

THE MEANING OF FELLOWSHIP IN 1 JOHN

by
William W. Combs¹

The word “fellowship,” *κοινωνία*, is used four times in 1 John, all in chapter one.

- v. 3 — “What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.”²
- v. 6 — “If we say that we have fellowship with Him and *yet* walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.”
- v. 7 — “But if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.”

But what does John mean by the term *fellowship* in these verses? Two different interpretations of fellowship in 1 John have been set forth. One view is what I prefer to call the sanctification view of fellowship.³ The other is what I will call the salvation view of fellowship.⁴

¹Dr. Combs is Academic Dean and Professor of New Testament at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary in Allen Park, MI.

²All Scripture references are from the *New American Standard Bible*, 1995 edition, unless otherwise noted.

³Representatives include Lewis S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 3:309; Charles C. Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959), p. 341; idem, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1986), p. 302; Zane C. Hodges, “Fellowship and Confession in 1 John 1:5–10,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129 (January 1972): 48–60; idem *The Epistles of John* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), pp. 57–67; W. Robert Cook, *The Theology of John* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), pp. 147–54; Robert P. Lightner, *Sin, the Savior, and Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1991), p. 241; idem, *The Epistles of First, Second, Third John & Jude*, Twenty-First Century Biblical Commentary Series (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2003), p. 17; Earl D. Radmacher, *Salvation* (Nashville: Word, 2000), pp. 73–74.

⁴Representatives include Robert Law, *The Tests of Life* (reprint of 1914 ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), pp. 52–66; Donald W. Burdick, *The Epistles of John* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1970), p. 21; idem, *The Letters of John the Apostle* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), pp. 104–5; I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, New

The first view, the sanctification view, is probably the dominant view in most fundamental and evangelical churches and Christian colleges. One of the commonly heard appeals to Christians during the sermon invitation is, “Are you in fellowship with God?” The sanctification view understands fellowship to be a particular condition or state of the Christian in which he enjoys the presence and blessing of God. The opposite state is to be out of fellowship because of unconfessed sin. When a believer is “in fellowship with God,” he experiences the blessing and presence of God in a way beyond what he acquired as a result of the new birth.⁵ The condition for being “in fellowship” is to “walk in the Light” (1 John 1:7), that is, living in obedience to the standard of God’s truth.⁶ Therefore, any sin the believer commits, causes him to lose fellowship with God. But fellowship can be restored by confession of the particular sin committed (1 John 1:9).⁷

The popularity of the sanctification view is due to a number of factors. For one, it was taught in the *Scofield Reference Bible* and thus widely disseminated in fundamental and evangelical circles, especially in days gone by when the *Scofield Bible* was more popular.⁸ It has also been propagated by Dallas Theological Seminary, whose views on sanctification were widely disseminated in the last half of the 20th century.⁹ The fountainhead of the sanctification view, however, is the Keswick theology that had its birth in the latter part of the 19th century and which in turn sprang from John Wesley and the Holiness movement.¹⁰ Thus the sanctification view teaches a kind of perfectionism, the result of a kind of second blessing.¹¹ When one is “in

International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 104–14; Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*. Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), pp. 12–30; John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 68–69; Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*. New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2001), pp. 56–62; John MacArthur, *1–3 John* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2007), pp. 18–37.

⁵Hodges, “Fellowship and Confession in 1 John 1:5–10,” p. 52.

⁶Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, p. 341.

⁷Ibid.

⁸C. I. Scofield, ed., *The Scofield Reference Bible*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford, 1917), p. 1321.

⁹The representatives of this view listed in footnote 3 are all teachers at and/or graduates of Dallas Seminary.

¹⁰William W. Combs, “The Disjunction Between Justification and Sanctification in Contemporary Evangelical Theology,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 6 (2001): 19–28. available from <http://www.dbts.edu/journals/2001/Combs.pdf>; Andy Naselli, “Keswick Theology: A Historical and Theological Survey and Analysis of the Doctrine of Sanctification in the Early Keswick Movement, 1875–1920” (Ph.D. dissertation, Bob Jones University, 2006), pp. 38–104.

¹¹Keswick speaker A. T. Pierson said, “There is that kind of sinless perfection in

fellowship,” he is in a spiritual state of blessing beyond initial regeneration. He is “walking in the light”—not committing sin—living on a higher plane and experiencing the blessings of God and the presence of God in a way not experienced by other believers who are out of fellowship. Thus there are two tiers or levels in the Christian life or two kinds of Christians: one is either in or out of fellowship; one is either a carnal Christian or a spiritual Christian; one is either filled with the Spirit or not filled with the Spirit; one is either abiding in Christ or not abiding in Christ.¹² See the chart below.

Keswick’s Two Kinds of Christians¹³

CATEGORY 1	CATEGORY 2
Out of fellowship	In fellowship
Free from sin’s penalty	Free from sin’s power
First blessing	Second blessing
First stage	Second stage
Average	Normal
Constant defeat	Constant victory
Carnal	Spiritual
Life in the flesh	Life in the Spirit
Not abiding in Christ	Abiding in Christ
Has life	Has life more abundantly
Not Spirit-filled	Spirit-filled
Christ is Savior	Christ is both Savior and Lord
Believer	Disciple
Justified but no crisis of sanctification	Justified and crisis of sanctification
No power for service	Power for service
Virtual fruitlessness	Abundant fruitfulness

which every Keswick teacher believes, the sinless perfection of instantaneously and for ever renouncing every known sin (“Unsubdued Sin,” in *Keswick’s Triumphant Voice*, ed. Herbert F. Stevenson [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963], p. 104). Another Keswick speaker Charles Inwood explains, “And it is possible to be so full of the Spirit that all bondage and all friction, and all the fever of lust disappear; so full of the Spirit that selfishness in motive, in intention, in purpose, in endeavour disappears; so full of the Spirit that all open and secret sympathy with sin disappears; so full of the Spirit that all conscious and willful resistance to God disappears...” (“The Fullness of the Spirit,” in *Keswick’s Triumphant Voice*, p. 339).

¹²Combs, “Disjunction Between Justification and Sanctification,” pp. 37–42; Naselli, “Keswick Theology,” pp. 174–252.

¹³Adapted from Naselli, “Keswick Theology,” p. 140.

Lower life	Higher life
Shallow life	Deeper life
Trying	Trusting
The unsundered life	The life of consecration
The life lacking blessing	The blessed life
The Christian life as it ought not be	The Christian life as it ought to be

I believe this view of fellowship is erroneous (as well as the view of sanctification that is at the heart of it). The correct view of fellowship in 1 John is, I will argue, what I have chosen to call the salvation view of fellowship. This position says that fellowship refers to the joint participation in a common life with God and fellow Christians. Stott explains, “Fellowship’ is a specifically Christian word and denotes that common participation in the grace of God, the salvation of Christ and the indwelling Spirit which is the spiritual birthright of all believers.”¹⁴ Earlier he notes:

The purpose of the proclamation of the gospel is, therefore, stated in terms not of salvation but of *fellowship*. Yet, properly understood, this is the meaning of salvation in its widest embrace, including reconciliation to God in Christ (*fellowship...with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ*), holiness of life (see v. 6), and incorporation in the church (*you...with us*). This fellowship is the meaning of eternal life (John 17:3).¹⁵

Akin observes, “Fellowship with the Father and his Son, then, is essentially the same thing as having eternal life.”¹⁶ Thus, to have fellowship or be “in fellowship,” is equivalent to being saved. One who is “out of fellowship” is an unbeliever. Though this view has not been as widely held in fundamental and evangelical circles, it is the position of most commentators and seems to have been the only way the passage was understood until the rise of the Keswick and Dallas theologies. I think I can explain how that happened, but it is beyond the limits of this essay to do so. Instead, I will present two reasons or proofs for the salvation view of fellowship and then briefly demonstrate how this perspective fleshes out in the argument of 1 John chapter one.

FIRST PROOF: THE MEANING OF THE WORD *FELLOWSHIP* IN THE CONTEXT OF CHAPTER ONE

First, we must distinguish between the English and Greek words.

¹⁴ *Letters of John*, p. 68.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 57.

The 11th edition of *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* says that today the English word *fellowship* means “companionship, company, community of interest, activity, feeling, or experience.”¹⁷ Most often the English word suggests the ideas of “enjoying one another’s company,” of “shared feelings and experiences.” We commonly speak of going out to eat and having fellowship with one another by enjoying one another’s company. However, this idea is not suggested by the Greek word.¹⁸ The English word *fellowship* once meant something similar to the Greek term, but that is no longer the case. *Webster's* says the English word once meant “partnership” or “membership,” a meaning more in line with the Greek term, but that meaning is now obsolete.¹⁹

As previously noted, the Greek word used in 1 John 1:3, 6, and 7 (as well as 15 other times in the NT) is κοινωνία. The definitive study of κοινωνία and its cognates (κοινωνός, κοινωνέω) was done by J. Y. Campbell a number of years ago.²⁰ He persuasively argued that one can summarize the fundamental idea of the word group as meaning “to have something in common with someone.” As it is used in the New Testament, κοινωνία generally means “to have in common, to share, to be a joint participant, a partner with someone else.”

So we can say that the English term has come to have a generally weaker sense of enjoying one another’s company, while the Greek term speaks of a somewhat stronger sense of something tangibly and actually shared between two or more people; thus the idea of *partnership*. It is not surprising, then, that in classical Greek κοινωνία was commonly used of business partnerships, marriage, and even sexual intercourse.²¹

To illustrate the meaning of the κοινωνία word group in the New Testament, we might first observe a couple of uses of the cognate verb κοινωνέω. In 2 John 10–11, John says, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into *your* house, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates [κοινωνεῖ] in his evil deeds.” In Philippians 4:15, Paul says, “You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the

¹⁷p. 460.

¹⁸“The ‘fellowship’ (*koinōnia*) of which it speaks is not simply conviviality or social ‘togetherness’ in the sense that the word ‘fellowship’ is sometimes used today” (Glenn W. Barker, William L. Lane, and J. Ramsey Michaels, *The New Testament Speaks* [New York: Harper and Row, 1969], p. 414).

¹⁹p. 460.

²⁰Κοινωνία and Its Cognates in the New Testament,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 51 (December 1932): 352–80.

²¹*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “κοινός,” by Friedrich Hauck, 3:798.

first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared [ἐκοινωνήσεν] with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone.”

We observe a similar idea with the noun κοινωνία. In 2 Corinthians 8:4 Paul says that the Macedonian churches were “begging us with much urging for the favor of participation [κοινωνίαν] in the support of the saints.” The Macedonian churches wanted to *share* in the offering for the saints that Paul was gathering. In Philippians 1:3–5 Paul says, “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of your participation [κοινωνία] in the gospel from the first day until now.” The church at Philippi *shared* with Paul in the gospel ministry. The cooperation and participation of the Philippians in Paul’s ministry is to be understood in its widest sense, though it certainly included their financial help. More examples could be given, but the basic meaning of the word group seems clear: “to share with someone in something.”

The meaning of κοινωνία in 1 John presents a problem. Normally, when κοινωνία is used elsewhere in the New Testament, we are told what is shared between two parties. For example, in 2 Corinthians 8:4 we observed that the Macedonian churches were “begging” Paul “for the favor of participation [κοινωνίαν] in the support of the saints.” It was the “support” of the saints in Jerusalem that the Macedonian churches “shared” with the other churches in Paul’s circle. However, in its four uses in 1 John chapter one, the word κοινωνία is used absolutely. For instance we are told in v. 3 that we have fellowship, κοινωνία, “with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ,” but we are not told directly what it is we share “with the Father, and with His Son.” In v. 6 we are said to have “fellowship with Him,” and in v. 7 “we have fellowship with one another,” with other believers, but again we are not told directly what it is we share with the Father, Son, and other believers. What we share must be gotten from the context.

The major emphasis in these beginning verses of chapter one is eternal life, which was manifested in the historical person of Jesus. It is the climax of v. 1: “What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life.” It is the emphasis of v. 2: “And the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us.” It is picked up again in v. 3 with the repetition of the phrase “we proclaim” from v. 2: “What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

From the context it is clear that what believers share with God and

other believers is eternal life, the very life of Christ.²² The *New English Bible* translates v. 3: “What we have seen and heard we declare to you, so that you and we together may share in a common life, that life which we share with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ.”²³ Since κοινωνία, fellowship, means sharing in a common life with God and fellow believers, clearly John is equating κοινωνία with salvation. Burdick says, “To be a Christian is the same as being in fellowship with Him.... Thus, the New Testament κοινωνία includes all who are saved.”²⁴ All believers are, so to speak, “in fellowship” because all believers share in eternal life. To have fellowship with God and other believers is to share in eternal life with them.²⁵ Thus, the meaning of the term *fellowship* (κοινωνία) in the context of chapter one argues that the salvation view of fellowship is correct.

SECOND PROOF: THE OVERALL PURPOSE OF 1 JOHN

Whatever John teaches about fellowship in chapter one would certainly be in agreement with the overall purpose and argument of the epistle. I believe that only the salvation view of fellowship meets this requirement. John actually has a number of purpose statements in 1 John. In 1:4 he says, “These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.” However, in 2:1 he says, “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin.” Then, in 2:26 John adds, “These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you.” But these are probably secondary or subordinate to the main purpose of the book, which most believe comes at 5:13: “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.”

Although it may seem unusual for John to wait to the end of his work to state his main purpose in writing, we can observe a similar situation in his gospel. It is rather universally agreed that the purpose of John’s gospel is not disclosed until the end of that work also, in John 20:30–31: “Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in

²²R. R. Williams, *The Letters of John and James*, Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 18; Barker, Lane, and Michaels, *New Testament Speaks*, p. 414; Stott, *Letters of John*, p. 68; Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 57; Martin M. Culy, *I, II, III John* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2004), p. 8; C. Haas, M. de Jonge, and J. L. Swellengrebel, *A Translator’s Handbook on the Letters of John* (London: United Bible Societies, 1972), p. 27; David Jackman, *The Message of John’s Letters*, Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 23; MacArthur, *1–3 John*, p. 18.

²³Similarly, the *Revised English Bible*.

²⁴*Epistles of John*, p. 21.

²⁵Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 58.

the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.”²⁶ So also in his epistle, John waits until the end to give us his primary purpose in writing: “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.”²⁷ As Hiebert says, “The purpose of the Gospel of John is distinctly evangelistic, to lead its readers to personal saving faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God; the purpose of 1 John is pastoral, to lead believers into a full understanding and assurance of their salvation in Jesus Christ.”²⁸ Similarly, Akin notes, “Whereas the Gospel of John is written with an evangelistic purpose, 1 John is penned to provide avenues of assurance whereby a believer can know he has eternal life through the Son.”²⁹

Since John’s purpose in 1 John is to lead his readers into an assurance of their salvation, he advances a series of tests to be applied to their Christian profession.³⁰ A simple reading of 1 John will reveal that John is giving test after test with which his readers can examine their profession of faith. My point here is to say that these tests are tests of salvation, not tests of spirituality. That is, these are tests to determine if one actually has eternal life or not. They are not designed to test the relative spiritual condition of genuine believers, that is, whether they are “out of fellowship” because of unconfessed sin.

Let us begin in chapter five and work back through the epistle to

²⁶E.g., F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 12; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 2nd ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 34; Rodney A. Whitacre, *John*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p. 28; Colin G. Kruse, *John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 20; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), p. 8.

²⁷Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), p. 632; Burdick, *Letters of John the Apostle*, p. 385; D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistles of John* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1991), p. 20; Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), p. 867; Stott, *Letters of John*, p. 186; Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 32; Marshall, *Epistles of John*, p. 243; Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 189.

²⁸*Epistles of John*, p. 20.

²⁹*1, 2, 3 John*, p. 32.

³⁰Law, *Tests of Life*, pp. 5–6; Williams, *Letters of John and James*, p. 7; Stott, *Letters of John*, pp. 58–59; Hiebert, *Epistles of John*, p. 19; Burdick, *Letters of John the Apostle*, p. 64; MacArthur, *1–3 John*, p. 10; Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p. 494; Thomas D. Lea and David A. Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003), p. 555.

demonstrate that 1 John is a series of tests of salvation.

5:12, “He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.”

5:1, “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the *child* born of Him.”

4:15, “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.”

4:7, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.”

3:14–15, “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.”

1 John 3:9–10, “No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.”

1 John 2:3–4, “By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, ‘I have come to know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”

What we see in these verses are three major tests: practicing righteousness, loving one another, and believing the truth about Jesus Christ.³¹ And let me repeat again: these tests are not designed to determine the spiritual condition of genuine believers but to determine if one is a believer—they are tests of salvation itself. Therefore, it would be rather odd if chapter one of 1 John were not also giving a test of salvation. And, in fact, chapter one does give a test of salvation. The test in chapter one deals with the Christian’s attitude toward sin. A genuine believer will have a right attitude toward sin—what we might call a sin-confessing attitude. Now we will examine how this works in chapter one of 1 John.

THE ARGUMENT OF CHAPTER ONE

Verses 1–4 are a prologue or introduction to 1 John, much like the prologue or introduction found at the beginning of the Gospel of John—John 1:1–18. Both deal with the same subject, the incarnation. In v. 1 the theme is introduced—the incarnate Son of God:

³¹Law, *Tests of Life*, pp. 5–6; Barker, Lane, and Michaels, *New Testament Speaks*, p. 416; Stott, *Letters of John*, pp. 58–59; Gundry, *Survey of the New Testament*, p. 494; Lea and Black, *New Testament*, p. 555.

“What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life.” In v. 2 the theme is repeated; John enlarges upon the last phrase of v. 1, “the Word of Life.” The Life is eternal: “And the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us.” In v. 3 John gives the purpose of his proclamation: “What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.” The “fellowship,” *κοινωνία*, John has in mind is the eternal life, the salvation, that his readers share with God and other believers.³²

In verse 5 John gives the theological basis for fellowship. This is first stated positively: “This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is light,” and then negatively: “In Him there is no darkness at all.” Obviously, to say that “God is Light” means that he is holy.³³ To affirm that “God is Light” and “in Him there is no darkness at all” is to acknowledge God’s absolute holiness and his complete freedom from any taint of sin. Therefore, those who have fellowship with God, that is, share in a common life with God—those who are saved—will naturally reflect the character of God. As Paul says in Ephesians 5:8, “For you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light.”

Then in vv. 6–10 of chapter one, we find the first test of fellowship—a right attitude toward sin. In these verses John draws an important implication from the preceding verses. If one claims to share in the life of a holy God, it will be reflected in his life, particularly, John says, in his attitude toward sin. The one who enjoys fellowship

³²Hodges argues that the wording of v. 3 proves that the salvation view of fellowship cannot be correct. When John says he is writing to his readers so that they “too may have fellowship with us,” fellowship “must be something more than what his readers have automatically acquired as a result of their new birth” (“Fellowship and Confession in 1 John 1:5–10,” p. 52). In other words, according to Hodges, John is writing to those who already have eternal life so that they “may have fellowship,” that is, “obtain fellowship,” a spiritual status beyond the eternal life they already possess. However, the word “have,” *ἔχω*, does not mean “have” in the sense of “obtain something new” when used in the present tense as it is in v. 3 (*ἔχητε*). That sense requires the aorist tense (James H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek, Volume 1: Prolegomena*, 3rd ed. [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, n.d.], p. 110; Marshall, *Epistles of John*, p. 105; Burdick, *Letters of John the Apostle*, p. 104). The present tense speaks of continuance in fellowship, the enjoyment of fellowship (see A. E. Brooke, *The Johannine Epistles*, International Critical Commentary [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912], p. 8; B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of John* [reprint of 1892 ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966], p. 12; Marshall, *Epistles of John*, p. 105; Burdick, *Letters of John the Apostle*, p. 104; Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 10; Hiebert, *Epistles of John*, p. 46).

³³Marshall, *Epistles of John*, p. 109; Hodges, “Fellowship and Confession in 1 John 1:5–10,” p. 50; Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 20.

with God, that is, one who is a genuine believer, will have a proper, that is, biblical attitude toward sin.

In explaining that attitude, John discusses three errors in regard to sin, in vv. 6, 8, and 10. Each is introduced by the formula “if we say” (“if we claim,” NIV). The first error, in v. 6, we might call the error of antinomianism: “If we say that we have fellowship with Him and *yet* walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.” The verb “walk” is used figuratively in the sense of live and is in the present tense, suggesting a habitual action.³⁴ So if one claims to enjoy fellowship with God, that is, to share in the life of God, to be a genuine believer, and yet lives habitually in sin, disregarding the commands about holiness, John concludes that person is a liar. The one who fails to persevere in holiness does not have fellowship with God; he is not a genuine believer.

The second error, in v. 8, we might call the error of inherent goodness: “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.” The word *sin* used in the singular speaks of the principle of sin. So the error is the denial of the principle of sin in us, the denial that sin exists in our nature.³⁵ There is no truth in this one; he is not a genuine believer.

The third error, in v. 10, might be called the error of perfectionism: “If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.” This error claims a believer may live without committing individual sins.³⁶ This error makes God a liar because he says throughout his Word that we are all sinners: “For all have sinned and fall short (present tense) of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). “His word is not in” the one who would make such a claim because he is not a genuine believer.

In contrast to these erroneous views of sin, v. 9 says the genuine believer, that is, the one who has fellowship with God, will have a proper attitude toward sin—a sin-confessing attitude or disposition: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Stott says, “The proper Christian attitude to sin is not to deny it but to admit it, and then to receive the forgiveness which God has made possible and

³⁴ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 22; Stott, *Letters of John*, p. 79; Hiebert, *Epistles of John*, p. 60; Burdick, *Letters of John the Apostle*, p. 121.

³⁵ Westcott, *Epistles of John*, p. 23; Brown, *Epistles of John*, pp. 205–6; Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 29; Stott, *Letters of John*, pp. 81–82; MacArthur, *1–3 John*, pp. 29–30; Jackman, *Message of John’s Letters*, p. 33; Burdick, *Letters of John the Apostle*, p. 125; Hiebert, *Epistles of John*, p. 64.

³⁶ Westcott, *Epistles of John*, p. 25; Brown, *Epistles of John*, p. 211; Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 33; Stott, *Letters of John*, pp. 83–84; MacArthur, *1–3 John*, p. 30; Jackman, *Message of John’s Letters*, p. 37; Burdick, *Letters of John the Apostle*, p. 128; Hiebert, *Epistles of John*, p. 67.

promises to us.”³⁷ Marshall observes, “Although the statement lies in a conditional clause, it has the force of a command or obligation: we ought to confess our sins, and, if we do, he is faithful and just....”³⁸

The object of confession in v. 9 is “sins.” The plural shows that John is speaking of individual acts of sin. The sanctification view of fellowship says that a believer who is out of fellowship with God is brought back into fellowship by confession of the sin that caused the fellowship to be broken. However, v. 9 says nothing about restoration of fellowship. While it is true that a believer needs to confess his sinful acts and omissions, that has nothing to do with fellowship. As I have tried to demonstrate, fellowship is a sharing by the believer with God and other believers in a common life. Nothing can break that fellowship. Verse 9 simply gives the proper attitude of a genuine believer toward sin. He *will* confess sin, that is, he will have a sin-confessing attitude. The genuine believer will recognize, repent, and confess his sin to God. Such an attitude should give assurance of salvation.

Some who hold the salvation view of fellowship have misunderstood v. 9 as though it were written to unbelievers, telling them how they can be saved, how they can come to experience this fellowship for the first time. In other words, this view says that it is by the confession of our sins that we initially come to Christ in salvation.³⁹ There are a number of problems with such a view, but the biggest difficulty is that confession of one’s sins is not salvific. That is, no one has ever been regenerated by simply confessing his sins. If confessing one’s sins could procure regeneration, then Martin Luther would have been saved while he was a monk. The Roman Catholic confessional booth would be the greatest evangelistic tool the world has ever seen. If confession of every one of the unbeliever’s sins was required for regeneration, how could anyone be sure he had not forgotten one of his sins? No, the means of salvation are repentance of sin and faith in the finished work of Christ. Certainly, one must confess that he is a sinner in order to be saved. That is part of repentance. Still, we must not make too great a dichotomy between confessing that we are sinners and confessing our sins. It is true that at the time of salvation we may recall many of our sinful acts and be sorry for them and confess them. But again, it is not the confession of sins *per se* that is the instrument of salvation but the confession that one is a wicked sinner along with a willingness and determination to turn from sin—repentance—and a positive faith, trust, a commitment to Christ as Savior and Lord.

³⁷ Stott, *Letters of John*, p. 82.

³⁸ *Epistles of John*, p. 113; Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 30.

³⁹ Peter E. Gillquist, *Love Is Now* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), pp. 62–65; Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, pp. 74–75.

But why does a believer have to confess his sins to God? After all, v. 7 says, “if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.” And it is true. All sins of a Christian—past, present, and future—are forgiven at the moment of regeneration. We have a perfect standing in the righteousness of Christ. But our relationship with God can also be viewed in a familial sense—we are children in the family of God. As such we sin against God and God convicts, and we must confess. Such repentance and confession is essential to progressive sanctification. As we progress in holiness we strive to sin less and less. But until we reach that state of ultimate sanctification (glorification), we must confess our sins and receive forgiveness in God’s family. Jesus explained this in John 13 when he told Peter, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.’ Simon Peter said to Him, ‘Lord, *then wash* not only my feet, but also my hands and my head.’ Jesus said to him, ‘He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean.’” As far as the Christian’s standing in justification is concerned, he “is completely clean”; he stands perfect in the righteousness of Christ, all of his sins are forgiven. But there is another kind of forgiveness, forgiveness from the daily defilement of sin as a member of God’s family. Those sins must be cleansed by confession to God. Jesus gave his own disciples a model prayer in Luke 11 in which he taught his disciples to pray: “Father, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins.” It is a serious error to believe that a Christian does not have to confess his sins to God. Confession and mortification of sin are essential to our progress in holiness.

CONCLUSION

In this essay I have argued for the salvation view of the term *fellowship* (κοινωνία) in 1 John chapter one. Fellowship refers to the joint participation in a common life with God and fellow Christians. To “have fellowship” with God is to be a partaker of eternal life. But I have also insisted that a believer must confess his sins in order to be properly related to his heavenly Father. But does not the sanctification view of fellowship say that one must confess his sins in order to be restored to fellowship with God? Yes it does. But that position errs in misunderstanding what John means by fellowship. We do not confess our sins to maintain fellowship with God. Fellowship with God is the privilege of all genuine believers because it is nothing less than the sharing of eternal life with God and other believers. As believers we confess our sins because sin is still an affront to God. And even though it does not diminish our standing in justification before God—we will always be his children, members of the family of

God—sin does affect our relationship in the family. God is working sanctification in us—progressive sanctification. We are progressing in holiness, and that means being set apart from sin, mortifying sin on a daily basis, and that involves confession—agreeing with God that sin is evil and wicked—and a determination to turn and forsake it. A genuine Christian will have a sin-confessing attitude. Certainly, it is true we can backslide and act carnally for a time. But ultimately a true Christian will repent and confess his sins to God. Those who are not willing to confess have no reason to be assured of their salvation. Though it is common to hear believers refer to other believers who are living sinfully as being “out of fellowship” with God, it may be best to refrain from such language since that is *not* how John uses the term *fellowship*. This in-and-out-of fellowship terminology is also deficient because it views all believers as being in either one of two tiers or levels—one is either in or one is out of fellowship. But there are not two distinct levels in the Christian life, in the believer’s sanctification. We could say that there are many levels. That is why we speak of *progressive* sanctification. It is simplistic to try to describe a believer as being either/or. In truth the Christian life of sanctification is a constant, daily, and progressive dealing with sin in our lives. It cannot be reduced to only two levels or tiers. There is no such thing as being in fellowship with God where one is “walking in the light” and not committing any sins. Anyone who thinks so has a weak view of sin and an under-appreciation of his own depravity. On the other hand, there is victory over sin in the Christian’s life—victory over the dominion or the reign of sin in the believer’s life. Sin no longer dominates our lives as it does the unbeliever. But we must still do battle with sin everyday, and that involves confession to God where we fail. Genuine believers will have a sin-confessing attitude. And if we do, it gives us assurance that we truly have fellowship with God, that we are genuine believers.