entirely within this framework of thought. When he speaks of loving one another, he refers to Christians loving one another. He is not referring primarily to an extension of this love to all human beings. That is not the specific agenda he is addressing.

But it would probably be wrong to interpret this silence on the wider issue as evidence that he would see love as limited to the

Christian community. And certainly it would conflict with his basic premises about God's original initiative of love to limit it in this way. While he addressed an inner Christian controversy, the insights to which he gives expression apply just as much to the wider world of reality. His famous *God is love* is true for the world as much as it is for the church. His love theology and love spirituality has been of abiding relevance as a central expression of the Christian message.

The theme of loving one another becomes the stepping stone to a new reflection in what follows: in acts of loving, the invisible God becomes visible.

2. 4.12–16 The unseen God dwelling in the true Believer. *God has never been seen by anyone* (4.12). This is standard theology for both Jews and Christians. It reaches back in tradition to the Sinai episode where God says to Moses: 'No mortal may see me and live' (Exod. 33.20). The climax of the prologue of the community's gospel reads: 'No one has ever seen God; God's only Son, he who is nearest to the Father's heart, has made him known' (John 1.18).

The writer takes this a step further. Not only is God made known in Christ. It can also be said: God becomes visible in the Christian. This is not an encouragement to conceit. It is focussing on love as the sign of God's being and action. When a community demonstrates this kind of loving, it is obvious that God is present. God *dwells in* that community. God's love reaches fulfilment (*is brought to perfection*) when it comes to realization in a human community where people love one another.

In the gospel of John Jesus is making a similar point when he says to his disciples: 'I give you a new commandment: love one another; as I have loved you, so you are to love one another. If there is this love among you, then everyone will know that you are my disciples' (John 13.34–35). In the same vein Jesus prays that the disciples may 'be one . . . that the world may believe' that God had sent him (John 17.21). Christian unity, where it occurs, is a making visible of God's presence in the world. Christian disunity is a sign of the absence of God, or, at least, a sign of God's love not finding its intended fulfilment. Reconciliation among people and among Christian communities is revelation of the invisible God. Evangelism and ecumenism are inseparably related for the author and his community.

The author is eager to reassure the readers that this is a reality as they love one another. God does, in fact, dwell in them. To reinforce this assurance the author returns to some of the points already made.

Thus in 4.13 he reminds them of the role of the Spirit in such assurance: *this is how we know that we dwell in him and he dwells in us: he has imparted his Spirit to us*. This repeats the claim made in 3.24: *And our certainty that he dwells in us comes from the Spirit. . . .*

But such assurance is not to be seen in isolation. The author is quick to add: *Moreover, we have seen for ourselves, and we are witnesses, that the Father has sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world* (4.14). The words *we have seen* recall the opening of the epistle where the author links himself with the tradition bearers who first saw, heard and came into tangible contact with Jesus. Here his *we* includes the readers with himself in this line of tradition. Together, they, too, are *witnesses*. The event to which they bear witness is the cornerstone of their assurance and hope: God's act of love in sending Christ as *Saviour of the world*.

The statement about God's sending the Son is formulated in traditional terms and has already appeared a few verses earlier in 4.9 and 10. *Saviour of the world* (4.14) was also probably a well-established phrase. It was already present in the community's gospel (John 4.42). Like the tradition in 2.2, it is one of the few places in the epistle where the wider world perspective comes to expression. The initiative of God's love was directed not to a particular group, but towards all people. The author preserves this wider perspective.

Assurance comes through the Spirit (4.13); it comes on the basis of what God has done for us (4.14); 4.15 draws these to their conclusion: guided by the Spirit and knowing what God has done, *if anyone acknowledges that Jesus is God's Son, God dwells in him and he in God*. Acknowledging *that Jesus is God's Son* carries with it the implications spelled out in 4.2, that he *has come in the flesh*. It is a particular way of believing in Jesus made possible by the Spirit. The words, *God dwells in him and he in God* recall 4.12, which spoke of God who *himself dwells in us . . . if we love one another*.

4.16 similarly returns us to where this short segment began: *Thus we have come to know and believe in the love which God has for us*. The author has spelled out the basis of assurance in the preceding verses. He now returns to the centrality of love as the manifestation of God's being and activity and as the evidence of our being in a right relationship with him: *God is love; he who dwells in love is dwelling in God, and God in him*. In this he returns to the words of 4.12: *If we love one another, he himself dwells in us*. This indwelling finds its realization not simply in the private devotion of prayer; its life is in community.

In 4.17 which follows we have in part a further echo of 4.12 in the

words, *love has reached its perfection*. But more properly this verse belongs with 4.18 to a new brief subtheme of love and fear.

3. 4.17–18 Love removing fear of judgement. *This is how love has reached its perfection among us* refers to the substance of the preceding section. Love *reaches its perfection* in the Christian community where there is mutual caring and unity. The author is concerned now to point out one of the important consequences of seeing love as the way the invisible God is made visible. It means that people can have *confidence* to stand before God *on the day of judgement*. The kind of understanding of God which the author espouses does not result in people feeling inadequate; it builds them up. It enables them to stand on their feet. It is life-giving. It even enables them to be confident in what is traditionally the most threatening situation of all: the last judgement.

In expounding this reality the author gives as his first reason: *because in this world we are as he is* (4.17). In 2.28 the author associates *judgement day* closely with the *coming again of Jesus*. There, the *he* in 4.17 almost certainly means Christ. But how are we like Christ *in this world*? To begin with, Christ is not *in this world*; he is exalted in the heavenly world. Yet we share with Christ a common relationship to the Father. Christ is God's Son; we, too, in a modified sense, are God's sons and daughters. Why does this give us *confidence* for facing the future judgement? Probably, because we, too, share the same love which the Father shows to the Son. This is true even though he is in the heavenly world and we are *in this world*. Possibly the author is also thinking of the protection which comes from such a relationship with the Father, enabling the believer not to fall and so be found wanting at the future judgement (as in 5.18).

The following verse expounds further the basis of this confidence: *In love there is no room for fear; indeed perfect love banishes fear* (4.18). The words *perfect love* are picking up the comments in 4.12 and 4.17 about love reaching its perfection. God's way, the way of love, is not to cast people down in terror, but to build them up. Fear belongs where there is no trust and where someone has powers they may use unpredictably and destructively.

Having power has often been seen as the mark of greatness or achievement. In this thinking about God our author is very close to Paul, who spoke of the cross as the revelation of the 'folly of God which is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God which is stronger than human strength' (I Cor. 1.25). People making God

in their own best images of greatness often picture God primarily as the all-powerful, or, at best, as the benevolent monarch. Our author, while not departing from traditional notions of God as God of the universe and creator, sees God primarily in terms of compassion and the will to give life. Evangelism based on the threat of eternal punishment would be a contradiction of what he sees as God's disposition towards us. People responding in such fear have a long way to go in letting love into their lives: *anyone who is afraid has not attained to love in its perfection* (4.18).

While the author is focussing here primarily on our relationship with God, his observations about fear and love invite application to all human relationships. Love builds trust. Where trust grows, fear diminishes. Where fear diminishes, there is more room for love and for life. Love gives life. Fear brings death. Fear has its place in the face of danger. It alerts us. But for the author the ultimate human fears of not being loved, of not being of value, of not belonging, of being lost, both in this life and beyond it, are met with a gospel of hope. We are loved, valued; we do belong; we are not lost. We need no longer choose fear and the rigidities and depression which flow from it. We may choose to believe that God is love and begin a process of letting go of fear and letting love reach its fulfilment in us.

The words *attained to love in its perfection* at the end of 4.18, and the words *love has reached its perfection* at the beginning of 4.17, neatly frame this brief segment about love and fear. In 4.19 the author returns to the issue of love's visibility.

4. 4.19–21 Loving the unseen God and the seen believer. 4.19 reasserts a foundational principle of the whole discussion: *We love because he loved us first*. The one action follows the other not only as obligation. God's love in the first place also enables us to love. Following this stream of God's love along its line of fulfilment from God through to human loving, the author reasserts that claims to *love God* by people who harbour hate towards their fellow-Christians are an exercise in fraudulence. At best such a response may be sincere and devout religion, but it has not grasped that the God to be loved is the one whose being and action is to love all people. It is worshipping, in effect, another god, even if it calls it *the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*. At worst, it may even justify hate and discrimination on the basis of its wrong understanding of God. History is strewn with both versions of so-called Christianity with

many variants in between. The author sees it in his day in the behaviour of those who have abandoned the community.

If in 4.12 the author argued that God is made visible in concrete acts of love, thinking from the perspective of the one who loves, here in 4.20 he turns this thought around and goes back the other way, thinking this time from the perspective of the one being loved: if you cannot love the visible human being, you will not be able to love the invisible God. This is much more than a neat play with ideas. Loving another human being means being open and vulnerable. It means meeting them and taking their being seriously. It is not simply giving; it is also receiving. If we cannot do that with another human being, we will not be able to do that with God. We will block out God's love and remain satisfied with something comfortable of our own projection and imagination that does not disturb us. We will be practising a form of idolatry. Usually in such cases we have reduced God to a manageable concept. Then, for all intents and purposes, God is no longer the invisible and unknown, but a carefully defined image hewn to suit ourselves.

The final verse of the segment, 4.21, repeats the sense of 4.19, only this time focussing directly on love as Christ's command. There the focus was probably love flowing through to others. *We love* meant *we love others*. It is however possible that already there the sense was: *we love God because he loved us first*. We might find support for this in 4.20 which goes on to speak about people claiming to love God. However the same verse is primarily concerned with the flow of love from God through us to others. In 4.21, on the other hand, both aspects are brought together: *whoever loves God must love his fellow-Christian*. The word *must* shows that loving one's fellow-Christian is not something which happens automatically, as if it occurs by some mystical transformation without human effort. The truth is: for the author loving is a conscious choice. It is a command. At the same time loving is a choice made possible by the prior loving which comes from God. Believers are to make a conscious effort to let such loving *reach its perfection* (4.17) in them.

The naturalness which ought, therefore, to characterize such loving leads the author to the family analogy which follows in 5.1–4a.

5. 5.1–4a The child of God loving God's children. *Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ* – this was an early definition of what it meant to be a Christian; indeed the term 'Christian' derives from this central confession of faith (Acts 11.26). Originally it was an affirmation

of the belief that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the Anointed One, the Christ. Usually the hope for the Messiah was associated with Jewish national religious hopes. He would be a leader who would liberate the people from their oppressors, the Romans, in particular. He would be a new David, a Son of David, the anointed king of Israel (e.g. Psalms of Solomon 17). Christianity could use such a term for Jesus only by significantly modifying its content.

The dangers inherent in having Jesus thought of as a political messiah of popular expectation are evident in the account of Jesus' trial and death. Such a trumped up charge led to his death. The charge nailed to the cross read: 'King of the Jews'. He was crucified between two brigands and offered in exchange for the revolutionary leader Barabbas. When the first Christians identified Jesus as the longed-for Messiah, they may well have seen this as a role Jesus would fulfil at the climax of history; but very soon they transferred the notions of kingship to Jesus' function in the universe as a whole. He had been enthroned by his resurrection and exaltation at God's right hand in heaven (Acts 2.36; 5.31; Rom. 8.34). There he awaited final subjugation of all God's enemies (I Cor. 15.20–28; Heb. 10.12–13). They applied the language of Israel's ancient coronation ceremony, preserved in the Psalms, to this act. Pre-eminent among such allusions was Psalm 110.1: 'This is the Lord's oracle to my lord: "Sit at my right hand, and I shall make your enemies your footstool" ' (Acts 2.33–35; Heb. 1.3,13; see also the use of Psalm 2.7 in Heb. 1.5; Acts 13.33).

By transferring the notion of messiahship from its setting among the national aspirations of Judaism to the wider world of universal powers of evil, Christians filled the term 'Messiah' or Christ with new content. It became a term to express Jesus' significance as the one who has been declared Lord of the universe. From there the term could easily become so inclusive that to say *'Jesus is the Christ'* meant little different from confessing that he is God's representative, God's chosen one, indeed, God's own Son. *The Son of God*, also used originally in the Psalms of the Israelite king as God's representative on earth (Psalm 2.7; 89.27), opened up much wider vistas of meaning when used outside of that framework of thought. To confess Jesus as *the Christ* or *Son of God* meant to make a claim about his being in relationship to God. It was to say Jesus himself was divine, the divine Son of God. Later centuries sought to give these terms greater precision, but certainly within the epistle, as in the gospel of John, such thinking is well-developed in this direction.

All this means that the confession of *Jesus as the Christ* in 5.1 goes far beyond saying that he is the fulfilment of Jewish hopes for the Messiah. *The Christ* now stands for the full-blown belief about Jesus evident in other passages in the epistle, which speak of the Son of God who pre-existed and came in the flesh to be the Saviour of the world. Beside this development in the use of the term *the Christ* is another in which, once it lost its original setting, *Christ* on its own became simply a second name for Jesus, to the point where popularly it has long been understood to function as Jesus' surname.

A person confessing *Jesus* as *the Christ* (in the way the author understands it and not in the way the opponents understand it!) *is a child of God* (5.1), literally: 'has been born of God' (see the comments on 3.9–10 for discussion of the expression). The author makes this statement in order to be able to develop the image of the family which he will use immediately as a further argument that Christians should love one another. He has already employed the family imagery for the community in 4.4–6, which structurally is the matching segment to 5.1–4a.

He begins the argument with the general statement: *To love the parent means to love his child* (5.1). This continues the motif of loving God which is present in the previous segment. One could use this statement as a way of saying that if we love God we should also love Christ, God's Son. It is, however, much more likely that the author is thinking of God as the *parent* and the *child* as the Christian. He has just spoken of believers being children of God; and 5.2 goes on to make this clear by speaking of believers as the children whom one should love. Because he is addressing believers who are children of God, it is also possible that the author intends that we understand *To love the parent means to love his child* along the lines: 'to love one's own parent means one should love one's siblings'. That would fit the readers' situation logically as members of the one family of God; but it is more probable that the author begins with the more general observation about attitudes to parents and their children and narrows his focus from there.

We ought to love God's children, if we *love God and obey his commands* (5.2). At one level this is so because, if we love God, we should keep his commands. But the author never remains at the level of obligation. There is more to Christian love than obligation and command, though it is these things as well. 5.1 has been arguing from the natural connection between loving a parent and loving the parent's children. The same natural connection should exist between our loving God

and loving God's children. It should never be a matter of mere obligation and command. Where such loving does not happen, we are probably dealing with an understanding of God which is not informed by love and which therefore denies God's being and action as love for his creation. An attitude to life which subordinates love and relationship with people to personal ambition and power will project onto God the conceit of carelessness which will willingly dispense with people who do not fit into its plan. Such is probably the approach of the author's opponents, at least as he portrays them in the epistle.

5.3 again holds in tension obligation and spontaneous natural response. Love is a command. Conscious choice is involved. Yet we are not dealing with a command or a set of commands which are *burdensome*. They do not sit unnaturally on our shoulders as an awkward and heavy weight. The reason they are not *burdensome* is not primarily that they make few demands; on the contrary, the call to love is a call to be self-giving which can be costly. Rather, they are not *burdensome*, because, as the author has just pointed out, they *follow* naturally from who we are as children of God. We are in relationship with the one who loves us and whose love enables us, in turn, to love and so fulfil his commands. This recalls the invitation of Jesus to come to him to find rest and taken up his easy yoke: 'Come to me, all who are weary and whose load is heavy; I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble-hearted; and you will find rest for your souls' (Matt. 11.28–30).

The author explains this connection more directly in 5.4a: *because every child of God overcomes the world*. The children of God are able to fulfil the command to love, because they can counter the pressures brought against them by the world and its value systems. Their base is not selfishness and greed but compassion and caring. Starting from this base and allowing themselves to receive such compassion and caring, they are free and are strengthened to pass on that compassion and caring without being crippled by the world's agenda of proving oneself and bettering oneself at the expense of others.

This is true, generally; but the author has in mind a more immediate application. In bringing this brief segment to a close by repeating *the child of God* with which it began in 5.1, the author makes the transition back to the major phenomenon in the world with which he had been concerned at the beginning of the whole section 4.1–5.13, namely, false teaching about who Jesus is (4.1–6). There we read that the false

teachers belonged to *the world* (4.5). It is above all from them that the pressure is being exerted upon the readers to abandon Christ's command to love their fellow-Christians and to abandon the community. But as long as they hold fast to the message they had heard from the beginning, with its proclamation of the centrality of God's love which reaches down into all of human life as it reached down into human flesh in the coming of Christ, they will be able to resist such pressures. It is this *faith* which provides the bulwark against the opponents which forms the theme of the final segment, 5.4b–12.

III 5.4b–12 Right confession about Christ and its evidence

The author returns to the theme with which the section 4.1–5.13 began: the importance of right belief about Jesus. In 2.18–27 he had identified those who had left the community as *antichrists*, who deny *Jesus is the Christ*. Already in 2.13–14 he had used the language of victory to describe the resistance of the *young men* against the wiles of their contemporaries. 2.15–17 set the conflict in the context of a struggle with the *world*. In 4.1–3 he warns against their false claims to be inspired by the Spirit in their new teaching about Jesus. Their inspired teaching denied that *Jesus Christ has come in the flesh*. The *world* listened to them and, from the author's perspective, they belong to that *world* and its value systems.

In returning to the theme the author repeats the familiar motifs. The struggle is against *the world*. The issue is right belief about Jesus, *our faith*. Those who espouse right belief about Jesus are able to *overcome* the pressures coming from the world in the form of these false teachers. Right belief is belief *that Jesus is the Son of God* (5.5).

Believing *that Jesus is the Son of God* amounts to the same as believing *that Jesus is the Christ* (5.1), as we explained in the previous segment. This is the author's shorthand for Christian belief about Jesus. The false teachers would almost certainly have also claimed to believe *that Jesus is the Son of God*, but would have understood the equation quite differently. Their understanding entailed, according to 4.2, a denial *that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh*.. However, it is at this point in the epistle, 5.6, that we learn a little more of where the difference lay. Unfortunately, the author's statement is open to more than one interpretation.

5.6 doubtless made the matter of dispute about Jesus quite clear to the readers: *This is he whose coming was with* (literally: 'through') *water*

and blood: Jesus Christ. He came, not by (literally: 'in') *the water alone, but both by* (literally: 'in') *the water and by* (literally: 'in') *the blood*. Without their first-hand knowledge we have to reconstruct what the author might have meant. Clearly, in the view of the author, the opponents taught that Jesus Christ came *with* or *by (the) water only*, and not *with or by (the) blood*. What is the meaning of this difference?

Water and *blood* might refer to aspects of the human body. Those saying he came only by *water* would be suggesting that his body was not a real human body. This would amount to saying the same thing as 4.2 in another way: he had not come fully *in the flesh*. This would assume the opponents had a belief of a kind which understood Jesus' body as substantially consisting of water and not of water and blood. The chief difficulty with this view is that we cannot be sure that any such notion of a water body ever existed at the time.

Alternative interpretations understand *water* and *blood* to refer not to aspects of the human body, but to stages of human life. Then *water* might refer to the waters of birth and *blood* to death. Another way of interpreting *water* is to relate it to baptism. The author and the opponents could agree that Jesus was baptized. That was something done to him. The issue of conflict was not what was done to him, but who he was. Was he a fully human mortal person or not?

On these readings the opponents would be denying that Jesus died. In denying his death, the opponents might be denying the event itself, but this seems different from the notion that he had not come *in the flesh*. More likely, the opponents would have accepted Jesus' birth or baptism, but denied that he was a real human being of mortal flesh and blood. Therefore he would not have died as a human being. He would only seem to have died, because he would only seem to have been a human being. This is close to the interpretation set out in the previous paragraph, but does not entail speculation about a water body. Such understandings of Jesus are commonly called docetic, coming from the Greek word *dokeō*, to seem, and are known to have existed at least from the early second century onwards.

Others have made the reference to baptism a starting point for a very different understanding of the opponents' views. They see a close connection between these and the views about Jesus' baptism known to exist in the second century, namely that the Spirit who entered Jesus at his baptism was Christ and that this Spirit-Christ departed from the human body Jesus before his gruesome death on the cross. There are even somewhat macabre teachings according to

which the Spirit-Christ hovered by the cross laughing at the plight of the human Jesus and those who thought they were crucifying the Christ had escaped scot free! We might properly call this an adoptionist understanding, since it assumes the Spirit-Christ adopted the human body Jesus. An adoptionist understanding also existed which did not deny the presence of the Spirit at Jesus' death, but this is clearly not the position of the opponents.

There are also various ways of understanding *blood*. It was a common synonym for death. In both the docetic and the adoptionist theories outlined above there is a denial of the reality of Jesus' death. It is also possible that by *blood* the author thinks not only of the reality of Jesus' death, but also of its atoning significance as a sacrifice for sins and is suggesting that the opponents deny this. Some have suggested the author's mention of atonement at various points in the epistle (2.2; 3.16; 4.10) is designed to counter this denial, but in none of these instances is such concern clearly evident. If they were denying Jesus' death, they would also be denying along with it its atoning significance, but this does not seem to be the issue.

Blood might also allude to the *blood* of the Holy Communion. The author could be referring to death, atoning sacrifice and the eucharist all in one, since they would have belonged together in current understanding of the Lord's Supper in the community, as John 6.51–58 shows. Jesus is the one who came and gave himself literally to death, effectively as a sacrifice and symbolically in the cup of the new covenant blood poured out for many in the institution of the eucharist. Such an allusion may be present secondarily. It is hardly the primary reference of 5.6, as if the opponents were denying that Christ came in the sacrament. Such an interpretation would have the author claiming that one must believe that Jesus came in his baptism and has come to us in the eucharist or that he has come to us in our baptism and our eucharist.

To read such an understanding back into 5.6 would be to construe it in a way not in harmony with the other chief text in the epistle for defining the opponent's position, namely 4.2, which clearly speaks of Christ's coming *in the flesh* in history and not in the sacramental and charismatic life of the church. In both 4.2 and 5.6 we must assume the same *coming* is in mind. This is not to deny the possibility that *the Spirit, the water and the blood* who are our *witnesses*, according to 5.8, might include a reference to the sacramental and charismatic actions of the continuing church.

There is a similar diversity of interpretations in a passage in the

community's gospel which seems to reflect a concern to rebut an opposing viewpoint. In John 19.34 the narrator tells how on the soldier's spear thrust *at once there was a flow of blood and water*. The text continues: 'This is vouched for by an eyewitness, whose evidence is to be trusted. He knows that he speaks the truth, so that you too may believe' (19.35). There was obviously a lot at stake in being able to claim this. Why? The most natural explanation is that the flow of blood and water proves something about Jesus. It may prove that he died. More likely it was seen to prove that he died as a real human being, from whom one could expect a flow of what in crude terms looked like water and blood after such a spear thrust.

Either someone was denying Jesus died and therefore denying that his resurrection was a real resurrection or someone was denying that this Jesus was really a human being of flesh and blood. There is no evidence elsewhere in the gospel or the epistles that the author is doing battle with people who believe the former. The concern seems much more to relate to debate within the Christian community where Christian witnesses are deemed to have credibility. The position being countered in the latter of these alternatives, in what looks like the latest edition of the gospel, would cohere well with the docetic stance outlined above for the opponents of the writer of I John.

Other interpretations of 19.35 are less convincing and fail to take into account the obvious concern of the author with what actually happened physically. These include the views that *water and blood* might refer to the gifts of baptism and the eucharist, the gifts of the Spirit and the eucharist, or the gifts of the Spirit and the atoning blood.

Another text commonly linked with the discussion of the false teachers of I John is II John 7. There, however, while the same formulations are used, the focus is not on how Jesus came, but on how he is coming. The ground has shifted to the future. The false teachers countered there may be related in some way to those of I John, but now the issue is the reality of future Christian hope and seems much more related to disputes with those who deny the hope for a thousand-year reign of Christ who shall return in flesh and blood to earth. See the commentary on II John for further discussion.

In conclusion, the two strongest options for interpreting 5.6 seem to be either the docetic or the adoptionist. The adoptionist interpretation could appeal to the confessional statements of the epistle, such as *that Jesus is the Christ* and *Jesus is the Son of God* (2.22; 4.15; 5.1,5), as in effect meaning: 'that the Christ or the Son of God is Jesus', and

argue that 4.2 means acknowledging 'that Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh'. Technically, as a translation, these are possible, but elsewhere in the epistle no such distinction between Jesus and Christ appears to be at issue, unless every other occurrence of *Jesus Christ* carried with it the subtle agenda of underlining that both are one and the same. *To deny the Son* (2.22–23) would presumably have to mean to deny that the Son is Jesus, but nothing in the context indicates this. It does not gain support from the parallel in John 19.35.

The adoptionist position should not be ruled out, however. It is known to have been espoused by the gnostic Christian teacher, Cerinthus, according to Irenaeus and to have taken Mark's gospel, in particular, as its starting point, where the account of Jesus begins at his baptism. John's gospel also might have been read by the opponents in this way, so that the divine Word would be seen to have descended upon Jesus at his baptism. But if this were the target of the author's argument, it seems strange that he seems to have no dispute with them over the significance of *the water*. He would surely have had to make clear that what he meant by *coming with* or *in water* was something quite different from his opponent's understanding. Instead he cites it as common ground.

It seems, therefore, more likely that the author is combatting a docetic understanding. Ignatius, writing early in the second century, attacks Christians in Asia Minor who believed Jesus only seemed to have a real human body. Against them he stresses the reality of Jesus' birth. They also rejected the eucharist. Against them Ignatius stresses the need for the reality of Jesus' *flesh* (the same word used in 4.2) for the atoning work of salvation (see especially his *Letter to the Smyrneans* 1–7). This may be the same group as one mentioned elsewhere by Ignatius as having strong Jewish links (see his *Letter to the Magnesians* 9–10). Later, in the mid-part of the century, we know of other *docetists*, such as Satornilus, Kerdon and Marcion, of whom it is said that they espoused the view that Jesus Christ was not born, but rather came to this earth with only 'phantom flesh' (*phantasma carnis*) and so only apparently suffered. These groups celebrated the eucharist with bread and water. A similar stance is reflected in the Acts of John.

There is no compelling reason for identifying the author's opponents with any one of the groups mentioned above, but it makes best sense of the material of the epistle (and the gospel) to identify them as a group of Christian teachers who are denying the full humanness of Jesus. In this *water* may refer to Jesus' baptism or it could refer to the *waters* of birth. One might expect, however, that

the opponents would deny such an indication of physical birth. There seems no dispute with them on the coming *with* water. It seems preferable to see here a reference to Jesus' baptism. This was something done to Jesus. At least that degree of agreement about his human reality is shared, but the opponents were not prepared to go the whole way and consider the implications of his death, that this was a fully human person of flesh and blood.

This denial was expressed in their refusal to acknowledge that he came *in the flesh* and that he died as a normal human being of flesh and *blood*. On these grounds they could well be moving in the same circles as those being countered in the final redactional additions to the community's gospel. It could even be that John 1.14 *The Word became flesh*, while not originally antidocetic, had already come to be used by the redactors in this sense, as later it would become a major argument against docetic teaching in the church.

Such a group would also have had difficulty accepting the eucharist or, at least, accepting it as the representation of Jesus' flesh and blood. In this sense the reasoning of 5.6–8 may well reflect a merging of Christ's baptism and death, on the one hand, and secondarily, Christian baptism and eucharist, on the other, which in some sense also represent Christ's baptism and death. They continue to bear witness to the reality of Christ's having come in the flesh. By implication the opponents would either deny the eucharist or, at least, deny the author's understanding of it. 5.6 need not entail that they rejected the eucharist outright. It is primarily about Christ's coming in history, not in the eucharist. But denial of his *coming in blood* (5.6) and denial of the *witness* of *the blood* in the eucharist (5.8) would go hand in hand.

Traces of such a conflict may be reflected in the scene constructed by the gospel writer in John 6.51–66. There we read that many disciples abandoned Jesus, finding his claims to be the one who had descended from heaven and would give his flesh for the life of the world, now to be consumed as flesh and blood in the eucharist, offensive. This episode, obviously shaped by conflict within the church over christology, is recognized by many as belonging to the latest stages in the gospel's redaction.

That docetic teaching might have developed in a community which was familiar with the main core of the fourth gospel is not surprising. When read without the context of the tradition in which it stands, where the reality of the historical and human Jesus is beyond dispute, it would have been quite possible to develop tendencies in the gospel

in a docetic direction. The larger-than-life portrait of Jesus on the stage of the fourth gospel, tantalizing his opponents with double meaning and irony, was a dramatic device employed by the author to enhance the celebration of Christ as source of light and life and truth. Taken literally as historical report, it easily becomes the basis for the image of Jesus as a god walking the earth in supreme confidence, toying with mere mortals, teasing his opponents with hidden twists of meaning and finally departing victoriously through what the world would see as the trauma of trial and crucifixion, but the eye of faith would see as a transition of a divine being unscathed in spirit to his heavenly home. Detached from tradition and canon, the gospel has lent itself to such distortion in almost every Christian generation. The likelihood that its own final redaction and the epistle are the witnesses to the first of many such aberrations is very high.

If we see the opponents as espousing a docetic position, much of the rest of what the author tells us about them makes good sense. Hand in hand with their denial of Jesus' full humanity is a denial of the relevance of caring about people at the real human level. Their position denies both Christ and the need for Christian love for one another and these are the author's major concerns to which he returns time and time again. The concern about the reality of Jesus' humanity is there in the opening words, where the author emphasized that what was from the beginning could be *seen* and *heard* and *felt*. The concern about the concrete implications of mutual love within the community is there in the assertion: *if someone who possesses the good things of this world sees a fellow-Christian in need and withholds compassion from him, how can it be said that the love of God dwells in him?* (3.17).

5.6 concludes: *and to this the Spirit bears witness, because the Spirit is truth*. The connection between correct belief and the role of the Spirit appears strongly in 4.1–3 in the segment which structurally matches the present passage. It has been a consistent feature of the author's reasoning to appeal to the witness of the Spirit. It appears under the image of *the anointing* in 2.20 and 27 which enables the readers, struggling with the antichrists, to distinguish truth from error. It assures the believer of mutual indwelling with God (3.24; 4.13). Here, as in 4.2, the Spirit ensures right understanding about Jesus. In that sense *the Spirit is truth*, because it bears witness to the truth.

In the community gospel Jesus promises that 'the Spirit of Truth, the paraclete, will bear witness to the truth about' Jesus (15.26) and 'will guide the disciples into all truth' (16.13). The same Spirit of Truth will teach them everything and remind them of all that Jesus

had told them (John 14.26). The witness of the Spirit is crucial for the writer of the gospel. It functions as the guarantee that what is recorded has authenticity. It is the gift of the risen and glorified Christ which brings the new understanding of the historical Jesus which will enable his ministry to be seen in a new light and with new understanding (John 2.17–22; 7.37–39; 12.16).

We have already noted occasions where the assurance of the Spirit stands beside the assurance which derives from the fact of Christ's coming. Such is the case in 4.13 where assurance based on the Spirit in 4.13 is immediately followed by assurance based on God's sending his Son in 4.14. A similar association of criteria is present in 2.20–27. Here in 5.7–8 the witness of the Spirit stands beside *the water and the blood* in the court of truth. All three *are in agreement* (5.8). This reflects the common legal requirement for the agreement of two or three witnesses in giving evidence before it can be considered valid (Deut. 19.15).

To what are they bearing witness? The answer must be that they are bearing witness to the fact that Jesus Christ came *by water and blood*. It sounds a little tortuous to have *water* and *blood* bearing witness to a coming in *water* and *blood*, but this is best explained by the twofold way in which the author has used *water* and *blood*, merging together Christ's baptism and death with their representation in Christian baptism and the eucharist, as outlined above.

The sense is clear. What is at stake is the coming of Jesus Christ in real human flesh. The *water* of baptism and the *blood*, implying real mortality such as belongs to a real human being, are the historical evidence preserved in the tradition and celebrated in the sacraments; and beside these is the witness of the Spirit given to the believer.

At this point in the text, directly before the words, *and these three are one*, some early Latin manuscripts contain what must have originally been a marginal note: 'and there are three who bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit'. It found its way into some later Greek manuscripts and thus into the Authorized Version of the English Bible of 1611. It reflects a scribe's alertness to the formal parallel between what the text was saying and what had become a major issue in discussion of the Trinity. The bulk of the ancient manuscript tradition does not have the text and there is no warrant for assuming it had been an original part of the text of the epistle.

5.9 alludes to the common practice of accepting human evidence: *we accept human testimony*. We have here another example of the

author's use of a general truth about the human community. He quotes a similar truth in 5.1: *To love the parent means to love his child*. It is preferable to read *we accept human testimony* in this way rather than as an allusion to specific human testimony about Jesus, such as the traditions which record Jesus' birth and death (*water* and *blood*) or the testimony of John the Baptist (*water* baptism), which has not even received mention thus far. It is true that the gospel of John tells of Jesus describing John the Baptist's testimony as *human testimony* (5.31–33) and in doing so exhibits a similar play with the imagery of court procedures to what we find here, but the issues are different.

The author is arguing that if we are prepared to act in normal human society on the basis of human testimony, we ought to act with all the more certainty when God himself takes the stand: *the testimony of God is stronger* (5.9). What is *the testimony of God*? We would expect it to be the testimony just referred to: the *water, the blood* and *the Spirit*. The remaining verses indicate that this is, indeed, probably the case. *The testimony of God is the witness he has born to his Son*. We should probably understand *the water* and *the blood* to be part of this testimony. Certainly the third element, *the Spirit*, is presupposed in what follows: *He who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in his own heart* (5.10). This is the work of the Spirit within the believer already alluded to in 2.20,27; 3.24; 4.1–3 and 13.

To *believe in the Son of God* (5.10) is shorthand for believing rightly about him and obeying his command. The opposite is not to believe God, since God has taken the stand for Jesus. Such disbelief effectively accuses God of perjury. 5.11 elaborates on the character of this evidence in the believer: *This is the witness: God has given us eternal life, and this life is found in his Son* (5.12). A common alternative translation reads: *And this is the witness that God has given us eternal life* and goes on to see 5.13 as the evidence for our having eternal life. But this fails to see that the issue is not evidence about whether we have eternal life, but whether there is a witness going on in us. The witness going on in us is the quality of eternal life and this quality of life is the life found alone in Christ.

What is being said here coheres with the emphasis of the epistle throughout. Life-style is evidence. When we have the life which Christ brings, that is the evidence we can rest upon that we have truly understood him and grasped what he offers. It is only the one who *possesses the Son who possesses life* (5.12). Thus the author ends this section, 4.1–5.12 and the major body of the epistle, with a strong

affirmative and an equally strong negative: *he who does not possess the Son does not possess life*.

We should not miss, however, the overwhelmingly positive nature of the author's attitude towards the gospel. It is not primarily about escape from evil or even forgiveness of sins. It is about *life*. This is the *life* of which Jesus spoke when he said: 'I have come that they may have life, and may have it in all its fullness' (John 10.10). The author sees this possibility threatened by the introduction of a new understanding of Jesus which denies his real humanity and ultimately denies that God is really interested in common human life and relationships. For the author this is a denial of Christ, a denial of God, and fundamentally a denial of God's love. God is for life and wholeness. The God of Jesus, is, for him, not a deity seeking to rescue an elect out of involvement in the common affairs of human living or to lift them up into an ethereal sphere. God is one whose being and action is made known in a reaching out and an establishing of a community of human beings where such love will reach its fulfilment in acts of mutual caring. Such is his understanding of life and love and God.

This theme of *life* is central to his concern and builds the transition to the closing section of the epistle, 5.13–21.

THE CLOSING: 5.13–21 Final instructions and encouragement

The concluding comments of the author in 5.13–21 are less a summary than they are final parting words, which reveal some of his chief concerns. 5.13 reiterates the overall purpose in his writing: reassurance of the readers and confirmation that they are on the right track and possess the life that is the goal of the gospel. 5.14–15 emphasize that such life means a relationship of prayer with God where we can have confidence that our needs are heard. 5.16–17 deals with the thorny problem of how best to respond to Christians who go astray and when to pray for them. 5.18–21 is a threefold summary of some central tenets underlying the epistle: the enabling power in the believer, the belonging of the believer to God's family and not to the world, and the believer's knowledge of the truth, concluding with a choice between God and idolatry. The section has, then, the following structure:

I 5.13 The epistle's aim: reassurance

II 5.14–17 Approaching God in prayer
1. 5.14–15 Praying to one who hears our requests
2. 5.16–17 Praying about people who go astray

III 4.18–21 Standing on God's side against the evil one
1. 5.18 Being able not to sin, untouched by the evil one
2. 5.19 Belonging to God's family, not to the evil one
3. 5.20–21 Knowing the true God; avoiding idolatry

I 5.13 The epistle's aim: reassurance

When the REB begins its translation of this verse with the words, *You have given your allegiance to the Son of God*, it obscures the clear formal break with what precedes and the fact that this verse introduces a separate section. Literally, and following the structure of the sentence

in the Greek, the verse begins: 'I have written these things to you.' While this recalls similar words at 2.1,12–14,21 and 26, here it looks back over all that has been written and identifies afresh the author's purpose in writing. *These things* could be construed to refer only to what immediately precedes, but the other is much more likely. 5.13, at the beginning of the closing words of the epistle, matches 1.4 at the conclusion of the opening words of the epistle: *We are writing this in order that our joy may be complete.*

The author's *joy* will *be complete* when the readers know that they *have eternal life* because they *have given their allegiance to Jesus Christ* (5.13). The preceding section had ended with the observation that it was this *life* in the believers which constituted God's own evidence that what the community believed about Jesus Christ's coming in the flesh was true. They had *given their allegiance* in this way *to the Son of God.*

This phrase also finds its echo at the end of the present section in 5.20: *we know that the Son of God has come.* The themes of *life* and *the Son of God* in 5.20 and 5.13 link the whole of 5.13–21 together structurally in a manner commonly employed by the author. This also justifies the inclusion of 5.13 within the final section rather than as the closing verse of the preceding one.

The words of 5.13 also echo one of the closing comments of the community's gospel, referring to the signs recorded in the gospel account: 'Those written here have been recorded (literally: These things have been written) in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and through this faith you may have life by his name' (literally: 'so that believing you may have life in his name,' 20.31). The literal rendering brings out the similarities even more clearly than they appear in the REB text. Literally 5.13 reads: 'These things I have written in order that you may know that you have eternal life, to those believing in the name of the Son of God.' At the very least this would have the effect of identifying the author's epistle with the community's gospel as a valid exposition of its heritage.

II 5.14–17 Approaching God in prayer

1. 5.14–15 Praying to one who hears our requests. In these verses the author repeats the theme of *confidence* from 3.21–22 (see also 2.28). God's love gives us life and encourages us to stand with confidence

before God. The model is not that of the grovelling servant before the tyrant or even of the prostrate suppliant before the Almighty. It is one of awe and reverence expressed in acceptance of love and acceptance of the invitation to be fully present with God, not to diminish oneself. Respect based on affirmation is of a totally different quality from respect based on being overridden or even overawed.

As in 3.21–22, so here, this *confidence* is explained as having the freedom to ask requests of God and the assurance of knowing they will be heard. What was already implicit there (see the commentary) is made explicit here: such requests need to *accord with his will* (5.14). The author is not thinking within the framework of modern consumerism which can sometimes reduce these promises to an unwritten guarantee that God is in league with my greed. On the other hand, the limits are not defined. They should probably be understood in the light of the similar promises in the last discourses of the community's gospel (see the discussion in the commentary on 3.21–22). They may also relate to requests for guidance in making judgements as they do in Matt. 18.15–20 and probably also in I John 3.21–22. This is an issue in what follows.

2. 5.16–17 Praying about people who go astray. Within the context of prayer the author addresses the problem of what to do about fellow-Christians who sin. Within this discussion he makes a distinction between *deadly sin* and *sin which is not a deadly sin*. Before attempting to clarify the precise meaning of these terms, it will be useful to hear what is said about them in the passage. This will shed important light on their particular meaning.

5.16 tells the readers that they should pray (*intercede*) for their fellow-Christians who are *committing a sin which is not deadly*. Already this raises a number of further questions. Are they being asked to pray for the person who is in the act of committing sin or for the person who has already sinned? If it were the latter, we might expect the prayer to be about forgiveness. Confession of sin and assurance of forgiveness is a theme early in the epistle at 1.5–2.2. But the verse is formulated in a way which suggests rather the former: prayer for someone who is *committing* sin. We might then understand the prayer to be about helping the person to resist the temptation and turn from the sin.

The words, *he should intercede for him, and God* (literally: he) *will grant him life*, understand *will grant him life* as the effect of the Christian's intercession. The Greek is ambiguous at this point. It

could be read to mean that the one interceding will in some way *grant* (literally: 'give') *him life*. If this were so, it would have to be God's action ultimately, so that the meaning amounts to the same whichever way we identify *he* in the text.

Assuming this, what is God, in effect, granting? *Life* would mean forgiveness if the prayer were for forgiveness of sins. If the prayer is that the fellow-Christian may be helped to resist temptation and turn away from sin, then *life* is a shorthand way of describing a process which includes help to resist and turn away from sinning, forgiveness for the sin committed, and restoration to right relationship which is the basis for enjoying the *life* which the Father gives. This is probably the way we should understand it. It is the *life* already referred to in 5.13.

The author repeats that this applies only if the sin being committed is not *a deadly sin: that is, to those who are not guilty of deadly sin* (literally: those sinning not to death). By introducing the word *guilty* into the text the REB translators have obscured the focus somewhat so that we might read it as referring to what has gone on in the past rather than to what is going on at the time of praying. The difference may not be greatly significant, but the focus is on what these people are doing and continue to do.

The author's explanation, *there is such a thing as a deadly sin* (5.16), suggests that he is introducing the readers at least to a new category, if not to a new idea. He continues: *And I do not suggest that he should pray about that*. The *he* is clearly the one who sees the person sinning. A different word is used here for *pray* (*erōtaō*) from the one used for praying earlier in the verse (*aiteō*). Originally the latter word meant to ask for something whereas the former meant to ask about something. Evidence from the use of these words in the gospel suggests that they have become interchangeable. This, then, makes it unlikely that the second instance of prayer, here, refers to a request for information. *Pray about* almost certainly means what it meant earlier in the same verse: prayer that this person be helped to resist temptation and to turn from this sin.

The author continues his explanation: *Although all wrongdoing is sin, not all sin is deadly sin* (5.17). It is time to ask what this *deadly sin* is. What can be so serious that the author considers those engaged in such sin have completely removed themselves from any hope or right of return? If we were to ask this question of the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, which is greatly concerned to emphasize Christ's role in interceding for his own as they face temptation and

struggle with suffering, the answer would be clear. It is the sin of apostasy. 'When people have once been enlightened, . . . and then . . . have fallen away, it is impossible to bring them afresh to repentance; for they are crucifying to their own hurt the Son of God and holding him up to mockery' (6.4–6). Similarly, Hebrews tells us that Esau lost all chance of reversing his decision to forfeit his firstborn rights: 'though he begged for it to the point of tears, he found no way open for a change of mind' (12.17). For such people, warns Hebrews, 'there can be no further sacrifice for sins; there remains only a terrifying expectation of judgement' (10.26–27).

In the case of our author the same is probably the intention. After apostasy there is no way back. It is useless praying for such people. They are lost forever. He doubtless has in mind those who have abandoned the community and, he is convinced, have abandoned Christ. The readers should not only be confident about their own position and resist the temptation they pose. They should see them as totally written off and without further hope.

This very strict position has other parallels in the New Testament beside Hebrews. Some have seen it in Jesus' statement, according to John 17, that he is not praying for the world (17.9), but that is unlikely. A closer parallel is the saying about blaspheming the Holy Spirit preserved in Mark 3.29 and, probably in a form dependent not only on Mark but also on 'Q' (the source shared by Matthew and Luke), in Matthew 12.32 and Luke 12.10. In Mark's version the contrast is between forgiveness of sins in general and forgiveness of sin against the Spirit. In Matthew and Luke the contrast is between sin against the Son of Man, Jesus, and sin against the Holy Spirit.

Both versions probably understand such sin (slander or blasphemy) as rejection of the gospel as preached by the early church after Easter, in the era of the Spirit. They may well have in mind the situation where Christians turn their back on the faith. That is certainly the context in Luke, where the saying follows the statements about confessing or denying the Son of Man, clearly formulated using the technical terms which belonged to the era of the church. Behind their use may be an original saying of Jesus which contrasted rejection of him as a person and rejection of the message he was inspired by the Spirit to present, though its exact form may now be irrecoverable.

Matthew also contains instructions about dealing with the problem of wayward Christians (Matt. 18.15–20). It draws upon a tradition which probably came to the author through the hands of a strongly Jewish-Christian form of Christianity. It begins in a manner similar

to our passage: 'If your brother does wrong'. It goes on to advise an initial confrontation between the wrongdoer and one wronged. It suggests as a second step that one or two others join the discussion. This reflects the common Jewish legal practice noted above (see the comment on 5.4b–12) of ensuring there are two or three witnesses before proceeding with a charge. The third step, should the first two fail, is to take the matter to 'the congregation (literally: 'the church'). If that fails, the person should be treated as a 'pagan' (literally: 'gentile'!) or 'a tax-collector' (18.17). The passage continues with an assurance that the disciples have the right to exercise such authority (18.18) and that Christ will be in their midst when they gather to make such requests and pass such judgements, even if there are only two or three of them present.

Matthew frames this community rule on either side with material which shows the opposite slant. Immediately before it he places the parable of the ninety-nine sheep (18.12–14), now interpreted as a model for how one should go out in compassion after the brother or sister who had gone astray. Immediately after it he places the question of Peter about how many times one should forgive (18.21–22), where Jesus raises Peter's seven times to seventy times seven! The parable of the unmerciful servant, which follows (18.23–35), presses the same point home.

Paul, too, was very severe on Christians who deviated from the proper understanding of the gospel. He pronounces a curse on them in Galatians (1.8–9) and in the Corinthian community he deems one person to have sinned so severely as to have passed beyond any hope of a return in this life (I Cor. 5.3–5).

The strict position espoused by these traditions and by our author served as a warning. It is not the only position preserved in the New Testament. The story of Peter who disowned and cursed Christ but was rehabilitated to become Peter the apostle suggests another way. In the centuries which followed, the church had to face major persecutions. Thousands were cowed by violence to disavow their faith. When the persecutions ceased, large numbers came back in their brokenness to the church. In the debate that followed, the strict line gave way to the compassion of restoration. In retrospect it was the love so central to our author's exposition which prevailed and overturned the stricter tradition which he espouses here.

There have been many alternative explanations of the two categories of sin, leading in part to elaborate speculations to deal with the problem such categorization creates. One has been the technical

distinction between venial (pardonable) and mortal (unpardonable) sin, where the latter was preserved for more serious offences for which people would have to do penance in an intermediate state between their death and the day of resurrection and judgement. But dividing up sins into levels of their severity is far from the author's mind, if the substance of the epistle is our guide. His concern is not degrees of mortality, but the threat of apostasy in the community.

Sin is the link between 5.16–17 and the segment which follows where the threefold affirmation begins with the extraordinary claim that the person born of God does not commit sin.

III 5.18–21 Standing on God's side against the evil one

The author makes three final assertions designed to give comfort and encouragement. They each include a contrast of systems: the way of God and the way of the evil one, the way of truth and the way of falsehood. They leave the readers with the final choice: the true God or idolatry.

1. 5.18 Being able not to sin, untouched by the evil one. There seems on first reading to be a contradiction between 5.16–17 and 5.18. In the former the author has been instructing Christians what to do when they see fellow-Christians sinning. Here in 5.18 Christians do not sin: *no child of God commits sin*. The author is picking up the assertion made already in 3.7–10. The comments on these verses discuss the matter in detail. In effect the author thinks in terms of systems of cause and effect. *The child of God* (literally: 'the person born of God') belongs within a system of relationships which has as its consequence and fruit not sin, but goodness and love. It begins and ends in love.

This is expressed in the present passage by saying that *he is kept safe by the Son of God* (literally: 'the one born of God'), *and the evil one cannot touch him* (5.18). REB opts to identify 'the one born of God' as a reference to Christ. The alternative is to see in it a reference to the Christian keeping himself safe, but this is less likely. The gospel identifies this as a promise of Jesus concerning his sheep: 'I give them eternal life and they will never perish; no one will snatch them from my care' (John 10.28). Neither in the gospel nor here should we understand this to mean an automatic assurance against sin or even against apostasy. What is stated as a reality is a reality made possible so long as we remain connected to the system, that is, so long as we

choose to be open to the transforming impact of God's love and to live from it. Choosing to be in the one system entails choosing not to be in the other, the system of evil.

2. 15.9 Belonging to God's family, not to the evil one. If 5.18 focusses on behaviour as the fruit of a system, 5.19 focusses on belonging within the system, belonging within the rest of relationships which make right behaviour possible as opposed to belonging in the world system where the values of the evil one prevail and produce the fruit of sin: *We are God's family* (literally: 'we are of' or 'out of God'). To the author there is no neutral territory. We are either in one system or we are in the other. When we are least conscious of being involved in a value system we are often most influenced by it. Either love reigns or its opposite reigns. Similarly Paul warns his readers not to be 'conformed to the pattern of this present world', but to be 'transformed by the renewal of their minds' (Rom. 12.2).

In 5.19 the author reiterates the foundation of his thought about God: it is the event of the coming of the Son of God. Through that event we have received *understanding*. That *understanding* consists of knowing *the true God*. There are false gods and the epistle will end with a warning against them: *Children, be on your guard against idols.*

3. 5.20–21 Knowing the true God; avoiding idolatry. The Greek of 5.20 has only *the true (one)* and reads literally: *we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding* 'so that we know the true (one) and we are in the true (one)', *in his Son Jesus Christ*. 'This (one) is the true God and eternal life.' It is clear from this that 'the true (one)' is God throughout. Christ is *his Son*. In the final sentence *this* (one) most naturally refers still to God, not to Christ, as some have suggested. It is not unknown for Christ to be given God's name (Phil. 2.9–11) or even to be called 'God' (Heb. 1.8–9; John 1.1), but that would run contrary to the theme here, which is contrasting true and false understandings of God for which Christ's revelation is the criterion.

5.20 reminds us of Jesus' prayer according to John 17.3: 'This is eternal life: to know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.' This is the *life* which is ultimately at stake in the issues addressed in the epistle. The author has already reminded us of that in 5.13, to which, in the structure of this final segment, 5.20 corresponds.

The final verse, *Children, be on your guard against idols*, belongs with 5.20 as its conclusion and should not be seen as an additional closing

comment only loosely related to what has gone before. It is not a new concern about idol worship or food sacrificed to idols or competing religions in the market place which crosses the author's mind at the last minute. It is related immediately to the major concerns of the epistle.

In effect, the author is saying that the issue facing the readers is one of belief in God or of turning to a false god. The false god, the idol, is the one created by the renegade Christians who have propounded false teaching about Christ's coming. The understanding of God which their position presupposes can no longer be recognized as Christian. The God which they themselves would doubtless acclaim as the God of Jesus Christ is a creation of their imagination, a deity, a theistic concept, supporting a system of thought and behaviour which belongs not on the side of the God of Jesus, but on the side of the world. In the epistle the author has explained how God's being and action is love which reaches out into all creation, including ordinary human flesh, and concerns itself with life and relationships at all levels. Theirs is a concept which divides reality, preserving only higher reality as spiritually relevant, thus denigrating both the earthly human Jesus and the responsibilities of practical caring which belong to Christian community.

THE SECOND EPISTLE OF JOHN

The Second Epistle of John

The so-called second epistle of John is a letter which follows a common stereotype letter format know from the period. If our letters commonly begin, 'Dear . . . ,' and end with 'Yours sincerely' or 'Yours faithfully', theirs followed even more elaborate rules. These included standard forms of introduction: writer, addressee, greeting; a word of thanksgiving to the gods; stereotype expressions of goodwill and intention within the body of the letter at its beginning and end; and formulae of farewell.

In II John we recognize the introduction: *The Elder to the Lady chosen by God . . . grace, mercy and peace*. There is no word of thanksgiving, but the affirmations of affection and gladness (2 and 4) belong to the usual courtesies. In a similar way the final words about wanting to write more (12) were a common feature of letter-writing (and still are!). The same applies to the declared intent to visit (12). Instead of the 'Farewell' (Greek: *errōsthe*) the author follows a common Christian pattern of ending by conveying kind regards (13).

Within the body of the letter, 5–11, *the Elder* begins with an exhortation to mutual love (5–6), expounds the context of that love by alerting the addressee to the danger of deceivers (7–8) and sets out some practical consequences (9–11).

The letter format enables us to recognize a simple structure:

1–3 Introductory greeting
4 Affirmation of relationship
5–11 Body of the letter
  5–6 An exhortation to mutual love
  7–8 The deceivers
  9–11 The strategy of not offering hospitality to deceivers
12 Parting words affirming the relationship
13 Passing on of greetings.

1–3 Introductory greeting

The letter begins in a strangely impersonal manner, or, at least, in a manner which avoids names. Possibly this was to avoid identification by the authorities, though nothing in the letter indicates such danger. The gospel of John also does not name a key figure in its presentation, calling him, rather, 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'. Similarly the Qumran community had spoken of 'the teacher of righteousness' without name. These figures were well known and their position well established in their communities. The same is probably true of *the Elder*.

He is unlikely to be simply one of the office bearers in the church who were called elders. There would have been more than one of them known to the community, making it rather strange that he calls himself *the Elder*. He does not appear at any point to appeal to his official position within the church organization as the basis of his authority. He may be *Elder* in the sense of being older than most others in the community. Anyone above forty years of age may have been called *elder* in the sense of 'senior'. Such seniors are called *fathers* in the first epistle.

Probably he is a senior figure known as *the Elder* not primarily because of age, nor because of office, but because of his experience and leadership in the community. He identifies himself with the tradition which formed the beginning of the community (5) and on that basis warns, encourages and send commands, but in a manner which suggests that his authority is not automatic. His command, for instance, needs to be supported with the argument that it is not inconsistent with the tradition (5–6). Similarly it is an authority against which it is not unthinkable that another community leader may show considerable independence, as III John illustrates. On the broader issues of identification see the Introduction.

The Lady chosen by God (literally: *the elect Lady*) also remains nameless. Neither the word *'elect'* nor the word *lady* should be understood as a proper name. The final verse mentions another woman, *your sister, chosen by God* (literally: 'your elect sister'), whose children send their greetings (13). There are some grounds for finding in these two references further evidence of the role of women in leadership in the communities of the Johannine writings. Within the fourth gospel itself women exercise significant authority. In the person of Jesus' mother they tell the disciples what they should do (John 2.5). In

the person of the Samaritan woman they evangelize a community (4.28–42). On the lips of Mary and Martha they confess the truth about Jesus (11.17–27) and in Mary's action they anoint Jesus' feet (12.1–8). They remain faithful in the women who stood with Jesus at the end (19.25–27) and in Mary Magdalene theirs is the first resurrection encounter (20.14–18).

Perhaps the *Lady chosen by God* had made her house available for the Christian community and assumed its leadership. Such house churches were the norm. If a false teacher comes, she is not to *admit him into her house* (10). Perhaps *the Elder* is writing from within another such community under the leadership of a woman, whose church community, *her children, send greetings* (13).

All this is possible; we may never know. A more common interpretation is to take *Lady chosen by God* as a symbolic reference to a community, reflecting widespread practice in both the Jewish and wider Graeco-Roman world of referring to cities and communities under the image of a woman. The final verse would represent the greeting of one community by another. It would also overcome the difficulty that only the children send this greeting, not the woman herself. It is more likely given the probable nature of this writing (see the discussion below).

Whether writing to a woman leader and her house church community or to a community symbolically represented by a woman together with its members (*and her children*, 1), the *Elder* affirms his *love* for them *in the truth* just as in III John 1. The REB repeats this affirmation for smoothness of language by adding to the beginning of the following verse the words: *We love you*. While these are not in the Greek original, they represent the intention of the opening. *Love* becomes an important theme in what follows. It was quite common to have the opening reflect the key themes which follow in the main body of a letter, as well as being a natural process of writing that one's concerns surface early in the writing.

The other more dominant theme of the opening is that of *truth*. The author loves the community *in the truth* (literally in truth; similarly III John 1), as do *all who know the truth* (1). This love is *for the sake of the truth that dwells among us and will be with us forever* (2). The greeting of *grace, mercy, and peace* is offered as a promise which is *in truth and love* (3). Some in the community were *living by the truth* (4; similarly III John 3 and 4). They are being warned of *deceivers* (7) who bring *teaching* (10) other than the *truth* about Jesus which the author defines in 7.

The truth entails correct belief about Jesus and at one level is the equivalent of the true, as against the false, teaching. But *the truth* also encompasses something more personal. Like *the word*, it can stand for the one about whom *the truth* bears witness. It can also encompass *the truth* which he taught, the way of living which he brought and made possible. While the phrase *in truth* (1,3) could mean little more than 'truly', it probably carries with it the wider sense. The REB indicates this wider meaning by translating: *in the truth*. This means something like: in the context of our common commitment to Christ and all he stands for.

The notion of *the truth that dwells among* (literally: in) *us and will be with us forever* (2) recalls I John 1.8 and 2.4 where the author warns those who fail to acknowledge their sins or who refuse to keep God's command that *the truth* will not be in them. In a similar way the author speaks of God's *word* not being in them (I John 1.10). In II John 2 we could easily replace the word *truth* by *Christ*. The author chooses *truth* probably because the focus is less on Christ the person and more on Christ's work, the benefits which his presence brings. In a similar way the author of I John began his writing with the impersonal formulation: *It was there from the beginning*.

To *know the truth* (1) is both to know *the truth about* Christ and to know Christ himself and his way. To be *living by the truth* is to live in that way. The community's gospel also uses *truth* with a wide range of meaning. Jesus tells the truth about the way to God and makes that way possible. In that sense he is 'the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except by' him (John 14.6). He is 'full of grace and truth' (1.14), speaks *the truth*, the teaching, 'which will set you free' (8.32) and saw his *task* being 'to bear witness to the truth' (18.37).

Whereas in the gospel the focus is on the benefit of *'the truth'* as the offer to the world of life and salvation and on its rejection by the Jews and by the world, the focus in the epistles moves to the same *truth*, having the same basic qualities, but now in dispute as to its christological reference. In other words, the issue of true or false teaching about Christ becomes a major added factor to its range of meaning. In that sense the theme of false teaching is already in mind in the author's use of *truth* in the opening words of II John.

To *love* the reader *for the sake of the truth* (2) is to love them for the sake of Christ and for the sake of preserving right belief about Christ. *Truth*, both Christ himself and right belief about Christ, *dwells among* believers who continue to hold to that right belief (2). Here the *us* in

dwells among us refers both to the author and his community and to the readers. The claim to possess *the truth* stands alongside the assurance of Christ's abiding presence, which *will be with us forever*. In the dispute over right teaching the more fundamental dimensions are not lost sight of. Hope, for the author, is not so much a reward or an event as the continuing presence of Christ.

The greeting forms part of the standard opening of most New Testament letters; with the farewell it frames the letter. A good example of the standard greeting and farewell framing a letter in the most common Graeco-Roman format may be found in the so-called apostles' letter in Acts 15.24–29. There were variations in format determined in part by the impact of different cultural influences. Jews commonly replaced the standard word for 'greeting' (Greek: *chairein*) with either *Peace* (Greek: *eirēnē*; Hebrew: *shalom*) or *Grace* (Greek: *charis*) or *Mercy* (Greek: *eleos*) or sometimes with a combination of these. Paul uses the twofold greeting *'grace and peace,'* which is also found in the letters attributed to Peter. The letters to Timothy, also attributed to Paul, but probably emanating from a later period, use the same threefold formula as found here: 'Grace, mercy and peace'.

These words are more than an empty greeting formula; but, because they are also a standard formula, we should hesitate before assuming that the rich heritage and matrix of meaning associated with each is all intended for conscious reflection by the addressees before they proceed! The word *Grace (charis)* appears in only one passage in the Johannine literature (the gospel and letters), in the prologue to the gospel which associates 'grace and truth' as the gift of Jesus, 'grace upon grace', in contrast to the gift of the law through Moses (John 1.14–17). The Johannine writers prefer the word 'love'. The word *mercy (eleos)* does not occur at all in the Johannine writings outside of the present passage. It, too, is captured by the wider concept, *love*. *Peace* was a common greeting and sometimes appears in combination with one or both of the other two words. Its Hebrew equivalent *shalom*, includes the idea of wholeness and health. It is much wider than absence of war and conflict. In the gospel it is the special gift of Jesus promised to his disciples (14.27; 16.33; 10.19,21) in contrast to the peace offered by the world.

All three words represent gifts *from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Son of the Father*. These words, too, appear to be part of a standard greeting formulation. Paul's usual pattern reads: 'Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ' (e.g. Rom. 1.7). I and II Timothy have 'Grace, mercy, and peace from

God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord'. All affirm the fundamental connection between God and Jesus and so give expression to the centre of Christian faith: God has made himself known to Jesus Christ and it continues to be so: in and through Jesus Christ we know God.

II John expands the formula with the words, *the Son of Father*, doubtless to underline the basis of this truth: the intimacy of relation between Jesus and God expressed through the words, *Father and Son*. In this it reflects the language of the fourth gospel with the strong preference for describing this unique relation with these terms.

The words *in truth and love*, with which the greeting ends, capture what we have already seen was the dual focus of the first epistle: right belief and right behaviour. Both belief and behaviour were part of a system of thought where *truth* also meant more than belief and *love* meant more than human behaviour. The same twofold emphasis is reflected in II John in 7–11 and 4–6, respectively, without the detailed spelling out of the wider context of these words.

Greetings usually take the form of wishes, or, more strictly, benedictions: *Peace be with you*. Mostly they are formulated without the word, *be*, so that Paul's commonly read: 'Grace to you and peace . . .' We are right to supply the word 'be' in such instances. This was understood in the common greeting, *Peace*, then, as it is now. In the very few instances where a verb is supplied it has this sense. For instance, I Peter 1.2 has the word 'be multiplied' in the formula. 'Grace and peace be multiplied to you' (similarly II Peter 1.2 and Jude 2). These, are, then, statements which do something; they are acts which grant or channel grace and peace. Probably they are more formal than literal in character and should be given about the same weighting as the common greeting: 'The Lord bless you' or 'God bless you'.

In the case of the 'greeting' in II John, however, we have a different kind of statement. It is not a benediction or a wish, but a statement of fact: *Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us* . . . The use of *us* rather than *you* also reflects the fact that this is not strictly a greeting, but rather a word of mutual reassurance. This may reflect lack of authority on the part of *the Elder*, in the sense that he is not in the position to offer a benediction or blessing of this kind. It may, however, reflect a desire to emphasize mutuality. Some hesitation about action which could sound like exercise of authority is present in II John 5. *The Elder* is not commanding; he is making requests.

4 *Affirmation of relationship*

The stereotypical letter format dictated that some word of thanksgiving to the gods should now follow, together with some attempt to affirm the relationship. Paul usually assures the readers of his thanksgiving to God for them and his remembrance of them in his prayers (e.g. Rom. 1.8–12). *The Elder* has no expression of thanksgiving, but affirms the relationship by recalling the positive news which he had received.

With the words, *I was very glad to find that,* he is probably referring to reports which had come to him from the readers' community at some time in the recent past. The contact was probably of this casual nature rather than being the result of an investigation whose 'findings' proved positive. In Greek, as in English, 'find' may mean little more than 'hear of' or 'learn'.

The words, *some of your children,* are something of a shock; we immediately want to ask: and what about the others? Surely such partial success is nothing about which to be *very glad!* The Greek could imply this; but it could also be just another way of saying: *your children* or your community by and large, without implying major dissent.

The meaning of *living by the truth* has already been explored in discussing the previous section. The language recalls the earlier portions of I John where *truth* and how one *lives* (literally: 'walks') are significant themes (esp. 1.5–8; 2.3–6). The connection with I John continues to be strongly evident in what follows. *In accordance with the command we have received from the Father* reflects the word about keeping commands in I John 2.3–6. I John 2.7–8 expounds this in relation to the idea this is no *new command;* similarly II John 5 goes on to make the same point. We associate *new command* with Jesus' command to his disciples in John 13.34–35, but the author of the epistle also frequently expounds the command to love another as God's command, as here (e.g. 3.22–24; 4.21; 5.2–3). What comes from Christ ultimately comes from God. The command is one which both *the Elder* and the addressees received in *the beginning* (5): therefore he speaks of it as the one *we* received from the Father(4).

5–6 *An exhortation to mutual love*

The main body of this short letter commences with a *request*. This is, in effect, an exhortation to a community and would have been read out aloud at one of its gatherings. Read in that context it sounds less artificial than if we were to understand it as a personal address to an individual. The echo of I John in the words, *Do not think I am sending a new command; I am recalling the one we have had from the beginning* (I John 2.7) is doubtless deliberate, especially if we see *the Elder* and the writer of the first epistle as two different people. It would assume that the readers are already familiar with the first epistle. Alternatively the same author is writing, following the same pattern of thought. For a further discussion of the relationship between the first and second epistles and their authors see the introduction (pp. xxv–xxvii).

Whereas in I John we are left to surmise that the command which is *no new command* is the command to *love one another* (first mentioned in I John at 3.11), here it is made explicit. This shorter version also omits the qualification that the *old command* is nevertheless a *new command*, with allusion to John 13.34–35. But the ethos is the same, as is also the style. *What love means is to live according to the commands of God* (literally: and this is love, that we walk according to his commands). The words which follow also reflect the language of the first epistle: *This is the command that was given you from the beginning, to be your rule of life* (literally: 'this is the command, as you heard it from the beginning, that you walk in it'). This recalls the concluding words of I John 2.7: *the old command is the instruction which you have already received* (literally: the old command is the word which you heard).

The concerns of II John continue to be the same as those of I John: right belief and right behaviour. Right behaviour is spelled out in terms of mutual love. In the situation of both writings this primarily means solidarity and caring within the Christian community and among Christian communities. Such solidarity is not separate from the issue of right belief. Caring for one another means standing together in mutual support against the dangers which threaten from outside. As such the command to mutual love and support leads naturally to the focus on the mutual threat identified in 7.

7–8 *The deceivers*

The Greek makes a closer link connection with what has gone by beginning v. 7 with the word, *hoti* (= 'because'), omitted in the REB translation. Mutual love and support is called for in the light of the threat to *the truth*. We are now moving from the first to the second significant theme announced in the opening, from *love* to *truth*.

Many deceivers have gone out into the world. This may be intended to stand as a general truth, in the sense that the communities now find themselves confronted by some of them. Verses 10–11 indicate that these deceivers come to the Christian communities, to their meeting centres, their houses, and seek entry. As we shall see in discussing these verses, such was a normal pattern for travelling teachers and preachers from early times. Are the deceivers being understood in this general sense or is a specific group in mind?

The identity of the *deceivers* depends on how we understand the relationship between this letter and the first epistle. If we are dealing with the same situation, they may well be those who had abandoned the community according to I John 2.18 and gone abroad to propagate a false understanding of Christ. Certainly there are echoes in II John 7–8 of the formulations of I John. So far we have noted the similarities to I John up to I John 2.8. Here we find similarities with I John 2.18–27, which recounts the split in the community and identifies the author's opponents as *antichrists* and as *those who would mislead* (literally: 'deceive'; Greek: *planōntōn) you*. Here we read: *Any such person is the deceiver* (Greek: *planōn) and antichrist*. The author of the first epistle felt the need to explain to his readers this daring use of *antichrist; the Elder* does not do so, probably because the epistle is already known; possibly, because space prevents it.

The similarities with I John extend also to the words: *people who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh*. This recalls I John 4.2: *every spirit which acknowledges Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God*. In the discussion of the similarities found between 4–6 and the epistle we noted two possibilities. Either the same author is following a similar train of thought writing in the same situation or another author is heavily dependent on I John. The same alternatives apply equally here and are discussed more fully in the introduction.

If *the Elder* is also the author of the first epistle, we are probably right in surmising that the false teachers are the same and that they are linked with the group who seceded from the author's community.

They are now actively seeking access to sister communities linked with the author's community and he writes to prevent this. One could argue that this letter follows shortly after the secession and after the first epistle. One could also speculate, alternatively, that the first epistle may come after the so-called second letter as the fuller treatment of the theme foreseen at first as a face-to-face explanation (12), but now put in writing as a sermon. But this all depends on common authorship against a common threat.

One of the difficulties in such an assumption is the difference between the description of the false teaching in II John and that of I John. II John 7 reads: *people who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh*. People frequently assume that the present participle, *coming*, has to refer to Christ's having come in the incarnation on earth, as does *has come in the flesh* in I John 4.2. Polycarp may have conflated both references into one with such a sense in his *Letter to the Philippians* (7.1), but need not be understood in this way. The problem is that the Greek of II John 7 cannot refer to an event in the past, i.e. Christ's having come; it must refer either to a present *coming* or a future *coming* of Christ in the flesh.

Some assume a grammatical slip on the author's part. Others point to the use of 'the coming one' as a reference to Christ (John 11.27) and speculate that perhaps the present participle reflects this influence and should not be taken too literally in terms of time. The problem here is that *in the flesh* does put the focus on the actual event of *coming* and its manner. Others suggest that the author is thinking of Christ's present being as still incorporating his full human personhood, so that in a real sense he has come and still comes in such fullness. But there is no indication elsewhere that this is an issue. Alternatively, we might see *coming in the flesh* as linked to coming in the sacraments which may be being denied by some. I John 5.6–8 has been interpreted in this light; John 6.53–54 may reflect a similar controversy and 6.60–66 may reflect its consequences in the community. But, as we have seen, these do not refer to a coming in the sacraments.

A major alternative is to start with the assumption that the authorship and situation of the first epistle and II John are different and that the author of II John uses a known writing, I John, to address a new situation. The new situation is one where people are denying that Jesus Christ will come in the flesh. What is at stake here is the materiality of future hope and, in particular, the hope that Jesus will reign on earth as the Messiah for a thousand years, a hope set out in

Revelation 20, but known to be a matter of controversy in the second century.

Justin Martyr in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, written perhaps in the late 150s CE, reports such difference of opinion and becomes quite vehement in rebuking Trypho for falling prey to some so-called Christians who are really godless heretics who deny such a hope and choose rather to see Christian hope in terms of souls going to heaven (80). Papias, in the early decades of the century, was known to have espoused millennial views, though somewhat bizarre in their predictions of material fruitfulness. The *Epistle of Barnabas* (written around 130–140 CE) shares the expectation of the thousand-year reign of the Messiah (15.4–5) and also the tradition that Christ will appear in flesh showing his wounds to the shame of those who crucified him (7.9). This is an old tradition reflected already in the New Testament itself (Rev. 1.7; compare also John 19.37). Irenaeus, in his work *Against Heresies* (III 16.8), cites both I John 4.2 and II John 7, together with John 1.14, to emphasize both that Christ came in the flesh and that he will appear again in the same flesh in which he suffered.

Of all these, perhaps the evidence of Justin is most telling, for it enables us to see the issue at dispute. Much of what follows in the *Dialogue* (especially 81–83) concerns this theme. Denial of the thousand-year reign is tied to denial of the resurrection body and denial of the reappearance of Jesus in the flesh, according to Justin, to reign for a thousand years in Jerusalem. While the *Dialogue* was composed probably in the late 150s CE, its setting is in the early 130s, much closer to the time of the second epistle. It reflects major conflict.

Such a context would explain the change in tense from *has come* in I John 4.2 to *coming* in II John 7. The fact that Christ's second coming is often pictured as an occasion of glory does not count against the belief that he would come in the flesh. For it would be precisely the embodied Christ who would reign gloriously and shine as he did in his transfigured body on earth.

The two concerns, Christ's having come and his future coming in the flesh, are not unrelated. Denial of a renewed earth and therefore of a literal resurrection body for believers was at stake in Paul's controversy with the Corinthians, who seem to have espoused a view of future life which did away with the need for embodied life. Paul envisaged a transformed 'spiritual' body, but a body, nevertheless. According to Paul, 'flesh and blood can never possess the kingdom of God' (I Cor. 15.50); only a new immortal body can

do that. Our author would be using language differently, but making the same point: it is the one Jesus Christ who came in the flesh who in the flesh, transformed by resurrection life, will rule on earth. Similarly, Ignatius in his struggle with docetism also shows that it was more than the incarnation which was at stake. The risen body of Christ was also *flesh* and not phantom (see his *Letter to the Smyrneans* 2–3). Those who denied this denied also their own future resurrection.

Denial of the relevance of the material and therefore the human and human relationships is the symptom of a spirituality which denies the human in Christ at any point, in incarnation on earth or in the fulfilment of a transformed heaven and earth. Where Christianity settles for only a heaven (transformed or not), it devalues earth; the world becomes dispensable; issues of justice in human community are neglected; the lovelessness lampooned in the first epistle becomes the norm – all in the guise of religion. Whether fought out in relation to the reality of Jesus in the past or in the future, the issues are ultimately the same. This made it possible for the new author who penned II John to draw on the rich resources of the first epistle against a new, but related danger. For it was precisely in the kinds of groups who most sought to modify the reality of the human Jesus on earth that we find the strongest tendency to transform future hope into the aspiration of ascent from the material world into the realms of pure spirituality.

To sell out to a gospel which diminished Jesus' humanity and therefore our own is to *lose what we have worked for* (8). The author sees himself and the community's leader or leaders as those who have worked to establish and maintain Christian communities. There is a sense of partnership, rather than the kind of apostolic authority characteristic of Paul, when he writes to his communities. *The Elder* is obviously a known leader, but one among others working in partnership.

The notion of *reward* for work well done is part of general understanding of God as one who expresses appreciation for human effort. Paul frequently writes of his hope for such recognition (e.g. II Cor. 1.14; Phil. 2.16) and Jesus promises reward for faithful service (Matt. 5.12; 6.1; Mark 9.41; Luke 10.7; John 4.36). The thought should not be confused with attempts to gain justification by works. No such boasting counts before God; it is itself the worst kind of sin (Rom. 3.19–20, 27). But neither Christianity nor Judaism conceived of God as blandly same-ish in relation to people. In relation to God, to seek

the reward is to want to be pleasing and to do so because you know that such attitude and behaviour will be fulfilling and rewarding. God wants us to do what is good for us and to do what is good for others, not to engage in the devious fiction of selflessness which leads only to manipulation.

9–11 *The strategy of not offering hospitality to deceivers*

By *anyone who does not stand by* (literally: 'remain in') the *teaching about Christ, but goes beyond it* the author means the *deceivers*. This way of putting it indicates that they were originally Christians, perhaps even part of the author's community (as those in I John 2.18), and have gone *beyond* what the community continues to teach *about Christ*. It is probably right to deduce from this that they saw themselves as 'progressives'. Theirs was a new development of doctrine, either in denying Christ's real incarnation on earth, if the situation is the same as that of the first epistle, or in denying his real coming to earth in the future. The Greek words translated *about Christ (tou Christou)* could also be translated 'of Christ' and mean 'coming from Christ'; but that is unlikely. At stake is a right understanding *about Christ*.

The author continues to be dependent on I John or to follow the same train of thought. The author has been using the passage about the *antichrists*, I John 2.18–27, associated with its parallel in 4.2. From within it he picks up 2.23: *to deny the Son is to be without* (literally: *not to possess) the Father; to acknowledge the Son is to have* (literally: *to possess) the Father too*. A similar thought is echoed at the close of the body of the epistle: *he who possesses the Son possesses life; he who does not possess the Son of God does not possess life* (5.12). The literal translation makes the parallels clearer between these passages and II John 9, which reads: he who *goes beyond . . . the teaching about Christ . . . does not possess God; he who stands by it possesses both the Father and the Son*.

The advice in 10–11, about what to do when such teachers come, reflects the ancient practice of itinerant ministry which reaches back to the beginnings of Christianity. The gospels record instructions to early missionaries given in the form of a commission to disciples, both in Mark 6.6b–13 (and its parallels in Matthew and Luke) and independently in Luke 10.1–16. Jesus himself appears to have engaged in a travelling ministry, receiving hospitality for himself and

his itinerant group of disciples from sympathizers in the towns to which he went. This set the pattern also for the ministry of the disciples after Easter.

Within the instructions given to the disciples we find careful rules about what they should take with them, how they should travel, and what attitude they should take towards hospitality. They should accept the latter, pronouncing peace upon the house and enjoying its provision. Where they are not welcomed, they should treat the place as pagan, symbolically shaking the dust off their feet in judgement (Luke 10.5–12). The initial interchange of greeting was much more than a formality. It signified acceptance or rejection.

As Christianity spread out into the wider world, itinerant apostles, prophets, teachers and evangelists became an essential vehicle for communication and support among the growing communities. This pattern of itinerant ministries continued well past the first century. But already in Paul's time problems emerged about authentication and the role of letters of commendation. Even Paul himself was called into question for not following the standard instructions for such itinerants (I Cor. 9). Later we read of teachers claiming inspiration and the need to assess them. I John 4 cites the criterion of their belief about Christ. The early second-century writing, the *Didache*, speaks of itinerant prophets who abuse hospitality (*Did.* 11). There was also a growing difficulty of the conflict between local authority and external authority. We see this illustrated in III John, where a leader, Diotrephes, refuses Christians sent to him by the author.

In II John we have the reverse. The author advises: *do not admit him to your house or give him any greeting*. In this way the house church will be protected. Hospitality, including the important sign of greeting, is to be refused. The author reinforces the importance of the greeting in the practice of itineracy: it was the sign of acceptance and involvement with someone's mission.

There is much more at stake here, therefore, than the offer of accommodation to a visiting preacher with whose views one may disagree. Within the context of the accepted practice of the time, it was a matter of allowing the establishment of a ministry or not. Caring for the community entailed (and entails) care about the substance and starting-point of ministry. A ministry which denies the reality of God's involvement with humankind and reduces it to an adventure of the spirit will undermine the foundations of the gospel in doctrine and in practice. It will offer religion without

engagement in issues of justice and relationship and, in the name of religion, thus achieve the opposite of the mission of Jesus.

12 *Parting words affirming the relationship*

The author will not have been first and was certainly not the last to end a letter by assuring the recipient that there was much more that could have been written, but . . . The gospel of John, itself, has a similar ending (21.25). In the case of our letter the limits of length were dictated by the size of a papyrus page. The author apparently hopes to deal with the matters in detail in a meeting face to face. Would he then deliver his sermon, now preserved as the first epistle, as some suggest? Or is he thinking more generally of expounding the specific issues peculiar to this letter and not reflected in the epistle which he has used because of its established authority? The words could also be simply a formal adaptation from III John 13–14a, with which they are almost identical.

A final allusion to the first epistle cements the connection between the two. The author does these things, he says: *that our joy may be complete,* just as in I John 1.4 we read: *We are writing this in order that our joy may be complete.* This is also part of the reward on earth. The author is totally engaged in the welfare and protection of these communities. This may be viewed cynically as sectarian self-preservation or sympathetically as the concern to preserve a holistic understanding of the gospel from one which would modify it into an other worldly pursuit.

The regret over space and the statement of hope or intent to visit (also in III John 13–14) is so much a standard feature of ancient letter-writing that we should not build too much on these as references to actual historical plans. They may be, especially if we are dealing with the author of I John following through the consequences of the historical situation the community faces. If, however, we have before us a letter employing the first epistle and its associations to combat a new danger, the detail may be little more than standard dress drawn from III John.

13 Passing on of greetings.

It seems to have been a feature of early Christian letters to close with greetings rather than with the usual *farewell*. These are simple and express the greeting of one community by another. For those who see the women as symbols of communities, that is all that is said. If the letter is addressed to a woman and her house church, the question arises how to interpret the sender here: *the children of your Sister, chosen by God*. Possibly this would be her *sister*, literally; more probably it would be her *sister* in the faith. But, then, why is this *sister* not included in the greeting? Any number of possibilities come to mind: she was elsewhere at the time; she had died; she had founded the community and moved on. None is impossible. It is much more likely that we have here a deliberately vague allusion, which allows the author to avoid limiting the application of the letter's message by tying it to a specific community of origin and community of addressees.

THE THIRD EPISTLE OF JOHN

The Third Epistle of John

The so-called third epistle of John is a letter which follows a common stereotype letter format know from the period. This is set out at the beginning of the commentary on II John. It included standard forms of introduction: writer, addressee, greeting; a word of thanksgiving to the gods; stereotype expressions of goodwill and intention within the body of the letter at its beginning and end; and formulae of farewell.

In III John we recognize a brief introduction: *The Elder to dear Gaius, whom I love in the truth*; without a greeting; no words of thanksgiving; a prayer for good health (2) and an affirmation of gladness (3–4). There follows the body of the letter (5–12) and, as in II John, a stereotypical comment about wanting to write more (13) and about intending to visit (14a). Instead of the common 'Farewell' (Greek: *errōsthe*) the author follows a common Christian pattern of ending with a greeting of peace and the passing on of kind regards (14b).

Within the body of the letter, 5–12, the elder expresses appreciation and encouragement to Gaius with regard to his exercise of hospitality towards emissaries (5–8), reports the inhospitable behaviour of Diotrephes (9–10), encourages Gaius to follow good examples and commends acceptance of Demetrius (11–12).

The letter format enables us to recognize a simple structure:

1 Opening
2–4 Affirmation of relationship
5–12 Body of the letter
  5–8 Appreciation and encouragement of hospitality
  9–10 The report of Diotrephes' inhospitality
  11–12 A request to follow good examples and accept Demetrius
13–14a Parting words affirming the relationship
14b Greeting and passing on of regards.

1 *Opening*

The opening is very similar to that of II John. See the commentary, there, for discussion of *the Elder* and the phrase *whom I love in the truth*, which is identical in both. There both *love* and *truth* were integrating themes and related in particular to the command to show love and the warning about *deceivers*. Here *love* is also a significant theme: it appears in the translation as *kindness* (6); in the expression *it was for love of Christ's name that they went out* (7) and in essence it underlies the encouragement of hospitality. The word translated *dear* (1) and *Dear friend* (2,5,11), is the Greek word *agapētos* derived from *agapē*, the word for *love*, and *agapētos* may be translated 'beloved'.

Truth is more prominent. The author refers to *faithfulness to the truth* (3); living *by the truth* (3 and 4); *spreading the truth* (8); and of Demetrius being *well spoken of . . . by the truth* (12). The range is similar to what we found behind its use in II John (see the discussion there). In these instances it includes, above all, *the truth* as what is believed and proclaimed about Jesus and the way of life entailed in believing in him. That Demetrius is *well spoken of . . . by the truth itself* is unusual and must mean that his work is of sufficient significance to be included in an account of God's graciousness within the community.

The Opening does not include a greeting, such as we find in II John; instead, unlike II John, it includes the brief greeting of *Peace* at the conclusion of the letter: *Peace be with you*.

2–4 *Affirmation of relationship*

It was common to commence letters with assurance of prayer for the good health and well-being of the recipients, and III John follows this familiar pattern. It is almost like the tendency in letters which people write today to say something like: I hope you are well. Here the author distinguishes Gaius's general physical well-being from the well being of his *soul* (Greek: *psychē*). *Soul* need not imply that he is thinking of only one part of Gaius's being as a separate entity within his physical body. It is much more likely that he is focussing on his whole person viewed from the perspective of his Christian life. Thus the author considers the practical matters of hospitality which he is about to address as belonging to the life of the *soul*.

Both III John and II John are written against the background of Christian communities among whom there were itinerant or travelling preachers and teachers, a practice which reaches back to the earliest days of the church (see the commentary on II John for detail). This is the background for the discussion of hospitality in the body of the letter. It is also the background for the immediate reference to the arrival of *fellow-Christians*, since these seem to be the same people of whom the author writes in 6–7 that *they went out . . . in Christ's name*. The *fellow-Christians arrived* where the author is located and reported Gaius's *faithfulness*, indeed, his living *by the truth* (3). 5–8 will focus on one particular aspect of Gaius's praiseworthy behaviour: hospitality.

The following verse shows us that Gaius is probably a convert of the author's, one of his *children*. The relationship is, therefore, one where not only is the author *the Elder*: he is also the father in faith of Gaius, and that usually carried with it its own claim to authority and responsibility. As in II John the author expresses his joy and gladness. *I was very glad*, and *nothing gives me greater joy* (II John 4: *I was very glad*; 12: *that our joy may be complete*).

5–8 *Appreciation and encouragement of hospitality*

The author praises Gaius for his hospitality shown to the *fellow-Christians* who have now reported back to him and spoken before his congregation. They had been *strangers* to Gaius, but obviously were not *strangers* to the author or his community. This allows us to assume that the two communities are sufficiently distant from one another for emissaries sent by one not to be known by a leading person in the other community.

The *loyalty* shown (5) is towards the author and towards what he stands for, *the truth*. The *fellow-Christians* belong to the author's congregation and he identifies personally with them. They report to the *congregation* (Greek: *ekklēsia*); they are also to be under way again and will again visit Gaius, whom the author encourages to *help them on their journey in a manner worthy of the God we serve* (6). The author is asking Gaius to continue to behave as he has before. Why should he doubt his continuing loyalty and hospitality? Probably because there

were influences either coming from, or similar to, those of Diotrephes who, 9–10 tell us, was refusing hospitality.

In asking that Gaius *send them on their way in a manner worthy of the God we serve* the author shows that these *fellow-Christians* are engaged in mission. They will use Gaius as a staging post in their journey. The following verse underlines that they are, indeed, emissaries, missionary envoys of the author's community: *It was for love of Christ that they went out* (7). Their acceptance of *nothing from unbelievers* shows that they are carrying out their task in accordance with the established practice of itinerant ministry laid out in the accounts of Jesus' commissioning the disciples (see the commentary on II John for detail). Their livelihood is not their responsibility, but belongs to those among whom they minister. The word for *unbelievers* could mean *Gentiles*, but this is unlikely in the present context.

The ancient practice of the local stipend as a living allowance to enable ministers to live has survived to the present day. The obligation is placed squarely on the shoulders of those to whom the ministry is given or among whom it is given. In ancient times that included the obligation to provide board and lodging. To fulfill this responsibility is to *play our part in spreading the truth* (8).

By writing that *we ought to support such people*, the author is doing more than asking for the same consistent treatment to be shown to his emissaries when they return. He is appealing to the broader principle. All *such people* should be supported in this way. This stands in sharp contrast to II John 10–11 which urges refusal of hospitality. But there the refusal is directed towards people who have espoused a false understanding of Christ. Here the issue of dispute over doctrine seems not to be at stake.

9–10 The report of Diotrephes' inhospitality

In stark contrast to Gaius, *Diotrephes . . . will have nothing to do with* the author and his missionaries (9). Whereas Gaius is addressed only as an individual, Diotrephes is mentioned in direct association with a congregation in which he plays a leading role. *The Elder* mentions that he has written *to the congregation* (9). The substance of his letter is indicated by what follows. It had included a request for hospitality for his envoys. It is lost to us; we have no such letter.

That the author writes that he has written to *the congregation* (*or* the church) is interesting because it assumes that Gaius, too, is related to this congregation. Yet it is also probable that Gaius is a leader of a group or at least has his own circle of friends. These will doubtless include *the friends* to whom greetings are sent in 14. When the author writes in 10 that he intends to visit Gaius and to *draw attention to the things* Diotrephes *is doing*, this makes most sense if the author is going to come to Gaius and his group to explain the issues, rather than just to Gaius himself.

Gaius is almost certainly not now a member of Diotrephes' congregation; otherwise he would have no need for information about Diotrephes' activities. In all likelihood, however, he had been and has long since separated from them, perhaps expelled formerly, if Diotrephes' recent behaviour reflects previous behaviour. Alternatively, and more probably, Gaius's group have formed as an offshoot or development of the main congregation to which Diotrephes belongs and are not sufficiently established to be called a congregation. This may also explain why the author can conceive of the possibility that Diotrephes' influence could harm his prospects with Gaius.

The author has written to the congregation, asking for hospitality for his envoys. Now they have returned bringing news of Diotrephes' refusal. Diotrephes *enjoys taking the lead* (literally: 'likes to be first'). This is the beginning of the author's attack on Diotrephes. He assures Gaius that more can be said: when he comes, he *will draw attention to the things he is doing* (10). The author himself, therefore, intends to come, not with the envoys, otherwise there would be no need for this letter, but clearly at a later, but not too distant time.

Already in this letter he gives an indication of his complaints. The first is that Diotrephes *lays nonsensical and spiteful charges against us* (literally: 'speaking nonsense against us with evil words'). Unfortunately this tells us more of the author's reaction than it does of the content of such charges. To him they are stupid talk motivated by evil intent. We know nothing of their content.

The charges were obviously serious enough for Diotrephes to be able to persuade a congregation that the author and his emissaries were not to be welcomed. One possibility is that the charges would have related to matters central to the faith. Some have speculated that they may be charges of false doctrine such as we find the author of the first epistle and *the Elder* of II John making. Then Diotrephes would be obeying the kind of instruction given in II John about

refusal of hospitality and the author would be on the side of those propounding false teaching about Christ. This is sheer speculation and assumes that those who collected the letters in the first place were unaware they were collecting letters from two sides of a fiercely fought controversy.

Alternatively, Diotrephes may be in league with the secessionists of I John. Accordingly our author (whom many would also see as the author of I John) would have espoused an understanding of Christ of such consequence that Diotrephes considered any contact out of the question. The problem with this view is that if the author is anxious about Gaius's continuing hospitality in the light of persuasion from Diotrephes that the author is in doctrinal error, then it is surprising that the issue of doctrinal orthodoxy does not surface in the letter.

A more satisfactory explanation is that the refusal of hospitality relates not to doctrine at all, but to an emerging assertion of local leadership authority against leadership from outside. The desire for independence over against the interference from itinerants may go hand in hand with a developing local power structure, perhaps on the model of episcopacy, but not necessarily. There is no indication of a clash of particular offices. The letter would bear witness to a power struggle in church politics rather than a matter of doctrinal debate. Diotrephes would be liable to want to extend his policy to cover Gaius's group and the author writes to forestall this.

The second complaint, which is seen as going beyond the first, is that Diotrephes refuses hospitality to *fellow-Christians . . . and interferes with* (literally: 'hinders') *those who would receive them, and tries to expel* (literally: 'expels') *them from the congregation*. The author probably also fears that he may extend this influence to Gaius and his community; hence the reason for the letter. The REB translation, *interferes with* and *tries to expel*, gives the misleading impression that Diotrephes is more limited in his power than he actually is. The Greek is better translated: 'hinders' and 'expels'. Diotrephes not only tries; he also succeeds in blocking such hospitality. He would have understood himself to be acting properly in accordance with the established practices of itinerant ministry. Expulsion from the congregation was also a known practice (e.g. Matt. 18.15–18 and see the discussion of I John 5.16–17).

11–12 A request to follow good examples and to accept Demetrius

The *bad . . . examples* are obvious. They include Diotrephes. The author does not mention *good examples* in particular, but Gaius himself has already acted in exemplary fashion. A more literal translation of 11 reads: 'Beloved, do not imitate the bad but the good. The person doing good is of God; the person doing evil has not seen God.' In this the contrast between *good* and *bad* is clear throughout. *Doing good* includes, in the context, offering hospitality. This is an exercise of love and care. Where such love is present in action we have evidence that someone is *of God*.

The author shares the assumptions of the first epistle, that God is loving and that loving is the best evidence for God. Anyone who does the opposite has no credible claim to have *seen* God. This assumes, conversely, that people who love have *seen* God, an extraordinary claim in the context of traditional faith according to which *no mortal may see God and live* (Exod. 33.20). The author shows himself to belong to the Johannine school of thought according to which to see the Son is see the Father and that this seeing is related to the works of the Father done by the Son (John 14.8–11; 1.18).

Demetrius may well be the bearer of this letter to Gaius. The author supports him with his commendation and cites his reputation (12). To be *well spoken of . . . by the truth itself* probably indicates that his accomplishments have been hailed as a sign of God's activity in the community. Letters of commendation were often necessary for travelling apostles and teachers. If Demetrius has such a reputation, he is coming to Gaius as more than the bearer of a letter. Gaius should offer hospitality also to him.

The author's words, *you know that my* (literally: 'our') *testimony is true*, recall similar claims made of the beloved disciple in John 19.35, but need mean no more than that this was a common form of expression in the Johannine communities. It is sheer speculation to argue from this that *the Elder* and the beloved disciple are identical. Gaius knows that the author's testimony is true because he is his father in the faith.

13–14a Parting words affirming the relationship

The stereotypical note about having more to write is almost identical to what we find in II John 12. In the context of this letter, however, the author has already indicated in that he has more to say. Here, as there, he promises a visit soon. This is also a common feature in letter-writing style, but has obvious concrete application in the context of the relationship with Gaius.

14b Greeting and passing on of regards

Peace be with you was a common greeting, reflecting the Hebrew, *shalom*. The author has omitted a formal greeting at the beginning of the letter such as we find in II John 3 and makes up for it here. The passing on of greetings is a common feature of early Christian letters. *Your friends here* (literally: your friends) suggest that Gaius is known well at least to some in the author's community, perhaps, at least, from the time of his conversion. Similarly the author and his community, at least some of them, have been well acquainted with Gaius and his group, and the author asks that they be greeted *by name*.

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