

Keys to Understand John's First Epistle

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Except as noted, Bible quotations are from the New International Version 1984 (NIV) with this change: Jesus' title Messiah is substituted for its equivalent Christ. Any bolding is added. "Gospel" means one of the four books (Matthew to John) written to tell the gospel (good news). John's "epistle" refers only to 1 John.

God has shown amazing love to some of us unworthy humans. He has granted us eternal life, the most valuable possession there is. But real and important though it is, eternal life is invisible and doesn't change our face now. It is quite possible to have that life without being sure of it (see below). It is also possible to cherish a false assurance, as the Lord warned us:

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" (Matthew 7:21-23)

How can we know if we have that life—and "will enter the kingdom of heaven"? God designed one book with the stated purpose "that you may know that you have eternal life." That book is 1 John. The keys below point out features of 1 John that help to understand its purpose and the basis it gives us to be sure of our salvation. We must find what 1 John really says, not what we wish it said. Its words and grammar seem simple. But like Paul's epistles, it includes "some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16).

Reading these keys by no means takes the place of reading 1 John, which can be done in fifteen to twenty minutes. Read it many times, writing down your observations and checking mine (and others). Read it with prayer for the Spirit's illumination. The more times you read it that way, the more you will be amazed at its concepts and the connections between them.

Key 1: John uses many expressions in his first epistle that he used in his Gospel—and with the same meanings.

This key is extremely important, since there are many expressions common to John's epistle and his Gospel.¹ As we read the epistle, these are some of the first such examples: "the beginning," "eternal life," "walk in the darkness," "do the truth," "have no sin," "the truth is not in [us or him]," "his word is not in [us or them]," "know [him or God or the Father]," "keep [his or my]

¹ Elsewhere, in a separate chart titled "[Expressions and Key Words Used Both in John's Epistles and Gospel](#)," I have listed over forty such examples. For each term I give references, usually with summaries, in 1 John and the Gospel. For many I add related expressions in those or other sources. I recommend that each serious student make his own chart.

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commandments.” One such expression to which I will devote a key and links to other writings, is “remain/continue/abide in.” We should expect any such expression to mean the same thing(s) in the epistle that it means in the Gospel. We should question any interpretation that changes its meaning.

As an example, consider “pass from death to life.” This expression is used only twice in the Bible, once in John's Gospel and once in his epistle. The only change in Greek is in the person of the verb, from “he” to “we.” In John 5:24 Jesus declares that “whoever hears my word and believes...has eternal life and will not be condemned; he **has crossed over from death to life.**” As you can see, the expression describes everyone who “hears...and believes [and] has eternal life,” in other words, every true believer. Now consider the use of the same expression in the epistle: “We know that we **have passed from death to life**, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life [abiding] in him” (1 John 3:14-15). We should assume that the bolded expression still describes all converted persons—true believers. If it does, that passage teaches that our love is evidence that we have eternal life.

Some interpreters, however, disagree. Perhaps because of the way they understand other doctrines, they want to avoid the conclusion that love is evidence of life. Therefore, they propose that the expression we are discussing means something different in 1 John than in John's Gospel. They teach that in the epistle it has no reference to conversion. I will paraphrase one such argument as follows:

Not every believer has passed from death to life. Some believers in experience still live “in the same sphere [death] in which the world lives.”² This was true of King David, who, though anointed with the Spirit was guilty of murder. Likewise, a genuine believer today may hate another believer and thus be guilty of murder. In that case he possesses eternal life without it abiding in him.

Such an interpretation tries to fit the Scripture to doctrine and experience. But it is faulty, partly because it twists the meanings of “abiding” and “passing from death to life.”

² Zane C. Hodges, “1 John,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1985), 896. Hodges admits that in John 5:24 the expression

refers to conversion.... [But it has no] fixed meaning. The context here must decide its significance. The statements of 1 John 3:14b-15 suggest that the spheres of ‘death’ and ‘life’ are here treated as experiential and determined by one's actions. If so, the issue of conversion is not in view here.

Hodges has expanded his views in *The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God's Love* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999).

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Key 2: In the first three verses John does not tell what and why he writes in this epistle but what and why the apostles preached to everyone.

It is commonly assumed that 1 John 1:1-3 gives John's purpose in writing. John does not say so. Instead, in those verses he gives the content and purpose of apostolic preaching.

Suppose you lived near the middle of the first century and met the apostle John. What would he tell you, and why?

- a) John would gladly tell you some of his **eyewitness experiences** with Jesus: things he heard, saw, and felt. These are the same things he reported in the Gospel he wrote.
- b) John would also tell you some **grand conclusions** he and the other apostles reached about Jesus. For example, Jesus came from God and embodies eternal life. These are also things John wrote about in his Gospel, especially in its prologue (John 1:1-18).
- c) Why would John tell you these experiences and conclusions, and write about them in his Gospel? No need to guess; in that Gospel he explains **his purpose** for it: "these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that **by believing you may have life** in his name" (John 20:31). In other words, the apostles who found eternal life in Jesus want others to take part as well.

You have just read three facts about apostolic preaching to the world: (a) the eyewitness experiences they told, (b) their grand conclusions, and (c) their purpose. The same facts are all true of the Gospels but not of John's first epistle. Yet, the epistle refers to each of them in 1:1-3.

- a) The **eyewitness experiences** apostles tell about: "That which...we have heard...seen with our eyes...looked at...our hands have touched—this we proclaim..." (v. 1). "We have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you..." (v. 2). "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard" (v. 3). When these verses repeatedly say "we proclaim," it simply means that the apostles told others the events they had seen and heard.³ The people they told included the readers of this epistle ("to you"). John also recorded his own testimony of such things in his Gospel but **not in this epistle**.
- b) The apostles' **grand conclusions** about Jesus: He "was from the beginning...the Word of life... the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us" (vv. 1-2). These are conclusions warranted from the testimonies in John's Gospel and stated in words that come directly from its prologue (see John 1:1, 2, 4, 14). The epistle assumes and builds upon these conclusions; however, it **does not prove them as the Gospel does**.

³ NIV translates *apangelomen* as "proclaim" in verses 2 and 3 and adds "proclaim" for clarity in verse 1. Contrary to what some may think, this Greek verb is not appropriate for a written message. It is common in the Gospels and Acts for an oral report (e.g., Matt. 2:8; 8:33; Acts 4:23; 5:22). Usually the report aims to inform but can be to command, as in Acts 17:30: "God...**commands** all people everywhere to repent."

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- c) The **purpose of this apostolic witness** to eternal life made flesh. What is their goal? For the hearers to “**have fellowship** with us [the apostles],” a “**fellowship**...with the Father and with his Son” (v. 3). As I will emphasize in the next key, this means for the hearers to participate, to share, in the divine life the apostles have discovered. It is the same goal as in John 20:31. John writes the epistle to people who have already heard the apostles and—as John later states—have apparently believed and participated. In other words, their participation is the basis of 1 John but **not its purpose**.

Key 3: By *koinonia* (often translated “fellowship”) in chapter 1, John refers to sharing essentials, the purpose of gospel preaching.

This key in effect emphasizes and extends the second key to the epistle. It looks more closely at the Greek noun *koinonia*, which in 1 John 1 means participation in divine life. John uses this word twice in 1:3, referring not to the purpose of the epistle but to the purpose of apostolic preaching. He uses it again in verses 6 and 7, as the basis of the first section (from 1:5 to at least 2:2).

Koinonia appears nineteen times in the New Testament.⁴ It has cognates (words from the same root) that are also used frequently. From the root for “common,” *koinonia* means “sharing something in common, participation, alliance.” Its range of meaning can go from a “contribution” given to someone (Rom. 15:26) to a “partnership” with someone (Phil. 1:5). The relationship it denotes is serious, not frivolous. In fact, in Greek writings the word is often used for the marriage relationship.⁵ It can even summarize the entire Christian life: “God...has called you into fellowship [participation or alliance] with his Son Jesus Messiah our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:9).

Though often used to translate *koinonia*, the English word *fellowship* now seems inadequate. In current use *fellowship* has been watered down and often means little more than eating and drinking together. Therefore, it seems more exact when NIV translates *koinonia* as “participation” (twice in 1 Cor. 10:16), as “sharing” (2 Cor. 8:4; 9:13; Philem. 6), and as “to share” (Heb. 13:16).⁶ Similarly, the eight occurrences of the verb form (*koinoneo*) it translates seven times as “share” and once as “participate.”⁷ Ten times we find the designation of a person who so shares (a *koinonos*). He is called a “partner” (Luke 5:10; 2 Cor. 8:23; Philem.17) or “participant”

⁴ Besides four times in 1 John, *koinonia* is used once in Acts, once in Hebrews, and thirteen times in Paul's writings.

⁵ Arndt and Gingrich (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 439) give several references of this.

⁶ It would not be misleading to translate 2 Corinthians 13:14 thus: “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Messiah, and the love of God, and the **participation** in the Holy Spirit be with you all.” In the New Covenant Christians already enjoy all three: the “grace,” the “love,” and the “participation.” Paul wants all three to abound.

⁷ For example: God's Son “**shared** in their humanity” (Heb. 2:14); “Anyone who welcomes [a false teacher] **shares** in his wicked work” (2 John 11; see also Rom. 15:27; 1 Tim. 5:22); we will “**participate** in the sufferings of Messiah” (1 Peter 4:13).

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(1 Cor. 10:20), or is described with a verb such as “participate” (1 Cor. 10:18; 2 Peter 1:4) or “share” (2 Cor. 1:7; 1 Peter 5:1).

When the apostles witnessed, what did they want the hearers to participate in? In “eternal life,” which was the subject of their witness (1:2). Let us return to 1:3, which summarizes that purpose, and paraphrase it.

We apostles tell you what we have seen and heard about eternal life made flesh, so that you also may participate in eternal life with us. And this participation is with the Father and with His Son Jesus (who has brought us His revelation).

John never says that *koinonia* is the purpose of his epistle. Instead, he says (in 1:3) that it was the purpose of apostolic preaching. By *koinonia* John meant participation in eternal life, which many of John's readers already had. A few verses later (vv. 6 and 7), John considers (a) persons who falsely claim such participation and (b) persons who give evidence of such participation.

Key 4: John first states the purpose of his epistle in 1:4, which purpose is to give assurance of eternal life.

John repeatedly tells why he writes his epistle (his purpose). The first such statement is in 1:4, where John first uses the verb “write” (after using “proclaim” in verses 1-3). His most comprehensive purpose statement is in 5:13: for his readers to know that they have eternal life. (Key 6 will emphasize reasons why they could know this.)

We will look at four purpose statements: 1:4; 2:1; 2:26; and 5:13.⁸ In three of these (all but 2:26) he uses a purpose clause, beginning with Greek *hina* (“in order to”), to make his purpose explicit. Only in these four verses John uses the Greek word *tauta* (literally “these things”), by which he refers to what he writes. In each case I will bold the translation of *tauta* and add comments.

1:4 “We write **this** [*tauta*] to make our [or, your] joy complete.”

If the reading “our” is correct, John's purpose includes at least himself with the readers. What does *tauta* refer to? It is unlikely that it refers to John's description of apostolic testimony just finished (vv. 1-3). The readers had previously heard and accepted that testimony, but John gives none of it here. Though their joy was still incomplete, John's brief description in three verses would hardly complete their joy. Thus, *tauta* here refers to what he writes in the epistle as a whole.

2:1 “I write **this** to you so that you will not sin.”

⁸ Besides these four, other times John states his reasons for writing (what prompted him). Some of these also may imply his purpose. For example, reminding them about the old/new commandment in 2:7, 8 may imply that they should obey it. If 2:12-14 gives six reasons for writing, they do not obviously imply a purpose. See also 2:21.

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This second purpose statement again refers to the whole epistle. The believer's relation to sin is a common theme there, not limited to this section.

2:26 "I am writing **these things** to you about those who are trying to lead you astray."

This does not state a purpose but clearly implies one. Warning about false teachers permeates the whole epistle.

5:13 "I write **these things** to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life."

This is the final and most comprehensive purpose statement for the entire epistle. It repeats a goal aimed at previously in many ways: to know that we have eternal life.

In each purpose statement just quoted, I conclude that *tauta* refers to the entire epistle rather than just a section. John has several goals in writing. But they are closely related goals; John does not shoot in every direction. Let's combine the four: John writes (1) to produce joy by (2) guarding his readers from sin, (3) guarding them from the perversions of false teachers, and (4) helping them know that they have eternal life. His purpose is not negative but positive—not to show them that they lack eternal life but to give proofs that they have it. What blessed assurance (what joy) that should produce!

Key 5: John assumes that everyone who participates (has *koinonia*) in eternal life walks in the light.

Light suggests purity, reality (darkness is nothing), and—above all—revelation (truth) about God who enlightens and the person who is enlightened. John is not writing to get people to walk in the light but to encourage people who are assumed—like all true believers—to do so.

After the prologue (1:1-3) and first purpose statement (1:4), John continues the thought of participation in eternal life. Now he ties it to a powerful metaphor from his Gospel: that God is light with no darkness. This, he says, is the meaning of the message the apostles passed on (1:5)—and the readers accepted. It is evident, then, that everyone who has *koinonia* (participates) with the apostles will walk (live his life) in that light. Jesus had said the same thing:

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12; see also 9:5.)

"I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness." (John 12:46)

Thus spoke the One who came from heaven to reveal God. He assured us that no follower of His will walk in darkness; all believers will stay in the light He is and has brought.

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John shows the relevance of this point in 1 John 1:6 to 2:2, as seen in the table that follows. I have labeled from A to I the cells that quote Scripture and the corresponding comments that follow the table. Comments are mostly on the bolded expressions.

As you read the table and comments, notice that John here makes three contrasts of false professors to true believers.⁹ Each contrast has three parts. (1) It begins with “if we claim” and a false claim (cells A, D, G).¹⁰ (2) It then passes judgment on people making that claim (cells B, E, H). (3) It closes with a counter-claim or its equivalent. The counter-claim for each of the first two contrasts (cells C, F) begins with “if we.” The counter-claim for the third contrast (cell I) begins differently (with “if anybody” after the second purpose statement in 2:1a) and is longer.

| 1 John 1:6 to 2:2: Three Claims & Counter-Claims Regarding God’s Light (Large letters label cells; see comments on bolded items.) | | |
|---|--|---|
| False Claim By False Professors | Judgment Of False Claim | Counter-Claim About True Believers |
| A ^{1:6} If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness , | B we lie and do not live by the truth . | C ^{1:7} But if we walk in the light , as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his son, purifies us from all sin . |
| D ^{1:8} If we claim to be without sin , | E we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us . | F ^{1:9} If we confess our sins , he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness . |
| G ^{1:10} If we claim we have not sinned , | H we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives . | I ^{2:1} ...But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Messiah, the Righteous One. ^{2:2} He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins.... |

Cell A. **to have fellowship**—This means to participate in eternal life (Key 3). It is true of every genuine Christian (cell C, Key 3). But it is not true of those who walk in the darkness (cell B).

⁹ The fact that 2:1 (cell I) does not begin with its “if” clause suggests it may start a new section rather than a counter-claim. In this key I consider only this set of false claims and counter-claims. There are similar examples in 2:4 with 2:9 (each beginning “the one who says”), also 4:20.

¹⁰ The use of “we” as in 1:6, 8, 10, does not mean that John himself might be guilty. New Testament writers often spoke as members of a larger group which included unbelievers. Galatians 1:8 says, “Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached, let him be eternally condemned.” Acts 4:12 says, “There is no other name...by which we must be saved.” Hebrews 6:1 says, “Let us...go on to maturity.”

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walk in the darkness—As you saw in John 8:12 and 12:46 (cf. John 3:20), no one who follows Jesus or believes in Him can walk in the darkness. See also 1 John 2:11, which uses the same expression to describe one who hates his brother.

Cell B. **lie, do not live by the truth**—Both expressions clearly relate a person to the devil, as seen in John 8:44:

You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, **not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him.** When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is **a liar and the father of lies.**

Cell C. **walk in the light, have fellowship**—These activities are true of every genuine Christian (see comments for cell A). Walking in the light is related to fellowship as physical walking is to physical life. The walking does not produce the life/fellowship but gives evidence of it.

purifies us from all sin—This is a process in all believers, also called sanctification. It is the sure working of the new covenant (2 Cor. 3:3, 18; Heb. 8:10).

Cell D. **to be without sin**—This expression probably means to deny the state and guilt of sin. See its use in the Gospel: John 9:41; 15:22, 24; 19:11. For example, “the Jews” in John 9 implied that they had no such guilt. They “hurled insults” at the man whose sight Jesus had restored. “You were steeped in sin at birth,” they argued; “how dare you lecture us!” And they threw him out” (John 9:28, 34). Later Jesus warned them, “Now that you claim you can see, your guilt [Greek, *sin*] remains” (9:41). In fact, one of the big results of Jesus' words (15:22) and Jesus' works (15:24) is to make such sin /guilt evident.

Cell E. **the truth is not in us** (repeated in 1 John 2:4)—Previously, this was said only of the devil, in John 8:44 (quoted in comments for cell B).

Cell F. **confess our sins**—This is a counter-claim to verse 8 (quoted in cell D)—and thus is true of every genuine Christian. As we walk in the light, it will continue to reveal our sins to us, which implies that we acknowledge them. John does not present this acknowledgment of sins as the key to a deeper life but as evidence of our participation in eternal life.

purify us from all unrighteousness—Here “purify” probably refers to the **totality** of the sanctification seen as an ongoing **process** in verse 7 (cell C).¹¹

Cell G. **have not sinned**—If different from the claim in verse 8 (cell D), this claim may simply point to the activity, rather than the guilt, of sin. No true Christian will make either claim. Each of them has accepted the testimony of the Holy Spirit foreseen in John 16:8. The Spirit was sent by the Son (and the Father) to “convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (New American Standard Bible).

Cell H. **make him out to be a liar**—This is what an unbeliever does who rejects God's light.

¹¹ In verse 9 “purify” is in the Greek aorist tense; in verse 7 “purifies” is in Greek present tense.

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his word has no place in our lives—This is what Jesus said about those who rejected the Father's testimony (John 5:38; cf. 8:37).

Cell I. This shows what happens in heaven when a Christian sins on earth.

In conclusion, a person who participates (has *koinonia*) in eternal life is one who walks in God's revelation (the light). Walking in the light is evidence of participation in life (*koinonia*). (Some who misunderstand *koinonia* wrongly think the reverse, that "fellowship" is evidence of walking in the light.) One who walks in the light does not deny his sin. Since the light reveals his sin, he sees it, acknowledges it, and is progressively cleansed from it.

Key 6: In his epistle John gives us reasons to know—not just be hopeful—that we have eternal life.

This key is an extension of Key 4. In this epistle John puts a great deal of emphasis on knowing.¹² There are things a believer can know—not just guess—and with good reasons. Why did John emphasize knowing? Possibly because the false teachers were either denying such knowledge or claiming it only for their followers. These teachers may have been forerunners of the Gnostics, who taught that salvation is obtained by secret knowledge. Gnostic heretics flooded the church in the second century.

High among things to know is the one stated in John's main purpose (see Key 4):

"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God
so that you may **know that you have eternal life.**"

John gives three main reasons why we can know that we have eternal life. Here they are, with sample verses for each reason.

1. Right belief about Jesus. "If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God" (4:15). "This is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us" (3:24). The next verses (4:1-6) show that we "recognize the Spirit of God" if that spirit "acknowledges that Jesus Messiah has come in the flesh"¹³ (4:2). The spirit of Antichrist does not acknowledge this (4:3; cf. 2:22).

¹² Eight times he says, with slight changes, "By this we know": 2:3, 5; 3:16, 19; 4:2, 6, 13; 5:2. It is sometimes difficult to know whether the evidence he refers to precedes or follows the words "by this." Many other times John appeals to the readers' knowledge and to the truth: for example, 2:4, 18, 20, 21, 27, 29; 3:2, 5, 15. In the conclusion of the epistle he lists things we know: 5:13, 15, 18, 19, 20.

¹³ This probably means "that Jesus is Messiah come in the flesh."

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2. Righteousness/obedience. “We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands” (2:3).¹⁴ “You know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him” (2:29).¹⁵ “Do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he [Messiah] is righteous” (3:7).
3. Love. “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers” (3:14). “This then [by the practical love just described] is how we know that we belong to the truth” (3:19). “Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God” (4:7). In 4:12-16 this third reason is combined with the first one. Mutual indwelling of God and us (He in us and we in Him) is known by both reasons: by love for one another (which is this reason 3) and by the Spirit who leads us to acknowledge Jesus the Son (which is reason 1).

Key 7: By the term translated “live” or “remain” (Greek *meno*) John refers to what must be true for every child of God.

This key deals with the Greek verb *meno*, used twenty-four times in 1 John and three times in 2 John. It is important for you to determine what John means by it. For details go to [“The Gospel of John: Messiah’s Signs & Men’s Responses”](#) and there see “Appendix B: *Meno* & the Supposed Doctrine of Abiding.” Here I will summarize the arguments, quoting mostly from the KJV.

Meno means “to stay, remain, continue” in a place, condition, or existence. It does not describe a new activity or state but continues/extends one already in existence. This continuing can be classified as sense A (literal) or sense B (non-literal).

- Sense A refers to continuing physically or mentally. The apostle John sometimes uses this sense (for examples, see John 1:32, 33, 39-40; 2:12; 3:36). All other New Testament writers use only this sense.
- Sense B refers to continuing morally or spiritually. Only John uses *meno* in sense B.

Each time John uses *meno* in sense B, he is describing a truly *converted person*. For example, God’s word *abides* (*remains*) in all who believe Jesus (John 5:38). We should not labor for the

¹⁴ Knowing Him is equivalent to having eternal life: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Messiah, whom you have sent” (John 17:3; see also 1 John 2:13, 14; 4:6, 7, 8; 5:20). Thus, those who have eternal life know both the Father and the Son. In contrast, unbelievers do “not know him” (1 John 3:1, 6; cf. John 1:10; 8:55; 14:17; 16:3; 17:25). To whom does “him”—the One we know—refer in 1 John 2:3 and 3:1? As elsewhere in 1 John (for example, 2:8, 12; 3:2), it is difficult to be sure. In 2:3 it could refer—as I think it does—to the nearest antecedent, “Jesus Messiah...the atoning sacrifice” (vv. 1-2). Some, however, think it refers there to God the Father, mentioned in the larger context (“God is light,” 1:5). This ambiguity, though common in 1 John, has little practical effect in meaning.

¹⁵ “Those who obey his commands live in him” (3:24). Cf. John 15:10, “If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love.”

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food that perishes but for that “which *endureth* unto everlasting life” (6:27). He that “eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood,” promised Jesus, “*dwelleth in me* and I in him” (6:56). Later He said “to those Jews which believed on him, If ye *continue* in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (8:31-32). So who does He say are disciples indeed, who will become free? Not mere believers but believers who abide (dwell/continue) in Him.

John 15:1-11 elaborates that truth. *Meno* occurs there ten times, all or nearly all translated as “abide” by some versions (e.g., ASV, ESV, KJV, NASB, NKJV). “Abide in me, and I in you” (KJV, v. 4), Jesus exhorts His disciples, in order to “bring forth much fruit” (v. 5). “If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth... and...burned” (v. 6). In other words, abiding is not guaranteed for all believers but is optional; and those who do not abide and bear fruit will be “burned.” This shows that an initial act of “believing” is insufficient for salvation; saving faith must (and will) continue. But some interpreters feel that this view contradicts Eternal Security. They deny that continuing in belief can be in any doubt; some deny that spiritual fruit is essential. Accordingly, they redefine *meno* at least in John 15 and John's epistles. They compose a doctrine of Abiding which describes only a small group of believers, if any. However, that eliminates the warning that every true disciple will continue with Christ and will definitely produce fruit. Furthermore, 1 John often says that abiding gives assurance (e.g., 1 John 2:28). How can it do so if it is a high level that few if any reach? It is not a special level but to continue in faith.

Key 8: John sometimes uses absolute (unlimited) statements where most writers would use relative statements or modify them.

John sometimes makes statements that he expects readers to modify.¹⁶ For example: “You **do not need anyone to teach you**...his anointing teaches you about all things” (2:27). John's statement is absolute (without limitations). But he cannot mean that under no conditions or in no sense do his readers need a religious teacher. He himself is writing as one, expecting them to pay attention and learn. Messiah's gifts to the church include both “apostles...and teachers” (Eph. 4:11); a wise person will listen to both. So John's absolute statement is subject to modification, telling under what conditions or to what extent a believer does not need a teacher, or a particular kind of teacher.

Consider another absolute statement, here another denial, reiterated in 1 John 2:29–3:10:

No one who lives in him **keeps on sinning**. No one who **continues to sin** has either seen him or known him. (3:6)

No one who is born of God will **continue to sin**;...he cannot **go on sinning**. (3:9)

¹⁶ Besides the passages mentioned in this key, notice especially 1 John 2:15; 3:15, 22; 4:7, 12, 20; and 5:15.

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In this passage John seems to deny that there will be sin in a believer's life. But he cannot mean that. As we saw in 1:7, 9; and 2:1 (Key 5), everyone who walks in the light will acknowledge his sin. Thus, John's absolute denial of sin forces us to stop and seek some answers, as we will do below. (1) Who is it that cannot sin? (2) What does the denial mean?

1. Who cannot sin? Some argue that only the person's new nature cannot sin—not the person himself (cf. Rom. 7:17, 20). In fact, they say, a child of God might be quite unrighteous, because he may let his old nature control him rather than his new nature. Though potentially righteous, he can actually be wicked. But if that were what John affirms, we could not count on personal righteousness to mark out God's children. Yet, John says we can. In this passage (2:29–3:10) he says so three times: in the introduction and in two conclusions.

If you know that he is righteous, you know that **everyone who does what is right** has been born of him. (2:29)

Do not let anyone lead you astray. **He who does what is right** is righteous. (3:7)

This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who **does not do what is right** is not a child of God. (3:10)

John's conclusion leads to my own: In this passage John describes two recognizable kinds of people, not some feature about them that may remain hidden. Of those two kinds of people, one kind are God's children: those who cannot sin but who do what is right.

2. What does the denial (cannot sin) mean? John states it several ways, each time using the Greek "present" rather than "aorist." If he had used an "aorist" verb for sin in 3:6, the denial would mean "No one who lives [remains] in him **ever** sins." That would contradict verses 7 and 9 of chapter 1 (those in the light acknowledge sin).¹⁷ Instead, he uses a "present" verb, which the NIV indicates by adding "keeps on" (v. 6). Similarly, it adds "will continue to" and "go on" in verse 9 because the Greek verbs are "present" there, too. And so they are in "practices sin" (3:4, 8) and "practices righteousness" (3:7; cf. 3:10). Thus, NIV points to the explanation that most interpreters adopt: God's children cannot practice sin as their characteristic way of life.

Sometimes John puts absolute statements side by side, so that they modify each other. To take either one as the whole truth could lead us into heresy.

If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. (4:15)

¹⁷ The purifying process (1:7) is never completed in this life. It is the "footwashing" after the "bath" (John 13:8, 10) and the "pruning" of the fruitful branches (John 15:2).

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God is love. **Whoever lives in love** lives in God, and God in him. (4:16)

These verses give two evidences for mutual indwelling of God and a person. Neither statement is true absolutely. They are true together.

Key 9: Although John speaks of the readers as believers, he knows that some are not—or that their faith is defective.

“He who stands firm to the end will be saved” (Matt. 10:22). The doctrine of Eternal Security teaches that God's elect will certainly persevere to the end.¹⁸ Key 9 seems to contradict that doctrine. It does not contradict it—but should modify our understanding of it.

John writes his epistle to those “who believe in the name of the Son of God” (5:13). He calls them his “dear children” in the faith (2:1) and his “dear friends” (2:7). Their “sins have been forgiven” (2:12); they “have known him who is from the beginning” (2:3); “the word of God lives in” them (2:14). They “have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of [them] know the truth” (2:20). The Father has “lavished” His love on them and made them “children of God” (3:1-2). As members of the same spiritual family, they call each other “brother” (2:9-11; 3:14-16; 4:20; 5:16).

Yet this holy family is in danger. John sounds the alarm: “I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray” (2:26). In many ways his epistle warns them about the “antichrists” (2:18, 22), who deny Jesus as Son/Messiah and thus deny the Father (2:22-23; 4:1-3). These antichrists teach wrong and live wrong; their ungodly lives match their ungodly words. Yet, they make untruthful claims that they know God, such as John warns about in 1:6, 8, 10; 2:4, 6, 9; 3:17; and 4:20. Those who accept their teaching become like them. Because that danger is real, the readers are exhorted to “remain in him” (2:28, see Key 7).

How could those whom John calls “dear children” and “children of God” really be in serious danger? Aren't they eternally secure? Yes, but only if they truly are what John calls them. Belonging to a holy group and enjoying holy names is inadequate evidence of who we are. Even the “antichrists,” John says, had previously belonged to the readers' (or apostles') group. No doubt they too had been called “children of God.”

They [the “antichrists”] **went out from us**, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they **would have remained** with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us. (2:19)

¹⁸ Eternal Security is evident from many Scriptures and many considerations. For example, see John 10:28-30; Romans 5:1-11; and 8:28-39. Salvation is entirely a gift of God's grace. The elect were—and still are—unworthy recipients of that grace. Since they do nothing to earn God's approval, they count on God's completing the good work He has begun in them. Having made them part of His family, He will never forsake them.

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In other words, before they “went out from” the holy family, those counterfeits were known as Christians. Has this situation changed? Isn't its persistence the reason why Jesus warned that “not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt.7:21)?¹⁹ He also described hearers who quickly respond to God's Word but soon wither: “Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They **believe for a while**, but in the time of testing they fall away” (Luke 8:13). Believing that saves is believing that continues and grows.²⁰ And remember that Jesus called even some “who had believed” Him children of “your father, the devil” (John 8:31, 44).

Such warnings add no requirement for salvation—no kind of works—to genuine faith in the genuine Lord. But who of us can see faith? There is clearly such a thing as counterfeit faith, which can delude even those who have it. So not even the blessed doctrine of Eternal Security should make us discount such warnings. Like Jesus and John, other New Testament writers echo the same warning. For example, consider the following samples from Hebrews. Its readers, like those of 1 John, are considered “holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling” (Heb. 3:1). Yet, their participation with Messiah (in His coming kingdom) is not certain for all of them.

We are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast. (Heb. 3:6)

We have come to share in Messiah if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. (3:14)

We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure...to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised. (6:11-12)²¹

You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised...My righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him. But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved. (10:36-39)

¹⁹ Another example of mistaken assurance is the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:23-35. In this parable the Lord said that the “master took pity on [the servant], canceled the debt and let him go” (18:27). Yet, when the servant refused to show mercy himself, “in anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This,” said Jesus, “is how my heavenly father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart” (18:34-35). In other words, we should not be sure of salvation without regard to our attitude toward others. “Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful” (James 2:13).

²⁰ Even John's “Gospel of Belief” shows that belief is a process. See the appendix “Belief in John's Gospel” in [“The Gospel of John: Messiah's Signs & Men's Responses.”](#)

²¹ Why does Hebrews 6:12 add “patience” as necessary along with “faith”? To indicate that real faith in the real Messiah will continue. Such faith will grow and will result in fruit.

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When John warns his “children” in the same way, does he want them to live in doubt? Of course not. He wants them to be joyously assured. Yet, there are wrong reasons and right reasons for assurance. The right reasons, as you saw in Key 6 (page 11), include right belief and evidence of God's grace in us. Eternal Security is a fact. But it operates in part through exhortations and warnings to which we respond in faith.

Key 10: The difficulty of outlining 1 John adds to its richness.

It is helpful to outline a Bible book. To do so, we must determine which ideas are more important and which are less important—and how they are related. Some are coordinate (on the same level with each other), and some are subordinate (on a lower level). By working at outlining the book, we discover what the author emphasizes and how he accomplishes his purpose.

Try outlining 1 John for yourself. But expect unusual difficulties. This epistle often puts ideas side by side without connectives that show their relationship. It keeps on returning to the same ideas from different angles. It sometimes depicts as black and white what surely must be gray. The very effort to outline 1 John will expose you to its outstanding beauty. As in a kaleidoscope, each small change in a prism of thought affects the whole. After you try for yourself, read and test the outline at the end.

Outline of 1 John
Revised from Donald W. Burdick
in *The Epistles of John* (Moody Press, 1970)

Introduction: The Apostolic Message & This Epistle (1:1-4)

- A. The Substance & Purpose of the Apostolic Declaration (1:1-3)
- B. The Purpose of this Epistle (1:4)

I. First Cycle: Christian Life Viewed as Fellowship (Participation) with the Father and the Son (1:5–2:28)

- A. Fellowship Tested on Ethical Grounds (1:5–2:11). Evidences:
 - 1. Moral likeness (1:5-7)
 - 2. Confession of sin (1:8–2:2)
 - 3. Obedience (2:3-6)
 - 4. Love of fellow believers (2:7-11)
- B. Readers Identified & Warned (2:12-17)
 - 1. Readers described (2:12-14)
 - 2. Readers warned not to love the world (2:15-17)
- C. Fellowship Tested on Christological Grounds (2:18-28)
 - 1. Believers contrasted to “anti-christs” (2:18-21)
 - 2. The Christological test (2:22-23)
 - 3. Believers exhorted to be faithful to the message about Christ, which will lead to eternal life (2:24-28)

II. Second Cycle: Christian Life Viewed as Divine Sonship (2:29–4:6)

- A. Sonship Tested on Ethical Grounds (2:29–3:24a). Evidences of Sonship:

- 1. The practice of righteousness (2:29–3:10a)
- 2. Love for fellow believers (3:10b-24a)
- B. Sonship Tested on Christological Grounds (3:24b to 4:6)
 - 1. A warning against false prophets (3:24b to 4:1)
 - 2. The Christological test (4:2-3)
 - 3. Agreement with apostles required (4:4-6)

III. Third Cycle: Christian Life Viewed as Interweaving the Ethical and the Doctrinal (4:7–5:12)

- A. The Ethical Aspect (4:7–5:5)
 - 1. The source of love (4:7-16)
 - 2. The fruit of love (4:17-19)
 - 3. The necessity of brother love (4:20–5:5)
- B. The Christological Aspect (5:6-12)
 - 1. The coincident witness of historical facts and the Holy Spirit (5:6-9)
 - 2. The experiential witness of eternal life (5:10-12)

Epilogue: Great Certainties of the Christian Life (5:13-21)

- A. The Certainty of Eternal Life (5:13)
- B. The Certainty of Answered Prayer (5:14-17)
- C. The Certainty of Victory (5:18)
- D. The Certainty of Sonship in a Godless world (5:19)
- E. The Certainty of Access to God through the Incarnate Son (5:20-21)