

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	1 John		Pastor/Teacher
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THE FAMILY OF GOD

In 1923, J. Gresham Machen wrote his magnificent book *Christianity and Liberalism*. In it he lamented the loss of the consciousness of sin, which was formerly the starting point of genuine Christian preaching,

“but today it is gone. Characteristic of the modern age, above all else, is a supreme confidence in human goodness; the religious literature of the day is redolent of that confidence. Get beneath the rough exterior of men, we are told, and we shall discover enough self-sacrifice to found upon it the hope of society; the world’s evil, it is said, can be overcome with the world’s good; no help is needed from outside the world. What has produced this satisfaction with human goodness? What has become of the consciousness of sin? The consciousness of sin has certainly been lost. Seventy-five years ago, Western civilization, despite inconsistencies, was still predominantly Christian; today it is predominantly pagan. In speaking of ‘paganism,’ we are not using a term of reproach. Ancient Greece was pagan, but it was glorious, and the modern world has not even begun to equal its achievements. What, then, is paganism? The answer is not really difficult. Paganism is that view of life which finds the highest goal of human existence in the healthy and harmonious and joyous development of existing human faculties. Very different is the Christian ideal. Paganism is optimistic with regard to unaided human nature, whereas Christianity is the religion of the broken heart. In saying that Christianity is the religion of the broken heart, we do not mean that Christianity ends with the broken heart; we do not mean that the characteristic Christian attitude is a continual beating on the breast or a continual crying of ‘Woe is me.’ Nothing could be further from the fact. On the contrary, Christianity means that sin is faced once for all, and then is cast, by the grace of God, forever into the depths of the sea. The trouble with the paganism of ancient Greece, as with the paganism of modern times, was not in the superstructure, which was glorious, but in the foundation, which was rotten. There was always something to be covered up; the enthusiasm of the architect was maintained only by ignoring the disturbing fact of sin. In Christianity, on the other hand, nothing needs to be covered up. The fact of sin is faced squarely once for all, and is dealt with by the grace of God. But then, after sin has been removed by the grace of God, the Christian can proceed to develop joyously every faculty that God has given him. Such is the higher Christian humanism – a humanism founded not upon human pride but upon divine grace. But although Christianity does not end with the broken heart, it does begin with the broken heart, it begins with the consciousness of sin. Without the consciousness of sin, the whole of the gospel will seem to be an idle tale.”¹

In this section of 1 John, the Apostle begins by declaring the universal experience of all true believers – their sins are forgiven. The verb *apheōntai* is in the perfect tense and should be

translated “have been forgiven,” as in the NASB. How are sins forgiven? John has already told us in 1:7, “The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin” by making propitiation for our sins (2:2). Rightly did Calvin proclaim, “Without this assurance there would be only a transient and sketchy sort of religion. In fact, those who pass over the free remission of sins and dwell on other things build without a foundation. But John means that nothing is more suitable to stimulate men to fear God than when they are properly taught what blessings Christ has brought them, as Paul beseeches them by the bowels of God’s mercies (Phil. 2:1).”²

I. THEIR IDENTITY. John addresses believers in general by referring to them as “little children.” The word *teknia* in v. 12 is a different word than the one translated “little children,” *paidia* in v. 13. F. F. Bruce points out that, “both nouns take their precise meanings from their correlation in the two contexts with ‘fathers’ and ‘young men,’ they must be synonymous, indicating a more restricted group than the general ‘my little children’ (*teknia*) of verses 1 and 28 or ‘little children’ (*paidia*) of verse 18.”³ The term *teknia* refers to the whole body of believers as members of the family of God. The emphasis is upon kinship, whereas *paidia* denotes the concept of subordination

A. Children. “John, then, addresses his readers as children, just as he does elsewhere in the Epistle, to express their need of instruction and their state of dependence upon God and upon teachers such as himself. They are people whose sins have been forgiven; they have fulfilled the condition laid down in 1:9, and as a result of their confession of their sin, they know the joy of forgiveness. Forgiveness, however, does not depend on human confession in the sense that this secures favor and pardon from God; it is granted ‘on account of his name,’ a phrase which directs our minds back to what John has said about the blood of Jesus and his role as advocate and offering for sin (1:7; 2:1f.), and which also leads forward to the need for belief in his name (3:23; 5:13). The act of forgiveness is expressed by a perfect tense; John is thinking of the conversation for his readers, whereas in 1:9 his thought was more of the continual forgiveness for which the Christian daily prays. If John is thinking here of new converts, the appropriateness of this statement is manifest. The experience of forgiveness is the center of the Christian experience of conversion. ‘No man can properly rank as a Christian, in the sense of the New Testament, who has not received the forgiveness of sins, or who is not conscious that through its impartation something has happened of decisive moment for his relation to God,’ wrote H. R. Mackintosh.”⁴

B. Younger Christians. The notion of believers at different stages of spiritual development does seem to be the flow of John’s thought, as Marshall points out, “the characteristics to which John refers are in each instance particularly relevant to the group which is being addressed: the young convert would be specially conscious of God’s forgiveness (where knowledge of the Godhead, shared with the fathers, is alluded to in place of ‘forgiveness’); the mature Christian would know God in a deep way; and growing believers would have the spiritual motivation and strength to conquer the evil one.”⁵

C. Seasoned Christians. John reminds the “fathers” in the faith of their growth in the knowledge of God. This knowledge, unlike the claim of the gnostics, is not one of speculation but one that has as its goal spiritual maturity in Christ.

NOTE: What does it mean to overcome (conquer) the evil one? “The idea of conquering evil is introduced for the first time in 1 John at this point. Here it leads into an appeal to resist worldliness (vv. 15-17; cf. 5:4-5). But the next time victory is mentioned in this letter (at 4:4), the thought of resisting *false teaching* is included (*kai nenikēkate autous*, ‘you have defeated them;’ that is, ‘you have successfully resisted those who were propagating heretical doctrines’); and it is therefore

not unreasonable to suppose that John was also anticipating this theme in the present verse. *All wrong must be conquered by the genuine Christian believer, including wrong thinking and theology!*"⁶

CONCLUSION: R. E. O. White, a noted Scottish Bible expositor from the last century, writes that, "in that first century, no less than now, the Christian calling was a call to battle and the Christian life a ceaseless war against fightings within and fears without, against unbelief and the enemies of the cross of Christ, against spiritual wickedness in high places, against principalities and powers and the rulers of the darkness of this world. The joyous discovery of the young, therefore, was the experience of victory, the finding in Christ of the cause to fight for and the strength with which to struggle, and the undying hope that refuses to acknowledge final defeat, but holds we fall to rise, and are baffled to fight better."⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ J. G. Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1946), pp. 64-66.

² Calvin's *New Testament Commentaries V* (Eerdmans, 1961), p. 250.

³ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Eerdmans, 1970), p. 58.

⁴ I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Eerdmans, 1978), p. 138.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Stephen S. Smalley, *Word Biblical Commentary: 1, 2, 3, John* (Word, 1985), p. 75.

⁷ R. E. O. White, *Open Letter to Evangelicals: A Devotional and Homiletical Commentary on The First Epistle of John* (Eerdmans, 1964), p. 60.