

REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY – ATLANTA

BE WHO YOU ARE!

THE BELIEVER'S RELATIONSHIP TO GOD AND THE WORLD IN JOHN 2:3-17

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TEXT AND TRANSLATION OF 1 JOHN 2:3-17

3 Καὶ ἐν τούτῳ γινώσκομεν ὅτι ἐγνώκαμεν αὐτόν, ἐὰν τὰς ἐντολὰς αὐτοῦ τηρῶμεν. 4 ὁ λέγων ὅτι Ἐγνώκα αὐτόν καὶ τὰς ἐντολὰς αὐτοῦ μὴ τηρῶν, ψεύστης ἐστὶν καὶ ἐν τούτῳ ἡ ἀλήθεια οὐκ ἔστιν · 5 ὅς δ' ἂν τηρῇ αὐτοῦ τὸν λόγον, ἀληθῶς ἐν τούτῳ ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ τετελείωται, ἐν τούτῳ γινώσκομεν ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐσμεν. 6 ὁ λέγων ἐν αὐτῷ μένειν ὀφείλει καθὼς ἐκεῖνος περιεπάτησεν καὶ αὐτὸς [οὕτως] περιπατεῖν. 7 Ἀγαπητοί, οὐκ ἐντολὴν καινὴν γράφω ὑμῖν ἀλλ' ἐντολὴν παλαιὰν ἣν εἶχετε ἀπ' ἀρχῆς · ἡ ἐντολὴ ἡ παλαιὰ ἐστὶν ὁ λόγος ὃν ἠκούσατε. 8 πάλιν ἐντολὴν καινὴν γράφω ὑμῖν, ὅ ἐστιν ἀληθὲς ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ ἐν ὑμῖν, ὅτι ἡ σκοτία παράγεται καὶ τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινὸν ἤδη φαίνει. 9 ὁ λέγων ἐν τῷ φωτὶ εἶναι καὶ τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ μισῶν ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ ἐστὶν ἕως ἄρτι. 10 ὁ ἀγαπῶν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ φωτὶ μένει καὶ σκάνδαλον ἐν αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν · 11 ὁ δὲ μισῶν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ ἐστὶν καὶ ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ περιπατεῖ καὶ οὐκ οἶδεν ποῦ ὑπάγει, ὅτι ἡ σκοτία ἐτύφλωσεν τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτοῦ.

12 Γράφω ὑμῖν, τεκνία, ὅτι ἀφέωνται ὑμῖν αἱ ἁμαρτίαι διὰ τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ.

13 γράφω ὑμῖν, πατέρες, ὅτι ἐγνώκατε τὸν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς.

γράφω ὑμῖν, νεανίσκοι, ὅτι νενικήκατε τὸν πονηρόν.

14 ἔγραψα ὑμῖν, παιδιά, ὅτι ἐγνώκατε τὸν πατέρα.

ἔγραψα ὑμῖν, πατέρες, ὅτι ἐγνώκατε τὸν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς.

ἔγραψα ὑμῖν, νεανίσκοι, ὅτι ἰσχυροί ἐστε καὶ ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν ὑμῖν μένει καὶ νενικήκατε τὸν πονηρόν.

15 Μὴ ἀγαπᾶτε τὸν κόσμον μηδὲ τὰ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ. ἐὰν τις ἀγαπᾷ τὸν κόσμον, οὐκ ἔστιν ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ πατρὸς ἐν αὐτῷ. 16 ὅτι πᾶν τὸ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ, ἡ ἐπιθυμία τῆς σαρκὸς καὶ ἡ ἐπιθυμία τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν καὶ ἡ ἀλαζονεία τοῦ βίου, οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς ἀλλ' ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου ἐστίν. 17 καὶ ὁ κόσμος παράγεται καὶ ἡ ἐπιθυμία αὐτοῦ, ὁ δὲ ποιῶν τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ μένει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα.

3 And by this we know that we *know* him, if we keep his commandments.

4 The one who says “I *know* him!” and does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in this one.

5 But whoever keeps his word, in him the love of God is truly *perfected*. By this we know that we are in him.

6 The one who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way as he also walked.

7 Beloved, I am not writing a new commandment to you all but an old commandment which you had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you all heard.

8 On the other hand, I am writing a new commandment to you all, which is true in him and in you all, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.

9 The one who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness until now.

10 The one who loves his brother abides in the light and there is no cause of offense in him;

11 but the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and is walking around in the darkness and he *does not know* where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

12 I am writing to you all, little children, because your sins *are forgiven* on account of his name.

13 I am writing to you all, fathers, because *you know* the one who is from the beginning.

I am writing to you all, young men, because *you conquer* the evil one.

14 I wrote to you all, children, because *you know* the Father.

I wrote to you all, fathers, because *you know* the one who is from the beginning.

I wrote to you all, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and *you conquer* the evil one.

15 Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

16 Because all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the arrogance of earthly possessions—is not from the Father but it is from the world.

17 And the world is passing away and its lust, but the one who does the will of God abides unto the age.

I. INTRODUCTION

Many Christians today have heard the mantra that they ought to “be in the world, but not of the world” based on Jesus’s words in John 17:11-16. In this mantra, Christians are exhorted to pursue God in a holy lifestyle and to “not love the world nor the things in the world” (1 John 2:15). Sadly, the world’s desires are powerful, and many Christians today tend to seek the approval of the world in various forms, most often in desiring approval from both individual unbelievers and a godless, yet sometimes attractive, culture of self-affirming individualism. However, when the famous “do not love the world” passage is examined in its proper context in 1 John 2:3-17, the broader first epistle of John and the rest of the Johannine corpus, a far richer and more fulfilling picture of God’s love in the Christian life unfolds juxtaposed to love for the world. In this paper, I will argue that if we are truly filled with the love of God, which is part and parcel to a dynamic relationship and fellowship with God, we are not only free but also naturally inclined to boldly love our brothers and sisters in Christ and not to seek the love and desires of the world. In doing so, we will first examine the context of 1 John before exegeting 1 John 2:3-17, paying particular attention to the use of “the love of God” and related concepts in the letter, as well as other relevant passages that may illuminate John’s words even more clearly.

II. CONTEXT: THE FIRST LETTER OF JOHN

1 John is categorized as one of the Catholic Epistles of the New Testament, and is usually attributed to the apostle John along with 2 and 3 John as they bear similar thematic and stylistic marks to each other and to John’s Gospel (which is widely believed to have been written before

the letters).¹ Early Church tradition widely identified 1 John as a letter “without any expressed second thought about the matter.”² It should be noted, however, that 1 John reads “more like a tract”³ than a letter as it does not include “classic epistolary elements in its opening and closing” as 2 and 3 John do such as a letter greeting or direct address.⁴ This observation has led some scholars, such as Raymond E. Brown, to argue that 1 John is a kind of “commentary” or “exposition” on the theological themes of the Gospel of John rather than an actual letter.⁵ At the same time, John clearly states that he “is writing” to a specific audience (ὁμῖν - “to you all”) twelve times; further context demonstrates that John is writing to a group of Christians.⁶ Ultimately, 1 John may be in a genre all by itself; for the sake of simplicity we will refer to 1 John as a “letter” or “epistle” as it has been traditionally.

Because 1 John does not contain any letter greeting, the author of 1 John is not identified by name, while 2 and 3 John’s author identifies himself “the elder” and gives no specific name (2 John 1; 3 John 1). This anonymity has led some modern scholars to cast doubt on the traditional authorship of the apostle John for all three letters of John.⁷ However, given the remarkable similarities between the letters of John and the Gospel of John, and particularly the parallels

¹ Gary M. Burge, “John, Letters of,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 587.

² Robert W. Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 16. Some of the Fathers cited include Irenaeus, Dionysius of Alexandria, and Eusebius.

³ Burge, “John, Letters of,” 587.

⁴ Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 16.

⁵ Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, Anchor 30 (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 90.

⁶ Stephen Rockwell, “Assurance as the Interpretive Key to Understanding the Message of 1 John,” *The Reformed Theological Review* 69/1 (2010), 21-22.

⁷ Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, Ibid, 9.

between 1 John and John 13-17, a large majority of scholars today hold common authorship for all four New Testament books.⁸ Given the witness of the early Church, the authority in which the author writes from (1 John 1:1-4), and the thematic and stylistic similarities within Johannine corpus, there is no compelling reason to deny John the apostle's authorship of 1 John.⁹ In terms of audience, some early Church traditions tend to identify a group of churches in Asia Minor associated with John that was likely made up of a mixture of Jewish and Gentile believers, though this cannot be known for certain.¹⁰ Given our affirmation of apostolic authorship, the most plausible dating for John's letters is in the late first century before the John's death around 100 AD but late enough that some of the possible heresies they deal with have come onto the scene in early Christianity.¹¹

Far more certain than the date or audience of 1 John are the general purposes for which he wrote it. The one such purpose of the letter is to oppose the apparent false teaching that had been promoted by several "antichrists" (2:18-27), particularly "in the area of christology."¹² Daniel L. Akin argues that 1 John "was written to a church or group of churches in crisis," particularly related to false teaching, evidenced by John strongly condemning those who did not specifically confess Jesus as the Christ (2:22) and "denied that Jesus had come in the flesh" (4:2-3).¹³ Though specific systems of thought are not called out by name, many scholars have

⁸ Burge, "John, Letters of," 595. See also Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 12.

⁹ Charles E. Hill, "1-3 John," in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized*, ed. Michael J. Kruger (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 487-488.

¹⁰ Burge, "John, Letters of," 588.

¹¹ Hill, "1-3 John," 484.

¹² *Ibid*, 490.

¹³ Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, NAC 38 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 29.

argued that forms of the early Christian heresies Docetism, which argued that Christ did not actually come in the flesh but merely “appeared” to, and Gnosticism, which argued for a special kind of “knowledge” into which believers were initiated that would make them sinless, are in view here.¹⁴ Beyond wrong theology, it appears that these opponents may have been living unethically as well; indeed, the concepts of christology and ethics are closely connected in 1 John. Refusal to submit to the traditional teachings and leadership of the Church on the part of these opponents seems to have bred open hostility and even hatred of fellow Christians who did not follow this unorthodox theology.¹⁵ While it is clear that John is alluding to some form of false teaching that had been present in the Christian community, we ought to be careful not to speculate too much concerning its precise nature.

Other clues in the text may point us toward a more primary purpose for 1 John. John clearly writes to a Christian audience that has seen some of its members depart from their midst (2:18-19); this departure from fellowship with God and other believers would undoubtedly have left the local congregation shaken. Thus, another purpose of 1 John emerges: “to impart true assurance” of salvation to a church in crisis; Charles E. Hill observes that multiple “assurance tests” throughout the letter seek to encourage the reader to know and be confident in their true fellowship with God, and to who is not of God.¹⁶ Stephen Rockwell goes further, arguing that the letter was not written as a polemic to those who promoted heresy, as they had already departed

¹⁴ Burge, “John, Letters of,” 591-592. Burge outlines the heretical christology of one such possible false teacher, Cerinthus: “He argued that Jesus was the earthly man of Nazareth well-known for his piety and wisdom. Christ was a heavenly deity who descended on Jesus at his baptism and departed before the crucifixion... Thus the man Jesus, not the Son of God, died on the cross.”

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 592.

¹⁶ Hill, “1-3 John,” 489.

from the congregation, but primarily as comfort for the Johannine believers who had remained: “1 John was written out of pastoral concern for a community of believers whose faith had been rocked by a recent schism in their community to assure them of the certainty of the eternal life that they possess in Christ.”¹⁷ Akin further states that 1 John 5:13 may serve as a purpose statement for the book as a whole: “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.”¹⁸ Ultimately, the theme of bringing assurance and comfort to the Christian community emerges as primary in 1 John, with the theme of concern for right doctrine and ethical living as subordinate.

The five chapters that make up the book of 1 John contain highly concentrated theology,¹⁹ but John’s use of parallelisms and repetition make the book difficult to outline or divide into a clean progression of thought.²⁰ One idea tends to flow into the next, making chapter divisions fairly arbitrary; because of this, scholars disagree over precisely how to organize and outline 1 John, with some arguing for two, some three distinct parts to the letter.²¹ Certain verses that begin a section for one scholar may be taken as the ending of another section for a different

¹⁷ Rockwell, “Assurance as the Interpretive Key to Understanding the Message of 1 John,” 20-21.

¹⁸ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 30-32.

¹⁹ Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 27-28. Yarbrough uses a unique metaphor to describe the depth of John’s writing: “These letters [1-3 John] are not simply theological, as one might say ale is alcoholic: they are rather theology distillate, analogous to highest-proof grain alcohol that is highly flammable and intoxicating in even small amounts. God—mainly Father and Son, but occasionally also Holy Spirit—suffuses every situation John envisions, each piece of counsel he issues, every sentiment he conveys, each affirmation he sets forth.”

²⁰ Hill, “1-3 John,” 490.

²¹ Burge, “John, Letters of,” 597.

scholar.²² Charles E. Hill argues that John “repeats ideas, words, or phrases in different contexts, and it is not always clear whether these have structural significance or not...he often finishes one section with a key word or phrase that serves to transition to the next.”²³ Ultimately, as with all other books of the New Testament, any outline or categorization of “sections” should be taken with a grain of salt, and any examined portion of the text ought to be taken both on its own terms in its “section” and evaluated in light of the book as a whole.

For our purposes, we will summarize the content of 1 John up to the placement of 2:3-17. John begins with a brief “prologue,” similar to the prologue of the Gospel of John, where he says that “that which was from the beginning... that we have seen and heard we proclaim to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us,” as their “fellowship” or “commonality” (κοινωνία) is with the Father and Jesus his Son (1:1-4). He goes on to touch on light and sin in 1:5-10, first saying that “God is light” (1:5), contrasting walking “in the light” with “walk[ing] in darkness” (1:6-7), then asserting that we lie “if we say we have no sin” (1:8). Beyond this, the one who says he does not sin is a liar, and the truth is not in him (1:10); if we corroborate with John’s Gospel (John 14:6), we see the concept of “truth” (ἀλήθεια) is closely identified with Jesus himself, as it is in 1 John 5:20 when John calls Jesus “him who is true” (ἀληθινός). John’s initial treatment of sin appears to wrap up in 2:1-2 as he says that “I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin,” and that Jesus himself is the advocate with the Father for those who sin.

²² Stephen S. Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, WBC 51 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984), xxxiii. For example, Smalley categorizes 1 John 2:3-11 as one section subtitled “Second Condition: Be Obedient.” See also Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 23. In contrast, Yarbrough contends that 1 John 2:1-6 is its own section he calls “Appeal to readers in the light of God’s character” and 2:7-17 is its own section he calls “Primary commandment: Embody the age-old message.”

²³ Hill, “1-3 John,” 490-491.

III. EXAMINATION OF THE PASSAGE

From 1 John 1:8 to 2:2, John has focused on the theme of renouncing sin. As he moves into 2:3-17, he begins expounding on the characteristic “marks” of a Christian, particularly as they relate to the love of God. Stephen S. Smalley asserts that this section highlights how “the genuineness of the Christian experience is tested and established *negatively* by the absence of sin, and *positively* by the presence of (obedient) love.”²⁴ In this section, we will examine the passage in three subsections, the “new commandment” of love in 2:3-11, the poetic exhortation of believers in 2:12-14, and the command against love of the world in 2:15-17, picking up on themes in each passage that may help us to better understand the love of God in 1 John.

The Commandment of Love: v. 3-11

In verse 3, John argues that keeping the Father’s commandments (τὰς ἐντολάς) is the sign that “we know” (ἐγνώκαμεν) the Father. Verse 4 juxtaposes a liar who says that he “knows” (Ἔγνωνκα) the Father but does not keep his commandments with the person who keeps his “word” (τὸν λόγον) having the love of God (ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ) perfected in him (2:5). The first obvious theme of the “commandment(s)” is brought to the fore here, and is mentioned again in verses 7-8, where John argues that the commandment is both old, as it is the word (ὁ λόγος) that they have heard, and also a new commandment. John goes on to say that the one who “hates” his brother is in the darkness, and the one who loves his brother is in the light (9-10), as opposed to the one who stumbles around in the darkness (11).

²⁴ Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 64.

The term “commandment” (ἐντολή) deserves particular attention here. Some scholars, including Smalley, argue that τὰς ἐντολάς (“commandments”) in verse 3 refers to the “orders” of God which Christians are to obey, referencing the Ten Commandments as representative of the moral law of God summarized by Jesus in the Gospels (Matthew 22:37-40).²⁵ However, Georg Strecker observes that ἐντολή as directly related to the Law or Torah (νόμος) is used in the Synoptic Gospels and Paul’s letters; in John, ἐντολή is not directly identified with the Torah and “the concept of νόμος never appears in the Johannine Letters.”²⁶ Moreover, an ἐντολή in this case may be taken not only as an order from God but also as a particular command “of the precepts of Jesus.”²⁷ Specifically, ἐντολή is equated with λόγος in verse 7, so that “the word which you all have heard” is the “old commandment.”²⁸ Robert W. Yarbrough argues that the “word” and “commandment” here could mean Jesus’s teaching broadly, but would conceivably cover Old Testament directives to love as well given the Jewish roots of early Christianity.²⁹ Already, one cannot help but to see connections between our passage and the wider Johannine corpus. Smalley argues that the λόγος of John 1:1 may be in view when John gives the command to love “as the traditional ‘message’ (λόγος) which John’s readers have received as Christians.”³⁰ The same language in 1 John 2:7-8 (and 1:1) of a “commandment” or “message” that “we have

²⁵ Ibid, 45-46. See also I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 129. Marshall argues that John switches from the plural “commandments” to the singular “is because John regards all the commandments as being summed up in one.”

²⁶ Georg Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, trans. Linda M. Maloney, ed. Harold W. Attridge, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 48.

²⁷ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 340.

²⁸ Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 49.

²⁹ Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 83.

³⁰ Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 55.

had from the beginning” is stated more explicitly in 3:11 as well as 2 John 2:5-6: “that we love one another.” All of these passages clearly reference John 13:34-35, where Jesus gives his disciples “a new commandment” (Ἐντολὴν καινὴν) to love one another. The newness of the commandment may simply be a direct callback to Jesus’s own words, or, as Smalley suggests, John may be “saying that a distinctively new dimension of love was demonstrated in the life of Jesus, the Son of God, and thus made possible in the lives of his followers.”³¹ Yarbrough corroborates and argues that Jesus’s command was new in that it is enabled by his sacrifice and embodiment of love on the cross and in his power to regenerate his followers to love others.³²

A second theme appearing in our passage is the idea of us knowing (γινώσκομεν) God. John asserts that the one who claims to know God and does not keep his commandments is a liar and the “truth” is not in him (1 John 2:4), but we know that we are “in him” — that is, in “Jesus Christ who is true” (1 John 5:20; cf. John 14:6) — if we keep his word (5). For the Christian, obedience to God’s commands is “the proper response” to knowing him.³³ I. Howard Marshall asserts that, for ancient religious people, the popular concept of the “knowledge” of God was focused on “mystical experience” or “knowledge of esoteric myths” that gave salvation to those who received them; for these people “knowledge was a purely religious attainment and had little, if any, connection with moral behavior.”³⁴ Akin argues that John may be using specific semantic categories so that his readers would not mistakenly import “proto-gnostic” ideas into their

³¹ Ibid, 57. Smalley argues that ἀληθές in verse 8 should be taken as “realization” — “this is realized in him and also in you.”

³² Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 100-101.

³³ Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 48.

³⁴ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 121.

understanding of the knowledge of God: “John does not use the cognate noun *gnōsis* in [1 John] or in the Gospel, while the use of the verb (*ginōskō*) and the concept of the ‘knowledge of God’ are pervasive in both.”³⁵ Moreover, the clear test of true “knowledge of God” in verses 3-11 is whether or not one keeps his commandments. Regardless of whether proto-gnosticism is in John’s view here, it is clear that his conception of knowing God is far different from that of the surrounding religious culture. Akin corroborates that “knowledge” in 1 John goes far deeper:

It is clear from this verse [3] that the knowledge of God cannot be defined as mere intellectual “knowledge” alone...Real knowledge of God contains an intellectual, moral, and spiritual component that cannot be separated. The “knowledge” of God described throughout the text of Scripture is not only intellectual but also experiential and dynamic. This knowledge is not gained through abstract speculation but through living life in a spiritual relationship with the one true God.³⁶

Here we must be reminded that John is not preaching works-righteousness. Keeping the commandment(s) is not a means by which we earn salvation or secure God’s favor; rather, as Marshall reminds us, obedience is “the result of love for God, the tangible evidence of the presence of that love.”³⁷

Verses 9-10 more clearly state that this commandment is to love (and not hate) one’s “brother” (τὸν ἀδελφόν). Some commentators, such as E. A. Brooke, argue that these verses should be taken in their “full meaning...in the light of the revelation of the brotherhood of all men in Christ,” and that John “would not contradict” the interpretation of “brother” to include all

³⁵ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 90.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 91.

³⁷ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 123.

humanity and not just those who believed in Jesus as the Son of God.³⁸ However, taken in the context of the rest of John's works (1 John 5:16; 3 John 3, 5, 10) it becomes apparent that the ἀδελφός is indeed a "fellow Christian."³⁹ N.T. Wright is one commentator who translates τὸν ἀδελφὸν as "family member" instead of "brother" in order to highlight the spiritual family of God as the primary focus of the commandment.⁴⁰ The language of "hating" (μισῶν) a brother or sister is particularly striking in verses 9-11; Yarbrough argues that this "hatred" of a fellow Christian may not necessarily have been violent or homicidal in this case, but a more "soft" hatred of "exclusion, insult, and rejection because of doctrinal belief or religious practice."⁴¹ After all, those who had departed from the believers John is writing to are described as literally "anti-Christ" (ἀντίχριστος) in the following section (18-19). The passage seems to indicate that hating your fellow Christian is the same thing as not loving them as demonstrated in not having "fellowship" or "commonality" with them (1 John 1:1-6), thus the necessity for love among Christians is vital for "abiding in the light" (2:10). It should also be noted that love for the brothers and sisters is not a replacement for the love of neighbor commanded elsewhere in Scripture that does apply to nonbelievers; Yarbrough argues that John is "underscoring the necessity of Christ's followers first practicing among themselves what they preach that God offers to the world through the gospel."⁴² Again, the commandment is not the means by which

³⁸ E. A. Brooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, ICC (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), 38-39.

³⁹ Srecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 51.

⁴⁰ N. T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone: James, Peter, John, and Judah*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 138-139.

⁴¹ Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 104.

⁴² *Ibid*, 107-108.

the knowledge of God is attained; Strecker argues that “love for the brothers and sisters is neither a substitute nor a proof, but rather the characteristic mark of love for God.”⁴³

A final theme in this section that we will touch on briefly is that of light and darkness. John typically contrasts light and darkness in an “ethical dualism” (cf. John 1:5).⁴⁴ Based on 1 John 1, the “darkness” can be seen as “the moral and spiritual gloom that enshrouds current human existence,” while being “in the light” is “being in fellowship with both God and other believers as the result of the cleansing effect by Christ’s death (1:7).”⁴⁵ Negatively, the person who is in darkness and hates his brother is described as a blind person who cannot see where they are going (2:11); this person can be seen to be one who does not “practice the truth” (1:6). Yet in verse 8, John prefaces his description of the ones who walk in light and darkness by telling his readers that the darkness is currently fading (*παράγεται*); Smalley highlights that one could translate the passive verb *παράγεται* as being “absorbed,” denoting the limited power of the darkness.⁴⁶ In contrast, the “true light” (*τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν*) is “already” (*ἤδη*) shining, and has driven away the darkness; one cannot help but hear the “already-not-yet” language of the eschaton and Christ’s final victory over darkness in this description.⁴⁷ Moreover, the one loving his brother is described as “abiding” (*μένει*) in the light; Akin observes that John here moves from the concept of “knowing” (*γινώσκω*) God to “abiding” (*μένω*) in him, or sharing “a special

⁴³ Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 52.

⁴⁴ Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 58.

⁴⁵ Yarbrough, *1-3 John* 102-103.

⁴⁶ Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 57-58.

⁴⁷ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 97.

intimacy with God thought the work of Jesus Christ.”⁴⁸ Additionally, John says that there is no “cause for offense” (σκάνδαλον) in the person whose life reflects the life of Jesus in the light.⁴⁹

Be Who You Are: v. 12-14

As John moves into verses 12-14, the style of his writing stylistically shifts from the rest of the letter into something resembling poetry, leading to confusion of its relationship to its preceding and following sections for some commentators.⁵⁰ However, careful study of the text demonstrates a logical progression of the ideas in the entirety of 1 John 3-17.⁵¹ Having finished his discussion on the love of God’s presence in those who know him and consigning those who are not filled with the love of God to darkness, John “turn[s] his attention in the next unit to those who are Jesus’ own.”⁵² The parallelism and repetition of the six clauses is striking. Collectively, they are written directly to three groups in sequence, “little children” (τεκνία and παιδιά), “fathers” (πατέρες), and “young men” (νεανίσκοι). The first three clauses use the verb γράφω (“I am writing”) and the last three clauses use the aorist ἔγραψα (“I wrote”); in each clause the conjunction ὅτι (“because” or “that”) is used along with six perfect tense verbs describing some aspect of the addressees and their relationship to God. Each of these factors will be considered in our examination of how this section relates to the preceding section in the flow of John’s writing.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 108. See also Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 99. Akin argues that the dative ἀντῷ could reasonably refer to the masculine “one who loves” (ὁ ἀγαπῶν) or the “light” itself (φῶς), and translates the σκάνδαλον phrase in verse 10 as “in it [light] there is no stumbling.” His wording hardly changes the meaning of the passage, but is certainly plausible.

⁵⁰ Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 66.

⁵¹ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 101.

⁵² Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 292.

The first question that must be answered is that of the audience: who precisely is John addressing as “children,” “fathers,” and “young men?” Various ideas have been put forward by multiple scholars, with some arguing that John is addressing three specific age groups of Christians, others arguing that he addresses all Christians as “little children” divided into two subgroups of old and young, and some arguing for a third option of John “using a rhetorical device to indicate qualities, appropriate to the three stages of life, which ought to be true of all believers.”⁵³ Given the previous use of *τεκνία* to address the letter’s audience as a whole both in 2:1 (“My little children, I am writing these things to you...”),⁵⁴ its use in the final address in 5:21 (“little children, keep yourselves from idols”), Jesus’s address of his disciples as both *τεκνία* (John 13:33) and *παιδιά* (John 21:5), as well as John’s likely advanced age when writing, it is more probable that John is using the term “little children” to address his whole audience in 1 John 2:12-14.⁵⁵ Additionally, *τεκνία* as an address in John is typically used for someone personally regarded “with deep filial love,” akin to the address of the readers as a whole as *Ἀγαπητοί* (“beloved ones”) in 1 John 2:7.⁵⁶ While there are helpful insights to be gained from both options two and three, given the strong evidence for the entire group being addressed as *τεκνία*, we agree with Smalley when he argues that “we should perhaps avoid making exclusive decisions about the meaning of the terms *τεκνία* (*παιδιά*), *πατέρες* and *νεανίσκοι*... [as] it is quite

⁵³ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 137-138. Marshall applies this concept directly to the passage: “All Christians should have the innocence of childhood, the strength of youth, and the mature knowledge of age.”

⁵⁴ Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 66.

⁵⁵ Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 122.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 116.

possible that our author is at this point being deliberately ambivalent.⁵⁷ What is clear is that John is addressing the entire community of believers in his audience, from the oldest to the youngest among them.⁵⁸

Several grammatical aspects of the text are worth noting. For example, scholars disagree over the meaning of John's change from the present tense "I am writing" to the aorist tense "I wrote" for the verb γράφω in all six clauses of 1 John 2:12-14. Most agree that John's present tense γράφω refers to the letter of 1 John, but the switch to the aorist ἔγραψα has engendered theories that John is using the aorist to refer either to another writing (2-3 John or the Gospel) he had previously sent his audience,⁵⁹ or, as Brooke suggests, to turn "back in thought to that part of the letter which he has already finished."⁶⁰ However, as Smalley argues, these theories are generally untenable due to either inserting speculation outside of the text itself (in the case of an external work) and do not hold water when compared to other usages of ἔγραψα in the rest of the New Testament (against Brooke).⁶¹ Ultimately, for a great number of commentators, the present to aorist shift for ἔγραψα is nothing more than "an authorial variation in style that has no significance as far as the content is concerned."⁶² And while the shift in tense may not affect the

⁵⁷ Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 70.

⁵⁸ Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 117-118. Yarbrough further asserts that these groups do not necessarily exclude women by being represented with masculine nouns, and that some have translated πατέρες and νεανίσκοι as "parents" and "young people" to reflect this.

⁵⁹ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 102.

⁶⁰ Brooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, 41.

⁶¹ Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 76-78. Smalley directly retorts Brooke's argument for an "epistolary aorist" explanation of the tense change: "Moreover, this theory provides a further reason for the change of tense in the verbs without accounting for the repetitive juxtaposition of the two triplets. Why should John refer in almost the same breath to both the uncompleted and completed sections of his work?"

⁶² Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 55.

content of each clause, the repetition of γράφω six times certainly highlights “John’s intensity of focus” and his demand of “full engagement” from his audience.⁶³

Another repetitive aspect of verses 12-14 is the use of the conjunction ὅτι (“that” or “because”) before each descriptive verb of the Christian community is used. Two interpretive options present themselves in the Greek: either ὅτι is used causally (“I write because”), or declaratively (“I write that”).⁶⁴ As Smalley observes, either the causal or declarative uses of ὅτι work in the context of 1 John 2; either John is exhorting the believers because of who they already are or he is proclaiming what should be true of his audience.⁶⁵ Though both translations could work in theory, the causal one ultimately seems most probable, as it musters support from the church fathers, the Latin tradition of the early church, and the required causal interpretation of ὅτι in 1 John 2:21.⁶⁶ In either case, as Yarbrough argues, the ὅτι clauses work together with the repetition of γράφω as “a rhetorical device to refresh reader attention.”⁶⁷ Wright insightfully asserts that the poetic and repetitive nature of 12-14 is almost hymn-like:

...in some traditions at least, the things we sing in church are deliberately repetitive. We use them quite differently: as a way of meditation, of stopping on one point and mulling it over, of allowing something which is very deep and important to make more of an impact on us than if we just said or sung it once and passed on... Repetition can touch, deep down inside us, parts that other, ‘safer’ kinds of hymn cannot reach, or do not very often.⁶⁸

⁶³ Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 115-116.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 120. See also Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 674-677.

⁶⁵ Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 71.

⁶⁶ Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 57. Strecker observes that 2:21 is the only other use of ὅτι with the verb γράφω in the rest of 1 John.

⁶⁷ Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 120-121.

⁶⁸ Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone*, 139.

In the six clauses of verses 12-14, John describes several weighty theological truths applied to his audience of believers: they are forgiven and “know the father;” the fathers “know the one who was from the beginning” (twice); the young men “conquer the evil one” (twice), are strong, and have the word of God abiding in them.⁶⁹ Some of these verbs repeat themselves, but all of them have the noteworthy similarity of being in the perfect tense. John tends to use the perfect verb often in his writings, but amongst all the letters of the New Testament, 1 John has the highest frequency of perfect indicative verbs at 2.8% of all total words in the epistle.⁷⁰ Traditionally, a perfect indicative verb is distinguished from a present indicative verb in that it “describes an event that, completed in the past... has results existing in the present time.”⁷¹ However, recent studies in biblical Greek verbal aspect may further illuminate the purpose of the perfect verbs in 1 John. Constantine R. Campbell argues persuasively that both the present tense and perfect tense verb forms share the same “imperfective” aspect (communicating “stativity”), but what distinguishes the perfect from the present is “the spacial value of *heightened proximity*.”⁷² If, as Campbell argues, the perfect verb form is to be taken as a “*super-present*,” John is drawing an incredible amount of attention to verses 12-14 in general, and the specific perfect verbal ideas in particular, which will be italicized in English for emphasis.⁷³

⁶⁹ Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 118-120.

⁷⁰ Rockwell, “Assurance as the Interpretive Key to Understanding the Message of 1 John,” 29-30. Rockwell observes that the Gospel of John has the most number of perfect indicative verbs at 206, and 3 John and the Gospel coming in second and third in terms of word frequency.

⁷¹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 573.

⁷² Constantine R. Campbell, *Basics of Verbal Aspect in Biblical Greek* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 50-51.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 50. Campbell more technically defines his understanding of the perfect tense: “Heightened proximity, like proximity, is regarded as a semantic value alongside imperfective aspect. The perfect, therefore, semantically encodes imperfective aspect and the spatial value of heightened proximity. As such, it might be appropriate to think of the perfect as a *super-present*.”

In our passage as a whole, four perfect verbs are found in 1 John 3-11, and none in 15-17. In contrast, six perfect verbs are found in verses 12-14, and several of them are repeated. The first of these verbs indicates that the sins of the believers (τεκνία, “little children”) “are *forgiven*” (ἀφέωνται) “on account of his name” in verse 12 — that is, they are *forgiven* because of Jesus’s name, and can be comforted in their status before God.⁷⁴ This is the first mention of “his name” (τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ) in 1 John, possibly calling attention to the purpose statement of John’s Gospel that the believers have life “in his name” (John 20:30-31).⁷⁵

The second mentioned perfect verb, repeated three times in 1 John 2:12-14, is “you *know*” (ἐγνώκατε), mentioned twice of “fathers,” that they “*know* he who is from the beginning” (13-14), and once of “children” (παιδιά), that they “*know* the Father” (14). As we have previously discussed, the verb “to know” (γινώσκω) can take a personal direct object, indicating a personal knowledge of the object.⁷⁶ B. A. Du Toit argues that in 1 John in particular, “knowing God” goes beyond mere intellectual knowledge: “it refers to an intimate, personal knowledge which amounts to real fellowship. It can only become real through faith in Jesus Christ.”⁷⁷ Given that each use of γινώσκω related to knowing God in 1 John thus far has been in the perfect tense, John seems to be emphasizing the intense, personal nature of “knowing God.”⁷⁸ This unprecedented familial access to God is given to all Christians, as John emphasizes that the

⁷⁴ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 138-139.

⁷⁵ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 104.

⁷⁶ Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 200.

⁷⁷ B. A. Du Toit, “The Role and Meaning of Statements of ‘Certainty’ in the Structural Composition of 1 John,” *Neotestamentica* 13 (1981), 95.

⁷⁸ For example, in 2:3 John says “by this we know that we *know* him,” with a present indicative verb (γινώσκομεν) being used for general knowledge and a perfect indicative (ἐγνώκαμεν) being used for personal knowledge.

“children” (παιδιά) have a personal knowledge of God as their own Father (14)!⁷⁹ Moreover, the references to “he who is from the beginning” in verses 13-14 again harken back to the opening of John’s Gospel (John 1:1-2), assuring the “fathers” that they *know* Jesus, who is also God!⁸⁰

Of the “young men,” John says twice that they “conquer” or “overcome” (νενικήκατε) the evil one (13-14). In verse 14 John also says of them that “you are strong, and the word of God abides in you;” once again the use of “the word” (ὁ λόγος) may be referencing John 1 where Jesus is called “the word,” but may also inclusively refer to “the Old Testament and to the account of the life of Jesus in [John’s] Gospel.”⁸¹ Marshall argues that this both highlights Christ’s ultimate victory over evil as well as the young men’s need to continue conquering the evil one.⁸² Ultimately, through all these verbs, John is reminding his readers that they are redeemed, they *know* God as revealed in Jesus, and the evil one has no power over them; Strecker asserts that John is exhorting them to “be what you are!”⁸³

Against the World: v. 15-17

John’s warning against worldliness in verses 15-17 must be seen against the backdrop of verses 3-14. John has already described “the state of the true Christian” in contrast to that of the “pseudo-Christian.”⁸⁴ Now, in light of the fact that they have *conquered* the evil one, in whose

⁷⁹ Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 78.

⁸⁰ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 104-105.

⁸¹ Ibid, 107. See also Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 123-125.

⁸² Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 140.

⁸³ Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 57-58.

⁸⁴ Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 67.

grasp the world lies (1 John 5:19), he exhorts his audience: “do not love” (Μὴ ἀγαπᾶτε) the world.⁸⁵ The readers would be primed to receive this command with their full attention, as it is given in the immediate aftermath of the heightened prose of verses 12-14 and is the first of only ten imperative verbs in all of his letters.⁸⁶ Given the prominent position of this prohibitive command in the letter body, a proper understanding of the term “world” (ὁ κόσμος) is critical to avoiding its misinterpretation. Within the wider range of Scripture, κόσμος can be defined in multiple ways, from the whole of the created order, to the earth specifically, to humanity in general, to (as used in John 3:16) pre-conversion believers “as the object of God’s love.”⁸⁷ However, the context of 1 John 2:15-17 shows us a different usage of κόσμος as “an evil organized earthly system controlled by the power of the evil one that has aligned itself against God and his kingdom (4:3-5; 5:19; John 16:11).”⁸⁸ Attached to the “world” are the “things in the world” (τὰ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ) in the description of what the believer should not love in verse 15; in verse 16, these things are described as the “lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the arrogance of earthly possessions.”⁸⁹ “Lust” or “desire” (ἐπιθυμία) is typically used as a negative concept in the New Testament, in in both cases here, the desires of the “flesh” and the “eyes” point to the capacity of both for doing evil as attested to elsewhere in Scripture (Romans 8:5-8;

⁸⁵ Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 323. Brown argues that verses 14 and 15 do not signal an abrupt change in content, as the relation between the “Evil One” and the world are linked in Johannine theology, particularly in Jesus’s prayer in the garden in John 17:15-16.

⁸⁶ Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 125-126. 1 John contains the smallest frequency of imperatives per word for any New Testament writing. While 1 John has 10 imperatives, the similar-sized epistles of James and I Peter contain 55 and 35, respectively.

⁸⁷ Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 561-562.

⁸⁸ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 108.

⁸⁹ Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 126. Yarbrough argues that the article τὰ points “to the fuller definition of what John has in mind...in John 2:16.”

Matthew 6:22-23).⁹⁰ The “arrogance of earthly possessions” (ἡ ἀλαζονεία τοῦ βίου), otherwise translated as “pride of life” or “pride in our possessions,” is difficult to pin a precise meaning onto, but ultimately drives the point home that we should not set our desire on earthly things that surround us in life.⁹¹

Beyond merely describing the “things in the world” as forbidden, John juxtaposes the world directly against God himself, stating that if anyone loves the world, “the love of the Father” (ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ πατρὸς) is not in him (1 John 2:15). Here the meaning of κόσμος related to God becomes more clear: “love for the world and love for the Father are mutually exclusive.”⁹² In John 17, Jesus strongly suggests that those who have been given “the word” (τὸν λόγον) are hated by the world (John 17:14); James similarly says that “friendship with the world is hostility with God” (James 4:4). It follows, then, that if the love of the Father has filled a person, they simply do not and cannot love the world!⁹³ One can either love the world and be at enmity with God, or be filled with the love of the Father as a part of his family.⁹⁴ Akin summarizes the dualistic choice laid out before the Christian in 1 John 2:15-17:

The object of one’s love or affection is decisive. One must be careful that this love is going in the right direction and that it acts in a manner consistent with Christian confession. John charges us to love neither the world in general nor the things of the world in particular. The command is comprehensive. Our allegiance must not be divided. Our affection must be focused and specific.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Ibid, 131-133.

⁹¹ Ibid, 133-134.

⁹² Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 82.

⁹³ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 143-144.

⁹⁴ Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 82.

⁹⁵ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 108-109.

Moreover, the world and its desires are described as “passing away” (παράγεται), just as the “darkness” is in verse 8, but the person who does God’s will “abides” (μένει) forever (17). The victory of God’s people against the evil one that was already brought to the fore in verses 13-14 is again emphasized, this time in relation to the world.⁹⁶ Believers are called to do the will of God, just as Jesus did (John 6:38), and thus to walk in the manner that Jesus did (1 John 2:6).⁹⁷ And those who walk in his footsteps do not perish with the world, but as obedient Christians inherit eternal life (1 John 5:13; cf. John 3:15-17).⁹⁸

Therefore, the command not to love the world is not a command to disengage from the work of loving our neighbor or ignore the reality that God “so loved the world,” for “even if the world of men has rejected God, that world remains the object of God’s love and salvific activity,” as Jesus’s own are “in the world but not of the world” (John 17:11-16).⁹⁹ John is also not instructing believers to despise physical creation, but rather to not be drawn away by both the good and the bad things of the world above God himself.¹⁰⁰ As Paul reminds us, sinful humanity will turn and serve the created things rather than the Creator (Romans 1:20); the Christian community is to turn from all such idolatry, as John states at the close of the book: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21).¹⁰¹ Ultimately, believers can know that they are “from God,” while the world is “in the power of the evil one” (5:19). Even as “antichrists”

⁹⁶ Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 135.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 136. See also Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 111.

⁹⁸ Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 87-88.

⁹⁹ Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 81.

¹⁰⁰ Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone*, 147.

¹⁰¹ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 109.

have deceived many (1 John 2:18-28) and gone after idols, we are filled with the love of the Father, knowing that our hope is in eternal life in him and in his Son Jesus (5:20).¹⁰²

IV. FURTHER ANALYSIS: THE LOVE OF GOD IN 1 JOHN 2

We have already seen that “the love of God” (ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ) is perfected in those who keep his commandments (especially of loving the Christian brothers and sisters), and that “the love of the Father” (ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ πατρὸς) is antithetical to love for the world (1 John 2:5, 15). As we take another look at the text, it becomes apparent that the way John uses “the love of God” (ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ) and other concepts closely related to it reveals a richer and more specific meaning for the Christian life than merely motivation to obedience and abandonment of worldly desire, as good as those things may be. The idea of “love” (ἀγάπη) in the New Testament is often generally defined as “the quality of warm regard for and interest in another” and can be translated as “esteem,” “affection,” “regard,” or “love.”¹⁰³ The phrase “the love of God” (ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ) is typically translated in two ways, with either the subjective genitive, “God’s love for human beings,” or as the objective genitive, “human love for God.”¹⁰⁴ Based on the context of “the love of God” being used in 2:3-17 in the context of directives to the readers, many commentators argue for the objective genitive in verses 5 and 15.¹⁰⁵ This reading may be

¹⁰² Ibid, 111-112. See also Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 80.

¹⁰³ Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 6. Ἀγάπη is not used often of “sexual attraction” in general Greek.

¹⁰⁴ Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 255-257.

¹⁰⁵ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 93. See also Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 130.

supported by a similar use of the phrase in 3:17, where John asks how “the love of God” (ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ) could be in someone who does not help his brother in physical need.

However, other uses of ἀγάπη in the book of 1 John seem to support a more subjective translation of “God’s love for us.” In 3:16, John says that how “we *know*” (ἐγνώκαμεν, perfect tense) “love” is because Jesus first laid down his life for us; thus also we are to lay down our lives for our Christian brothers and sisters. 1 John 4 contains one of the most famous treatments on ἀγάπη in the New Testament; John makes the statement “God is love” (ὁ θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν) multiple times, and clarifies this by stating that love comes from God in that he loved us and sent his Son “to be the propitiation for our sins” (4:7-12). Burge reminds us here that “if we are uncertain about God’s profound desire for us, we need only look to God’s love shown to us in Christ. Christ is the material expression of God’s tangible love.”¹⁰⁶ John says that abiding in love is closely connected with the gift of the Spirit and the confession of Jesus as the Son of God, and that we can have “confidence for the day of judgement” because of the God’s love (4:13-18). In language reminiscent of 2:3-11, he asserts that “we love because he first loved us,” and that those who love God will also love their brother, as this is the commandment from God (4:19-21). Bearing in mind the context of ἀγάπη in the whole of 1 John, it appears that ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ may not be limited to either the subjective or objective genitive interpretations, but rather refers both to “God’s care for human beings and the love of human beings for God.”¹⁰⁷ This use of ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ fits well into Daniel B. Wallace’s definition of a plenary genitive as a genitive that “is *both* subjective and objective. In most cases, the subjective produces the objective

¹⁰⁶ Burge, “John, Letters of,” 594.

¹⁰⁷ Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 58. See also Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 83.

notion.”¹⁰⁸ Thus, the full picture of “the love of God” in 1 John is one of “a mutual love between the children of God and their Father,” and love between the brothers and sisters as an extension of that love.¹⁰⁹ The love of the Father, as Yarbrough argues, is “a prerequisite for a person’s love for God to acceptably arise.”¹¹⁰ As a person is so loved by their Father, doing his will by loving their brothers and sisters in particular is a clear sign that God’s love dwells in that person.¹¹¹

Closely tied to the “love of God” is the concept of “knowing” God, especially in 1 John 2:3-14; the one who is filled with “the love of God” is also said to be the one who truly “*knows*” God.¹¹² Du Toit reminds us that this dynamic relationship with God is described as “knowing” him but is also “equated with fellowship, being a child of God, knowing the truth, abiding in the Father, being born of God, seeing him, and possessing eternal life” throughout the whole of 1 John.¹¹³ Moreover, these same concepts can be traced back to the very words of Jesus in the Gospel of John. Smalley observes that 1 John and John 13-17 are closely connected: “the claim in v 4 (to ‘know God’) derives from John 17:3...[and] the parallel in v 6 (to ‘abide in him’) originates from John 15:4.”¹¹⁴ Kelly M. Kapic argues that the “agricultural imagery” of the vine and the branches (John 15:4-20; 1 John 2:24-27) captures well the biblical idea that the believer

¹⁰⁸ Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 119-121. Wallace argues that “if *both* [subjective and objective] ideas seem to fit in a given passage, *and do not contradict but rather complement one another*, then there is a good possibility that the genitive in question is a plenary (or full) genitive.

¹⁰⁹ Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 290.

¹¹⁰ Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 131.

¹¹¹ Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 88. Smalley argues that “the person who loves God is essentially the *obedient* Christian: ‘one who does God’s will’ (ὁ δὲ ποιῶν τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ).”

¹¹² Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 125.

¹¹³ Du Toit, “The Role and Meaning of Statements of ‘Certainty’ in the Structural Composition of 1 John,” 95.

¹¹⁴ Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 59.

has been united to Christ by the Holy Spirit, and that our union with the Son by the Spirit enables us to “fully enjoy the love of the Father: because of this union we actively participate in communion with the triune God.”¹¹⁵ Furthermore, the love of the Father spurs us on to love the Christian community as we seek to model the love of Jesus in our fellowship. Indeed, Jesus only gives the “new commandment” of love (John 13:34; cf. 1 John 2:7) to his disciples after he had finished serving them by washing their feet (John 13:1-20).¹¹⁶ Jesus makes his framing of the “new commandment” in the context of this event clear: “if I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you” (John 13:13-14).

Ultimately, if we take this evidence into account, we must agree with Smalley that love in 1 John 2, connected to John’s Gospel, “defines the nature and activity of God (4:8-9; cf. John 3:16), describes the way in which men turn to him (4:16; cf. John 14:21), and—being grounded in God’s own love—should determine the (loving) relationship of believers to each other (4:21; cf. John 13:34).”¹¹⁷ This love of the Father is grounded in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; the one who believes in him is invited into an intimate knowledge and relationship with him by the power of the Holy Spirit, and in this relationship is given the power to live according to his commandments.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Kelly M. Kopic, *You’re Only Human: How Your Limits Reflect God’s Design and Why That’s Good News*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022), 29-34.

¹¹⁶ Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 100.

¹¹⁷ Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 49.

¹¹⁸ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 95.

V. CONCLUSION: APPLICATION FOR THE CHURCH TODAY

In 1 John 2, we learn that those who are filled with the love of God are “*forgiven* on account of his name, and “*know* the Father” through Jesus, “one who is from the beginning,” (12-14), fulfilling the promises of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34 that all God’s people should “know” him and be forgiven of their sins.¹¹⁹ Likewise, it is because believers are filled with God’s love that they are enabled by the power of the Holy Spirit to work out their love for God in loving their brothers and sisters (3-11) and not loving the world (15-17). Certainly, we ought to live as those who are in the light and love our brothers and sisters, even if they can sometimes be difficult to love.¹²⁰ Unfortunately, many Christians today tend to do the opposite of living what John describes as a life bathed in God’s love. The love of the world is enticing in many ways to those in the church; for example, a well-off Christian might be so set on investing their wealth in building a second summer home in the mountains that they ignore the physical needs of a starving family in their congregation, while a more liberal Christian might so badly want to appear understanding to the unbelieving LGBT community that they compromise the truth of the Gospel and shun their conservative brothers and sisters as “bigoted.” While enjoying the physical blessings of this world or reaching out to unbelievers are certainly good things, we must keep watch for signs in our own lives that we have misplaced our love away from the love of God and his people.

Yet John is not merely getting at the ethical behavior of his beloved Christian community, important as it is. He is assuring them that God has already paved the way for them to abide in

¹¹⁹ Brown, *The Epistles of John* 320.

¹²⁰ Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, 60-61.

his love. In *You're Only Human*, Kopic remarks that Christians “know we are supposed to believe and affirm that God loves us, but if you probe deep enough, you see that the doubts persist.”¹²¹ He uses the term “like” to remind us of the aspect of “love” that includes a “warm regard” for another as he argues that we often struggle with the assurance of God’s love for us:¹²²

Have you ever felt that your parents, or spouse, or your God loved you and yet wondered if they actually *liked* you? *Love* is so loaded with obligations and duty that it often loses all emotive force, all sense of pleasure and satisfaction. *Like* can remind us of an aspect of God’s love that we far too easily forget.¹²³

The reality, as John reminds us, is far from the fantasy that God merely “tolerates” us for Jesus’s sake.¹²⁴ John emphatically and pastorally addresses us as “little children” who “*know*” their Father in a personal and intimate way (1 John 2:12-14).¹²⁵ Those who have been given the Spirit, and confess Jesus as the Son of God, can have the comfort of *knowing* that they are truly loved by their Father as they abide in him (3:13-16). We may therefore be confident in any circumstance, for we no longer need to fear judgement day, as “perfect love casts out fear” (3:17-18); we know that we have eternal life in Jesus because we *know* him, and the evil one has already been defeated (2:13-17; 5:4). United to Christ, we can know that we are loved by our Father, and are now free as our most true selves both now and in eternity to enjoy his common fellowship with us and our brothers and sisters to whom we are united to in faith, loving them

¹²¹ Kopic, *You're Only Human*, 18-19.

¹²² Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 6. *ἀγάπη* is not used often of “sexual attraction” in general Greek.

¹²³ Kopic, *You're Only Human*, 19.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 23-24.

¹²⁵ Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, 114-115. Yarbrough argues that verses 12-14 can easily be seen as an address of “pastoral concern” which “erupts in direct address that should probably be understood as laden with considerable emotion.”

“because he first loved us” (4:19).¹²⁶ And as the “beloved” who we already are, we are free to sing joyously back to him: “I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart” (Psalm 40:8).

¹²⁶ Kapic, *You're Only Human*, 36.

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