

OF WHOM IS JOHN SPEAKING? (I JOHN 1:6-10)

In I John 1:6 – 2:2 John gives six $\epsilon\alpha\nu$ clauses; conditional statements. These are if/then clauses where the protasis expresses the condition and the apodosis expresses the consequence in the conditional sentence.

- **If we say we have fellowship and walk in darkness...(then)...**
 - If we walk in the light as he...(then)...we have fellowship...
- **If we say that we have no sin...(then)...**
 - If we confess our sins...(then)...He is faithful and Just...
- **If we say that we have not sinned...(then)...**
 - If any man sin...(then)...he has an advocate...

The question upon which our understanding of this passage hangs is about who John is writing about in these verses. Is John drawing a contrast between the believer and the unbeliever, or between the true believer and the false believer? Is John speaking here of the believer who is simply in need of a fuller understanding of the nature of sin? To put it another way, is John refuting error in the mind of Christians or is he refuting heresy in false teachers and professors. The answer to these questions is vitally important for our understanding of I John; it will explain other parts of the passage; it will answer the question, for example, in Vs. 6 can a Christian “*walk in darkness?*” or in Vs. 8 what does it mean when John says “*the truth is not in you?*”

John addresses his remarks in these verses (1:6-10) I believe, to the visible Church, made up of believers and non-believers. All of what John says he applies to believing people. To apply it to the ungodly only is easy, but it is an over simplification and becomes a superficial reading for the Christian. To search the heart of the Christian for sin is something as difficult as it is necessary, but it reaps rich rewards: fullness of joy (1:4) and true fellowship with God (1:7). John is writing that the believers “*joy may be full*” (1:4); he specifically addresses his letter to his children in the faith (2:1, 5:21 *cf.* Titus 1:4). The use of the 1st person pronoun “*we*” identifies John and the apostles as those to whom this is also applicable (1:4), men who were not immune from sin, men who knew the plague of their own heart (I Kings 8:38), and the heinousness of sin (Romans 7:13).

In each corresponding conditional statement (V's 1:7, 1:9, 2:1) there is an antidote for every spiritual pollutant in the Christian mind, heart and life. John gives a remedy for the previous one, each time implying that all men are susceptible to the sin stated in the first statement (V's. 1:6, 1:8: 1:10), and that as Vs. 7 states, "*walking in the light*" does not exclude sin, and that men do sin (2:1). John recognizes and addresses those in the Church who are growing in the general character of the Christian; fraught with frailty and discouragement and self-deception (Jeremiah 17:7 cf. Psalm 66:18), John at this point is addressing the ethics of the Christian (the walk, practice) as they flow from the essence of Christianity.

John is not however, blind to the reality that there are those in the Church who are resting on a false conception of the gospel and are therefore unsaved, for some went out from the Church because they were not of it (I John 2:19). The Bible repeatedly likens the Kingdom of Heaven to a "*mixed multitude*" (Nehemiah 13:3 Cf. Matthew 13:24ff; 25:1-10). While there are those in Christendom who are false professors, described by John as antichrists (I John 2:22, 4:3), liars (I John 2:22), seducers (I John 2:26), and false prophets (I John 4:1 cf. II Peter 2:1) , the Scripture gives us commands to and directions how to identify those who are not true believers, both to preserve the leadership (Acts 6:3; I Timothy 3:2) and the people (II Timothy 3:1-5; II John 1:10; II Corinthians 6:17 cf. Matthew 7:16). It is the duty of the leaders, the elders to guard and secure the flock over which the Holy Ghost has made them overseers (Acts 20:28). A. W. Pink identifies a threefold design in John is address;

"First, to stir up the saints themselves, and prevent their becoming careless and remiss. Second, to convict and undeceive the deluded, that the ignorant and erring might discover their perilous state and be lead to cry to God for a real work of grace to be wrought in them. Third, to unmask hypocrites, and thereby prevent the children of God from being imposed upon by those who had nothing in common with them; and to separate themselves from all such false pretenders." (Pink 1951; 2005, 1:73).

The Thoughts Of Others...
John Writes To False Professors/Teachers

John R. W. Stott says that John is here exposing the spurious claims for the false teachers and quotes those who argue that the claims made were slogans and maxims of the false teachers. Stott answers the objection that the “we” in Vs 6 is used because he is “stating general principles which are applicable to all people generally” and John humbly identifies himself with those to whom he writes (Stott, *The Letter of John* 2004, 77-78). William Edward Jelf, writing in the 1800’s states that John is writing in “opposition, doubtless, to those false professors and teachers who would turn the doctrine of all being concluded under sin and of the free gift of mercy, into a cloak of maliciousness.” (Jelf 1877, 7). Albert Barnes takes the same view; while he admits that to walk in darkness commonly denotes to be in doubt about our religious state in contradistinction to living in the enjoyment of religion, “the leading thought, is that if we live in sin, it is proof that our profession of religion is false” (Barnes 1868, 283). Calvin of the same opinion says “they are alienated from God who walk in darkness” (Calvin 1993, 163).

Richard Lenski in his commentary writes that the claims John is refuting are not claims that John or his readers would have made as Christians, but are those of “antichristians.” Lenski backs his argument here on the use of the Greek conjunction $\epsilon\alpha\nu$ rather than $\epsilon\iota$. If John had used $\epsilon\iota$, which is more definite “he would have stated a reality which would have left a wrong impression” (Lenski 1966; 2001, 386). This however is a moot point because John uses the same Greek conjunction in both the protasis and the apodosis leaving no grammatical difference between the two.

To Believers

○ **To believers who are walking in disobedience.**

It is the Christian living a lie by a life that is contradictory to fellowship and aggravated by the person saying he is in fellowship with the God who is light and in whom is no darkness at all. They

were *'not acting the truth.'* (Candlish 1870;1993, 39). Candlish makes the point that the *"walking in darkness"* (Vs. 6) is itself the lie; it is the hypocrisy of practice rather than of profession. John is articulating here a thought process of believers by *"drawing attention to certain features of their way of life"* while *"saying"* they had fellowship with God. They were not putting the truth into practice (Marshall 1978, 110). The distinction here is between the Christian profession and the Christian practice; those who claim something (*"if we say..."*) and yet the life is marked by the opposite, (Bruce 1983; 2004, 42). What John is speaking of here is the casuistry that denies the reality of truth in the heart, (Lias 1887; 1982, 37). In commenting on verse eight (*"if we say we have no sin"*) Lias compares it to Paul's admission in Philippians 3:12 *"Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect"* and says that to say *"we have no sin"* is the same condition *"as if we were walking in darkness..."*

- **To believers who were untaught regarding the nature of God and the nature of sin.**

John is addressing his remarks to a people, the *"converted idolaters of the Asians cities,"* who were sincere in their Christian beliefs but were coming out of paganism and the danger was of viewing the God of heaven as changing and indifferent like their previous gods and thus acting accordingly. (Findlay, Fellowship in the Life Eternal 1909; 1977, 95ff). While Findlay raises a very valid point in this view he falls short in that he does not deal with the heresies that John is evidently refuting and the fact that there were those unbelievers who left the Churches because they were not true believers (2:19).

- **To believers as an examination of their standing with God.**

John writes here to believers who are to *"examine where they stand in the light of God's word."* Having examined themselves under John's epistle they will be able then to measure others by the same standard and will therefore be able to *"confront the errors of those who try to lead them astray"* (Beeke 2006, 33). John is drawing our attention here to the *"insidious danger which menaces our personal religion"*, that of having the *form* of Christianity, without the *essence*, the *appearance* without the *reality*. (Dryander 1899, 14). John would here then prove our sincerity in Christianity by these tests in V's 6ff. B. F. Westcott comments on εὐν ἐπιπρωμεν *"John considers only the case of professing Christians. In doing this he unites himself with those whom he*

addresses; and recognizes the fact that he no less than his fellow Christians has to guard against the temptations to which the three types of false doctrine correspond" (Westcott 1886, 19). James Morgan writes on V's 6 "having said so much on the privileges of believers, he thought it necessary to address them in the tone of warning. They must beware of self-deception (Morgan 1865, 31).

○ **To believers, and identifying false professors among them.**

This declaration in I John 1:6ff is written to the "outward visible church of Christ" and "...belongs to such as profess Christ, and make a boast of having communion with the Holy Trinity" for John writes to these that "their joy might be full" which he could not write to unregenerate persons (Pierce 1835; 2004, 50-51). John Cotton maintains that opinion and profession of fellowship with God is not certain sign of true fellowship, for opinion ("if we say we have fellowship...") may spring from common graces, (i.e. that God will accept us for our good works, see Matthew 7:21-23), (Cotton 1658; 2001, 37). Hugh Binning the Scottish philosopher and preacher said;

"Those who delude themselves in this matter, are of two kinds, [those who] pretend to Christianity in general...Others again, though fewer, can pretend even to these higher points of Christianity, as communion with God, walking after the Spirit, and indeed in this they are more consistent to their profession of Christianity. But, as the apostle saith, there may be a practical lie in it too, if we consider and compare their practice with their profession."
(Binning 1735, 417).

Concluding remarks

Many of those commentators who see this written primarily as an answer to unbelieving, false teachers and false professors, will have no difficulty seeing the *application* to the believers. Stott, for example states that John uses the "we" (Vs. 6) because he is "stating general principles which are *applicable* to all people generally" (Stott 1964; 2004, 77-78). Also there are many who would apply it to the different aspects of Christian examination; warning, instruction, correction, etc.