

# TAKING A STAND

by Steve Zeisler

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Many have described John as the apostle of love. It was a theme he consistently taught in his long apostolic ministry. However, John was not interested in love experienced as sentiment.

We live in a world that is so committed to tolerance and syncretism that it will sacrifice truth and righteousness to achieve them. John said some of the most profound things ever spoken about forgiveness of sins, but there was no place in his thinking for denial of sins. John challenged his readers to change for the better, and he would not offer a gospel that would make people feel better without being willing to change. Contemporary thinking tends to fudge standards: "Well, we can't really know what's right or wrong. Who's to say, after all, it depends on your point of view. Everything gets taken out of context. I was probably misquoted. There are shades of gray." None of that sort of euphemistic language finds its way into John's teaching.

There are three themes that we've encountered in the book of 1 John, and in relation to each, John makes a strong statement about lies and truth. Let's review these themes. The first is what we believe about Christ regarding his person and work.

The second theme is obedience. Do we obey what we've been told in the gospel? Do we actively serve the One who is our commander? Do we agree with our whole hearts and follow his commands, or do we resist?

The third theme, as already noted, is love. Are our lives sacrificially poured out for other people? Do we give ourselves away?

I took a golf lesson from my friend John McMullin recently. As we were talking about a golf swing that would actually get the ball on the green near the flag, John kept saying one thing after another in a similar vein. The first was something like, "If you're going to succeed, you have to have your weight balanced and your knees bent." So I would do that, and the ball would go flying off in some odd direction. Then he said, "No, if you're going to hit the target, you have to keep your left arm straight." So I'd keep my left arm straight. Then he said, "If you're going to hit the target, you need to keep your head still." Each time it was a different important aspect of the golf swing. The point is, they all work together. In order to hit the target you have to keep your weight balanced and your knees bent, your left arm straight, and your head still.

That's the point the apostle John is making in this letter. All three of the themes that concern John work together, so that as we obey, believe, and love we become mature Christians. So we'll find as we come now to chapter 5 that John is going to take us on a thematic tour in which we'll find each of these important aspects of the Christian life related to the others.

The message of Chapter 5 grows out of the end of chapter 4, naturally enough. The call in 4:20 is, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen." A logical question at this point might be: Who is my brother? John answers by giving us ways to identify fellow family members, those who are born of God. First John 5:1-5:

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

## What children of God believe

The paragraph opens with a statement about belief: Everyone who is committed to the truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah of Israel, has been born of God. The paragraph ends with a statement about belief as well: The one who overcomes the world is the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. Let's take those two sentences together. The content of our faith is a proper thing to examine.

What does the Lord God declare in his word, and do we believe it? John gives us two points: that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah) and that Jesus is the Son of God.

The promises of Messiah made to Israel found their expression in a person who was born in Bethlehem to Mary, promised by angels, visited by shepherds, and attended by magi. A particular boy named Jesus was the Messiah, the Savior promised to the nation of Israel. He is the historical figure believers were looking for throughout the centuries before his birth, and the one they have been looking back to in all the centuries since.

The other point is that Jesus is the Son of God. What does that mean? To believe that Jesus is divine is the requirement that John is making of us here. It is to believe that he is the pre-existent Lord from heaven, that none other was born in that manger but the Son of God himself, who had existed eternally with the Father and the Spirit, submitting himself to the humiliation of birth and ultimately the humiliation of death.

Who is the liar? The one who denies that Jesus is the Christ and the one who denies that he is the Son of God. When we affirm Jesus as the Christ and divine Son we are declaring what is true.

There are a couple of important applications that result. First of all, in verse 1 John says that everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God. Now unfortunately, that leaves out a lot of nice people, doesn't it? There are a great many kindhearted, talented, wise, successful, people in the world who thoughtfully reject these things, who have looked carefully at the gospel and claim it is a fiction. It's challenging to recognize that being a nice person is not ultimately the most important qualification by which God examines us. The Lord God himself has spoken of his Son and has challenged us, implored us to believe in him. These things matter to the Lord, and they must matter to us. Obviously, kindhearted, artistic, thoughtful, wise, successful people can be congratulated for what they are. But if they do not believe Jesus is the Christ, they are not born of God.

Another application that flows from this is the opposite: There are a lot of difficult people who are children of God. In your human family, perhaps there is somebody at whom you can only shake your head---how in the world did you get related to that person? You have almost nothing in common with them except that you have the same parent or grandparent. The same is true of the Christian faith as well. Everyone who believes Jesus is the Christ is a child of God, exactly as you and I are. However distant fellow believers seem in their appearance, status and manner we share equal status as children of the heavenly Father. Follow John's argument in verse 1: "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves his child as well." If we are children of God who love our Father, then we are required to love all the other children. One of the things I have been most grateful for in the last year or so in this area is the formation of a fellowship of evangelical pastors that meets once a month for mutual encouragement and prayer. It's something that God has done without anyone's anticipating or planning it. There are about ten of us who meet, and there is great variety in the group. Our churches have different racial make-ups. The traditions that we come from are different. There are theological issues that distinguish us. But we are growing in love for each other and appreciate what God has given us as his children. Having Ed Harris from the AME Zion Church preach here last summer was a result of this fellowship and the friendships that have developed from it. This pastor's fellowship has been a way for us to take seriously what John is speaking of here.

Remember, we used the analogy of a golf swing earlier. Just getting your weight balanced and your knees bent is not going to allow you to hit the target. You also have to keep your arm straight and your head still and do all the other things that go into hitting a golf ball where you want it to go. Likewise, belief is just one of the issues that we have to be serious about. John goes on then to talk about love. Verse 2: "This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands."

## **Love marked by obedience**

That's an interesting argument, isn't it? How do we love family members most effectively? John doesn't major on attentiveness particularly. But that's what often concerns us about how other people love us, isn't it? I usually consider that the person who loves me best is the person who is most attentive to me. The person who is most aware of my ups and downs, my needs and wants and hopes and dreams, who can minister to me and support me and care about me and put up with me---that is the person who loves me. But that isn't what John says. What he stresses in talking about love is keeping commandments, which is the third of his themes. How can you love someone most profoundly? Take God seriously in their presence. Be obedient to the Lord, love him, listen to him, allow him to bring about the changes of mind and action that mark you out as different. When we act on his commands and in doing that bring others along with us, we're doing more for them than we could by any other means.

The people who have helped me most in my life are not always the ones who understand me the best, but are the ones who challenged me to take the Lord most seriously. By their example of obedience I am stirred to obey, to see God, to listen more faithfully to what he wants. This is love.

One of the ugliest moments in biblical history, and maybe all history, is recorded in 2 Samuel 13. It is the story of the rape of Tamar by her half-brother Amnon. They were both children of David. Amnon lustfully longed for his half-sister Tamar. Second Samuel 13:2-3 says, "Amnon became frustrated to the point of illness on account of his sister Tamar, for she was a virgin, and it seemed impossible for him to do anything to her. Now Amnon had a friend named Jonadab son of Shimeah, David's brother. Jonadab was a very shrewd man." The statement that Amnon had a friend named Jonadab could not be more misleading. Jonadab had the effect on Amnon of encouraging him to sin. Jonadab was a shrewd man, and he hatched the plot by which Tamar could be brought into the bedroom of Amnon. It led to her rape and degradation, to Amnon's murder, and ultimately to civil war. Jonadab encouraged Amnon to sin, helped him give way to his worst instincts, promoted his weakness. He was no friend. He was the bitterest of enemies. He cost Amnon his life and uncounted others their lives as well.

The friend who loves you is the opposite of Jonadab. They will take God seriously, obey God from the heart, love God deeply, and encourage you to do the same.

### **When God's commands are not burdensome**

John is weaving these themes together like the fibers of a rope. What we believe leads to loving relationship with each other. Love is experienced best as obedience to the commands of God. Now we come back again to belief. Look at how the paragraph continues in verses 3b-5: "And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God." So obedience to the commands becomes something not burdensome if what we believe is the radical message of the gospel. If we believe with all our hearts, that Jesus is who he claims to be, then we find that the keeping of his commands is not burdensome at all.

It's not burdensome to do the things that Jesus told us to do, to turn the other cheek when someone slaps us, to give up our rights for someone else, to love our enemies, to give to the poor and care for those who are outcast and hurting, to deny desires that are unhealthy and ungodly. None of those things are difficult or burdensome if we believe that Jesus cares for us. He is defending us, he is committed to meeting our needs at the deepest level, he knows the number of hairs on our head, his face is turned to us all the time, and we are never once out of his thoughts. He is the Lord God, commander of the universe, and he is committed to making us who we ought to be, filling us with the life of God. If we believe that's true, then obedience is no burden.

When faith in God's goodness or power wanes, obeying his commands becomes burdensome. The thinking of the world challenges us, "Someone else is getting more than you. You're attempting to live a life of discipline and self-sacrifice and love for God, but actually that's foolish, because you'll miss out. Nothing good will come of it." Everything depends on what we believe. If we believe that Jesus loves us as much as he claims, then the commands are not burdensome, they are a gift.

I was talking to a man this week whose brother is in competition to become a Navy Seal. The physical, mental, and emotional requirements are extreme. But people fight for the opportunity, hundreds apply. They go through unbelievable difficulties attempting to be the best of the best, in order that they might achieve status as a Navy Seal and get to wear the patch of that sort of warrior. All the hardship and discipline becomes a privilege, something that is freely chosen and delighted in, because someday they will get to wear that badge of honor. The psychology in John's point is exactly the same. Life in Christ is something that is so worth having, his grace so abundant that when we believe him his commands are not burdensome.

Belief leads to relationship, relationship should be filled with love, love issues itself in obedience, and obedience flows from what we believe. The only way to "hit the target" is to have all these elements that comprise our Christian life reinforcing each other.

### **The testimonies about the Son of God**

Let's look briefly at the next paragraph, which grows out of the argument at verse 5 about overcoming the world. It turns out that the world fights back against faith, doesn't it? The world doesn't make it easy for us to believe the radical idea that our lives are changed as we have heard here. In verses 6-9 we encounter arguments that John made to strengthen the original recipients of this letter:

This is the one who came by water and blood---Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son.

Now listen carefully, this is the testimony of God, greater than man's testimony, to be taken very seriously because of who said it, and because of the nature of what is said. Verses 10-12:

Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

The testimony of the water and the blood and the Spirit are issues that John was writing about to his first-century hearers who were being confronted by heretics known as gnostics. The gnostics essentially said this (in one version of gnosticism): Jesus was an ordinary human being who was born of an ordinary mother and father, Mary and Joseph, and who grew up as a carpenter. But on the day of his baptism, a dove descended on him from heaven, and he became the Christ. Some sort of God-influence or God-envelope descended on him at his baptism, and he went on to become the marvelous teacher and example and so on whom we all should follow. Jesus, baptized in deity for a period of time in his life, was someone we should applaud and emulate. But the Spirit left him at the end of his life; the envelope was taken off, and the ordinary man, Jesus of Nazareth, was crucified on a bloody cross and died just the way everyone else dies.

What John is saying is that the testimony at Jesus' baptism---this is the "water" reference---is true. "This is my beloved Son." His teaching is to be listened to, his example emulated. But it is also true that his cross was testimony to his deity. He didn't cease being God the Son on the cross. The envelope wasn't taken off. It was God the Son, the divine One, who died on the cross. Father and Son separated for the first time, Jesus suffering death and hell for us as the Son. That's what the testimony of the blood refers to.

Then finally the Spirit witnesses to us on the inside, God speaking to our hearts that it's true---no other is like him. He is the focus of every hope and longing of mankind. He is the one, unique answer. The ultimate reason that these things must be believed is that God steps onto the witness stand and bears testimony that this is his Son, and the one who has the Son has life. To be born of the Father, to be a child of God, to be infused with life itself, is to be in a right relationship with Christ. The one who does not have the Son---the one who believes anything else, who truncates the message, who waters it down, who pretends to believe but doesn't

really, whose "Christianity" is filled with falsehood and hypocrisy and deception and shallowness---does not have life.

I want to close with a word to you if you know for sure that you do not have the Son. People come to church, especially at Christmas time, for a lot of reasons. There are some here who are wrestling with these things, who are struggling to believe and are in the process of coming to faith. Conversion rarely happens instantaneously. If you are one whose heart hears the testimony of the Spirit that Jesus is the Son of God, this Christmas season--this very day--can be the time that you give your life to Christ and become a child of God. Consider the words of invitation in some of the old, familiar carols:

Christ, by highest heaven adored;  
Christ, the everlasting Lord!  
Late in time behold Him come,  
Offspring of the Virgin's womb:  
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;  
Hail th' incarnate Deity,

Pleased as man with men to dwell,  
Jesus, our Emmanuel.  
Hark! the herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the newborn King."

Hail the incarnate Deity---incarnate in the man Jesus. One of the reasons I'm convinced that most people in modern western culture don't like the old Christmas carols so much, and prefer Frosty the Snowman and Jingle Bells and others, is that almost all of the older hymns had some call for decision in them. If you listen carefully to the lyrics, they're urging us to believe something. I'm going to read two verses from O Little Town of Bethlehem as an appeal to you who do not have the Son. There is no life, no hope, no eternity, no assurance of the presence of God, without the Son. Respond to the invitation here:

How silently, how silently  
The wondrous gift is giv'n!  
So God imparts to human hearts  
The blessings of His heav'n.  
No ear may hear His coming,  
But in this world of sin,  
Where meek souls will receive Him still  
The dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem!  
Descend to us, we pray;  
Cast out our sin, and enter in;  
Be born in us today.

We hear the Christmas angels  
The great glad tidings tell;  
O come to us, abide with us,  
Our Lord Emmanuel!

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