

## “Vital Signs” (An Exposition of 1 John 5:1-3)<sup>1</sup>

### *Introduction*

I recently took a course on basic first aid through the Sheriff's Department. In addition to teaching us CPR and other basic skills, one of the very first things that they taught us was the importance of checking for *vital signs – signs of life*. You are taught to check the ABC's – *airway, breathing, and circulation* (the pulse).

In a somewhat similar way, in our text and throughout the first epistle of John he is teaching us to *check ourselves for spiritual vital signs – signs of spiritual life* - life given by the Holy Spirit in the new birth.<sup>2</sup> And so one of the most important ways that we can come to '**know that we have eternal life**' (1 John 5:13) is by *knowing if we have been made spiritually alive by the Holy Spirit*.

In order to help us as believers in Jesus Christ to attain to a sure and certain confidence or assurance of our salvation, he applies what we might call three (3) tests of our spiritual vital signs – signs of our truly having been born again and being in a state of salvation.

Those three tests may be summarized as those of *love, obedience, and truth* - LOT, for short. (They have also been referred to as the *social, moral, and doctrinal* tests.) In other words, the evidence or proof of the genuineness of our being born again unto new life in Christ will be seen: **1.)** in our love for God and for the brethren, **2.)** in our obedience (however imperfect) to God's commands, and **3.)** in our belief and abiding in the truth of Christ.

In our text the Apostle John includes *all three of these tests* and shows how they are intertwined and interrelated in such a way as to be *inseparable*. All three must necessarily go together. All three of these things are evidence of our being born again and begotten of God by His Holy Spirit – *faith* in Christ, *love* for God and our brethren, and *obedience* to God's commandments.

And so this morning we will look at these three tests, all the while acknowledging that there is a great deal of overlap between them. First, we will look at what John tells us about *what we must believe*; second, the *necessity of love*; and third, *the necessity of obedience*.

### *Faith as Evidence of the New Birth*

The *first* thing that John brings to our attention is that *our belief in the truth of Christ is evidence of the new birth*. In v.1 John writes, **“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him.”** (Italics added)

You could say it this way – *how do you know if you have been born again or “born of God”?* The first answer to that question that John gives us is that if you have been born of God *you will believe or trust in Christ for salvation*. But that in doing so you will also **“believe that Jesus is the Christ.”** This is the *doctrinal test – believing and holding to the truth of Christ is the first sign of true spiritual life*.

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> See Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Life in Christ: Studies in 1 John*, (Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2002), p.579.

Perhaps the first thing to notice here is that John clearly tells us that *regeneration precedes faith and is the cause of it*, not the other way around. This is because the word **“believes”** is in the *present* tense, while **“has been born of God”** translates the *perfect* tense of the Greek word, which here *indicates a past event with ongoing results or consequences*.

As John Stott puts it, this “shows clearly that believing is the consequence, not the cause, of the new birth.”<sup>3</sup> And so being born of God comes *first*, and it is only *because* one has been born of God that he or she believes that Jesus is the Christ!

So how do you know if you have been born again by the work of the Holy Spirit? *Simple – your faith*. Have you trusted in Christ for salvation? And do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah of God? If so, that is evidence that you have been born again and are a child of God through faith!

In many ways this is similar to the question as to how you may know if you are among the elect of God. Sometimes after coming to the knowledge of the truth of election and divine predestination, it happens that sincere believers will start to wonder how they can be sure that God has chosen them for salvation. Have *you* ever wondered about that?

Well how *do* you know? We certainly *cannot* peer behind the curtain, so to speak, to look into the secret things of God (Deuteronomy 29:29). Just as you know that you are *born again* because you believe, likewise you know that *you are elect* primarily because you believe. In 2 Thessalonians 2:13 Paul tells us:

**“But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, *through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.*”** (Italics added)

God chooses *the means* as well as *the ends*. All of those whom He has *chosen before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before Him* (Ephesians 1:4) have been chosen to come to salvation *through faith in Christ* - **“belief in the truth.”** So if you are a believer in Christ, you are *born of God* and *among the elect of God*, having been chosen before the foundation of the world.

But notice that true Christian faith involves *believing the truth* – the truth of Christ. Faith is *much more than mere mental assent or agreement* with the truth about the person and work of Christ, but it is most certainly *not less than that!*

*True saving faith involves believing in and trusting in the actual Christ, as He has been revealed to us by God in the Scriptures and in the gospel.* Any “faith” in Jesus that does *not* confess that He is **“the Christ”** (5:1) or that He is **“the Son of God”** (4:15) is *not* true saving faith - it is something other than the Christian faith altogether! Earlier in the letter John told us that the same is true of any “faith” that does *not* **‘confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh’** (1 John 4:2) – it is *not* from God.

### ***Love as Evidence of the New Birth***

That brings us to our *second* point, which is that *love* - love for God, and even more specifically *love for the brethren* – is a sign of life and evidence of our being born of God.

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<sup>3</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 172.

Again, in v.1 John writes:

**“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and *everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him.*”** (Italics added)

I think that the King James Version renders the sense of the latter half of this verse more clearly than the ESV does here. It puts it like this: **“and every one that loveth him *that begat* loveth him *also that is begotten of him.*”** (The word for “Father” is *not* in the Greek text.) This preserves more clearly the play on words and the force of the argument that John is making.

Certainly being *born of God* (and so being a child of God) results in *loving God*. If you do *not* love God, how can you think that you have been born again and know God? Even the early Gnostics (the false teachers who were troubling the church in John's day) would have *claimed* to love God.

But John shows us the inseparable connection between loving God and loving the brethren. If you love *God*, that love *will evidence itself in your love of the brethren* – in loving your brothers and sisters in the Lord. Just as James tells us that *faith without works is dead* (James 2:17, 26), even so *love for God without a corresponding love for the brethren is dead* – it simply does not exist.

How we treat other believers reveals our true relation to God. Before Saul's conversion on the Damascus road, he **“persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.”** (Galatians 1:13). And what did the Lord Jesus say to him when He stopped him in his tracks on that Damascus road? He said, **“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”** (Acts 9:4) And in case that was not clear enough, when Paul asked who He was, our glorified Lord told him, **“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”** (v.5)

In persecuting *the church*, Saul was in some way actually persecuting *Christ Himself*! Jesus is united to and closely identifies with His church, which is His body (Ephesians 1:23). And so how you treat the church is how you treat Christ. *If you hate and despise the church of God, you do not love Christ – you actually hate and despise Him!*

Did our Lord not say much the same thing in Matthew's Gospel? In Matthew 25 when Christ spoke of the Final judgment and the separation of the sheep from the goats, *how was it determined which were the sheep and which were the goats?* It was how they treated **‘the least of these His brethren’** (v.40, 45), whether they fed or clothed or visited them in their time of need!

We demonstrate that we have been begotten by God, having been born again by the Spirit of God, by loving those who likewise have been born of God. Just as earthly family members most naturally love and care for one another (even though they may squabble), even so the family of God does likewise. *There will always be a Spirit-wrought family likeness and love among all those who are born of God.*

### ***Obedience as Evidence of the New Birth***

*Last but not least*, John tells us that *obedience to the commandments of God* is evidence of our being born of God and of loving Him and His children. In v.2 John writes:

**“By this we know that we love the children of God, *when we love God and obey his commandments.*”** (Italics added)

Here once again we see that *love and obedience must go together*. If we truly love *God* we will also necessarily *love the brethren*; and if we truly love God, we will also *keep His commandments*. F.F. Bruce writes:

“Love to God and love to His children, love to God and obedience to God, are so completely involved in each other that any one of them implies the other two. A man may say he loves God, but his love to God can become manifest to himself and to others only in so far as he obeys God’s commandments and shows practical love to God’s children.”<sup>4</sup>

If we truly love God, we will demonstrate that to be true by obeying His will. Our Lord Jesus Himself said, **“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”** (John 14:15) Keeping God's commandments is *not* legalism. Of course, it is possible to treat God's law in a legalistic, Pharisaical way, but that is *not* really obedience at all – that is nothing but self-righteousness and hypocrisy!

After all, God's commandments are the expression of His holy will, and His holy will is an expression of His nature, character, and perfections! Because of this, we who believe in Christ ought to love God's law because we love God Himself!

What did the Psalmist say in Psalm 119? In Psalm 119:97 he exclaims, **“Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.”** And as that were not clear enough, he *twice more* tells the Lord, **“I love your law”** (v.113, 163)! As believers we should *love* God's law, even His commandments.

And let us not forget that *love itself is a commandment*! In fact, love is *the greatest commandment*! In Matthew 22:34–40 it is written:

**“But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”** (ESV)

The two greatest commandments, which must always go together, and which are in some way even *a summary of the entire Old Testament* (i.e. **“all the Law and the Prophets”**), not just the New, are both *love* – love for God and love for our neighbor.

*Love and the law of God are not at odds with each other*. The law of God and *the gospel of God* are not at odds with each other. In fact, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* goes so far as to tell us that the three uses of the law<sup>5</sup> that we often speak of are *not* “*contrary to the grace of the gospel, but do sweetly comply with it*; the Spirit of Christ subduing and enabling the will of man to do that freely, and cheerfully, which the will of God, revealed in the law, requireth to be done.” (19.7)

Why is God's law and the three uses of it not contrary to the gospel? *Because of the work of “the Spirit of Christ* subduing and enabling the will of man to do that freely, and cheerfully, which the will of God, revealed in the law, requireth to be done.”

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4 F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John: Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Nashville, TN; Bath, England: Kingsley Books, 2018), 116.

5 The pedagogical use, the civil use, and the normative use, in which the law reveals our sin to us and drives us to Christ, restrains sin in society, and serves as the rule of righteousness for believers.

One of the many hallmarks and blessings of the New Covenant in the gospel of Christ is that in the New Covenant it was promised and prophesied that God would write His law, *not* just on *tablets of stone*, but upon the very *hearts* of His people! Jeremiah 31:33<sup>6</sup> says:

**“For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: *I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*”** (Italics added)

In the gospel of Christ God gives new life to those who were spiritually dead in their sins. He takes hearts of stone and turns them to hearts of flesh. In Ezekiel 36:26–27 the Lord says:

**“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. *And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.*”**

And what is the result? New life in Christ, a changed life in Christ, even a love for God's law! And what does John tell us in v.3 of our text? He defines love for God this way:

**“For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. *And his commandments are not burdensome.*”**

*What does love for God look like?* To love God is to **“keep his commandments.”** And how so? By no longer viewing them as **“burdensome”** (or **“grievous”** - KJV). By not viewing God's law as an onerous burden strapped to your back, but something that you delight in because you love God!

## **Conclusion**

All three of these “tests” - love, obedience, and truth – are intertwined and interrelated. These are the clear & simple evidence of our being born again as believers in Christ by the Spirit of God! *Do you see these things evident in your life as a believer?* Then you should be encouraged and assured that you really are a child of God – for you show (however imperfectly) the family resemblance and love.

And if that is the case, *seek to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ* (2 Peter 3:18); seek to grow in the faith, in your knowledge of Scripture and the truth of Christ; and seek to grow in your love for God and the brethren! And in so doing you will grow in assurance and in your joy in the Lord!

Or do you *claim* to love God, but find that you still *hate God's law*? Do you find His commandments to be nothing but a burden, and so continue to walk in a way that is contrary to them in disobedience? Do you hate God's people and avoid the gathered church like the plague?

If that describes you, then despite what you may have professed to believe in the past, you must *turn now from your sin and unbelief*, and turn to Christ by faith so that all of your sins may be forgiven and you may have eternal life!

And the Lord will put His Spirit within you, and give you a new heart, even one that loves His people and loves His law. And all to the praise of His glorious grace! - Amen

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<sup>6</sup> Hebrews 10:16 quotes this passage in the New Testament.