



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

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Reassuring the Orthodox: 1 John 2:12-14

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In context, 1 John 2:12-14 is one of the most reassuring texts in the New Testament. The epistle confronts some of the sternest challenges to the growing Christian movement. Though John boldly labels them as “antichrists” (2:18-22), his opponents’ denial of the true nature of Jesus (2:22-24), and their audacious claims to sinlessness (1:8) and special enlightenment (2:4), had apparently shaken the faith of the community from which they had departed (2:19). John counters by reassuring those who were not among the “privileged.” He begins by reminding his readers of their fellowship with the Father through his Son, Jesus Christ, a participation which would make their joy complete (1:1-4). He concludes with the affirmation that, by believing in the name of the Son of God, they would know that they possessed eternal life (5:13).

Between these texts are a series of arguments designed to expose the fallacies of the heretics’ claims by showing how they were at odds with the testimony of those who had witnessed the earthly ministry of Jesus as well as with the ethical excellence which consistently had resulted in the lives of his followers. Even as he argues, however, John does not leave his readers without reassurance that they could be secure in remaining true to orthodox views about Jesus. First John 2:12-14 serves as a pause in the argument which provides reassurance even as he reinforces some of the major themes previously developed and sets the stage for what will follow.¹

While there are several questions about this text which affect its interpretation, Schnackenburg is correct in observing “the problem here is with the context rather than with word-by-word exegesis.”² This paper will illustrate how this passage serves as a reassuring digression in the midst of John’s arguments against the heretics and thus exhorts the readers to firmness of faith. In developing this thought, attention will be given to evidence of Greek

¹ Smalley observes that verses 12-14 are “intimately associated with what has gone before.” He points to John’s use of the phrases, “I am writing” (2:1, 7, 8) and “we are writing” (1:4). He also calls attention to the repetition of such themes as forgiveness and sees allusions to the following references: 1:9; 2:1 (in v. 12); 1:1; 2:3 (in both vv. 13 and 14); and 1:8, 10 (in v. 14). He also notes a connection in the contrast between what he has said in negative terms about the heretics and the orthodox who are the referents in 2:12-14 (Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, vol. 51, *Word Biblical Commentary* [Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1984], 67).

² Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles: Introduction and Commentary*, trans. Reginald and Ilse Fuller (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 115.

rhetorical style as a means of emphasis,³ to an explanation of the repetition in the verses, to the way ὅτι (*hoti*) is used in the text, to the relationship of the text to verses 15-17, and to the insight one gains for being reassured about salvation in a world where Christianity is often challenged.⁴

Repetition of Themes as a Means of Reassurance

There are two ways in which repetition occurs in this passage: in the use of key terms and themes which serve to emphasize what the believers had in Christ, and in the six-fold use of γράφειν (*graphein*). In view of the epistle as a whole, it is not surprising that such repetition would occur, for, as Brown notes, “the author has a predilection for threes as seen in the three boasts of 1:5-2:2, and the three claims of 2:3-11, and soon to be seen in the three things the world has to offer in 2:16.”⁵ But this lack of surprise at his repetition does not mean that there is universal agreement on the reason for it in this text.

Bruce has proposed that “the three sentences in verses 13c and 14a, b may represent a later and fuller re-writing of what is preserved as an earlier draft in verses 12 and 13a, b.”⁶ Others suggest that material from an earlier writing has been inserted, either from the Gospel of John, 2 John, and /or a lost letter.⁷ With regard to Bruce’s position, it is possible, of course, but it must be questioned whether a writer so careful in his argumentation would not have detected his repetition. It is better to look for some reason which fits the context and purpose of the document.

Watson offers a plausible explanation in the rhetorical figures of *conuplicato*, *expolitio*, *traductio*, and synonymy. Noting that the text not only repeats certain phrases, but adds to them, he points to the specific figures of *conuplicato* and *expositio*. The former “is used to amplify because repetition is a form of amplification.” On the other hand:

³ A word on Greek rhetorical style: Duane Watson has argued that the major questions raised by the text “can be more fully answered by Greco-Roman rhetoric.” He utilizes various figures from Greek rhetoric to explain the repetition in the passage, the change of tense in the use of γράφω (*graphō*), the elaboration of key themes while adding additional ideas when they are used again, and as a means of explaining the different words which are used for children in verses 12 and 13. It is also from Watson that the idea of the passage as a *digressio* comes, defined as “the handling of some theme, which must however have some bearing on the case, in a passage that involves digression from the logical order of our speech” (105). His analysis offers a plausible explanation for seeing the emphasis on reassurance which this text presents, and so will be included in the discussion of the major issues of this passage (Duane Watson, “1 John 2.12-14 as *Distributio*, *Conuplicato*, and *Expolitio*: A Rhetorical Understanding,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 35 [1989], 97-110).

⁴ Another issue in this text, which will not be treated in this paper, is the identity of the groups encompassed by the terms “children, fathers, and young men.” Three solutions have been suggested: (1) there are three different groups, indicating levels of physical age or, more likely, spirituality; (2) there is one group with three names—all are in a sense children, all are fathers, all are young men engaged in spiritual warfare; (3) there are two groups which are part of the whole group referred to by the term “children.” This paper assumes the third view. For a summary of each position, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, vol. 30, *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1982, 297-299).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John: Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans’ Publishing Company, 1970), 57-58.

⁷ See Brown, 294-297, for a summary of the various views and list of the authors who have expressed them. This issue also relates to the question of the tense changes from γράφω (*graphō*) to ἔγραψα (*egrapsa*), discussed below.

Expolito 'consists in dwelling on the same topic and yet seeming to say something ever new.' It maybe [sic] accomplished in one of two ways: repeating the idea in different form or by altering the idea. In the former, words, delivery, or treatment are varied. In the latter, the idea is altered in seven ways: state it simply, subjoin a reason, use another form with or without a reason, present the contrary, and use comparison or example.⁸

Examples of *expolito* here include the use of "children" where the idea is altered by using another form ("your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake" and "you know the Father").⁹ The "young men" section finds a case where "the idea is altered by repeating it and subjoining a reason" ("you have overcome the evil one" repeated with the reasons, "you are strong and the word of God abides in you").¹⁰ The positive traits of overcoming the evil one, being strong, and having God's word abiding within amount to "amplification by accumulation in which all the items of a listing have one referent."¹¹

In John's use of *πατήρ* (*patēr*), Watson finds evidence of *traductio* or transplacement, a figure utilizing the frequent reintroduction of the same word as well as a word used in various functions. The different terms for "children" are cited as an example of synonymy, repetition by means of replacing a word with another of the same meaning.¹²

Watson's explanation fits the theme of reassurance which is present in 1 John. Certainly John's primary concern is to refute the false teachers. But he must also give attention to the damage those teachers have done to those who had remained orthodox. What better way to show the weaknesses of what the false teachers had to offer than to remind his readers of the superior blessings they had in Christ? The reminder is all the more forceful when the themes are repeated and amplified in the manner of verses 12-14.

Notice just how fundamental and forceful are the themes John addresses here. There is forgiveness (*ἀφεόνται*, *apheōntai* - v. 12), perfect passive in form, reminding them both of a past action with a present result and of what they owed God as the giver of forgiveness.¹³ Coupled with the reference to the divine name, the phrase would have naturally reminded the readers of John's earlier reference to the blood of Jesus and his place as advocate and offering for sin (cf. 1:7; 2:1f.).¹⁴ Furthermore, nothing could be more basic as a source of reassurance, for forgiveness was the message of the gospel (cf. Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38).¹⁵

⁸ Watson, 102.

⁹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the NASB.

¹⁰ Watson, 103.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ C. Haas, M. DeJonge, J. J. Swellengrebel, *A Translator's Handbook on the Letters of John*, vol. XIII, *Helps for Translators Series* (London: United Bible Societies, 1972), 55. Hereafter referred to as Haas.

¹⁴ I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 138.

¹⁵ B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John: The Greek Text with Notes*, 3rd Ed., Repr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1966), 59. Brown, 302, emphasizes the connection between the name and forgiveness by commenting on the force of *διὰ* (*dia*) with the accusative, "which normally supplies the grounds for the sake of which something is accomplished, . . . Thus the idea is not so much that sins are forgiven through or by means of Jesus' name, but are forgiven because of Jesus' name."

The use of “the name” (τὸ ὄνομα, *to onoma*) also raises a question as to whether John’s readers were being reminded of their initiation into the community by baptism. Though Schnackenburg argues that there is no clear reference to baptism as a salvific event in these verses,¹⁶ Brown suggests the possibility that the idea of being forgiven because of Christ’s name, coupled with the address, “children” (τεκνία, *teknia*), may indicate a baptismal background for verse 12. He invites a comparison with Acts 2:38; 8:16; and 1 Corinthians 1:13, 15.¹⁷ Whether or not baptism was intended as part of John’s reminder, it is evident that his intent was for them to recall the fundamental events which had changed their lives.

As he turns to the fathers (v. 13), John reminds them that they “had known (ἐγνώκατε, *egnōkate*; perfect tense) the one from the beginning (literally, for τὸν ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς, *ton ap’ archēs*).” The perfect tense suggests a reminder that there had been a commitment to following Jesus in the readers’ past, a sense “of knowing made perfect by being lived out in the Community as distinct from an initial moment of knowledge.”¹⁸ Given the reference in 1:1, it is best to take the phrase “the one from the beginning” as “an allusion to the Word which was from the beginning with God and has appeared in the person of Jesus.”¹⁹ The question of whether the reference to “the beginning” refers to God’s eternity,²⁰ the beginning of the Christian era, or the readers’ Christian experience²¹ has been debated. Whatever one concludes about that specific matter, John’s point is the same: he is “reassuring his audience about their knowledge of the importance of Jesus’ earthly life—that is what he is writing and has been writing to them (see 2:14cd).”²² As with his emphasis on the forgiveness received by the “children,” his point is to remind them of the fundamental blessings they had received as Christians who had followed Jesus according to the orthodox teachings. The contrast with the claims of the heretics is obvious: they may not have possessed the enlightened knowledge of those who had gone out from among them, but they still had what they always had in Christ, forgiveness and knowledge of God.

Remembering this fact naturally gives rise to the next, addressed to the “young men,” namely, that they had all they needed to “overcome the evil one.” The phrase refers to “one of the names of the devil, the supreme ruler of the forces of evil.”²³ It is again significant that the tense is perfect—νενικήκατε (*nenikēkate*)—for the reference is to a victory already won, though there is yet fighting to be done.²⁴ By using the perfect tense for a word denoting victory or superiority, “whether in the physical, legal or metaphorical sense, whether in mortal conflict or peaceful competition,”²⁵ John adds to his reminder of victory the idea that

¹⁶ Schnackenburg, 116.

¹⁷ Brown, 303.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Haas, 55.

²⁰ Bruce, 59; Marshall, 139.

²¹ See Brown, 303, for a summary. He takes the phrase to mean “what it generally means in the Epistles, i.e., the beginning of Jesus’ self-revelation to his disciples in the ministry.”

²² Ibid.

²³ Haas, 56.

²⁴ Marshall, 140.

²⁵ Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), s.v. “νικάω, νίκη, νίκος, ὑπερνικάω,” by O. Bauernfeind.

a serious commitment is required. The battle is hard, yes, but it has been won. Don't throw it away by allowing false teachings to erode the foundation of belief they had established.

Finally, he reminds them of the importance of the word of God—indeed, it is placed in a position which connects their strength with their victory (v. 14). As Smith comments, “they have the strength of youth, but it is disciplined by the indwelling Word, and therefore they have conquered.”²⁶ In addition to this insight, the place this emphasis serves in the context of the entire epistle should be appreciated. The heretics had little regard for the word—their claim was of an esoteric knowledge. As the result, their actions lacked the ethical content which would have characterized them had they been schooled in the word (cf. 2:3-11). Thus, it was no surprise that they would be living in a way which would be best characterized by saying that the evil one had overcome them. John's exhortation both reassures and exhorts them, preparing them for the challenge which will follow in verses 15-17. Schnackenburg's summary of this point, which shows the force of John's argument, is worth repeating in full:

In true Johannine style, the message for the young people is repeated three times, though in different words (v. 14c). In v. 13b they are assured that they have conquered the evil one. The middle phrase indicates the source of their power. It is that the word of God abides among them. The word is not a weapon for combat as in Eph. 6:17, but rather the power of God at work within them (cf. John 5:38; 6:63b; 8:31; 15:3; 17:14, 17). The aphorism stands in contrast to 1 John 1:10, where the heretics are said not to possess the word of God. The young warriors for Christ are told, though with a special nuance, that they have the same thing as their experienced fathers have. They are in living fellowship with God. From that fellowship they derive the power to overcome the evil one. It would appear that the young people are in particular need of these assurances. Moreover, the indicative of the verb “abides” allows the imperative to be heard along with it (cf. the beginning and end of 2:27).²⁷

The Tense Change from *Graphō* to *Egrapsa* as Reassurance

Not only does John reassure his readers by the repetition of fundamental themes which emphasize the essence of their joy in Christ, he also uses the tense change from the present *γράφω* (*graphō*) (vv. 12-13) to the aorist *ἔγραψα* (*egrapsa*) (v. 14) as a way of reinforcing the point.²⁸

As was true with the repetition generally, a variety of explanations for this tense change have been offered. Commonly mentioned is the concept of the epistolary aorist, “whereby the writer courteously projects himself in imagination into the position of the readers, for whom actions contemporaneous with the time of writing will be past.”²⁹ Others

²⁶ David Smith, *The Epistles of John*, vol. V, *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, reprint (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 177-178.

²⁷ Schnackenburg, 119.

²⁸ The versification referred to here is from the UBS 3rd edition text; the NASB places the first occurrence of the aorist with verse 15.

²⁹ C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1971), 12. See also Bruce, 58. But Watson, 104, makes the excellent observation that the epistolary aorist explanation “does not explain why *graphein* is not aorist throughout this section.”

propose that one of the uses refers to some earlier writing, or to earlier parts of the same epistle, a theory which itself has been subdivided into different proposals.³⁰

It may be best to follow the conclusion of Moule who wrote, “no really convincing explanation is known to me.”³¹ Or, as Haas suggests, the variation may only be “a matter of style rather than meaning.”³² But in view of John’s obvious planning throughout the epistle,³³ it seems more likely that the alteration is designed to heighten his point.³⁴ Watson’s solution, therefore, must be considered:

A shift of verb tense is a figure of speech when the present is substituted for the past or the past for the present. It was advised that the past tense be used instead of the present or the future because it is more vivid: ‘There is something more striking in the suggestion that all is over, than in the intimation that it is about to happen or is still happening.’ A shift in tense lends variety and liveliness. As noted above, the past tense contributes to the vividness of the repetition which is *conduplicato*. It contributes to the rhetor’s emphasis upon the fact that the audience already possesses the qualities he espouses in his earlier argumentation (1.5-2.11). It is another facet of the amplification created with *distributio*, *conduplicato*, and *exposito*.³⁵

Given this data, it is plausible that John is neither referring to another writing or section of the epistle, nor is he merely varying his word use for variety, but is rather utilizing a known device of rhetorical style to reinforce the reassurance which is the message of this text. It is reminiscent of Paul’s warning to the Galatians to remain true to what he had preached to them (Gal. 1:8-9). Thus, de la Potterie’s suggestion, as summarized by Marshall, has merit: “that in verse 14 John is looking back merely to verses 12f. and repeating the formula for emphasis.”³⁶ The fact that the fundamental themes of verses 12-13 are repeated and elaborated add credibility to this view. It is much like a modern preacher who makes his point and then says something to the effect, “Now, let me repeat that.” John is writing to a group of people who would have been subject to confusion and disillusion, having witnessed a major dispute over fundamental issues. It is, therefore, no surprise that John would seek to reinforce the blessings they have in Christ in the strongest of terms, using the most forceful of styles.

³⁰ See Brown, 294-297, for a summary of these options. Marshall, 136, also summarizes a number of positions on this question. Of particular interest is his note on whether the epistolary aorist from the readers’ perspective is even possible, and his summary of the positions of Brooke and de la Potterie. For the view that it is the same writing, see John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans’ Publishing Company, 1964), 96.

³¹ Moule, 12.

³² Haas, 55. Marshall, 135-136, also observes that “most writers explain the use of the verb in these two tenses as a matter of stylistic variation, perhaps to relieve the monotony of ‘I write’ occurring six times over.

³³ See Brown’s comment on John’s “predilection for threes,” p. 2, above. See also the way he develops the structure in 1:6-10 where the subjunctive aorist and present indicative are used interchangeably in a sort of diatribe.

³⁴ Brown, 297, does suggest one additional possibility: “A persuasive argument for the theory that in 1 John 2:12-14 *graphō* and *egrapsa* are variants with no significant difference of meaning is that hitherto the author has always used *grapein* in the present tense (1:4; 2:1, 7, 8) and henceforth he will always use it in the aorist tense (2:21, 26; 5:13) with no apparent difference! . . . It seems to me the most plausible theory.”

³⁵ Watson, 105. For the section he quotes, he cited Demetr. *Eloc.* 4.214.

³⁶ Marshall, 136.

Hoti as a Declaration of Reassurance

One of the primary questions about this passage has been how to take the use of ὅτι (*hoti*). Is John's purpose in using it to declare the blessing the believers had or is he using it in a causal sense to explain why he is writing? Understood in the context of a passage designed to reinforce their fundamental convictions leads one to argue for the declarative sense as being the stronger emphasis.³⁷ Once again, something of the debate must be appreciated.

Arguments in favor of the causal use include those of Westcott and Smalley. Westcott is far more dogmatic in his view, flatly stating, "There can be no doubt that the particle is causal (*because*) and not declarative (*that*). St. John does not write to make known the privileges of Christians, but to enforce the duties which follow the enjoyment of them."³⁸ Smalley's position is more reserved. He submits that the causal use of ὅτι

implies John's readers are spiritually capable of responding to his teaching, and of living in the light by observing the conditions which he is outlining. In the present v the sense would thus be: 'I am writing to you because your awareness of forgiveness will enable you to learn more about fellowship with God' (cf. 2:21; John is writing *because* his readers 'know the truth').³⁹

At the same time, Smalley does allow that the declarative sense is not out of place here, noting that "one of the writer's objectives in vv. 12-14 is precisely to describe in summary form the rich and life-giving spiritual qualities which are characteristic of the orthodox (as opposed to the heterodox) members of the community."⁴⁰

Among those who favor the declarative position are Haas, Brown, and Noack. Haas emphasizes the fact that John is stressing vital truths of the Christian life and thus it makes more sense to say that he is repeating what he has said than that he is explaining why he said it.⁴¹ Brown concurs, though as Smalley does for the opposite position, he allows for the presence of the causal sense.⁴²

Noack is more strenuous in his argumentation.⁴³ He first observes that the declarative use fits the context of the writing, pointing to other places in the epistle where it is so used (e.g., 2:8, 21). He also calls attention to the latter purpose statement in 5:13, one which "equals a statement to the effect that the readers have eternal life. It is a fact laid before the readers."⁴⁴ It is also important to remember that the epistle has been written in the assumption that things are not well with the readers—they need the reassurance John offers.⁴⁵

³⁷ Brown, 301, makes the point that the matter cannot be settled grammatically, for ὅτι can be taken with either sense.

³⁸ Westcott, 58.

³⁹ Smalley, 71. He cites Westcott, Brooke, and Bultmann as sharing this view.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Haas, 55.

⁴² Brown, 301. In his translation of the text, Brown uses a colon for the word, indicating that he prefers the declarative sense while allowing for the causal idea.

⁴³ B. Noack, "On I John II.12-14," *New Testament Studies* 6 (1959-60): 236-241.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 238.

Second, the declarative use fits grammatically.⁴⁶ Noack argues on the basis of previous usage in the epistle and that there is nothing in the construction here which rules out the declarative sense.

This comparison with the clauses of the structure *tauta graphō/egrapsa humin* elsewhere in the epistle demonstrates that the author is in the habit of expressing the object of *graphō* not only when it is clearly conceived, as is *kainēn entolēn* ‘a new commandment’ in ii.8, but also when it is undefined, as, for example, in the cases where *tauta* refers to some part of the epistle or to the epistle as a whole. If this observation is applied to ii.12-14, the inference will be that, unless the *hoti* clauses are taken as objects, *graphō* and *egrapsa* would, in these verses, stand without an object, contrary to the author’s usage. Why did he not write *tauta graphō humin, teknia, hoti ktl.*? It may be that he wanted to introduce stylistic variations, and was aware that a six-time repeated *tauta* would mar the style; but, in the main, the author does not trouble himself with stylistics, and, if after all he did, he might have put *tauta* in the first of the six clauses without repeating it in the remaining five. Therefore, the possibility ought to be considered that he omitted *tauta* because, in fact, it is not *tauta* that is the object of *graphō/egrapsa*, but the following *hoti* clauses.⁴⁷

Finally, Noack argues that the declarative use of ὅτι fits with the oral preaching which lies behind the New Testament text. As has been observed above, this passage does place emphasis on fundamental issues about which the readers needed reminders in the face of the teaching of the heretics. Noack builds on this idea, observing that, “It would seem that the present written form, with *graphō*, does not obey rules of its own but complies with the original shape of oral preaching.”⁴⁸

The passage is reminiscent of other New Testament texts where readers are reminded of the blessings they have in Christ as a means of exhorting them to continue in their struggle against sin. In particular, there is 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul “makes known the gospel which I preached to you, which you also received, in which you stand, by which you are saved” (vv. 1-2a). That gospel was *that* Christ died for our sins . . . *that* he was buried, and *that* he was raised on the third day . . . and *that* he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve” (vv. 3-5). In each case, “that”, which translates ὅτι, is declarative. Though complicated somewhat by the repetition,⁴⁹ it is the contention of this writer that the same sense fits 1 John 2:12-14. Here was a community of believers who had been faced with what was obviously a serious challenge to the most fundamental issues of their belief system. What is more, the nature of the heresy was such that those who clung to the orthodox teaching were made to feel inferior—they were not the enlightened. If only they had ascended to a higher level of spirituality, a higher *gnōsis*, they too would be able to see things as did the heretics. It is this kind of atmosphere which gave rise to this epistle.

⁴⁶ To say it fits grammatically is not the same as saying that the word must be taken grammatically to mean this. Thus, there is no contradiction with Brown’s statement, cited above, that the issue cannot be settled grammatically.

⁴⁷ Noack, 237-238.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁴⁹ Noack, 240, observes: “It seems to me to be beyond doubt that, if v. 12 were the only sentence in this passage, nobody would have hesitated to understand and translate it in the following way: ‘I write to you, little children, that your sins are forgiven for his name’s sake.’”

Application: The Need and Means for Reassurance

The message of 1 John 2:12-14 and John's method for delivering it provide valuable insight for meeting the needs of modern believers who also struggle with the issue of reassurance. Both within the church and in its struggle to remain pure within society at large, there appear challenges to the firmness of conviction needed to live confidently in faith. Within the church, the struggle often appears in the form of the overemphasis on extremes. On the one hand are those who never feel secure in their faith because they have seen the lifestyle of following Jesus to be one which amounts to observing ordinances in order to stay saved. On the other hand, there are some who react so strongly against legalistic salvation—and who sometimes leave an impression that they are the enlightened ones—that works of righteousness are deemphasized, a course which, if left unchecked, moves closer to the extreme of license. Within culture, believers also face the challenge of being characterized as unenlightened if they continue to cling to traditional tenets of faith which are not considered tenable by educated people.⁵⁰ In response to both sources of insecurity, the message and approach of verses 12-14 teach three things.

First, there is value in repeating fundamental teachings. In the final analysis, no matter what the heretics might have said, John came back to the fundamental issues. Because of Christ, their sins were forgiven. They knew God. They had overcome the evil one. They had the ability to remain strong because God's word did abide in them. While there is value in engaging in the struggle with God's revelation which gives deeper insight into the divine will, the pursuit of deeper understanding should never be allowed to obscure the fundamental message which gets to the heart of the human psyche: because of Jesus, people are made whole. In this respect, John again stands with Paul, who, though he wrote near the end of his life when so many matters of doctrine had been more fully developed, nevertheless returned to the fundamental issue of his faith—the fact that the foremost of sinners had experienced the saving mercy of God in Christ (1 Tim. 1:12-17). Fundamentals should be repeated often.

Second, the false distinctions between doctrine and ethics must be eliminated. It is significant to notice the number of commentators who include verses 15-17 with the section treated in this paper.⁵¹ Though there is clearly a shift from the first section to the second,⁵² it is also apparent that the exhortation of verses 15-17 is best understood as being delivered to the audiences in view in verses 12-14. Furthermore, it is a section which serves to complete John's emphasis, showing that the results of lives carried out according to orthodox teaching will be the total opposite of the so-called enlightened lives of the heroics (cf. 1:8-10; 2:3-11). And, indirectly at least, this too provides reassurance. John's message is that a life lived in

⁵⁰ For example, in its preface, the *Humanist Manifesto II* says, "As in 1933, humanists still believe that traditional theism, especially faith in the prayer-hearing God, assumed to love and care for persons, to hear and understand their prayers, and to be able to do something about them, is an unproved and outmoded faith. Salvationism, based on mere affirmation, still appears as harmful, diverting people with false hopes of heaven hereafter. Reasonable minds look to other means for survival" (Paul Kurtz and Edwin H. Wilson, Preface in *Humanist Manifestos I and II* [Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1973], 13).

⁵¹ For example, Brown, Smalley, Marshall, Schnackenburg, and Smith.

⁵² Haas, 54; Smalley, 67; Schnackenburg, 115; and Watson, 105-106 make noteworthy comments in the discussion of just how closely related verses 12-14 are to verses 15-17.

the manner of a walk after Jesus (cf. 1:7) makes a difference. It does not yield the things so many seek, "the things in the world" (2:15), for those things pass away (v. 17). So, John argues, stick with what lasts, those things which are connected to the blessings received in Christ. Don't just profess a life with a difference, make the difference real. The effect resembles the challenge of the psalmist who wrote, "O taste and see that the LORD is good; How blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!" (Psa. 34:8).

Third, the reassurance must be constant. The entire context of 1 John is bracketed in the statements of reassurance in chapters 1 and 5. But John does not limit his reassurance to the beginning and end of the epistle. Rather, he interjects it into his argument and by so doing reinforces the very point he is trying to make. Modern believers, besieged by constant challenges to their beliefs, must also be regularly told why their chosen lifestyle is worth continuing. Such consistency is vital for their "joy to be made full."

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*Graduate paper written for James and the Epistles of John
Taught by Dr. Michael Moss
Lipscomb University, Summer 1993*