

An Exegesis of 1 John 1:5-10

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Introduction

The author of 1 John refutes certain false teachings while upholding the truth that Jesus Christ came in the flesh. In particular, in 1 John 1:5-10, he addresses two main issues of false teaching: indifference of moral conduct in regard to spiritual communion with God; and denying the very fact of having committed sin.¹ The author's corrective statements have their foundation on verse 5, that God is light. Each statement reveals a responsibility for Christians in light of the context. The author's statements are both a refutation of the false teaching as well as a call to adhere to the truth. Verse 9 is of some controversy as it deals with confession of sin: does it refer to the Christian's need to acknowledge having sin in general, or is it a decree for the Christian to confess everyday sins as they occur in order to stay forgiven? First John 1:9 must be interpreted within the greater context of the passage, and this context must be given its due authority to reveal the meaning.

Historical and Literary Contexts

Historical²

Authorship is assumed to be the Apostle John based on the closeness of language and thought with the fourth gospel. Early Christian tradition ascribes the authorship to the Apostle

¹ Alan E. Brooke, *The International Critical Commentary: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1912), 13-22.

² Sources for historical contextual information include Colin G. Kruse, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letters of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); David Walls and Max Anders, *Holman New Testament Commentary: I & II Peter, I, II & III John, Jude* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999); and Thomas F. Johnson, *New International Biblical Commentary: 1, 2, & 3 John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993).

John. Eusebius states the authenticity was never questioned. Tradition that John's latter days were spent in Ephesus gives a possible location for the author.

John writes from a mixed perspective of we and I. The group to whom he refers as "we" claims personally to have been with Jesus and testified to his life. They are proclaimers of the life and message of Jesus. They claim to have fellowship with God the Father and his Son Jesus, and want the audience to have fellowship with them. John repeatedly refers to his audience as his children and beloved, signifying his authority and deep, caring love for them.

No definite date is mentioned or alluded to in the letter. John does say, though, it is now the last hour, referring to antichrists having gone out teaching false doctrine about Jesus. With the assumption that the letter was written after the fourth gospel (85-90 AD), it is thought to have been written in the early part of the 90s. However, the date cannot be determined with certainty. Speculation exists concerning the time it would take for the growth of heresy thus preventing an early date.

The letter is written to Christians. The Christians are addressed as beloved and little children, signifying they are under the care and apostleship of John. The message of Jesus is being proclaimed to them so they will have fellowship with John and his companions. They heard this message from the beginning and know Jesus. Apparently, some people are trying to deceive them about Jesus, but they overcame them.

A number of loosely related churches possibly were operating in fellowship with John and his companions. Also, the letter appears to be circular because of lack of address and greeting. A probable view is that the letter was circulating within John's scope of the influence near Ephesus.

The letter centers on the theme of the true flesh and blood nature of Jesus as opposed to what the antichrists were saying. John is strengthening the Christians' understanding that Jesus came in the flesh. Certain antichrists and false prophets came denying that Jesus came in the flesh, and thus they deny the Father and Son. The antichrists were sinning because of their false teachings about Jesus and subsequent actions. The antichrists are trying to deceive these Christians.

The conflict is between church members of John's community and secessionists from those churches. The antichrists were once among these Christians' number but left them. These false teachers are speculated to be forerunners of Gnosticism or Docetism due to the nature of the heresy—denying Jesus came in the flesh.

Literary

First John is an epistle, divided into nine major parts. The opening in 1 John 1:1-4 is missing the traditional statements for a letter in New Testament times but puts forth the major thesis of proclamation of Jesus Christ. In the second part, 1 John 1:5-2:17, John gives general instruction about walking in the light, concerning sin and obeying Jesus. In the third part, 1 John 2:18-29, John warns of the antichrists who are trying to lead them astray. In the fourth part, 1 John 3:1-10, John reinforces the knowledge that Christians are children of God. In the fifth part, 1 John 3:11-24, John exhorts the Christians to love one another, and that this is living in Jesus. In the sixth part, 1 John 4:1-6, John again warns of the antichrist and false spirits. In the seventh part, 1 John 4:7-5:12, John again tells the Christians to love God and one another. Finally, John exhorts the Christians to pray for their brothers (1 John 5:13-17) before closing out the letter (1 John 5:18-21).

The first paragraph (1 John 1:1-4) is the opening of the letter. Although void of some of the traditional parts of a letter, it gets right to the point that John (and the “we”) has personally seen, touched and heard the real Jesus Christ in the flesh. The next paragraph (1 John 1:5-10) explains that Christians are to walk in the light of God. Also, Christians cannot claim to be without sin. The third paragraph (1 John 2:1-6) continues on a similar logical line where John explains that although he does not want them to sin, if anyone does, Jesus is the advocate. Also, Christians must keep his commands.

In the context, 1 John 1:5-10 serves as the beginning of the body of explanation that John gives to these Christians. It begins with the foundation that God is light and then builds on that with how Christians are to walk in the light and claim their sin. The third paragraph thus picks up and continues the theme of sin, and how Jesus is the advocate for sin.

John felt these Christians needed to hear the message of the truth of God again because some were not living as Christians while claiming they were. These people thought they were still in fellowship with God while living in darkness and believing things that were lies. Someone was promoting a false teaching about the responsibility as Christians to live in the light of the truth of God. The letter later reveals that people were denying that Jesus came in the flesh. This caused them to stray from the original teaching they received concerning life and doctrine. Specifically in 1 John 1:5-10, John pinpoints the error of thinking Christians can have fellowship with God while denying him at the same time or denying that they have sin. The bombardment of conditional clauses from John shows that he was trying to correct the errors being put forth which caused people to struggle or fall away.

Overview

First John 1:5-10 consists of two overall assertions. The first concerns the message John heard. The second comes in a series of conditional statements concerning how Christians are living based on acknowledging the truth of the first assertion.

In John's declaration of the message he has heard in verse 5, he first emphasizes that he has indeed heard this message and is proclaiming it to his audience. John then explains two more specific things about this message: God is light and has no darkness at all in him. This verse functions as the thesis statement for the rest of the paragraph and serves as the foundational truth for the points John will go on to make.

John's conditional declarations in verses 6-10 flesh out the emphasis of his message. There are 15 total independent clauses contained within five main sentences. Each of the five main sentences has three independent clauses. Each of the five sentences begins with a conditional "if" statement followed by two implied "then" statements. Dependent clauses and phrases provide further details throughout.

In the first sentence (1 John 1:6) John sets up the conditional statement by saying if we claim fellowship with God while walking in darkness, then we lie and don't practice the truth. John's description of claiming fellowship while walking in darkness sets up the negative consequence of being a liar and not practicing truth.

In the second sentence (1 John 1:7) John speaks to the previous sentence in that if we walk in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from sin. These two sentences are a pair. It is specifically Jesus' blood that cleanses us from all sin. A qualification is we must walk in the light as God is in the light.

The third, fourth and fifth sentences (1 John 1:8-10) continue John's explanation. In verse 8, if we say we have no sin, then we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. In verse 9, if we

confess our sins, then God is faithful and just to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. The dependent phrases that God is faithful and just describe God. Also, God will cleanse specifically from all unrighteousness. In verse 10, if we say we have not sinned, then we make God a liar and his word is not in us.

Exegesis

1:5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

First John 1:5 begins with the declarative statement ***this is the message***. The content of this message serves as the thesis and foundation for the entire paragraph. John makes clear that this message is one that ***we have heard from him*** (referring to Jesus) ***and proclaim to you*** (referring to his audience). The “we” here includes John and his companions and not the audience of the letter. In saying they heard this message from Jesus, they were claiming to have had a live, sensory experience of Jesus. The mentioning of their experience reiterates the content of 1 John 1:1-4 which goes to great lengths to describe the fact that John and his companions experienced Jesus in the flesh.

The message they heard and are proclaiming is ***that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all***. The figure of speech John employs that God is light serves to reveal something of God himself. At its most elementary meaning, God is light refers to God’s identity revealed in terms of function,³ specifically, that he is righteous. For the righteousness of God is that attribute that causes him to remain true to his nature to reveal himself,⁴ be morally perfect,⁵ holy and

³ Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, vol. 30 of *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 229.

⁴ John Stott, *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Letters of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 75.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

pure,⁶ the standard of morality and behavior for his creatures,⁷ and the source and example of all things related to truth, life, and love.⁸ Early in Greek usage light referred to the sphere of ethical good, whereas misdeeds were said to take place in darkness.⁹ The descriptive metaphor that God is light therefore is no coincidence.

Darkness, on the other hand, is symbolic of the evil forces that are opposed to God and his nature.¹⁰ Just as John uses light as a metaphor to describe God, so darkness is also metaphorical language. Darkness as figuratively used in biblical literature is symbolic of evil, gloom, spiritual blindness, everything that is harmful and fatal, and the absence of God.¹¹ Since God is righteous, meaning that he always remains true to his nature, it is not possible for him to have even a hint of darkness in him.

1:6 If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.

Now that John has laid down the foundational message that God is light and in him is no darkness at all, he moves into the first of five conditional statements, all of which take the form of general address. John's use of general address here and following shows that he is intentionally speaking to certain issues affecting his audience. John is addressing the teaching that false teachers were trying to bring to the Christians under his shepherding. The first false teaching John addresses is some people were claiming that it is possible to have fellowship with

⁶ Alan E. Brooke, *The Johannine Epistles*, 12.

⁷ Ed Glasscock, "Forgiveness and Cleansing According to 1 John 1:9," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166 (April-June 2009), 220.

⁸ Kenneth Grayston, *The New Century Bible Commentary: The Johannine Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 48.

⁹ Hans-Cristoph Hahn, "Light, Shine, Lamp," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 490.

¹⁰ H. J. S. Blaney, "Light," in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill Tenney, vol. 3, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 932.

¹¹ Hans-Cristoph Hahn, "Darkness, Night," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, 422-24.

God regardless of the conduct of their lives. In other words, they were teaching it is acceptable to God to live in sin and still be in fellowship with him.

John makes a shift in his perspective by writing *if we say*. Where in the previous verse the “we” includes John and his companions, now the “we” includes John, his companions, and also the entire audience of the letter, who are Christians. John uses the inclusive “we” as a way to identify himself with his audience and express common Christian convictions.¹² The “we” can now be taken to mean Christians in general.

John means to teach or remind his Christian audience that if we claim to *have fellowship with him* while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. The fellowship being “with him” refers to God. Fellowship historically means association, communion, or participation.¹³ To have fellowship with God speaks to the Christian’s relation of faith to God and association with him. It means that we have something in common with God, mainly that he has justified us and made us righteous; with this, we are being renewed in God’s image. We now can have a relationship with God because our sins are forgiven. We are members of God’s own household.

We cannot claim to have fellowship with God *while we walk in darkness*. “Walk” refers to the conduct of daily life. To walk in darkness means to live life in the things that darkness symbolizes, mainly, the evil that opposes God and his nature. It means living in sin, or not living according to God’s standard and revelation. It is impossible to be in fellowship with God while living in sin.

John directly states that if we are walking in darkness, we do not have fellowship with

¹² Kenneth Grayston, *The Johannine Epistles*, 55.

¹³ Johannes Schattemann, “Fellowship,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, 639.

God, but *we lie and do not practice the truth*. Truth refers to the gospel itself and God's revelation of his will.¹⁴ To practice the truth means the same as to walk in the truth, as opposed to walking in darkness. John says we are lying if we say we are in fellowship with God but living in sin. It is not possible to be in fellowship with God while at the same time ignoring or disobeying God's will and law.

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 cleanses us from all sin.

First John 1:7 must be taken in conjunction with 1 John 1:6. John's discourse is such that verse 7 brings to completion what he starts in verse 6. Where previously John exposes the falsehood of claiming fellowship with God while walking in darkness, he now supplies the corrective teaching. In saying ***But if we walk in the light*** John again employs metaphorical language but now to prescribe the appropriate Christian teaching.

Walking in the light is a theme found throughout the Bible. Scripture defines walking in the light as obeying God's laws (Ps 56:12-13, Isa 2:1-5), knowing God's laws and rejoicing in his name constantly (Ps 89:14-16), trusting in God's name and relying on him (Isa 50:10), constantly learning and obeying Jesus commands as his disciple (John 8:12), a guide in life (John 11:8-10, 12:34-36), living in what is good, right and true, and being wise and understanding God's will for living (Eph 5:7-17), and loving one another and living obediently to God's commands (2 John 1:4-6). Brooke sums this up well by defining walking in the light as "the conscious and sustained endeavor to live a life in conformity with the revelation of God in

¹⁴ Anthony C. Thistelton, "Truth," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3, 874-901.

Jesus.”¹⁵

John says our walking in the light must be *as he is in the light*, referring to God. John uses different language here compared to his declaration that “God is light” in 1 John 1:5.

Although saying God is “in the light” is different from saying God “is light,” the main point is the same: the righteousness of God. The highest honor for a Christian is to strive to live a life

that reflects the moral and ethical nature of God. God is in the light, meaning that he lives true to himself and his nature. Christians are called to walk in the light also.

God calls Christians to walk in his righteousness, ever becoming like him. If we accept God and his son and walk in the light as God is in the light, two things are a result. First, *we have fellowship with one another*. This fellowship is between God and the Christian. We have association, communion and participation with God. The conditional nature of this sentence makes it such that we must walk in righteousness in order to have fellowship. It is not possible to have fellowship with God if we do not walk in the light.

The second result of walking in the light is *the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin*. John uses figurative language in the sense that it is not the actual blood that Jesus spilled 2,000 years ago that we somehow physically rub on ourselves today to clean our sin as if we were taking a bath in it. Spiritually, Jesus’ blood was shed for the forgiveness of sins (Matt 26:27-29). His self-sacrifice was what turned away God’s wrath from us. God thus no longer holds our sins against us. We have redemption and forgiveness of sins through Jesus’ blood (Eph 1:6-10). Sin separates a person from God and brings that person under his wrath. Sin in its most

¹⁵ Alan E. Brooke, *The Johannine Epistles*, 15.

basic definition is breaking God's law. In context it refers to faults committed against God, whether in thought, word or deed. Christians are saved through Jesus' blood that was shed on the cross. Every sin is forgiven, not just some. If we walk in the light, God holds us in a continual state of forgiveness as covered by the blood of Jesus. John shows the conditional relation of the continual cleansing power of Jesus' blood as we walk in the light. Not that we are earning or meriting God's forgiveness by our obedience, but it is our faith that saves us, and saving faith is evidenced by walking in the light.

A questions such as, "at what point does the blood stop being applied for cleansing?" while important is unanswerable based on what John says, and thus irrelevant. John affirms a positive result of walking in the light, which is fellowship with God and forgiveness of sins. John does not give a direct teaching here on any possible negatives or reversals of the conditional statement. In general, to automatically assume that the negative or reverse of a conditional statement is also true or within the author's intended meaning is not sound logic. Other scriptures must be cited as proof when a possible alternative meaning is considered in the context of a conditional statement when not directly addressed.

To summarize 1 John 1:6-7, John directly says that if we are walking in darkness, we do not have fellowship with God, but if we are walking in the light, then we do. Fellowship and cleansing from sin are contingent on the Christian walking in the light, as the conditional statement demands. Because John uses a conditional statement juxtaposed against walking in darkness, or not living a life of obedience to God's commands (sin), it is a necessity to live in obedience to God to have fellowship with him and remain in a state of cleansing from sin.

1:8 If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

In saying *If we say we have no sin* John strikes at the heart of the problem in the previous two verses. The issue John addresses in this verse is indeed connected with the previous two verses. Some teachers were saying they had no sin, which underlies the previous false claim that Christians can have fellowship with God while walking in the darkness. In order to believe fellowship with God can exist regardless of living in sin, it follows that there must be a denial of having sin in the first place.

The results of saying we have no sin are that first *we deceive ourselves*. John cannot be any clearer in his refutation of this false teaching. People who believe they have no sin are lying to themselves. To claim to be without sin is to ignore God's truth that all have sinned. Second, *the truth is not in us* because the claim of having no sin eliminates the need for the cleansing power of Jesus' blood. The truth is the gospel itself and God's revelation of his will. The truth is that Jesus came to save people from their sins. If we say we haven't sinned, then we deny part of the revelation of Jesus Christ.

While John in 1 John 1:6-8 addresses two different false teachings, he is not necessarily going down a checklist making doctrinal statements about each heretical teaching. His discourse flows together, and the lines are blurred. At most the modern day reader can understand that there were false teachings that heretics were claiming, tipped off by John's "if we say" clauses, but the paragraph under examination has at its root one main false teaching that John addresses, namely, the denial of having sin. To try and distinguish nuances to the sin John was talking about, as if he were meaning different kinds of sin verse by verse based on singular or plural usage, such as original sin, or the abiding power of sin as a principle, goes beyond his intention. Within the context of what John addresses, the most sensible conclusion is that by sin he simply means having committed it.

When people commit sins, they *have sin*. If people deny they have committed sins, they will say they *have no sin*. By addressing the fact that people were claiming they had “no sin,” John is simply speaking in terms of the general designation of having sinned. To *have sin* is a synonym of *having committed sins*. John does not intend a different meaning based on a singular or plural usage of sin.

1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Just as 1 John 1:6-7 are a pair, so are 1 John 1:8-9, because in verse 9 John is following up on the “if we say” false claim he refuted of not having sin in verse 8. John now gives the proper teaching that a Christian should have concerning the reality of sin. By saying ***If we confess our sins*** John addresses the heart of the problem which also has implications for the first false claim. Because the first false claim of having fellowship with God while living in sin has as its root the denial of having committed sins in the first place, his prescription of confession has ramifications for both.

To confess means “to share a common view or be of common mind about a matter” which readily shades into “to concede that something is factual or true...with focus on admission of wrongdoing.”¹⁶ Confession of sin is a concept that spans the theology of the Old and New Testaments. The Bible reveals the call and expectation to confess sin (Ezra 10:11, Jer 3:13), the link of confession with obtaining mercy (Prov 28:13), the link with forgiveness of sins (Mark

¹⁶ Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 708.

1:4-6), and the real life example of confession of sin being linked with forgiveness (2 Sam 24:10, Ps 32:4-6).

The results of confessing sin are first that God is *faithful and just to forgive us our sins*. Because God is faithful, he will always follow through with his promise of forgiveness. Also, because God is just, or righteous, he will always hold fast to his own will and nature in that he will respond in mercy and love toward the confessing sinner and forgive him.

The second result is that God will *cleanse us from all unrighteousness*. Unrighteousness is simply a synonym for sin. Unrighteousness is non-conformance to the law of God. Just as righteous deeds are those that conform to God's standard, unrighteous deeds are those that do not conform. God cleanses the confessing sinner from all sin. Cleansing from unrighteousness and forgiveness of sins are very similar in nature. The distinction must be that forgiveness of sins refers to God not holding our sin debt against us, while cleansing from sin has implications for the soul not having its sins attached or related to it.

John's statement prescribes clearly and directly that if we confess our sins God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins. John's passage is unique to the New Testament because it is the only one that directly prescribes this practice and link of confession and forgiveness, therefore establishing its certainty and conditional necessity.

Leviticus 5:5-6 prescribes something very similar for the Old Testament and by implication almost matches John's theme exactly. The implication is that in the New Testament the sin offering has already been made and sin has been atoned for by Jesus once for all time. Therefore, confession of sin is the only thing left to be linked with forgiveness after the sacrifice of Jesus, as John may be indicating.

The controversial aspect of this passage is whether or not Christians must confess every sin continually to remain forgiven. If pulled entirely out of context and read as a stand-alone sentence, it is easy to come to the conclusion that Christians must confess every sin to remain forgiven. However, when taken in its proper context, namely, that John is addressing the false teachers' claim of denying having ever committed sin, it is hard to imagine that John's intended meaning is anything other than a prescription for people who believe the lie or who are tempted to do so to take a continual, humble position agreeing that they have sinned, and are sinners. The conditional nature of this verse shows that God will not forgive people who will not agree with him that they have sinned.

The context indicates that John is not addressing what Christians are supposed to do when they sin daily. His purpose is to counter the argument of people who claimed they never sinned at all and thought they could still have fellowship with God while continuing to sin. The context indicates that John is not suddenly teaching Christians how to stay saved if they sin. He is teaching that Christians must agree with God concerning the truth that they have sinned; this agreement with God is a condition of forgiveness.

1:10 If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

John finishes the paragraph by summarizing the man point of contention: ***If we say we have not sinned.*** The claim is a repeat of the claim of verse 8. This sentence can be seen as part two of verse 8. In conjunction with verse 5 it bookends the entire paragraph. In conjunction with verse 8 it bookends the saving prescription of verse 9.

In verse 8 John says claiming not to have sinned results in self-deception and an inner falsehood. In verse 10 the negative consequences of claiming not to have sinned are ramped up. First, ***we make him a liar.*** People who claim they have not sinned make God a liar. In verse 8 the

consequence is that we deceive ourselves, but here the deception is attributed to God himself. Calling God a liar and implying that he could not be truthful is horrendous. It makes the revelation and sacrifice of Jesus a waste of time. Second, *his word is not in us*. Just as in verse 8 a denial of having sinned results in the truth not being in us, here God's "word" is not in us. Being that God's word is truth (John 17:17), the two statements are synonymous. To deny having sinned is to deny the word of God that says all have sinned. God's word has no place in the hearts of people who claim they have not sinned.

Conclusion

An exegesis of 1 John 1:5-10 reveals that within John's community there were certain people who were teaching and claiming that they had never sinned. They thought they could still have fellowship with God while living in sin. John writes to Christians under his care for the purpose of addressing the claims of the false teachers. The message he gives his audience is the same message that speaks to the modern day church. We must never claim or believe that sin is non-existent. We must always remain in a humble state that agrees with God that we have sinned. When we abandon the word of truth that says we all have sinned, we destroy the saving power of the death of Jesus in our lives. It also opens the door to living in sin, because if we can remove the truth that sin exists and that we have committed it, then we can justify a life lived in sin while still claiming to be in fellowship with God. May the church always remain humble to the word of God and the fact that we are sinners. May we also look to the righteousness of God and the blood of Jesus to forgive and cleanse us of all our sins.

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