

THE REVELATION AND EXPERIENCE OF THE TRIUNE GOD IN THE FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN

BY RON KANGAS

The most basic truth unveiled in the Holy Scriptures, and the foundational element of the common faith, the faith held by all genuine believers in Christ, concerns the reality of the one true and living God. God is, and we must believe that He is—that He is the eternal, self-existing, ever-existing I Am (Heb. 11:6; Exo. 3:6, 14). God is uniquely one. Nevertheless, this God, the only God, is three-one, triune, and, especially in the New Testament, He is revealed as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14), all of whom are fully God, are eternal, coexist, and coinhere, dwelling in one another mutually.¹ The most profound and mysterious revelation of this Triune God in the Word of God is found in the Gospel of John, and this revelation is developed and applied in the first Epistle of John, not only for the believers' enlightenment but also for their experience and enjoyment as they seek to live in and according to God's economy for the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose to produce and build up the Body of Christ and ultimately the New Jerusalem for His corporate expression.

The Gospel of John reveals the unique God, the I Am, who is the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. The Father is the source, the origin and the Originator, the One whose will is the reason for the existence of all created things (5:30; 6:38; Rev. 4:11). No one has ever seen God the Father; however, "the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him" (John 1:18). All that the Father has is the Son's and is in the Son (16:15). The Father sent the Son (7:29; 6:57), is expressed in the Son (14:7-11; 8:19), and works in the Son (14:10; 7:16). The Son is the expression of the Father, who is the source. As the One who expresses the Father, the Son replied to Philip's request, "Show us the Father" (14:8), with these words: "Have I been so long a time with you, and you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (v. 9). To see the Son, the expression of the Father, is to see the Father, for the Son is in the Father, and the Father is in the Son (v. 10), living a life of coexistence and coinherence (personally and mutually dwelling in each other). The Son, being equal with God (5:18) and one with the Father (10:30), is the Word, who is God and who was with God in the beginning (1:1). The eternal Son had glory with the Father before the world was (17:5). At the time appointed by the Father, the Son came to carry out the will of the Father (4:34; 12:49), having become a man to be the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world (1:29). The Son died, shedding His blood for redemption and releasing the divine life as living water (19:34; 7:38-39). On the day of His resurrection the Son in resurrection breathed Himself as the Spirit, the holy breath, into the disciples (20:22).² As unveiled in the Gospel of John, the Spirit is the realization of the Son, who is the expression of the Father. The Spirit is the reality of the Son (14:16-20; 15:26), and He receives all that the Son is and has obtained and discloses it to us (16:14), guiding us into all the reality (v. 13). The Spirit has entered into us, the believers, so that we may experience and enjoy the Son and that we may be joined to the Triune God as one (17:21-23). This profound revelation is developed and applied in 1 John, for in this Epistle we have the revelation and experience of the Triune God

for our present and eternal abiding in Him and delight in the fellowship of the divine life, the fellowship that is “with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ” (1:3).

The Revelation of the Triune God in 1 John

Like the Gospel of John, the Epistle of 1 John, in its nature and character, is divine, mysterious, and mystical. This Epistle should be studied and appropriated according to its nature and character, and although it has a pronounced polemical element,³ it should not be regarded merely as a theological treatise. The Epistle of 1 John is divine because it is a revelation of divine things, conveying deep divine truth and ministering the divine life through the divine fellowship. First John discloses divine things, with which there is no beginning or ending because whatever is divine is eternal, having neither beginning nor ending. John’s intention was to impress us with the fact that what he conveyed was divine and eternal. The thought in this Epistle is not human but divine; therefore, only by divine revelation can we understand the view of the writer. Because 1 John is divine in content, it is also mysterious, speaking of the mystery of life (1:1-2), the mystery of fellowship (v. 3), the mystery of abiding (4:13), the mystery of the anointing (2:27), the mystery of the divine birth (v. 29), the mystery of the divine seed (3:9), and the mystery of the blood, the water, and the Spirit (5:6-8). In 1:1 “John used the expression *that which* to open his Epistle and unfold the mystery of the fellowship in the divine life. That he did not use personal pronouns in reference to the Lord implies that what he was about to unfold is mysterious” (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 1, note 1). Furthermore, 1 John is mystical in the sense of having a spiritual meaning and a divine reality that are not apparent to the senses nor evident to human reason or intelligence but, without being irrational, transcend such functions and faculties. When John wrote this Epistle, he was living not merely in the natural, human, physical realm but, as a genuine God-man—a believer in Christ who had been born of God to have the life and nature of God—enjoying fellowship with the Father and the Son, he was living also in the divine and mystical realm of the Spirit as the consummation of the processed and consummated Triune God. If readers of 1 John rely exclusively on their intellectual acumen or previous theological indoctrination, they will be unable to perceive and receive the revelation of the Triune God presented in this divine, mysterious, and mystical book.

JOHN WAS LIVING NOT MERELY IN THE NATURAL, HUMAN, PHYSICAL REALM BUT AS A GENUINE GOD-MAN—A BELIEVER IN CHRIST WHO HAD BEEN BORN OF GOD TO HAVE THE LIFE AND NATURE OF GOD—ENJOYING FELLOWSHIP WITH THE FATHER AND THE SON.

The Revelation of the Father

The Father is the source of eternal life, the One of whom believers in Christ are begotten to become children of God (1:2; 3:1-2). To know the Father is to recognize and honor Him as the unique source and origin.⁴ The life of which the Father is the source is the eternal life; this divine, indestructible life is the first and basic attribute of God, the self-existing and ever-existing I Am. This eternal life, being the divine, spiritual life, is not only everlasting but also eternal both in time and in nature. As used to modify the divine life, “*eternal* denotes not only duration of time, which is everlasting, without end, but also quality, which is absolutely perfect and complete, without any shortage or defect” (Lee, Recovery Version, 1:2, note 3). The Father has this life in Himself (John 5:26). For this reason He refers to Himself as “the fountain of living waters” (Jer. 2:13), revealing His longing and intention to be for His people the unique source of life, not only for their existence and satisfaction but especially for the fulfillment of His purpose to have a corporate expression of Himself. God’s eternal purpose is fulfilled not by the created human life but only by the life of the Father, the eternal life imparted into those who believe into the Son of God (John 3:15-16), Now, in this life, the children of God may have fellowship with the Father as the source of life and with the Son as the embodiment of life (1 John 1:3; 5:11-12).

Intrinsically related to God as life are two other divine attributes emphasized in 1 John—light and love. “God is light and in Him is no darkness at all” (1:5). Contrary to the misguided notion of Gordon H. Clark, the expression *God is light* is used not in

a metaphoric sense but in a predictive sense to denote and describe an essential aspect of the divine nature.⁵ Light is the nature of God's expression. Since God is light, to see God is to see light (Matt. 5:8). The Lord Jesus, God manifested in the flesh, declared concerning Himself, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). Those who believe into the light—the Son of God as the light of life—become "sons of light" (12:36).

According to the divine revelation in the Word, light and life are inseparable. Where there is light, there is life (Gen. 1:3), and where there is life, there is light (John 1:4). "As light is the nature of God in His expression, so darkness is the nature of Satan in his evil works (3:8). Thank God that He has delivered us out of the satanic darkness into the divine light (Acts 26:18; 1 Pet. 2:9). The divine light is the divine life in the Son operating in us" (Lee, Recovery Version, 1 John 1:5, note 4). A further demonstration of the relationship between life and light is seen in Psalm 36:9: "With You is the fountain of life; / In Your light we see light." First, we experience and enjoy God as the fountain of life, and then in His light we see light. Regarding seeing light in God's light in Psalm 36:9, Watchman Nee speaks with insight:

This tells us that a man can only see real light and realize the true nature of things through God's light. The first occurrence of the word "light" in this verse means the enlightening light, and the second occurrence of "light" means the true nature of things. The first "light" refers to the light that comes from God's enlightening, and the second "light" is the facts that one sees, that is, the facts that are revealed under God's enlightening. A believer must live in God's light before he can have sight. Only those who live in God's light will see light, and only those who live in His light can discern the true nature of things...Once we realize that God is light, we will live in His light. (898-899)

First John also places great emphasis on the divine attribute of love. "God is love" (4:8). "His love is perfected in us" (v. 12). "We know and have believed the love which God has in us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God and God abides in him" (v. 16). "We love because He first loved us" (v. 19). Love is the inner substance of God, His divine essence; in His essential being, God is love. Love is His nature, and according to His nature of love, He loves. Like light, the divine love is intrinsically related to the divine life. "In this life are all His riches, / All His nature, love and light" (*Hymns*, #602). God is rich in mercy because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in offenses and sins and walking "according to the ruler of the authority of the air, of the spirit which is now operating in the sons of disobedience" (Eph. 2:1-2, 4). Because God is love, the kindness and love to humankind of our Savior God has appeared (Titus 3:4).

In his first Epistle, as in his Gospel, the apostle John conjoins the love of God with His giving His Son so that, in Him, we may have eternal life (John 3:15-16). In John's words, "We have beheld and testify that the Father has sent the Son as the Savior of the world" (1 John 4:14). Love as the inner substance, the essence, of the Father was the motive for sending His Son. "In this the love of God was manifested among us, that God sent His only begotten Son into the world that we might have life and live through Him. Herein is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son as a propitiation for our sins...God has loved us in this way" (vv. 9-11). In what way did the Father send the Son? It certainly was not in the heretical, tritheistic manner of sending the Son apart from Himself while, He, the Father, remained in heaven, separate from the Son, whom He sent into the world. The Father sent the Son by coming not only with the Son but also in the Son. Shortly before He was arrested, tried, and crucified, Christ the Son said to His disciples, "Behold, an hour is coming, and has come, that you will be scattered each to his own place and will leave Me alone; yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me" (John 16:32). This echoes His word in 8:16: "I am not alone, but I and the Father who sent Me." The Father and the Son are one (10:30) and cannot be separated; therefore, when the Son was on earth, the Father was with Him. The Father's being with the Son, whom He had sent into the world, was not an outward, external

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matter of causing the Son to have a sense of His presence; on the contrary, the Father was in the Son and was with the incarnated Son in the way of coinherence, mutual indwelling. Let us attend to the Son's word regarding this: "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak from Myself, but the Father who abides in Me does His works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me" (14:10-11). Elsewhere the Son said, "Believe the works so that you may come to know and continue to know that the Father is in Me and I am in the Father" (10:38). The Father sent the Son by being with the Son and in the Son.

First John 4:9-11 discloses the Father's twofold purpose in loving us and sending His Son—propitiation and impartation. In verse 10 we see that God's love was manifested in sending His Son "as a propitiation for our sins," providing Jesus Christ Himself as the propitiation for our sins (2:2). Christ made "propitiation for the sins of the people" (Heb. 2:17) by offering Himself to God as the sacrifice of propitiation. The meaning of propitiation is to appease the situation between us and God and to reconcile us to God by satisfying God's righteous requirements. Propitiation solves the problem between us and God, the problem of our sins, which kept us away from God and hindered God from coming to us. Propitiation involves two parties, one of which has wronged the other, has become indebted to the other, and must act to satisfy the demands of the other. Because the two parties have been separated, there is the need of propitiation. As sinners, whose situation is illustrated by the tax collector in Luke 18:13, we needed propitiation to appease our situation with God and to satisfy His demands.

In His unfathomable love for us, God sent His Son to die on our behalf as the sacrifice of propitiation. Christ is the sacrifice of propitiation for our sins, offering Himself not only for our redemption but also for satisfying and fulfilling God's demands. On the cross Christ propitiated for us and brought us back to God, reconciling us to God and making us one with Him in such a way that God the Father can now be peacefully gracious to us.

Although propitiation is indescribably precious, it was not actually the goal of the Father's sending His only begotten Son into the world. In order to be impressed with the Father's goal, let us consider 1 John 4:9 again: "In this the love of God was manifested among us, that God sent His only begotten Son into the world that we might have life and live through Him." The Father's desire is not to populate heaven with a multitude of redeemed, justified, reconciled, and forgiven sinners who are restored to a pre-fallen condition. God's intention in sending His Son as a propitiation for our sins was that, being reconciled to God and at peace with Him in Christ, we may have life—the eternal, uncreated, indestructible life of God—and live this life through Christ for the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose to have a corporate expression of Himself in His chosen, redeemed, and regenerated people, who will share His life and nature for His glory. The following note bears careful consideration and study:

We, the fallen people, are not only sinful in nature and conduct (Rom. 7:17-18; 1:28-32) but also dead in our spirit (Eph. 2:1, 5; Col. 2:13). God sent His Son into the world not only to be a propitiation for our sins that we might be forgiven (v. 10) but also to be life to us that we might have life and live through Him. In the love of God, the Son of God saves us not only from our sins by His blood (Eph. 1:7; Rev. 1:5) but also from our death by His life (3:14-15; John 5:24). He is not only the Lamb of God who takes away our sin (John 1:29); He is also the Son of God who gives us eternal life (John 3:36). He died for our sins (1 Cor. 15:3) that we might have eternal life in Him (John 3:14-16) and live through Him (John 6:57; 14:19). In this the love of God, which is God's essence, has been manifested. (Lee, Recovery Version, 1 John 4:9, note 3)

In 1 John 3:1 we find a further expression of the Father's love: "Behold what manner of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and we are." We truly are children of God because we have been begotten of God, born of God, to

actually have the life of God, the eternal life. “This is the promise which He Himself promised us, the eternal life” (2:25). “God gave to us eternal life and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life,” and now we may know that we have eternal life (5:11-13). Regarding this, we must pierce through the fog of the doctrinal error which insists that redeemed persons have merely been adopted by God or simply re-created by Him in their natural human life but are not begotten of God.⁶ The divine truth, asserted uncompromisingly by John in his first Epistle, is that the believers in Christ have been born of God, begotten of the Father, and thus possess the Father’s life, the eternal life (2:29; 3:9; 5:4, 18). We have been begotten of God and know God (4:7). “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been begotten of God, and everyone who loves Him who has begotten loves him also who has been begotten of Him” (5:1). Oh, what love that the Father sent the Son as a propitiation for our sins and that we might have life and live in Him! What love that we should be called children of God, begotten of God to possess the life of God! And we, the blessed believers in Christ, are the children of God!

In 1 John we have a revelation of God the Father not only as life, light, and love but also as “Him who is true” (5:20), the true One. Literally, the Greek word is “the True,” denoting the divine truth, the divine reality, itself. After referring the second time to “Him who is true,” John speaks of “His Son Jesus Christ,” and in so doing, he indicates that “Him who is true”—“the true One,” “the True”—is God the Father Himself. The Father is the True, the divine reality. To be sure, this reality is not restricted to the Father but is equally a property of the Son and the Spirit. When the Word, the eternal Son of God, became flesh and tabernacled among us, He was full of reality, for reality came with Him through incarnation (John 1:14, 17). Testifying faithfully regarding Himself, the Son declared, “I am...the reality” (14:6). The Spirit is the Spirit of reality who guides the believers into all the reality (16:13). Later, we will consider the amazing statement in 1 John 5:6: “The Spirit is the reality.” This true One, the Triune God as the divine reality, is versus idols, and John concludes this Epistle with a charge concerning them: “Little children, guard yourselves from idols” (5:21). An idol is anything that replaces the true God in human hearts and lives and, in this Epistle, especially the heretical substitutes for the true God, for the true One.⁷

The Revelation of the Son

Both in the Godhead and in the divine economy, the Father and the Son, although eternally distinct, are inseparable. The Son is with the Father, the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father, and the Son is the expression of the Father. An antichrist is “one who denies the Father and the Son” (2:22). “Everyone who denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who confesses the Son has the Father also” (v. 23). The Father and the Son are one (John 10:30); hence, denying the Son equals being without the Father, and confessing the Son is to have the Father. With this in mind, let us consider, in an initial and introductory way, the revelation of the Son in 1 John.

According to John’s understanding, believers who can be called “fathers”—those who are mature in the divine life—“know Him who is from the beginning” (2:13-14). This One from the beginning is the eternal, preexisting Son, who is the Word that is God. The deity of the Son, who is revealed in the Gospel of John as I Am, is eternal and absolute; He is the self-existing, ever-existing God, co-equal in the Godhead with the Father. The apostle John opens his first Epistle with a marvelous and mysterious unveiling of the eternal, preexisting Son of God: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of life” (1:1). Instead of referring to a specific divine title of the Lord or using some kind of personal designation, John speaks of “that which was from the beginning” to indicate (we may reasonably believe) that the subject and content of his Epistle is mysterious. This One from the beginning is “the Word of life,” the Word in John 1:1 and 14, who was with God and was God in eternity and,

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through incarnation, became flesh in time. “This Word is the divine person of Christ as an account, a definition, and an expression of all that God is. In Him is life, and He is life” (Lee, Recovery Version, 1 John 1:1, note 5). “That which was from the beginning,” that is, “the Word of life,” was incarnated and was tangible and could be physically substantiated; this is proved by “which we [the apostles] have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we beheld and our hands handled.” Jesus Christ is Jehovah God incarnated to become a human being, the God-man, the Nazarene.

In verse 2, a parenthesis, John employs other synonyms for this One: “(And the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and report to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us).” From this we can readily perceive that *that which was from the beginning, the Word of life, the life, and the eternal life* all refer to the same person—the incarnated Son of God.⁸ *Life* in verse 2 is synonymous with *the Word of life* in verse 1, for both denote the eternal, preexisting Son of God who became a human being through incarnation, the One who declared, “I am...the life” (John 11:25; 14:6). This life, this Word of life, is “the eternal life,” which is the life of God, the indestructible life, not (as often supposed) unending existence in heaven. Eternal life is not a thing, it is not an element, and it is not everlastingness; eternal life is a person—the Son of God, the Word who became flesh and in whom is life (1:1, 4, 14).

The human name of the incarnated Word, the Son of God, is Jesus, and genuine believers must confess that Jesus is the Son of God, that Jesus is the Christ, and that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (1 John 2:22; 4:2, 15). Jesus Christ is the God-man who was crucified for our redemption, shedding His blood to satisfy the requirements of God’s righteousness, holiness, and glory, to release us from our sins and to enable God to impart, and us to receive, the eternal life embodied in Him. Thus, in 1:7 John speaks of “the blood of Jesus His Son.” It is helpful to study this verse in light of Acts 20:28, which speaks of “the church of God, which He [God] obtained through with His own blood.” The Greek word translated “obtained” also means “acquired” or “purchased.” God obtained, acquired, the church by paying the price of His own blood. Through incarnation our God, the Creator, the eternal One, became mingled with man, and as a result, He was no longer only God but a God-man. This God-man had blood and was able to die for us. When the God-man died on the cross, He died not only as a man but also as God.

The blood that has redeemed fallen human beings and cleansed us from every sin is the blood of Jesus, the Son of God. As fallen human beings, we needed genuine human blood for our redemption, and as a man, the Lord Jesus shed human blood to redeem us. The Lord Jesus is also the Son of God, even God Himself; thus, with His blood there is the element of divinity, and the divine element ensures the eternal efficacy of His blood. As a man, He had genuine human blood, and as God, He has the element that gives His blood eternal efficacy. Now the blood of Jesus, God’s Son, cleanses us from all sin.

The name *Jesus* denotes the Lord’s humanity, which is needed for the shedding of the redeeming blood, and the title *His Son* denotes the Lord’s divinity, which is needed for the eternal efficacy of the redeeming blood. Thus, *the blood of Jesus His Son* indicates that this blood is the proper blood of a genuine man shed for the redeeming of God’s fallen creatures, with the divine surety as its eternal efficacy, an efficacy that is all-prevailing in space and everlasting in time. (Lee, Recovery Version, 1 John 1:7, note 4)

The blood shed by the Lord Jesus, the God-man, on the cross is eternal blood; therefore, the redemption accomplished by Jesus, God’s Son, is eternal (Heb. 9:14). With these truths, we can understand that, in a very real sense, the blood of Jesus, God’s Son, is what Paul refers to as God’s own blood, through which God obtained the church. This is the profound thought embedded in the words *the blood of Jesus His Son* (1 John 1:7).

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“Himself is the propitiation for our sins” (2:2). This One is now our Advocate. “My little children, these things I write to you that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous” (v. 1). If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us (1:8), and if we say that we have not sinned, we make God a liar, and His word is not in us (v. 10). Even though believers have the divine seed in their regenerated human spirit (3:9) and may not sin habitually, they still commit sins occasionally. John wrote with the intention that his readers would not sin but nevertheless realized that, in actuality, they might sin. When believers sin, they should confess their sin with the assurance that God the Father is faithful and righteous to forgive their sin and cleanse them from all unrighteousness (1:9). Because believers’ sins are a relational and familial matter, involving the Father and His children, they need the One whose blood cleanses them to minister in His ascension as their Advocate with the Father. Concerning *Advocate*, Witness Lee writes,

The Greek word refers to one who is called to another’s side to aid him; hence, a helper. It refers also to one who offers legal aid or one who intercedes on behalf of someone else; hence, an advocate, counsel, or intercessor. The word carries the sense of consoling and consolation; hence, a consoler, a comforter. It is used in the Gospel of John (14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7) for the Spirit of reality as our Comforter within us, the One who takes care of our case or our affairs...It is used here in reference to the Lord Jesus as our Advocate with the Father. When we sin, He, based on the propitiation that He accomplished, takes care of our case by interceding (Rom. 8:34) and pleading for us. (Lee, Recovery Version, 1 John 2:1, note 5)

We need to be impressed with the fact that our Advocate is Jesus Christ the Righteous. God the Father is righteous, and the Lord Jesus, the God-man, is also righteous. “He was manifested that He might take away sins, and sin is not in Him” (3:5). As the only truly righteous person who ever lived, He, the righteous One (Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14), died on behalf of the unrighteous (1 Pet. 3:18), fulfilling the righteous requirements of the law so that, righteously, God would have the ground to forgive us of our sins.

The Son of God was manifested not only to deal with sin but also to nullify, to bring to naught, the evil works of God’s enemy. “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). On the cross the Lord Jesus took away the sin of the world, and, as revealed through Paul, through His death He destroyed “him who has the might of death, that is, the devil” (Heb. 2:14). The Lord Jesus had this glorious victory in view when shortly before His crucifixion He declared, “Now is the judgment of this world; now shall the ruler of this world be cast out” (John 12:31). All that the enemy has planned and accomplished in rebelling against God, establishing his own kingdom, and injecting his elements of sin and death into humankind has been undone, nullified, reduced to nothing, through the manifestation of the Son of God. All believers in Christ need to be enlightened to see this glorious fact.

First John 1:1-2 reveals that the Son is the Word of life, the life, and the eternal life, and this supports, develops, and applies the truth unveiled in the Gospel of John that in Him is life, that He is life, and that He came that we may have life. What is presented in the first verses of 1 John is reflected in 5:11-12: “This is the testimony, that God gave to us eternal life and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.” God gave His only begotten Son by sending Him in the likeness of the flesh of sin and concerning sin so that everyone who believes into the Son would have eternal life (John 3:15-16; Rom. 8:3). To repeat, eternal life in John 3:15-16 denotes the life of God, the uncreated, divine life, not everlasting life in a future heaven. First John 5:11 says that God gave to us eternal life, and in verse 13 the apostle John says, “I have written these things to you that you may know that you have eternal life, to you who believe into the name of the Son of God.” Eternal life, given in fulfillment of the Father’s promise, is not something that we should simply hope that we

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SPIRIT AND TEACHES
US TO ABIDE IN
THE TRIUNE GOD.

have or believe that we have, but a divine provision that we know that we have. God has given to us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. If we are clear regarding this, we will no longer separate eternal life from the Son in whom this life is. God has no intention of giving us things, not even eternal life as a thing or an element. Whatever the Father gives to us, He gives in the Son, and we must learn to cease asking the Father for things, such as love or power, apart from the Son. The eternal life that God gives is in the Son; thus, the unique way to have eternal life is to have the Son, who actually is the life itself, as fully revealed in 1:1-2 and throughout this Epistle and the entire Gospel of John. Because eternal life is in the Son and even is the Son, we have eternal life only by having the Son: "He who has the Son has the life" (5:12). Those who know that they have the Son through receiving Him by faith may also know that they have eternal life. Having the Son is our assurance that we have the eternal life, which is given in the Son.

The Revelation of the Spirit

In 1 John the Spirit is explicitly mentioned in 3:24; 4:2, 6, 13; 5:6 and 8.⁹ In this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He gave to us" (3:24). As we will see when we consider the experience of the Triune God in 1 John, a central thought in this Epistle, a marvelous development of the unveiling of Christ the Son as the true vine with the believers as branches abiding in the vine, is the reality of our abiding in the Triune God and the Triune God abiding in us. Christ is in us (Col. 1:27); this is a deeply subjective matter, for it involves Christ as the life-giving Spirit joined to and mingled with the regenerated human spirit to be one spirit (1 Cor. 15:45; 6:17). The spirit is where He abides in us, but how do we know this and not merely believe it? It is by the Spirit that we know with full assurance that the Triune God in Christ as the Spirit is actually dwelling in us. This subjective reality requires a subjective knowing, and this knowing is based upon the Triune God becoming the subjective God to us and in us, strengthening us with power into our inner man and making His home deep down in our hearts (Eph. 3:16-17).

First John 4:13-14 should be studied along with 3:24. In 4:13 John speaks not only of the Triune God's abiding in us but also of our abiding in Him. "In this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, that He has given to us of His Spirit. And we have beheld and testify that the Father has sent the Son as the Savior of the world" (vv. 13-14) This word about abiding is a development of the Lord's direct word in John 15:4: "Abide in Me and I in you." Through death and in resurrection the Lord Jesus has prepared an abode, a place (14:2-3), for us in the Father (v. 20) and in the Father's house, the church of the living God (1 Tim. 3:15-16). In John 15 the Lord Jesus, referring to the same corporate reality and mutual dwelling place, speaks not of the Father's house but of His, the Son's, vine, charging us to abide in the vine. To abide in the vine is to dwell in our abode in the Father's house. God wants us to know this. How may we know that we are abiding in the Triune God and that the Triune God is abiding in us? We know that we abide in Him and that He abides in us through the divine fact that the Father has given to us of His Spirit, and the Spirit witnesses with our spirit (Rom. 8:16) and teaches us to abide in the Triune God (1 John 2:27).

In 1 John 4:2-3 we have another kind of knowing: "In this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God; and this is the spirit of the antichrist." We know the Spirit of God because the Spirit of God, by which the Lord was conceived in the womb of a human virgin (Matt. 1:20; Luke 1:35), will never deny that Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, has come in the flesh. In 1 John 4:2 the word *flesh* is of vital significance. The Word, who is God Himself, became flesh. God sent His Son in the likeness of the flesh of sin; that is, the Son became flesh but did not have sin in the flesh. We should not say that Christ came in the likeness of the flesh; this is to deny the reality of the incarnation. Rather, we should say that Christ came in the likeness of the flesh of sin; this is to assert the truth of the incarnation while maintaining the

testimony that the incarnated Son of God, the God-man, became a human being, yet without sin in the flesh. The Spirit of God will “confess Jesus” (v. 2), declaring that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. John’s word and the function of the Spirit of God in confessing Jesus are a powerful antidote to the heresy, rampant today as it was in the first century, that denies the incarnation of the Son of God. In union with the confessing Spirit, all believers openly testify, “Jesus is the Son of God” (v. 15).

In 4:6 and 5:6 the Spirit of God is related to the truth. In 4:1 the apostle exhorts us to “not believe every spirit, but prove the spirits whether they are of God.” The Spirit of God always confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. “From this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of deception” (v. 6). *The Spirit of truth*—this is a precious designation of the Spirit, who guides us into all the reality, especially the reality of all that the Son is as the embodiment and expression of the Father (John 16:13-15). If we “prove the spirits whether they are of God,” we will discern between the Spirit of truth—the Spirit of God testifying that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has become a man through incarnation—and the spirit of deception—the evil spirit of antichrist, which denies the incarnation, human living, redemptive death, and bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

On the one hand, the Spirit of God testifies concerning the Lord’s humanity, that He, the Son of God, has come in the flesh to be a real and physical human being, not a mere phantom as the Docetists and the Gnostics heretically assert. On the other hand, the Spirit of God testifies concerning the Lord’s divinity, that He is the Son of God. The Spirit joins with the water and the blood to testify that Jesus is the Son of God (1 John 5:6). “There are three who testify, the Spirit and the water and the blood, and the three are unto the one thing” (vv. 7-8). This “one thing” is “the testimony of God,” the testimony that God has “testified concerning His Son” (vv. 9-10). The water refers to the baptism of the Lord Jesus (Matt. 3:16-17). The first manifestation of Jesus as the Son of God was His baptism by John, at which time a voice out of heaven said, “This is My Son, the Beloved, in whom I have found My delight” (v. 17), and John the Baptist testified that Jesus is the Son of God (John 1:32, 34). The blood refers to the blood that the Lord Jesus shed on the cross for our redemption (Matt. 27:51-53). This shedding of blood (John 19:34) was witnessed by the centurion and those guarding Jesus, who “when they saw the earthquake and the things that happened, became greatly frightened, saying, Truly this was the Son of God” (Matt. 27:54). The Spirit of truth also testifies that Jesus is the Son of God (1 John 4:2; 5:6, 8; John 14:16-17; 15:26). The Spirit bears such a testimony because “the Spirit is the reality” (1 John 5:6). Not only is the Spirit of God the Spirit of truth and the Spirit of reality who guides us into the reality; the Spirit is the reality itself. The Spirit is the reality of all that Christ, the Son of God, is and has as the embodiment and expression of the Triune God.

The Experience of the Triune God in 1 John

The believers’ experience of the Triune God as presented in this Epistle is particular and detailed, including matters such as walking in God as light and obeying the teaching of the anointing to abide in the Lord. If we would have a proper understanding of what John unveils regarding spiritual experience in the fellowship of the divine life, we need to realize, or be reminded, that the three of the Divine Trinity, although distinct, are inseparable both in the Godhead and in our experience according to God’s economy. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit coexist and coinhere mutually, and They always work together as one in fulfilling God’s purpose and in supplying and building up the believers. This means that in our experience the whole Triune God is present and active. For example, if we are experiencing Christ as life (Col. 3:4; 1 John 5:11-12), we are experiencing not only Christ the Son, who is life (John 11:25; 14:6), but also the Father as the source of life (5:18) and the Spirit as the Spirit of life (Rom. 8:2). For the sake of keeping this article to a manageable length, we will consider a limited number of experiential matters in a brief, introductory way.

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Believing into the Son of God

The Christian life and experience begin with believing into the Son of God.¹⁰ “Everyone who believes into Him [the Son] may have eternal life” (John 3:15). “He who believes into the Son has eternal life” (v. 36). “These have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, you may have life in His name” (20:31). “This is His commandment that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 3:23). “He who believes into the Son of God has the testimony in himself” (5:10). “I have written these things to you that you may know that you have eternal life, to you who believe into the name of the Son of God” (v. 13). Certainly, we “believe that” and we “believe in”; however, John’s emphasis both in his Gospel and in his first Epistle is that we “believe into.” We believe into the Son of God—we believe into Him in such a way that, in spirit, we enter into an organic union with Him to be one with Him. This union is the experiential foundation of the Christian life personally and the proper church life corporately. Only by being in Christ through believing into the Son of God can we live as children of God (3:1-2).

The action of believing into the Son of God is not an exercise of any kind of human ability or strength, which has been poisoned and deadened through indwelling sin. We need to be convinced that believing in the Son of God is not a human possibility. The Lord Himself is the Author, the Originator, of our faith (Heb. 12:2). Only by turning to Him and opening to Him to receive an infusion of faith as the believing element can we truly believe in and into Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and by believing we may have life, eternal life, in His name. This believing is an actual human experience as indicated by the record in the book of Acts. In response to the gospel, those who received repentance unto eternal life believed; they were not passive but responded to the word of God by believing. “They believed Philip, who announced the gospel of the kingdom of God and of the name of Jesus Christ” (8:12). The Ethiopian, reacting to Philip’s word, said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God” (v. 37). “In this One everyone who believes is justified” (13:39). “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved” (16:31). All those who receive the Lord as the true light, the light of life shining in the darkness, are those who “believe into His name” (John 1:12). Believing into a person, the incarnated, crucified, resurrected, and ascended God-man, Jesus Christ, is the beginning of the experience of the Triune God to which John bears faithful witness.

Begotten of God

Those who believe into the Son of God are begotten of God, born of God, regenerated of the Spirit of God, to become children of God possessing the life and nature of God.¹¹ John, in emphasizing the divine birth, repeatedly uses the word *begotten*. “Everyone who practices righteousness also has been begotten of Him” (1 John 2:29). “Everyone who has been begotten of God does not practice sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been begotten of God” (3:9). Since God is love (4:8), John says, “Everyone who loves has been begotten of God and knows God” (v. 7). From this it follows that “everyone who loves Him who has been begotten loves him also who has been begotten of Him” (5:1). Referring to the regenerated human spirit, John remarks, “Everything that has been begotten of God overcomes the world” (v. 4). This leads John to say, “We know that everyone who is begotten of God does not sin, but he who has been begotten of God keeps himself, and the evil one does not touch him” (v. 18). God the Father has begotten, generated, produced, what can only be called a new, divine-human species—children of God with the life of God. This divine begetting is not a metaphor, and it does not refer to adoption apart from the impartation of the divine, eternal life into created, fallen, redeemed, and believing human beings. There surely is no miracle greater than this.

John’s writings on the mysteries of the eternal divine life stress very much the divine birth

(3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18; John 1:12-13), which is our regeneration (John 3:3, 5). It is the greatest wonder in the entire universe that human beings could be begotten of God and sinners could be made children of God! Through such an amazing divine birth we have received the divine life, which is the eternal life (1:2), as the divine seed sown into our being (3:9). Out of this seed all the riches of the divine life grow from within us. (Lee, Recovery Version, 1 John 2:29, note 7)

“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been begotten of God” (5:1). This divine begetting, issuing in the producing of children of God (as opposed to mere creatures or redeemed sinners), is necessary for two reasons. The first, and lesser, reason is that we need to be regenerated because our created human life has been corrupted through the fall, having become sinful and evil, and cannot be changed or improved (Jer. 17:9; Rom. 7:18). Because of this deplorable condition we need to be regenerated and receive another life. This is often the main reason, even the only reason, theologians give to explain the need for regeneration. However, there is a second reason, and it may come as a surprise to many readers. The second, greater, and primary reason is that we need to be regenerated simply because, as human beings with a human life, we do not have the divine life, the eternal life of God. There is no such thing as a “divine spark” as an element in the original God-created human nature. When we were created by God, we obtained only a created human life, not the uncreated life of the Triune God as emphasized by John in his first Epistle. Since God’s intention in His creation of humankind was that created beings would receive eternal life and fulfill His purpose by growing to maturity in this life, we would have needed regeneration—rebirth in the spirit with the divine life—even if we had not sinned and even if our created human life had not become corrupt and evil. Therefore, regeneration is necessary primarily because it is the means by which we obtain the eternal life for the fulfillment of God’s eternal purpose. This matter needs to become crystal clear to all believers in Christ: Even if we had not sinned and had not become evil and corrupt, and even if we did not require the renewal, or re-creation, of our natural human life, we would nevertheless have needed to be regenerated, begotten of God, simply because, as humans created by God, we did not have the life of God.

To be regenerated is to receive another life—the divine, eternal, uncreated, indestructible life of God—in addition to our original created human life (John 3:3-6, 15-16; 20:31). We can have the life of God only by being begotten of God, born of God the Spirit in our spirit. If we see this and thereby understand what regeneration is, we will realize that we need to be regenerated, born of God, not mainly because we are sinful but mainly because we do not have God’s life. The goal of regeneration, therefore, is not primarily to deal with our fallen life and nature but primarily to bring the life and nature of God into us so that we may become actual, begotten children of God. When the Spirit of God imparts the life of God into the spirit of a believing person, that one is immediately born of God to become a child of God. This is the meaning of regeneration, of being begotten of God, according to the divinely inspired writings of the apostle John.

Fellowship with the Triune God

Based upon the fact that those who have believed into the Son of God have been born of God to have the life and nature of God and to become children of God, they may experience and enjoy the supreme delight of fellowship with God. In fact, the fellowship of the divine life is the subject of 1 John. “That which we have seen and heard,” John says to his readers, “we report also to you that you also may have fellowship with us, and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ” (1:3). At the beginning of the church life, as recorded in Acts, all the believers continued steadfastly in the fellowship of the apostles (2:42). This fellowship is the communion and mutual participation in the divine life for the fulfillment of God’s purpose. Such fellowship and participation enabled the believers to have not only the oneness of the Spirit (Eph. 4:3) but also the genuine one accord (Acts 1:14; 2:46; 4:24; 5:12; 15:25), which is

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the application of the oneness of the Spirit to all of our inward parts as human beings—mind, emotion, and will—in order to live and serve “in one spirit, with one soul” (Phil. 1:27). Those who enter into this fellowship, the apostles’ fellowship with the Father and the Son (including the Spirit by implication) (2 Cor. 13:14; Phil. 2:1), gladly abandon private interests and personal goals and become one with the Triune God and the apostles in the fellowship of the divine life to fulfill the purpose for which they have been created, redeemed, regenerated, and brought into the organic Body of Christ.

As experience testifies, the essence of the fellowship of the divine life is the flow of the divine life in the Body of Christ. This flow is illustrated by the circulation of blood in the human body with the continual supply of life to the members. In the book of Revelation this flow of the divine life is signified by the river of water of life proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb at the center of the New Jerusalem, the wife of the redeeming God (21:9-10; 22:1-2). The river of water of life refers to the Spirit of life, and in this river grows the tree of life as the eternal life supply to the glorified and built-up sons of God, who compose the New Jerusalem, a universal corporate God-man. To live in the fellowship of the divine life requires that we learn of God to maintain an uninterrupted flow of life within us. As this life flows among us, we, with the apostles, have fellowship with the Triune God.

In 1 John 1:6-7 we have a crucial condition for living in the fellowship of life: “If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and are not practicing the truth; 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 every sin.” To be in the darkness is to be in self-deception and death, living without the truth and the word of God operating in us. Light is the nature of God’s expression, for the God with whom we may have fellowship is light, and in Him is no darkness at all (v. 5). “What fellowship does light have with darkness?” Paul asks the Corinthians (2 Cor. 6:14). Light, which is of God, and darkness, which is of Satan, are incompatible, and fellowship between them is impossible. Once we were darkness, but now we are light in the Lord, sons of light through regeneration (Eph. 5:8; John 12:36), so, in the words of Paul in the verse cited from Ephesians, we should “walk as children of light.” Children of light—children of God with the life and nature of God—must walk in the light as God is in the light in order to have fellowship with the Triune God and one another. To walk in the light is to live in the light, with our whole being open to the constant shining of the light of life (John 8:12). Only in this light can we experience and enjoy the fellowship of the divine life.

While we are having fellowship by walking in the light, various aspects of our fallen, sinful condition will be exposed spontaneously. However, there is no need for despair, discouragement, or self-condemnation, because the blood of Jesus, God’s Son, continually cleanses us from every sin. Furthermore, we may experience God’s forgiveness and cleansing: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). God the Father, who is life, light, and love, is also faithful to His word and righteousness according to His nature to forgive and to cleanse us. God must always be righteous, for the throne of His administration is established upon righteousness (Psa. 89:14), and the righteousness of God manifested in the gospel of God is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16-17). In the divine fellowship, the flowing of the divine life, we know and experience our God in His faithfulness and righteousness as we come to realize that the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from every sin.

In Him Who Is True and in His Son Jesus Christ

“We know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding that we might know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life” (1 John 5:20). The words *know* and *in* point to an

experience in which the God who is true and real in Himself becomes the true God and the eternal life to the believers subjectively.¹² Through His incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding so that we might know God as the One who is true. This understanding is the faculty of the enlightened mind of a believer empowered by the Spirit of reality to know the divine reality. As noted earlier, the Greek word translated “Him who is true” may be rendered as “the true One” or even simply as “the True,” with the word *True* conveying the meaning of “genuine” or “real.” Only the Triune God is true, real; everything and everyone apart from Him is false or unreal. In employing the expression *the true One* John is speaking of the God who becomes true and real in our experience of Him, with that which is true in Him objectively becoming true in us subjectively and experientially (2:8). The Son of God has given us an understanding so that we may experience, enjoy, and possess the true God as our reality; we know the true One, the divine reality, by being in Him to experience and possess Him. We are actually in this reality! In this way the Triune God who formerly was only objective to us has become our subjective reality. To be in the true One is also to be in His Son Jesus Christ, for the Father and the Son are one, and to confess the Son is to have both the Son and the Father. Moreover, Jesus Christ as the Son of God is the embodiment of God; the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Him bodily (Col. 2:9), and thus we have been made full in Him (v. 10).

“This is the true God and eternal life” (1 John 5:20). To whom, or to what, does *this* refer? Here John is not propounding mere objective truths concerning God, the Son of God, and eternal life; rather, he is identifying the believers’ subjective realization and experience of the Triune God. *This* refers to the God and to the Son of God in whom we are, for we are in the true One and in His Son, who are inseparably one in our spiritual experience. We do not only believe in the true God and know the true God doctrinally; we are in Him, the true One, and in His Son Jesus Christ. Now that we are in Him, we can testify, “*This* is the true God, and this is eternal life.” Of course, if we were not in Him, God with the Son would remain the true God and eternal life; this is the objective reality of the transcendent, eternal, and unchanging Triune God. In referring to the objective being of God, we might say, “*That* is the true God and eternal life.” But this is neither John’s purpose nor his emphasis here. He wants his spiritual children to have an experiential knowledge of the Triune God, an understanding brought to us, the believers, through the coming of the Son of God not only to us but especially into us. He is in us, and we are in Him. The One in whom we are is the true God, the True, and He is eternal life. *This* refers to the indescribable reality of the Triune God in whom we are and who is now the divine reality and the divine life to us and in us in the life and fellowship with Him.

Abiding in the Triune God through the Teaching of the Anointing

Central to John’s ministry as exhibited in his first Epistle is the matter of the believers’ abiding in the Triune God, living in Him continually as their dwelling place. God wants us to dwell in Him (Psa. 90:1), even as He longs to dwell in us (Eph. 2:21-22).¹³ Knowing this mutual abiding and experiencing it continuously, John places strong emphasis on it: “If that which you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father” (1 John 2:24); “Little children, abide in Him, so that if He is manifested, we may have boldness and not be put to shame from Him at His coming” (v. 28); “Everyone who abides in Him does not sin” (3:6); “He who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And in this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He gave to us” (v. 24); “In this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, that He has given to us of His Spirit” (4:13); “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him and he in God” (v. 15); “He who abides in love abides in God and God abides in him” (v. 16). In his Gospel John reveals not only the life of God but also the building of God, the house of God (14:2-3) with its many abodes as His eternal corporate expression. The goal of the believers’ experience of the divine life and growth in this life is God’s building, His dwelling place. What is unveiled in the Gospel

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of John is consummated in the book of Revelation with the holy city, the New Jerusalem, as the eternal mutual abode of the Triune God and His redeemed, regenerated, and glorified people. In his first Epistle John points the way to this mutual dwelling place, that is, our abiding in the Triune God and His abiding in us. This is truly what the church is—the Father’s house, the temple of God, the dwelling place of God in spirit (1 Cor. 3:16-17; Eph. 2:21-22; 1 Tim. 3:15). Sadly, multitudes of believers have been duped, deceived, and misled to wait for an abode in heaven, which the ascended Christ has allegedly been constructing for two thousand years. Limited is the number of children of God who see and experience what John reveals in his Gospel, Epistles, and Revelation—a mutual dwelling place, a spiritual building where we dwell in the Triune God, and He dwells in us. For the building up of this mutual abode, we must learn to abide in Christ.

We may learn to abide through the teaching of the anointing: “As for you, the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone teach you; but as His anointing teaches you concerning all things and is true and is not a lie, and even as it has taught you, abide in Him” (1 John 2:27). Here we have a truly tremendous subject that necessitates a full and adequate treatment elsewhere; at present we can do nothing more than introduce the basic thought, which develops and applies the revelation of mutual dwelling in the Gospel of John. Through His incarnation the Lord Jesus brought divinity into humanity, and through His death and resurrection He brought redeemed humanity into divinity. By His going through death and coming in resurrection as mentioned in John 14, the Lord Jesus prepared for us an abode in the Father’s house, the church. Now we may know that the Son is in the Father, that we are in the Son, and that the Son (with the Father in Him) is in us (v. 20). In the Son we are in God the Father, and in the Son the Father is in us. This is the mutual abode. Based on the divine truth in John 14, the Lord Jesus charged us to abide in Him, that is, to live and have our being in Him. According to 1 John 2:27, we have within us the moving of the Spirit as the anointing, and this anointing is teaching us one crucial thing—to abide in Christ the Son.

As amazing as it may sound to those unfamiliar with the intrinsic significance of the divine revelation in 1 John, the anointing that abides in us and that teaches us to abide in Christ is actually the resurrected Christ as the life-giving Spirit, the Spirit of reality. Christ is the anointed One for the fulfillment of God’s purpose, and He is also the anointing One, sharing with us, His believers and the members of His Body, the anointing that is upon Him, making us the corporate Christ (1 Cor. 12:12), the great “Me” encountered by Paul when He appeared to him (Acts 9:4). This One, the anointed and the anointing One, is now the anointing, for He, as the compound Spirit typified by the ointment in Exodus 30:22-33, is the anointing moving within us, teaching us to abide in Him. The Son, who abides in the Father and in whom the Father abides, is now in us instructing us by moving within us to abide in Him even as He abides in the Father. What a profound yet experientially accessible matter this is! John knew the desire of God’s heart for a mutual abode, and he lived a life of mutual abiding. Therefore, being one with the Triune God and writing under the anointing to all believers, he testifies to the divine birth, the divine fellowship, and the divine reality, culminating in the revelation and experience of our living in the Triune God and His living in us.

The more we abide in Him, the more we will live as Christ lives. “He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk even as He walked” (1 John 2:6). “To be in Christ is the beginning of the Christian life...To abide in Christ is the continuation of the Christian life. This is our responsibility in our daily walk, a walk that is a copy of Christ’s walk on earth” (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 6, note 1). This is to become a reproduction of the resurrected Christ as the firstborn Son of God, who now lives in us so that we may live in Him (Rom. 8:29; Gal. 2:20). Eventually we will become the same as He is in life, nature, and expression—the ultimate goal of God’s eternal economy, which is that His chosen, redeemed, regenerated, and glorified people become the reproduction of the

firstborn Son of God for His consummate corporate expression—the New Jerusalem. Assured of this glorious outcome, John could say, “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not yet been manifested what we will be. We know that He if is manifested, we will be like Him because we will see Him even as He is” (1 John 3:2). AFC

Notes

¹In speaking of the Triune God, we must avoid the heresies of tritheism and modalism. Tritheism is the view, rarely promulgated deliberately and explicitly but frequently held unintentionally and unconsciously, that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, being separate from one another, are actually three Gods. Although it is correct to say that the three are distinct both in the Godhead and in the outworking of the divine economy, it is erroneous to assert that They are separate and thus three individual Gods. Modalism is the notion that in the eternal being of God there are not three divine persons, or hypostases, but that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are merely three temporary and successive manifestations of the one God, who is viewed as a singular monad. The truth is that there is one God, and this unique God is triune; however, the three—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—coexist and coinhere eternally in the Godhead and are not mere ephemeral manifestations of God.

²Along with 7:39, this verse indicates that the Gospel of John not only reveals the three of the Triune God in their eternal coexistence and coinherence but also unveils the consummate Spirit as the consummation of the processed and consummated Triune God. In the divine economy the consummated Spirit is the Triune God after He has passed through the process of incarnation, human living, crucifixion, and resurrection. This process is a matter involving the economical Trinity but not the essential Trinity. Because God is immutable, with Him change cannot be essential; it can only be economical. In His economy God has changed in the sense of being processed as indicated above, but although He has changed in His economy, He has not changed—and cannot change—in His essence. Here *processed* refers to the steps through which the Triune God has passed in His economy; *consummated* indicates that the process has been completed; and *the consummated Spirit* implies that the Spirit of God has been processed and has become the consummated Spirit. At the time of John 7:39 the Spirit—the consummated Spirit—was “not yet,” but He now is, and for this reason the New Testament speaks of the Spirit of Jesus (Acts 16:7), the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9), and the Spirit of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:19). The Lord Jesus was glorified when He was resurrected (John 7:39; Luke 24:26), and through this glorification the Spirit of God became the Spirit of the incarnated, crucified, and resurrected Jesus, a compound of the Triune God, the man Jesus, His human living, His death, and His resurrection. This consummated Spirit, as the breath of the resurrected Christ, was breathed as the holy breath into the disciples by the Son in resurrection. The Gospel of John therefore reveals that Christ became flesh to be the Lamb of God, that in resurrection He became the life-giving Spirit, and that in His resurrection He breathed Himself as the consummated Spirit into the disciples (1:1, 14, 29; 20:22).

³The apostle John not only fights against Christological heresies but also writes concerning sin, darkness, death, the devil, deception, the lie, the world, the antichrist, and idols (1:6, 8; 2:15, 18, 21-22, 27; 3:4, 7-8, 10, 12-13, 15; 4:1-3, 6; 5:4, 18-19, 21).

⁴The fact that 1 John emphasizes source is indicated by the frequent use of the Greek preposition *ek*, which is often translated “out of” (2:16, 21, 29; 3:8-9, 12, 19; 4:1-2, 4-7, 13; 5:1, 4, 18-19).

⁵For Clark, *light* in 1 John 1:5 does not denote God but information. “*Light*, therefore, is a figure of speech that means *information* from God” (29). Thus, Clark would say that for believers to walk in the light as God is in the light is to walk in information as God is in information. What a gross misunderstanding of the truth in 1 John!

⁶Sadly, many theologians, especially Calvinists, being ignorant of the true significance of regeneration, stridently deny the reality of the divine birth that the apostle John held dearly and steadfastly defended. This is the situation with Robert Alexander Webb’s *The Reformed Doctrine of Adoption* (a book endorsed and highly recommended by J. I. Packer), a volume that contains striking examples of this denial. “Spiritual birth cannot be strictly and literally the same in nature and mode with natural birth. It must be a mere analogy, and not an identity” (184-185).

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
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INTO THE DISCIPLES.

JUST AS A HUMAN
CHILD HAS THE LIFE
AND NATURE OF
HIS HUMAN FATHER
BUT NOT HIS
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OF GOD BUT NOT
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FATHERHOOD OF GOD.

Insisting that spiritual birth (regeneration) does not involve imparting the life and nature of God into the believers in Christ, Webb denies the biblical truth, emphasized by John, that believers have actually been born of God to become children of God with the life and nature of God (1 John 5:11-12; 2 Pet. 1:4). For Webb, regeneration is a mere analogy; for God, regeneration is a reality that involves the dispensing of the divine life and nature into the believers. Those who receive Christ into them by faith, who believe into His name, have been given the authority to become children of God begotten of God (John 1:12-13). Webb and other theologians of his ilk have no right to regard as analogy what God regards as reality.

“Generation” is defined as that mode of origination of human life wherein the essence of the begetter is communicated to the begotten; “like begets like;” the nature of the parent is imparted to the offspring; the metaphysics of the child is identical with the metaphysics of the father. If this definition be true, then the Christian child, if he be truly begotten, has, in regeneration, the nature and essence of the begetter communicated to him, which could mean nothing less than the divinization of every genuine convert to Christianity. Is regeneration deification? If like begets like, and God begets human children in regeneration, must they not be metaphysically like Him?...

The regenerated child of God is either human or divine. If he continues human, then he was not really begotten, for like must beget like, and God, the begetter, is not of the same nature as the child, which is begotten. If he becomes divine in regeneration, then conversion is the annihilation of identity. (Webb 184)

In response to Webb's question, we say, yes, regeneration is deification—in the sense of a regenerated child of God being divine in life and in nature but not in the Godhead nor as an object of worship. Just as a human child has the life and nature of his human father but not his father's status or fatherhood, so a child of God has the life and nature of God but not the Godhead or the fatherhood of God. A child of human beings is human because, through generation, he has the human life and nature. A child of God is divine because, through regeneration, he has the divine life and the divine nature. In this limited sense the believers in Christ become divine through regeneration. However, we, the believers in Christ, do not cease to be human when we undergo regeneration. On the contrary, we remain human, but now we have the divine life and nature in addition to our human life and nature, and in this way we are divine as well as human. Whereas Webb, posing a false antithesis, says that the “regenerated child of God is either human or divine,” the truth is that a regenerated child of God is both human and divine. We have been begotten of God, yet we remain and maintain our personal identity. Regeneration does not entail the annihilation of one's identity as a human being. A child of God is one who has been begotten of God to have the life and nature of God. Such a God-begotten child is divine as well as human, for he has become a divinely human being—a God-man, a genuine brother of the unique God-man, Jesus Christ, the firstborn Son of God. His Father is our Father (John 20:17).

⁷In her commentary on 1 John, Karen H. Jobes observes, “John teaches throughout, but especially in 5:20, that the highest form of knowledge is knowledge of the one true God who has been revealed in Jesus Christ...This true knowledge of God in Christ stands in opposition to the many voices, views, and religions that offer God-substitutes.” Following this, Jobes quotes C. H. Dodd's volume on the Johannine Epistles: “That is, idols—in the place of the living God of Christian revelation...the worship of any God-substitute is idolatry...whether it be a political idea, or some fashionable cult, or merely the product of [one's] own ‘wishful thinking’” (245).

⁸Seeing this will rescue us from a common error—the supposition that the life spoken of in 1 John denotes eternal life after death. Commenting on life and knowledge in 5:20, Jobes asserts, “This is the knowledge by which one attains eternal life after death” (245). Such a remark exhibits the darkness John polemically addresses and exposes. The life in 5:20 is the life in 1:2—the eternal life, which is in the Son and which the Son is.

⁹Note 4 on 3:24 in the Recovery Version is illuminating:

Thus far in this Epistle the Spirit has not been referred to, though the Spirit is anonymously implied in the anointing in 2:20 and 27. Actually, the Spirit, that is, the all-inclusive compound life-giving Spirit...is the vital and crucial factor of all the

mysteries unveiled in this Epistle: the divine life, the fellowship of the divine life, the divine anointing, the abiding in the Lord, the divine birth, and the divine seed. It is by this Spirit that we are born of God, we receive the divine life as the divine seed in us, we have the fellowship of the divine life, we are anointed with the Triune God, and we abide in the Lord...This Spirit and the eternal life (v. 15) are the basic elements by which we live the life that abides in the Lord continuously. (Lee)

¹⁰Reformed theologians disagree with the claim that believing into Christ is the beginning. Placing what can rightly be called dogmatic insistence on their view of the order of salvation, these theologians assert that faith, the action of believing into the Son of God, follows regeneration. The opinion is that it is impossible for a spiritually dead sinner to exercise genuine faith and that to claim that one can do this is to embrace some form of Pelagianism and hold that a fallen human being possesses at least a latent ability to believe in God. In order to uphold the absolute sovereignty and grace of God in salvation, Reformed theologians insist that only after one is regenerated by the Spirit (an event in which a chosen one is viewed as being entirely passive) can he believe and then be justified by grace through faith. There are two errors here. The first error is that it is not regeneration by the Spirit but the sanctification of the Spirit leading to repentance that enables one to believe (1 Pet. 1:2). The second error, pointed out elsewhere in this article, is a gross misunderstanding of regeneration, viewing it not as an actual divine birth but merely as a restoration, or renewal, of fallen human nature.

¹¹At this juncture a deviant and erroneous concept of regeneration must be exposed and corrected. This concept, which is a core idea in Reformed theology, is that regeneration, or the new birth, is nothing more than an inner re-creating of fallen human nature. Supposedly, because one is dead in sins, unable to seek God or respond to Him, the Spirit of God renews or re-creates his fallen human nature, and this renewing, this re-creation, is understood as being equal to what the Word of God means when it speaks of being born again, born anew, born from above, born of the Spirit in the human spirit (John 3:3-6). The truth is this: Regeneration is an actual spiritual birth in which we receive the divine, eternal life, the life of God, in addition to our natural human life. Through regeneration the Spirit of God brings the divine life with the divine nature into the human spirit, causing it to be enlivened. Thus, to be begotten of God the Father, regenerated, born again, is to be born of the Spirit in our spirit. Our first birth—the natural birth through our parents—caused us to obtain human life; our second birth—the spiritual birth through the Spirit of God—causes us to obtain divine life. Through this rebirth God has dispensed His own life, the eternal life, into our spirit. This is regeneration, and this is what it means to be begotten of God.

¹²The following discussion of this verse relies upon and is deeply indebted to Witness Lee's *Life-study of 1, 2, and 3 John, Jude*, pp. 348-356.

¹³Just as Clark is in error concerning God's being light, he is in the darkness of error concerning the mutual indwelling of the believers and the Triune God: "Now, the New Testament does indeed teach a mutual indwelling of Christ and the believer. There is a very real sense in which minds interpenetrate...Christ dwells in us and we in him by our thinking and believing his doctrines" (120).

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REGENERATION IS AN ACTUAL SPIRITUAL BIRTH IN WHICH WE RECEIVE THE DIVINE, ETERNAL LIFE OF GOD, IN ADDITION TO OUR NATURAL HUMAN LIFE. THROUGH REGENERATION THE SPIRIT BRINGS THE DIVINE LIFE WITH THE DIVINE NATURE INTO THE HUMAN SPIRIT.