

Jesus as Truth: An Exegetical and Theological Reading of John, with Implications for 1 John

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At a key moment in John's narrative, Pilate asks Jesus, "What is truth?"¹ The question carries a deliciously ironic flavor in the discourse of John,² as truth stands as a major theme throughout the Gospel. Indeed, the question, though addressed to Christ, fixes the reader directly in its sights. Truth looms large in the Johannine theological vocabulary, and many attempts to place it in terms of Greek philosophical thought or Jewish religious (or sectarian) significance draw criticism, for the simple reason that Johannine usage of the term *alētheia* (truth) and its cognates does not align with non-Johannine usage.³ Rather than dwelling on the possible parallels, this essay will delve into the Gospel of John itself and survey the uses, looking for a hermeneutical key. Once this is accomplished, the results will be applied to John in hopes of unlocking the import of truth in that text and thereby creating a theological reading of certain difficult passages. If this is successful, then the implications for 1 John will be considered.

¹ John 18:38. This article will not delve into questions of authenticity or historicity as the canonical significance lies at the heart of this work. For such issues see, e.g., Andreas J. Köstenberger, " 'What is Truth?' Pilate's Question in Its Johannine and Larger Biblical Context," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48 (2005): 33–62.

² For the irony, see below.

³ E.g., Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:418–9. Keener notes how the history of the understanding of the background of this word in Johannine studies has moved from Hellenistic, to Jewish, and points between.

Exegetical Consideration of the Passages

The Early Portions of John: Introducing the Argument

The Gospel opens with the prologue of 1:1–18, a poem that sets the interpretive stage for the rest of the book.⁴ Within these opening verses, truth appears closely entwined with the person of Jesus and the message he brings. The term *alētheia* occurs in 1:14 and 17, yet it is foreshadowed by the use of the adjective *alēthinos* (true) in 1:9. Jesus comes as more than a light, he comes as the true light (*to phōs to alēthinon*, the light the true), that which gives light to all. Carson describes this as “the genuine and ultimate self-disclosure of God to man.”⁵ The Father sends the Son in this sense, that the Son is full of grace and truth. This phrase clearly resonates with Exodus 34:6 in the description given of God (with *hesed va emet*, “grace and truth” in Hebrew, replaced by *charitos kai alētheias*, the same in Greek), though John differs in wording from the LXX.⁶ The last use of truth in the Prologue repeats the phrase “grace and truth,” this time using it as a contrast between Jesus and Moses.⁷ Whereas Moses merely passes on the law without originating it (note the divine passive), Jesus, in and of himself, conveys grace and truth. This opening poem, then, contends that truth comes from the *person* of Christ when he is on earth, that he is the reality about which others have testified (cf. 1:6–8, 15), and that key characteristics of God are found in him.

The interplay of light and truth reemerges in 3:21, with Jesus or the evangelist⁸ commenting on how “the one who does the truth” (a literal ren-

⁴ See, e.g., Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 3 vols. (New York City: Herder and Herder, 1968), 1:224–32. For the poetic nature of the prologue, see R. Alan Culpepper, “The Pivot of John’s Prologue,” *New Testament Studies* 27.1 (1980): 1–30.

⁵ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 122.

⁶ Francis J. Moloney, “The Use of χάρις in John 1:14, 16–17: A Key to the Johannine Narrative,” *Pacifica* 29.3 (2016): 261–84, here 272. Moloney does not think there is a direct connection as the phrasing and usage is too different. Here the Septuagint (LXX) is the Greek translation of the Old Testament, often called the Old Greek instead.

⁷ As in Moloney, “The Use of χάρις,” 272–3. Not “true grace” or any other combination, contra Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 2 vols., Anchor Bible 29–29A (New York: Doubleday, 1966–1970), 1:14 and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 47–8.

⁸ The distinction for this article is moot, though see the discussion for these comments in 3:21 being editorial in R. V. Tasker, *John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 69. Cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel & Epistles of John*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 89. For a case for Jesus speaking the words of 3:16–21, see Brown, *John*, 1:136–7, 149.

dering of *ho poiōn tēn alētheian*)⁹ comes to the light, namely Jesus (cf. 1:8–9; 3:19).¹⁰ The purpose of coming to the light (note the *hina* clause, which typically introduces purpose or intent) is that the deeds are understood as being “in God.” Doing the truth, then, points toward being in Christ (the light), just as not doing the truth points toward being in the darkness.¹¹ Brown phrases it as “The one who turns away is not an occasional sinner, one who ‘practices wickedness’; it is not that he cannot see the light, but that he hates the light.”¹² If one holds to the Semitic understanding, that doing the truth means living or acting honorably,¹³ then the Fourth Gospel seems to be pointing toward good deeds equating to being in God. If someone acts honorably, that person comes to the light in order to demonstrate he or she is in God. Thus, only those in God can act or live honorably. However, this does not make practical sense. If, instead, doing the truth referred to something else, then this wooden interpretation would not be helpful. The author makes the distinction clear in the preceding verses, namely, that those who are in the light (meaning they are in Jesus) are those who do the truth.¹⁴ Doing the truth is a defining characteristic rather than a prerequisite for being in God.¹⁵ Faith in Christ functions as the only important work, with the rest flowing from it.¹⁶ The next occurrence of truth is in 4:23–24, but we will focus on this later, due to the complexity of the passage.

The Middle Portions of John: Clarifying Truth

The first definitive identification of what John means by truth is found in 5:33, where Jesus proclaims the Baptizer as the witness to the truth. Previously, John announced that God sent the Baptizer to witness to the light as he was not the light (1:7–9). The light came into the world, and this light was Jesus. The Baptizer witnesses to the incarnation, thus the

⁹ For the clear parallel to 1 John 1:6, see below.

¹⁰ Contra Stanley E. Porter, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus: In Pursuit of the Johannine Voice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 189. Porter sees “light” as an ethical or theological term, and in turn sees “truth” the same way in this passage.

¹¹ The obvious Pauline parallels regarding “in Christ” will not be discussed here.

¹² Brown, *John*, 1:149, emphasis original.

¹³ The evidence for this view comes mostly from Qumran. See Schnackenburg, *John*, 1:407–8, and Carson, *John*, 207–8, though Carson simply names it “Semitic” without giving evidence.

¹⁴ Cf. Carson, *John*, 208. Carson follows this argument but does not see the faulty reasoning in equating the Semitic interpretation with the words of 3:21.

¹⁵ David F. Ford, “Meeting Nicodemus: A Case Study in Daring Theological Interpretation,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 66.1 (2013): 1–17, here 12–13.

¹⁶ See Keener, *John*, 1:574.

truth relates directly to the incarnation (cf. 1:19–34).¹⁷ The last verse confirms this interpretation, when Jesus states that the witness or testimony he receives is divine not human. The significance in this declaration lies in the confirmation that Jesus proclaims himself as the truth. The truth is not God, the truth is not the gospel, rather the truth is the person of Jesus Christ in the flesh according to this passage. The Baptizer functions as an additional witness to God, thus supporting Jesus's claim rather than making the claim for him. What the Baptizer declares concerning Jesus is not only true, it is the truth in that Jesus *is* the truth.

Jesus also emphasizes the importance of truth in 8:31–47. He had spoken to the crowds and then turns to address those who believed in him.¹⁸ In 8:32, Christ tells those who believe in him that the truth will set them free, then parallels this statement in 8:36 by saying the Son sets them free. While some commentators see this usage of truth as referring to the gospel, this parallel does not allow for such an understanding.¹⁹ The message here cannot be separated from the messenger, for the gospel concerns Christ and, in a sense, the gospel *is* Christ.²⁰ John conveys the truth as the actuality of Jesus, not simply the revelation referring to him, nor words about him, instead this signifies an encounter with Jesus.²¹ The conditional sentence that begins Jesus's response to the believing Jews starts with the condition of remaining in Jesus as his true disciple, and this abiding enables the truth to set one free. Thus, those who are true disciples exclusively achieve freedom through the truth.²² If truth sets one free, and Jesus sets one free, then Jesus is the truth. The rest of the dialogue follows the same idea, as Jesus continues to tell the crowd about the truth, a truth that the devil does not have in him. Having the truth, in 8:42, equates with loving Jesus. Knowledge of the Father indicates or leads to love for the Son, and thus the truth would be in them.²³ Being

¹⁷ Carson, *John*, 260.

¹⁸ The problems surrounding John's various uses of believe and faith are not relevant for this discussion.

¹⁹ Contra Carson, *John*, 348–9; Keener, *John*, 1:747. Edward W. Klink III, *John*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 414, comes the closest to this view, but then after stating truth is relational and found only in Jesus, he also retreats to the view of truth as gospel.

²⁰ Tasker, *John*, 117. Tasker says, referring to the combination of 8:31 and 32, "Christ's word is indistinguishable from Christ himself."

²¹ Cf. Brown, *John*, 1:355, though Brown is not clear with respect to what a "revelation" of Jesus means.

²² Cf. Carson, *John*, 349.

²³ Carson, *John*, 352.

in the truth and loving Jesus are one and the same. Certainly, Satan has no stake in Jesus, and thus the truth could not be in him.

Finalizing the Argument: Truth in John Is a Person

In many respects, 14:6 serves as the lynchpin for the argument, as Jesus's statement makes abundantly clear. Throughout John, the evangelist offers clear interpretive tools, noting in 7:39 that water equates with the Holy Spirit. In 12:33 he describes what lifting up signifies, and in 3:36 he details what life entails. The Fourth Gospel makes plain the hidden symbols throughout the book, and thus the Gospel explains Jesus as the referent of the truth. The stark statement by Jesus that "I am the way, the truth, and the life" leaves little room for the interpreter to come up with an alternate meaning.²⁴ In speaking of Jesus, Schnackenburg states, "so that all that a human being striving for truth and salvation is looking for is to be found fully and completely in him, and him alone."²⁵ John looks to neither Gnosticism nor Mysticism, apocalyptic nor wisdom tradition in formulating his ideas on truth, rather he focuses the theme clearly and totally on Christ.

The next references to truth in John's Gospel are either part of an introductory formula ("I tell you the truth," e.g., 14:12; 16:7, 20, 23) or a name for the Holy Spirit ("Spirit of truth", e.g., 14:17; 15:26; 16:13). It is the latter of these phenomena that gives data to this line of inquiry. While the Spirit of truth appears as a name for the Holy Spirit only three times in John, each occurrence affirms the interpretive link between Jesus and truth. The first time Jesus speaks of the Spirit of truth, he tells of someone he will send to comfort the disciples and be with them during his absence. The purpose of the Holy Spirit is to remind believers of the teachings of Jesus, to keep his words and him alive within them (14:23–26). The Spirit of truth testifies about Jesus (15:26), indeed, that functions as the main purpose of the Spirit in John. The Spirit reinforces the work of the believers in spreading the word about Jesus. The key for understanding the Spirit of truth is found in 16:13–15. The ESV renders the passage,

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but

²⁴ Brown, *John*, 2:630. Brown understands Jesus as the revelation of the Father (e.g., 1:18), and thus the embodiment of truth.

²⁵ Schnackenburg, *John*, 2:237.

whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

The truth the Spirit looks to guide the believers into is the truth of Jesus, in that it *belongs* to Jesus. What truth is this? Simply the truth of who Jesus *is*. The unity of possessions between the Father and Son in this instance highlights the importance and scope of the truth the Spirit offers: this truth is spiritual truth, and this truth is the only truth.

The last major occurrences of truth in John, outside of the testimony of the author being truth in 19:35, come in two conversations. First, Jesus's prayer in chapter 17 contains three uses of truth. Second, the conversation between Jesus and Pilate stresses the issue of truth. In John 17, the telling passage is found in verses 17–19. From the ESV, Jesus prays, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth." God's word is truth, yet we already know from John's prologue that the word is Jesus. This, then, restates that Jesus is the truth since the word is truth and Jesus is the word. In addition, Jesus sanctifies himself in order that believers might be sanctified in the truth, something that only makes sense if Jesus is the truth. The final conversation with Pilate, then, takes on an intensely ironic tone. Jesus declares in 18:37 that he came to bear witness to the truth and that all who are of the truth listen to him. Thus, those who actually follow Jesus listen to him and Jesus came to witness about himself. When Pilate asks the question "What is truth?" the irony abounds since the answer to his question stands directly in front of him. Rather than being some sort of sardonic twist by Pilate, John uses this moment to spotlight the identity of Jesus.

John 4:23–24 and Trinitarian Worship

Truth in John, then, is not some nebulous concept, rather, truth finds itself defined in the person of Jesus the Christ. Truth is not limited to God nor to the message of the gospel, rather, both are part of what the truth is. Jesus is God's word, and this word then is also the truth. Thus, God's truth for all people is in fact Jesus. The revealer is also the revelation as Jesus comes to witness about himself to all people, and this leaves the Spirit of truth to continue his work while he is not with believers.

How does this fit John 4:23–24, which we skipped over earlier? The ESV translates this passage as, “But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” The implications should be both clear and important. The formula of “worshiping God in Spirit/spirit and in truth” conveys something important, but there is a dispute over what that is. Many take the view that this refers to recognizing that God is spirit, and also embodies truth, so no place can contain his worship.²⁶ Some add the idea that the worshiper must have the Holy Spirit in them and be a true Christ follower.²⁷

The implications of this study, however, point in a different direction. John employs language in different and consistent ways, with key words intentionally being repeated to convey the same theme over and over.²⁸ To worship God in Spirit/spirit and in truth fits a Trinitarian understanding of John, if one allows John’s vocabulary to remain consistent. This goes against the idea that this worship refers to a new understanding of God as spirit, and therefore having no specific place or a worship that contains some new quality that was previously missing. If true worship is Trinitarian worship, since one can only worship God by including the Spirit and the Son, then true worship also is explicitly Christian worship.²⁹ One should worship the Father (God) in the Holy Spirit (Spirit) and in the Son (truth), so the approach to the Father is through, or by way of, the Spirit and Son, which is a consistent teaching and theme of the Fourth Gospel. In John, the Son and Spirit want to direct all glory to the Father.³⁰

Implications for 1 John: Exegesis

1 John 1–2: Simple Ideas

1 John picks up the concept of truth from John’s Gospel, yet the epistle also develops the idea in a different direction. While some conclude this

²⁶ Porter, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus*, 189–90.

²⁷ See the argument in Schnackenburg, *John*, 1:438–9.

²⁸ “Water” being one of the more obvious examples, along with “word,” “hour,” “life,” and “light.”

²⁹ Strangely, Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain reject this reading in their book, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John’s Gospel*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 24 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 94.

³⁰ Note Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids: MI: Baker, 2015), 58, where he summarizes, “Jesus seeks to promote not himself but God.”

supports a difference in authorship, this seems to be jumping to a conclusion without looking at the data. Truth appears in 1 John immediately after the opening and remains a major theme throughout the short book. The word *alētheia* occurs nine times in 1 John,³¹ each usage carrying specific theological and practical insights.

The author of 1 John utilizes dichotomies with no gray areas. The wordplays between light and dark, love and hate, truth and lying remain as the metaphoric and communicative focal points throughout the work.³² This method of contrasts immediately comes to the fore in 1:6, where the author parallels not doing the truth (*poioumena tēn alētheian*) with lying. The important stylistic detail of the active picture of “doing the truth” in balance with the verbal concept of “lying” strikes at the heart of 1 John’s theological agenda, namely that practice shows what one believes. Faith enacted is true faith, whereas faith professed without action is no faith at all.³³ The contrast of dark and light surrounds that of truth and lies, creating a doubled metaphor to carry the author’s argument. The author equates walking in the darkness with lying and not doing the truth. The opposite of these actions is walking in the light or being in the light (1:7). The idea of doing the truth, then, conveys a way of living rather than a momentary action in time. 1 John sees truth here as an enacted principle, or an internal standard used to measure external action. “Doing the truth” in this sense signifies truth as an ethical and practical concern.

In a close parallel to this usage and within the same pericope, not having the truth within oneself (1:8, *hē alētheia ouk estin en hēmin*) is parallel to self-deception. In this case, the person who claims to not have sin (the conditional phrase beginning 1:8; *ean eipōmen hoti hamartian ouk echōmen*) exists without the truth. The opening claim to be without sin likely stems from the rhetoric of the secessionists³⁴ and the author is replying with a correction. Those who have the truth, then, are those who sin. The logical conclusion, in a theological sense, to having sin is to seek forgiveness, which comes from God by way of confession (1:9). Truth in 1:8 marks an inverted value in that one finds truth only in those

³¹ 1:6, 8; 2:4, 21; 3:18, 19; 4:6; 5:6.

³² The abrupt shift to idolatry in 5:21 will not be handled here, as it is outside the parameters of this study.

³³ See the discussion in Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, Anchor Bible 30 (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 199–200.

³⁴ Cf. Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary 51 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 28–9

who have sin and confess it.

Another practical usage of truth occurs in 2:4, where truth connects with keeping God's commands.³⁵ In this passage, having the truth parallels keeping his commandments. One must keep his commands in order to show one does in fact know him, whereas not keeping his commands yet claiming to know him makes one a liar. As stated previously in 1:8, if one is a liar then such a person does not have the truth. This moves truth once again into a practical category, such that keeping commands displays whether one is in the truth or not. Logically, this argument concludes with 2:6, such that whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did. In this line of logic, keeping his word (2:5 *tērē autou ton logon*) restates keeping his commands (note the same verb is used in each instance) putting the previously negative statement into a positive declaration.

The next mention of truth, namely in 2:21, pushes the significance of truth to a new level. Here, the author moves from seeing truth as integral for the believer to declaring possession of truth as a salvific issue. The audience received the letter because they indeed had the truth, and this truth includes confession of Jesus as the Christ and as the Son, and whoever confesses the Son also has the Father (2:23 *ho homologōn ton huion kai ton patera echei*). Having the Father, for 1 John, equates with eternal life, as seen in 2:25, since those who have the Father receive his promises, and his promise is eternal life. Therefore, in reversing the logical flow of the thought, eternal life equates with having the Father. Also, having the Father equates with confessing Jesus as Christ and Son, and denying the Son is being a liar, and affirming there is no truth in the liar. Thus, logically, having the truth signifies in 1 John having eternal life. Therefore, possession of the truth becomes and is defined as a salvific matter. However, this does not lay out the content of truth, only the consequence of truth.

1 John 3–4: Truth Acting

In 3:18–19, truth occurs twice in a row with slightly different nuances, as the author is presenting a different argument. Truth does not reduce to an adjective in 3:18, such that the deeds are considered “sincere” or

³⁵ Whether the *autos* (he) refers to Jesus or God the Father is not relevant here, but see Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 253. The likely referent is Jesus since there is only a repetition of pronouns through 2:6, and there only Jesus as the antecedent makes sense of the argument.

“true” deeds,³⁶ rather the emphasis is on truth as an action, or truth as active.³⁷ The author picks up the significance of truth as seen in 1:6, such that truth refers to practical living in light of Christ. Genuine truth continues to be an active truth.³⁸ The reference in 3:19, however, moves to a deeper level by renewing the salvific dimension of truth. This verse does link strongly with the preceding, however, as it acts as a summary and conclusion while building to a new argument, as the author pushes beyond active faith into the means of assurance for the believer.³⁹ The immediate clue comes from the parallel between being of the truth (*ek tēs alētheias esmen*) and being reassured before God (*emprosthen autou peisomen tēn kardian hēmōn*, literally “persuading our hearts before him”). The heart condemns the believer before God, assailing one’s confidence, yet assurance is found in doing what God commands (see 2:4), namely, believing in Jesus and loving one another. Assurance has both an inward aspect (faith) and an outward aspect (loving), both of which rely upon truth as a foundation.⁴⁰

The other main form of assurance manifests itself in the person of the Spirit indwelling the believer (3:24). The author places belonging to the truth⁴¹ and having the Spirit on the same level. Marshall pushes the significance one step further in stating that belonging to the truth is the same as being born of God.⁴² Just as in 2:21, truth has now become a salvific seal. Speaking the truth, doing the truth, and belonging to the truth all entail a moral element, yet the salvific element carries more weight for the author of 1 John (and presumably for the readers and hearers as well). The phrase *ek tēs alētheias esmen* goes beyond identification and into the realm of theological disclosure.⁴³ Smalley points out that the formula of *einai ek* within 1 John (cf. 2:19, 21; 3:8, 10) displays the nature of something by referencing its origin (whether negated or

³⁶ See Brown’s discussion, *The Epistles of John*, 451–2.

³⁷ I. Howard Marshall (*The Epistles of John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978], 196) calls for a deeper meaning than truth as an action; rather he calls for a love that reflects the inward reality of the outward actions. This seems too much of a stretch for this type of common parallelism in the Johannine corpus without more argumentation.

³⁸ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 199.

³⁹ Smalley, 199–200.

⁴⁰ See Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 452–3.

⁴¹ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 196.

⁴² Marshall, 197.

⁴³ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 201.

not).⁴⁴ In this instance, being of the truth entails being born of God, which in turn places truth within the sphere of God.⁴⁵ Thus, truth entails a practical matter, such that a life dedicated to truth is lived a specific way. Truth also carries a salvific flavor, such that only those of the truth can have confidence before God. Finally, being of the truth places one within the divine sphere.

The last two occurrences of truth bring the discussion in a different direction, namely truth interacting with the Spirit. The author's principle concern at the beginning of 1 John 4 is identity, who believers are.⁴⁶ Brown's taxonomy of "those who belong to God" as over against "those who belong to the world" covers 4:4–6.⁴⁷ The logic of the author's argument follows much the same as that in 2:21. Those who indeed come from God (*ek tou theou*) listen to the words of 1 John (with the obvious lockstep intent of obeying the contents) and thus prove the Spirit of truth is in them (*ek toutou ginōskomen to pneuma tēs alētheias*). The import of the identity of the spirit in 4:6 comes to the fore in asking what truth signifies in this verse. If the referent is the Holy Spirit, then a Trinitarian focus is being developed in this section. However, the only possible previous mention of the Holy Spirit appears in 4:2, and this, on the heels of a plural mention of spirit. While there are echoes of the Paraclete from John in this section,⁴⁸ the more likely reading is to see the spirit in 4:6 as a continuation of the concept referencing the *inner being* of the individual. In other words, the flow moves from talking about false prophets to testing the spirits, with the logical follow up of how to test spirits and evaluate the results of such a test, to the defeat of those not from God, finally ending with the conclusion of believing the contents of 1 John since those contents come from God. Of special importance is the *hoti* ("that" or "in order that," often introducing logical consequences of the previous statement) in 4:1, demonstrating that the false prophets are the reason for testing spirits (in the plural). One tests the false prophet not

⁴⁴ Smalley, 201.

⁴⁵ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 197.

⁴⁶ Or who are believers versus those who are not. Cf. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 501. Contra Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 203; and Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 215. Marshall sees the focus as the identification of spirits in terms of the spirits whereas Smalley links this to the larger picture as a condition for living as a child of God in this world.

⁴⁷ Especially Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 507.

⁴⁸ Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 507–9. However, in mild disagreement, see Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 230.

by challenging an unseen force within the prophet, rather one simply asks a confession of a specific doctrine. The argument of the passage does not call for, nor need, two specific supernatural spirits influencing all prophets, whether false or true.⁴⁹ Thus the Holy Spirit remains in the wings, and human actors retain the stage in 4:6.⁵⁰

What, then, does this occurrence of truth actually mean? Rather than harkening back to the Fourth Gospel with Spirit of truth as a name for the Holy Spirit, this spirit of truth functions as an indicator of status or identity, as in 3:19. Each spirit of truth is not a false prophet, and thus in contradistinction each is (in this context) a true prophet from God (taking the genitives in this section as being source or origin, as in 4:2, *to pneuma tou theou*, the Spirit/spirit of God). Those who have a spirit of truth are from God, just as the author and his work are from God. Once again, truth functions as a sign of those who are saved.

1 John 5: The Difficult Section

The last passage including truth in 1 John also comprises the most difficult passage to navigate in the book, due to textual, grammatical, logical, and theological issues. The textual problems of 1 John 5:5–8 are well known and need not be entered into here, other than simply to say that the phrase *hoti ho Christos* (that the Christ) was inserted during the transmission of the text for theological, textual, or grammatical smoothness.⁵¹ This changes the tone of the passage, making the spirit a messenger who claims Christ is the truth. Rather, the spirit here testifies concerning the truth which he himself is. If the spirit, then, is defined as truth for 1 John, does that mean that 1 John and John do indeed have different understandings of truth, such that John has truth instantiated in the person of *Christ*, and 1 John has truth instantiated in the *spirit*? While this is certainly a relevant question, asking it at this juncture nevertheless gets ahead of the discussion. First the phrase “the Spirit is

⁴⁹ Contra Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 500–1. Brown sees the “Spirit of Truth” and the “Spirit of Error” as two powers contesting over the prophets, but this certainly has no grounding anywhere else in the text or theology of 1 John and remains too speculative to defend.

⁵⁰ Thus Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 230–1. Contra Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 209, especially n. 22. Marshall states that in 4:1–3 the idea of spirit means one who is influenced by a spirit rather than direct reference to the Holy Spirit, yet he offers no argument for his position.

⁵¹ Cf. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 580; Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 234; and Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 273, 280.

truth” must be exegeted to make plain the intended meaning, especially in this quagmire of a text.

The author states baldly *to pneuma estin hē alētheia* (the Spirit/spirit is the truth), yet the use of this type of double articular construct (two articles used with a verb between so there is direct grammatical correspondence) within the Johannine corpus typically is restricted to describing Jesus.⁵² This indicates that something slightly out of the ordinary occurs in 5:6. Often times, *hoti* can introduce indirect discourse or possibly, in this case, the contents of an implied testimony, yet the role of the spirit remains testifying about Jesus rather than testifying about himself.⁵³ The characterization of 1 John regarding the term spirit consistently displays the spirit as a witness to the person of Jesus, and in turn the witness to believers that they follow Jesus. However, this witness is never called the Holy Spirit nor is any indication made of something external to the believer. There are only twelve occurrences of *pneuma* in 1 John,⁵⁴ and other than the occurrences in 5:6 and 5:8 that are now under dispute, only 4:13 refers to the Holy Spirit, as the term elsewhere refers to the spirit within people in all previous passages.⁵⁵ Therefore, what warrant exists for understanding this occurrence as the Holy Spirit? Smalley argues from the appearance in 3:24, building off the concept of anointing in 2:20, 27, yet he assumes that 3:24 names the Holy Spirit. Once again, though, the context of 3:24 allows for an open interpretation as to the identification of *pneuma*, whether the intended referent is the Holy Spirit or the spirit of the individual empowered by God. In fact, taken in conjunction with the above argument concerning 4:6, it is unlikely that 3:24 points to the Holy Spirit. This spirit functions as the practical seal of salvation, in that the individual changes personal behavior,⁵⁶ exactly what the author discusses in 4:1–3 with no reference to the Holy Spirit. If there are no prior explicit references to the Holy Spirit, what about 5:8? The problem with using 5:8 (“the Spirit and the water and the blood”) is that the interpretation relies upon 5:6, not to mention the difficulty

⁵² Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 580. Brown notes that scholars have been saying that God is described anarthrously (without an article) in order to show *function*, whereas the articular formulations for Jesus show *essence*, concluding that any such a designation certainly goes beyond the evidence.

⁵³ Though appealing to the Fourth Gospel, see Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 580.

⁵⁴ 3:24; 4:1 (2x); 4:2 (2x); 4:3; 4:6 (2x); 4:13; 5:6; and 5:8.

⁵⁵ Note that the paucity of direct references to the Holy Spirit does not mean there are no references. See Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 250.

⁵⁶ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* 211–2.

inherent in exegeting the verse at all.⁵⁷ Marshall notes that, no matter how one slices the problem of the spirit in 5:6, the basic understanding remains that this spirit enables the individual and the corporate body to live truthfully.⁵⁸ The emphasis, then, is upon truth as an internal indicator of salvation. Even in the unlikelihood that 5:6 does call the Holy Spirit truth, the result lies in the truth being a sign of salvation.

Conclusion

Truth in 1 John indicates a status of salvation. If one has the truth, one is indeed a child of God. If one lives the truth, the practical aspect that prevails in the earlier portions of the book, then one is indeed a child of God. A test of this truthfulness is the appropriate confession that Jesus is the Christ who came in the flesh, and that he is also the Son of God the Father. Truth displays itself in the life of the individual in practical ways, yet the emphasis lies on the confession of, and adherence to, Jesus.

How does this study of 1 John fit with the study of John? In John, truth was instantiated in the person of Jesus. In 1 John, truth confirms adherence to Jesus. The Holy Spirit leading one into all truth signifies an individual being led into a saving knowledge of Jesus. The theological bridge of the cross spans the gap between John and 1 John. In other words, truth in John focuses on the person of Jesus in the flesh—as he lived and taught within an earthly, human setting. In 1 John, the stress is on truth residing within the individual, functioning as a witness to the efficaciousness of Jesus’s work in one’s soul. Yet this truth finds its kernel in the flesh of Jesus (cf. 4:2), namely that he came. Therefore, a progression occurs from John to 1 John, but the progression, while theological in nature, is chronological in character. John focuses on the truth *before* the cross, whereas 1 John focuses on truth *in light of* the cross. At the same time, John points toward the time *after* the cross, with Jesus’s own words about truth coming from the Holy Spirit (16:13), while 1 John points to *before* the cross by acknowledging that salvation is found only in Jesus’s earthly existence in real flesh. Truth, then, exists in the historical person of Jesus and in the theological comprehension of his significance for the individual. Both John and 1 John attest to this understanding of *alētheia*.

This study has focused on the term *alētheia* in both John and 1 John,

⁵⁷ See the discussion in Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 581–5.

⁵⁸ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 234–5.

seeing if there is a development of thought, or a simple progression. In both works, the word was found to be Christocentric in origin and salvific in significance. John carefully lays out the pre-cross importance, without neglecting the post-cross meaning, whereas 1 John majors on the significance for the individual in light of Jesus's death, without ignoring his life. The implication follows that there is progression from John to 1 John, but without a development that would require a great length of time or different authors. The theological nature of 1 John finds itself complementing and filling out the picture of *alētheia* as found in John.