

The Necessity of Walking in the Light: An Exegesis of 1 John 1:5-10

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Abstract

1 John 1:5-10 is an exhortatory piece whose subject is the character of Christian living in relation to God's standard of holiness. This paper is a study of the necessity of walking in the light based on the exegesis of 1 John 1:5-10. The exegesis applies the grammatical-historical method through which the researcher examines the grammar, syntax, and the literary structure of 1 John 1:5-10. The statement, ὁ θεὸς φῶς ἐστὶν καὶ σκοτία ἐν αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδεμία, in verse 5 and its related concepts in the other verses serves as the central idea under investigation. The researcher observes that the author uses a pastoral rhetoric method to warn against three negative claims and practices (1 Jn 1:6, 8, 10) and encourages his audience to observe two positive confessions and practices (1 Jn 1:7, 9), all of which are related to verse 5. The exegesis shows that the aim of the author is to encourage believers to live according to the fact that God is light and requires that those who have fellowship with him should walk in the light (1 Jn 1:5-7). This article has highlighted some of the ways in which Christians today can be motivated to pursue a holy life as a requirement by God in order to conform to his nature.

Keywords: God, light, fellowship, sin, walk, confession, cleanse

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Everyone who comes to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ is expected to conduct their lives in a manner that practically demonstrates their faith. One of the challenges in modern day Christianity is that some believers do not conduct their lives in a manner that is consistent with God's character and expectations as presented in 1 John 1:5-10. Some reasons for this contradiction could be false confessions of being a Christian or challenges associated with living a Christian life in an increasingly evil world. This passage contains references to characteristics of God that explain his nature, behavior, and relationship with his people. The purpose of this paper is to exegete 1 John 1:5-10 to find out what John said about the character of God and its implications for those within the Johannine Christian community. It explores the theological, logical, and ethical connection between who God is and how believers ought to conduct their lives in relation to him. It then draws life applications for individual believers and the Christian community today.

Exegesis

The Exegetical Outline

In the following exegesis section, the issues discussed include: (1) the message in 1 John 1:5, that, "God is light," (2) the theme of "walking in darkness" (verse 6), and (3) the theme of "walking in the light" (verse 7). The other issues discussed are the contrasting themes of the "claim of not having sin" (verse 8), "dealing with sin" (verse 9), and finally the claim of "not having sinned" (verse 10).

The Message: God is Light

Verse 5: ὁ θεὸς φῶς ἐστὶν καὶ σκοτία ἐν αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδεμία "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all"

“God is light” is the message that John says that they heard from Jesus Christ. The gnomic phrase θεὸς φῶς ἐστὶν portrays God’s unchangeable nature to be light. The verb also indicates that certainty of what the apostle says about God. The word φῶς (“light”) is a predicative nominative which means that it describes God’s identity, and by implication, his personality and activity. The absolute sense of θεὸς φῶς ἐστὶν also indicates that all light outside of him is a radiation of his very nature. The writer is not merely saying that God is the author of light as the creator of day and night and the luminaries, but he uses the term “light” metaphorically to emphasize that “God is holy and true and cannot tolerate sin”(Gunawan, 2017, p. 300). Smalley’s view of the phrase ὁ θεὸς φῶς ἐστὶν is broader and more comprehensive because he says that God is absolute in his “glory” (physical), in “truth” (intellectual) and in his “holiness” (moral) (Smalley, 1984, p. 20). However, the author of 1 John is concerned more with the moral character of God with an emphasis on his holiness, so that he can encourage his audience to pursue holy living.

This statement is seen by some scholars as the summary of the whole message of 1 John. It is called the “theological proposition” of 1 John 1:5-2:21 (Bigalke, 2013, p. 7). It forms the basis for confession and practice because it is the starting point of the moral and ethical discussion in the verses that follow. Though the phrase θεὸς φῶς ἐστὶν only occurs here in the entire epistle, the moral and ethical discussions are prevalent in the epistle whose basis is the character of God.

The statement, καὶ σκοτία ἐν αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδεμία, is a strong antithesis which serves as an emphasis to the fact that God is light. Similar antitheses between light and darkness are common in Johannine theology as seen in John 1:5; 3:19-21; 8:12; 12:35, and 12:46. Pauline

writings also contain this antithesis formula in Romans 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:4-5 and Ephesians 5:8. The full statement describes God's absolute holiness and freedom from every sin.

The apostle employs an emphatic negation to strengthen his thesis statement that God is light. The term for darkness, σκοτία, is a nominative subject of ἔστιν. It is used metaphorically as an antithesis to φῶς and in this context it refers to moral impurity. Darkness is the absence of light and it stands for absence of morality and purity. Psalm 5:4 also teaches about the absolute hatred of sin by stating that “he has no pleasure in wickedness” and “he hates all workers of iniquity.” οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδεμία can be translated as “no, not even one (speck).” God and sin are mutually exclusive. God has no spot, speck, or faintest blemish of sin.

Walking in Darkness

Verse 6: Ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι κοινωνίαν ἔχομεν μετ' αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐν τῷ σκότει περιπατῶμεν, ψευδόμεθα καὶ οὐ ποιοῦμεν τὴν ἀλήθειαν. “If we say that we have fellowship with him yet we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.”

The construction of ἐὰν followed by a subjunctive occurs five times in this passage. In all five appearances, ἐὰν is followed by a 1st person plural where the author joins the audience in applying the saying and the inference (Ἐὰν εἴπωμεν, ἐὰν... περιπατῶμεν, ἐὰν εἴπωμεν, ἐὰν ὁμολογῶμεν, and ἐὰν εἴπωμεν).

εἴπωμεν is an aoristic present since it expresses the idea that the claim of having fellowship with God is happening simultaneously with the walking in darkness. ἐὰν followed by a subjunctive in the protasis makes the “if” statements in verse 6-10 indefinite third class conditional statements. The subjunctive conveys an undefined hypothetical situation presented in the apodosis (Duff, 2005, p. 226). The situation is not viewed as actually happening, such as, “if we say as we do.” Furthermore, it is unlikely that the author and his audience would be walking

in darkness since he had written that they “have fellowship with God” (1:3). Some authors view the “if...” construction as an antithetical polemic where the claims or behaviors rejected can be assigned to schismatics and used to identify and profile them (Lieu, 1991, p. 14).

Another approach, perhaps the most balanced, is to see that this grammatical construction serves as a mitigated command and as such, verse 6a can be read as, “Do not claim to have fellowship with him and continue to walk in darkness” (Culy, 2004, p. xviii). Lieu’s (2008, p. 83) idea is that the antitheses can act as exhortations and warnings where they show paths open to the Christian community and their consequences. It is unlikely that John was “walking in darkness” since the “we” includes those who belonged to the apostolic circle. Hodges (1972, p.51) observes that some theologians regard the conditional clause as *a priori impossible*, that is, it is practically impossible for any Christian, much less an apostle, to make such a claim. These statements convey a timeless theological truth about human weakness and susceptibility to live in and commit sin while truly confessing the Christian faith.

Having fellowship with God is another way of saying that the believer has a saving relationship with God which comes from faith in Jesus Christ. In John’s phraseology, it results from believing in Jesus Christ and receiving eternal life (Jn 1:12: 5:24).

Walking in darkness could mean living a life of total disregard of the leading and guidance of God, becoming like one who does “not understand where he is going because darkness has blinded his eyes” (1 Jn 2:11). The article τῷ in 1:6, 7 is supplied emphatically to denote irreconcilable distinction between light and darkness. Both ἐν τῷ σκότει (1:6) and ἐν τῷ φωτὶ (1:7) are used to distinguish two separate spiritual and ethical regions. The first represents the sphere of evil, deceit, and sin and the second represents the sphere of purity, truth, and holiness.

The assertion that someone has fellowship with God while walking in darkness is an outright lie. The statement, οὐ ποιοῦμεν τὴν ἀλήθειαν, does not just serve as a repetition in the negative form for ψευδόμεθα but as an independent clause that answers the clause ἐν τῷ σκότει περιπατῶμεν. There is a twofold expression of the hypocrisy of claiming one thing and practicing something different. There is the lie of the tongue (the spoken lie) and the lie of life (not practicing the truth). Darkness cannot fellowship with light; right and wrong cannot coexist. Keener observes that in the OT, walking in the light meant obeying God's commandments (Psalm 56:13) and the Jewish teachers referred to their way of life as *halakhah*, "walking" (Keener, 2014, p. 708).

Walking in the Light

Verse 7: ἐὰν δὲ ἐν τῷ φωτὶ περιπατῶμεν ὡς αὐτός ἐστιν ἐν τῷ φωτί, κοινωνίαν ἔχομεν μετ' ἀλλήλων καὶ τὸ αἷμα Ἰησοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ καθαρίζει ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ πάσης ἁμαρτίας. (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.)

There are two occurrences of the phrase ἐν τῷ φωτὶ in this verse. In both cases, it represents a realm of existence that is characterized by holy conduct, and godly values. Unlike men who "walk" in the light, God is always "in" the light. Since φωτί is a dative of sphere, it denotes the quality of life and character that is free from corruption by sin. The idea that "God is in the light" is the same as "God is light" because the element of God's life is the same as his nature.

The metaphor of "if we walk in the light as he is in the light" can be interpreted to mean "if we live in holiness as he is holy..." Walking in the light means living according to God's holy standards that are revealed in the Word of God. In other terms, it is living in a manner

“worthy of the calling” (Eph 4:1), producing the fruit of light which is found in all that is good and true (Eph 5:9). The same can be seen in Paul’s advice to the Galatians to “keep in step with the Spirit” and to produce the fruit of the Holy Spirit as opposed to gratifying the desires of the flesh (Gal 5:16-26). “Walking in the light” is the conscious sustained endeavor to live a life in conformity with the revelation of God and is the necessary condition for fellowship with God (Brooke, 1912, p. 17).

Walking in the light as God himself (αὐτός is emphatic) is in the light is an invitation to imitate God by conducting one’s life in a Christlike manner that is free from sin. It is a necessity on the part of the believer since it is the demonstration of who they are in Christ. Those who are saved and are in fellowship with God, are called upon to reflect and conform to the character of God in their lives. To have a fellowship with God means that one must adopt a life that is antithetical to sin and wickedness.

The fellowship of believers with one another is the practical and visible demonstration of one’s personal relationship with God. It entails a reciprocal sharing with other believers in the life and activities of the body of Christ. Allen (1985) rightly calls this phenomenon of mutual sharing the formation of a Christian community which has a vertical and horizontal aspect. The vertical aspect is the relationship that believers have with God through Jesus Christ and is manifested horizontally in the loving personal relationships amongst believers.

κοινωνίαν ἔχομεν μετ’ ἀλλήλων is a progressive idea that stems from κοινωνίαν ἔχομεν μετ’ αὐτοῦ (verse 6). It communicates the idea that all those who walk in the light of God and who live according to God’s righteous standard are those who have a true and enduring fellowship with God. Walking in the light is expressed in fellowship. The way for someone to

demonstrate that they are walking in the light, that is, conforming to the character of God, is to express the qualities of godliness to members of the body of Christ.

The verb καθαρίζει has a gnomic present shade and the implication is that for those who walk in the light, the means of cleansing them from sin has been provided in the death of Jesus Christ. Those whose lives show the evidence of walking in the ways of God, are those who have been cleansed (justification) and receive the continuous cleansing from sin (sanctification). They are not encouraged to sin but if they happen to sin, as indeed it happens every so often, they have Jesus Christ whose atoning power of his blood never ceases. Myers (2021, p.57) makes sense of the present tense and connects it to the Levitical sacrificial system by saying that John describes how Jesus' blood continues to cleanse believers who confess their sins and trust in Jesus' mediation. The present tense is also a statement of fact thus teaching that the blood of Jesus is effective and adequate in cleansing from every sin. His blood is still cleansing because he is still ministering as a priest and a mediator.

The Claim of not Having Sin

Verse 8: ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι ἁμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν, ἑαυτοὺς πλανῶμεν καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν. (If we say that we do not have sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.)

The condition functions here as mitigated exhortation that can be interpreted as, “do not claim to be without sin.” ὅτι is a conjunction that introduces the complementary statement ὅτι ἁμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν in an indirect discourse. The claim of sinlessness is not actually made but theoretical.

The apparent claim of having no sin is the denial of inherent corruption present in the human heart. The claim of perfectionism could be traced to the Jewish antinomianism where some individuals maintained that they were absolved from the moral obligations of the law

(Smalley, 1984, p. 22). Paul taught that all men “have sinned” (Rom 3:23) due to the sin of Adam (Rom 5:18-19). All people have inherited the original sin and have a continuous proclivity to sinful conduct. ἁμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν has an aoristic present shade which implies that whenever one claims to be sinless, they are lying. The present tense also helps us to see that the believer is susceptible to sin even in the regenerate state.

“Having sin” does more than just to mean to “commit sin.” For a person who is not a Christian, sin is the principle and active power that works within him (Eph 2:1). For a Christian however, though they may fall in sin, the power of sin is suppressed by the power of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:16). The idea denoted by “to have sin” is found only in 1 John and in the fourth Gospel in John 9:41; 15:22, 24; 19:11. The gospel usage denotes a definite sense of guilt of sin. The proponents of this negative statement, ἁμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν, recognize the fact of sin and its power on human affairs but go ahead to deny that they themselves are guilty, thus committing “the most heinous sin possible” because taking such a position is to “rebel against God’s righteous providence” (Breland, 1938, p. 70).

The phrase ἑαυτοῦς πλανῶμεν means deceiving oneself or taking a path that is contrary to God’s revealed truth. Refusing to admit sin only amounts to self-deception, a fact that is presented by the aoristic present shade. Self-deception is a sorry state which can be avoided by recognizing and depending on the redemption wrought by Jesus for sins, something that Raymond calls the “greatest weapon against sin” (Raymond, 1988, p. 111).

ἡ ἀλήθεια “the truth” stands for “that which is really so” and in the context of this passage it is the opposite of being in denial of sin (Danker, 2009, pp. 15–16). Those who claim to have no sin reveal that they lack an inner principle of truth. This truth is more than honesty and uprightness and Brooke (1912, p.19) suggests that it can be viewed objectively or subjectively as

an external standard in accordance with which actions must be shaped, or as an inner principle that is working and molding a man's inner life.

Dealing With Sin

Verse 9: ἐὰν ὁμολογῶμεν τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν, πιστός ἐστὶν καὶ δίκαιος ἵνα ἀφῆ ἡμῖν τὰς ἁμαρτίας καὶ καθάρσιν ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ πάσης ἀδικίας. (If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just that he may forgive us our sins and cleanse us from every unrighteousness.)

ὁμολογῶμεν is a progressive present that shows that confession of sins to God leads to forgiveness and cleansing. Confession of sin is the voluntary act of admitting one's sins and appealing for God's mercy while making a resolution to abandon sin and live according to God's law. Simenson (2004, p. 401) says that "confession is how God leads us to walk in the light." The subjunctive is John's way of making appeals to the believers to consider acknowledging their faults and mistakes so as to remain in the path of walking in the light, in the right relationship with God. As Allman (2015, p. 217) puts it, true confession itself is an act of prayer in which a believer acknowledges sin to God and that yields cleansing and forgiveness of sins. Whether the reference is to public or verbal acknowledgement of sin is unresolved among scholars, but there is a consensus that it involves concession of sin and admission of wrongdoing.

Pardon for sin is not a meritorious act but a gratuitous act. It can be viewed in at least two ways. First as an exclusive condition where there is no pardon for sin without confession and secondly as an inclusive condition where God certainly forgives those who confess. Believers are cleansed from their sins as they confess and trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins. Those who acknowledge the existence of sin in them have an open door to access forgiveness and removal of sins. The plural form, ἁμαρτίας, may indicate confession of "particular acts of sin" in an individual rather than the acknowledgement of sin in general (Smalley, 1984, p. 31).

The adjective πιστός (faithful) is used 67 times in the NT where it stands for “trustworthy,” “faithful,” “dependable” (Bauer, 2001, p. 64). From God’s perspective, it is fundamentally right for him to show his mercy to humanity by forgiving their sins. His justice is fulfilled when he grants us the forgiveness of sins in conformity to his character, and that has already been accomplished by the shedding of the blood of his Son Jesus Christ. Therefore, forgiveness of sins is an act of justice upon Christ (since he bore the punishment for sin from God) and mercy upon us (since God punished Christ on behalf of humanity). The penalty for sin was fully paid by the death of Christ.

ἀπὸ πάσης ἀδικίας is a parallel statement to ἀπὸ πάσης ἁμαρτίας. Both phrases indicate God’s determination to remove everything that is ungodly from the lives of believers. The term ἀδικίας refers to acts of wrongdoing. It stands in contrast to δίκαιος which is the character of God. In this context, both ἀδικίας and ἁμαρτίας refer to all acts of wrongdoing that amount to darkness. ἀπὸ πάσης ἀδικίας is a genitive of separation which denotes that God removes every unrighteousness in form of words, deeds, thoughts or otherwise from the believer once they repent.

The Claim of not Having Sinned

Verse 10: ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι οὐχ ἡμαρτήκαμεν, ψεύστην ποιοῦμεν αὐτὸν καὶ ὁ λόγος αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν. (If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar and his word is not in us.)

οὐχ ἡμαρτήκαμεν “we have not sinned” is an extensive perfect which takes note of the sinful acts that have been committed in the past and the continued struggle with sin in the present life. οὐχ ἡμαρτήκαμεν is a parallel statement to ἁμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν (verse 8) and both refer to a denial of sin. The claim of not having sinned is a denial of one’s sinful nature before the soul-

searching splendor of the holiness of God. Since the verb ἡμαρτήκαμεν includes past and present sins, the author implies that the claim of not having sinned refers to denial of every sin ever committed, including the original sin of Adam. Impenitence, as Findlay (1909, p.113) calls it, is refusal to bow down at the sight of divine righteousness and admit human guilt.

The noun ψεύστην is an accusative of result which describes what one makes of God when one denies one's sinfulness. This phrase καὶ ὁ λόγος αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν functions as an idiom that can be translated as a "rejection of what God says." ὁ λόγος is a nominative subject whose referent is the body of truth about God that was revealed to the apostles by Jesus Christ and summarized as ἡ ἀγγελία "the message" in verse 5. This λόγος entails the teachings of Jesus and the application of his teachings to the life of a believer. αὐτοῦ is a genitive of source since everything that the apostle refers to as the word has its origin in God. As noted in previous occurrences, ἔστιν is a gnomic present that states a timeless fact that as long as one claims to be sinless, the claim is not true and consistent to the word of God. If the word of God is not in someone, it shows that person is not living in conformity to the standards of God's holiness in their daily life as believer.

Conclusion and Application

The Moral Challenge to Walk in the Light

The statement ὁ θεὸς φῶς ἐστὶν καὶ σκοτία ἐν αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδεμία carries with it an inevitable moral challenge to believers to walk in the light (verse 7). Faith must match with duty and confession with conduct. The moral perfection of God (verse 5) is a message that believers must seek to resonate with as followers of Christ. This message has sadly disappeared from many pulpits in churches today. Increasingly, preachers are presenting God as one who has a

degree of tolerance to sin. God will receive people just as they are even in their pretense and self-deception. The outcome of this contemporary preaching is liberalism and shallow Christianity.

This passage is a reminder that God is holy, and does not tolerate sin, and neither should believers. Those who have true fellowship with him must shun evil and seek holiness. The goal of believers is to be like God in character. Fellowship with God is more than just a verbal proclamation of saying that they have fellowship with him (verse 6); it carries with it the weight of living a pure life.

Developing the Right Attitude Towards Sin

Believers ought to be aware of the nearness and reality of sin in their lives. One test of existence of someone's fellowship with God is their response to sin. Whenever one sins, instead of denying their sin (verse 8 and 10), they should confess and repent (verse 9). One of the challenges in modern Christianity is normalization of sins such as bribing, fornication, and homosexuality. These sins are treated as "unavoidable" and somehow "tolerable." John writes that both claims ἀμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν (we have no sin) and οὐχ ἡμαρτήκαμεν (we have not sinned) only portray self-deception. When believers sin, instead ought to feel indicted and convicted before God and proceed to a godly sorrow that produces repentance (2 Cor 7:10).

The Father is always ready and willing to receive all those who err but choose to recant their evil ways and turn to him. Churches should support and offer a hand of fellowship to those who fall in sin but repent, with the aim of pointing them to the love of Jesus. There is every effort by John to portray Jesus at the center of the redemptive plan of God as shown by the phrase, τὸ αἷμα Ἰησοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ καθαρίζει ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ πάσης ἀμαρτίας. Though the life of a believer is not perfect here on earth, there is assurance of an ever-present and effective gift of forgiveness of sin.

God gives believers the power to overcome sin in their Christian life. The believer is gradually freed from the power of sin while holding onto the glorious hope in Christ to be finally freed from the presence of sin (Breland & Ky., 1938, p. 66). Since at present sin is an ugly reality, believers should long for the day of the Lord Jesus Christ who will “transform our lowly bodies to become like his glorious body” (Phil 3:21) away from the power and presence of sin. While on earth, their call is to abide in Christ Jesus by walking in step with the Holy Spirit so that they can overcome the power of sin. Kopic (2014, p.111) rightly observes that believers could lose the power over sin if they fail to abide in Christ.

Conclusion

“God is light” is the motivation for believers to walk in the light and remain in fellowship with him and with one another. John exhorts the believers to look with great admiration and humble admission the holiness and righteousness of God and thereby desire and live according to his will. 1 John 1:3 states the aim of John’s writing, which is “that you may have fellowship with him.” The biggest hindrance to experiencing fellowship with God is the presence of sin in one’s life. It follows that the reason for John’s saying that God is light is so that believers can build up their faith and conduct their lives in a holy way so as to remain in fellowship with him. Those who come to faith in Jesus Christ must reflect the true character of God. Verse 5 is the foundation for the appeals that John makes in the subsequent verses. He does not make direct imperatives but mitigated appeals to his audience to consider conducting their lives according to the fact that God is light. The first appeal is expressed in verse 6 and 7 which is “conduct your lives according to God’s pure and holy nature” which in essence is “do not sin.” The second appeal is based on their response to sin and can be stated as, “when one falls into sin, they should confess and seek God’s forgiveness.”

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