

The apostle John wrote 1 John in challenging circumstances. As the apostolic age was drawing to a close, the church’s enemies were developing sophisticated methods to oppose, obscure, and oppress the spread of the gospel across the Roman Empire.

The congregations to which John wrote had been initially infiltrated by false Christians who then later separated from those congregations (see 1 John 2:19). Known as “**secessionists**,” these individuals did not leave quietly. They claimed to have acquired superior knowledge and disparaged the simplicity of the gospel preached and written about by John and the other apostles. They preached a different Christ, a different way of salvation, and a different system of ethics. As a result of their antics, the confidence of many genuine believers who remained loyal to the truth was shaken.

In the midst of this upheaval and uncertainty, the apostle John writes to restore confidence in the simple truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He earnestly desires the members of these congregations to rest assured in the truth of the apostolic witness and in the certainty of their own salvation. This purpose is communicated succinctly near the end of his letter: “**These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life**” (5:13). John’s letter was to serve as a bulwark against the fiery darts of doubt, disbelief, and cynicism hurled by these agitators.

To achieve this purpose, John provides a significant list of evidences from which his readers were to draw assurance with respect to their salvation. These evidences also provided them with the necessary criteria for discerning false professors who remained in their midst or who were making claims from outside the church that they were the true children of God. So far, we have looked at thirteen of these evidences:

- 1) **1 John 1:1–4** – “Assurance and the Historicity of Christ” – *Do you believe that the biblical testimony about Jesus Christ is true?*
- 2) **1 John 1:5–10** – “Assurance and the Confession of Sin” – *Are you deeply aware of your sin and do you acknowledge it to God?*
- 3) **1 John 2:1–2** – “Assurance and the Sufficiency of Christ” – *Do you believe that the sacrifice of Christ is sufficient for your sin?*
- 4) **1 John 2:3–6** – “Assurance and the Obedience of God’s Commands” – *Are you zealous to obey God’s revealed will for your life?*
- 5) **1 John 2:7–11** – “Assurance and the Love of One’s Brother” – *Do you give yourself sacrificially for the benefit of other believers?*
- 6) **1 John 2:12–17** – “Assurance and the Hatred of Evil” – *Do you loathe the things that are contrary to God and His ways?*
- 7) **1 John 2:18–27** – “Assurance and the Persistence in Truth” – *Do you hunger for and persist in the truth of God’s Word?*
- 8) **1 John 2:28–3:3** – “Assurance and the Anticipation of Glory” – *Does your longing for Christ’s return influence your life today?*
- 9) **1 John 3:4–10** – “Assurance and the Practice of Righteousness” – *Are you convinced that sin is utterly inconsistent with your new life?*
- 10) **1 John 3:11–24** – “Assurance and the Lifestyle of Love” – *Are you convinced that love is absolutely essential to your new life?*
- 11) **1 John 4:1–6** – “Assurance and the Discernment of Error” – *Do you care about the truth and are you growing in discernment?*
- 12) **1 John 4:7–10** – “Assurance and the Primacy of God’s Love” – *Does your love for others flow from an awe over God’s love for you?*
- 13) **1 John 4:11–14** – “Assurance and the Reflection of God’s Love” – *Do you feel compelled to love others because of God’s love for you?*

1 John 4:15–21 – “Assurance and the Experience of God’s Love”

The apostle John now writes,

Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love. We love, because He first loved us. If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also. (1 John 4:15–21)

These verses belong to a larger section related to the topic of *love* that extends from 4:7 to 4:21. In this section, John echoes many of the same emphases about love he has already made in the letter, all in the attempt to instill in his readers the central role that love and its expression play in cultivating assurance. But if we wanted to come up with a title to the section of 4:15–21, we could entitle it “Assurance and the Experience of God’s Love.” John’s intent in these verses is to explain **how the experience of God’s love impacts every believer**. God’s love never leaves its object the same. It transforms. It renews. It changes. And in 4:15–21, John explains **how the experience of God’s love impacts the believer vertically** (with respect to God Himself), **internally** (with respect to his own feelings), and **horizontally** (with respect to his relationships). John wants his readers to draw assurance from what he describes this section, but also to identify the areas that need strengthening in the case where assurance may be weak.

I. The Vertical Impact (4:15–16a)

John begins this section by stating a *universal truth*: “**Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God**” (4:15). The verb “**to confess**” (in Greek, ὁμολογέω, *homologeō*) literally means “to say the same thing” or “to be of the same mind” (ὁμός, *homos*, meaning “same” + λέγω, *legō*, meaning “to say”; see also 1:9). The kind of “confession” that John has in mind here is not wishful thinking or making a mere claim, but *admitting* something to be true and consistent with ultimate reality. Moreover, according to the language John uses with the verb (the aorist tense as opposed to the present), this “confession” is not a work in progress, but something that the confessor has come to believe as settled fact.

The substance that is confessed is “**that Jesus is the Son of God.**” John points to the confession that matters most—the confession that relates to the *identity* of the historical person of Jesus, namely, that He—though human—is *divine*. Contrary to the secessionists who claimed that the Christ only appeared to be human, or that Jesus only appeared to be God, John indicates that the right confession—the prime test of orthodoxy—is given when the person of Jesus is acknowledged as truly human and divine. Indeed, this acknowledgement is the most important confession that a person can ever make. It expresses the very essence of saving faith.

- See 1 John 5:1; John 20:31; the “I Am” statements in John’s Gospel; Romans 10:9; etc.

For the person who has made this confession, “**God abides in him, and he in God.**” There can hardly be a simpler and more beautiful summation of salvation than this. On the one hand, this confessor is one who has the Source of all life now dwelling in him. As such, he now lives an invincible life (see 4:4). On the other hand, this confessor experiences direct dependency upon and identification and fellowship with Almighty God.

Ultimately, in v. 15 John describes the confession associated with *conversion*—the confession that brings about a new, continuous state of reality—one of *union* and *indwelling*.

To this fundamental act of confession described in v. 15, John adds a simple statement relating to *assurance*: “**We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us**” (4:16a). Through the emphatic pronoun “**we**” (“*we ourselves*”), John indicates that the truth he states is true of himself as well as all others

who “confess” the truth about Jesus Christ. What is true about them? They **“have come to know and have believed.”** The two verbs here describe the *knowledge* and *trust* that were expressed in Jesus at the moment of conversion and that continue to bring on-going results (see the same verbs in John 6:69—both in the perfect tense). The content of what has come to be known and believed is stated powerfully: **“the love which God has for us.”** Although God expressed His love at a particular point in history by sending His Son to be the propitiation for our sins (see 4:9–10), God *continues* to love us! This is what makes the gospel “good news”! It is not that we must convince God to love us through good works, lengthy prayers, or acts of penance. To the contrary, He already **“has”** love **“for us”** (literally, “in us”).

The recognition of this love *changes everything*. When we make the ultimate confession about Jesus Christ at conversion, we do so because we know *God loves us*. As a result, our life in the *vertically* dimension—in relation to God—changes forever. We know now that God has only *love* for us. As John Owen stated, “The love of the Father is the only rest of the soul.”

II. The Internal Impact (4:16b–18)

John then turns to examine the impact that God’s love makes *internally*. He begins by saying, **“God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (4:16b)**. This is the second time in his letter that John asserts that **“God is love”** (see also 4:8). In fact, it is the only New Testament declaration of God’s character that is repeated *twice*. Certainly, John doesn’t intend for this statement to be taken as an exhaustive description, but it is an absolutely true one nonetheless. It deserves to be emphasized, for while many have no problem with confessing that *God is holy*, they have a hard time truly believing that *God is love*—especially in God’s disposition to themselves. But Jonathan Edwards sums the truth of 4:16b well when he writes, “The very nature of God is love. If it should be enquired what God is, it might be answered that he is an infinite and incomprehensible fountain of love.”

Since God is love, **“the one who abides in love”**—that is, “the one who practices love as a lifestyle”—is one who **“abides in God.”** In other words, one in true spiritual union with God cannot help but reflect the moral qualities of God. John made this same point back in chapter 1 with respect to God’s moral purity. Because “God is light,” those who have fellowship with him “walk in the light” (see 1:5–7).

John then states, **“By this”**—which refers back to the truth that “the one who abides in love abides in God”—**“love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment” (4:17a)**. John again returns to the idea that **“love is perfected”** (see 2:5; 4:12). This idea of “perfected” is best understood as “completed” or “having achieved its purpose.” God’s love is expressed toward us not aimlessly, but to achieve purposes. What are those purposes? Back in 2:5, love achieves its intended purpose through enabling our *obedience*. In 4:12, love achieves its intended purpose through motivating us *to love one another*. Here, love achieves its intended purpose by *instilling confidence in us*. For what? *To stand unashamed in the day of judgment*—and the apostle John includes himself in this confidence (note the pronoun “we” in “so that we may have”).

It is important to define **“confidence.”** The term basically means “boldness in speech.” It is used in 3:21 and 5:14 to speak of *confident prayer*. The term was used in 2:28 to refer to *confidence at Jesus’ appearance*. Here, this “boldness of speech” is offered with respect to something related to Jesus’ appearance: **“the day of judgment.”** This day, of course, is not a reference to the Great White Throne Judgment where unbelievers are judged (see Revelation 20:11–15). Rather, it is a reference to the Judgment Seat of Christ, which is reserved for believers at Jesus’ appearance (see 1 John 2:28). This is not a judgment that threatens eternal condemnation, for the redeemed have already had their sins propitiated (see 4:10–11). Instead, this is a judgment that reveals faithfulness and determines rewards.

- See 1 Corinthians 3:12–15; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 2 Timothy 4:8.

Amazingly, John states that believers *can* have the assurance to answer this judgment *confidently*! In other words, John is saying that it is fully possible to sing “It is well with my soul!” even when thinking about standing before Christ! Why? He provides the answer in the next clause: **“because as He is, so also are we in this world”**

(4:17b). This language has perplexed many interpreters, but it is probably best understood as follows: We can have confidence before the judgment seat of Christ *because* as Christ is (in fellowship with the Father), so also are we, even while we are yet in this world. In other words, because Jesus Christ has served as the propitiation for our sins (see 4:10), God is at peace with us. He has love for us. He has made us His children. He is in us and we are in Him—even in this world, even as we still await final glory (see 3:2–3). Because of what the Son of God has done for us, His status is our status!

In response to such an amazing assertion, John adds another one in 4:18, **“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.”** Notably, the terms **“fear”** and **“fears”** are mentioned four times in v. 18. This **“fear”** is not a reference to **“reverence”**—the positive kind associated with **“the fear of the Lord”** (e.g., 2 Corinthians 5:11). Instead, this **“fear”** is **“dread,”** specifically, the kind of dread expressed by those who believe they will be punished for their crimes by an judge. This fear is characteristic of those who believe their sins have *not* been propitiated (4:10). Conversely, the term **“love”** is mentioned three times in v. 18. Love has nothing in common with this kind of fear; it cannot co-exist with it. God’s love for us, which inevitably shines through us in expressions of love for others, naturally expels these feelings of dread. As God’s love impacts us, it causes us to love others. And the more we love, the less we dread. This is the impact that God’s love has on us *internally*. It expels our worst fears.

III. The Horizontal Impact (4:19–21)

To close out the section, John turns to describe the impact that God’s love has on us *horizontally*—with respect to *relationships*. He first explains the motivation of this love for others: **“We love, because He first loved us” (4:19)**. Using the argument of the lesser to the greater, John then reminds us of our *obligation* to love others: **“If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen” (4:20)**. He closes with a reminder of the *sanction* for loving others: **“And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also” (4:21)**. In other words, it has come from Christ Himself (see John 13:34; 15:12, 17).

For Discussion

1. It is true that the phrase **“God is love”** (1 John 4:16b) has been misconstrued by many—particularly in the effort to condone sin. At the same time, many Christians have a hard time affirming the truth that the apostle John does intend. They find it easier to affirm that **“God is holy”** or that **“God is light”** rather than that **“God is love.”** Why is that? How does a hesitation to affirm this truth misdirect the Christian life?
2. When you consider the appearing of Jesus Christ (1 John 2:28) and His judgment of believers (4:17), what in your life today prevents you from the **“confidence”** you are meant to have when you appear before Him? What are you doing about that? How does the reminder of God’s love for you enable you to deal with those things?
3. In light of John’s words in 4:18, what is the difference between healthy **“fear”** and unholy **“fear”**? Define each kind and provide an illustration of each.
4. Why is it important to get the **“cause and effect”** logic of 4:19 correct (**“we love because He first loved us”**)? What happens when we reverse this order?

For Further Study

1. **Memorize** Romans 10:9 and 1 John 4:18.
2. Listen to the sermon by Jonathan Edwards preached on 1 John 4:16b, entitled **“The Spirit of the True Saints Is a Spirit of Divine Love,”** and read by Dane Ortlund, available here: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/podcasts/word-of-the-week/jonathan-edwards-gods-love/>. It is one of Edwards’ most powerful sermons.

Audio, video, and handouts for this session are available at www.gracechurch.org/motw.

Next meeting: April 22 – 7pm – **“Assurance and the Triumph of Faith, 1 John 5:1–5”** (Brad Klassen)