

Dr. Robert Yarbrough, The Johannine Epistles, Session 5, Section 1: 1 John - Full Scale Faith, Central Burden [1 John 1:1-2:6]

1) Abstract, 2) Briefing Document, 3) Study Guide Questions, 4) FAQs

Abstract:

This academic lecture by Dr. Robert Yarbrough introduces his study of **1 John**, emphasizing the importance of this book within the Johannine writings and its focus on a **balanced Christian life**. Dr. Yarbrough highlights **love** as a dominant theme in John's writings, contrasting the nature of the Christian God with Greco-Roman deities and identifying **God as light** as a central concept with implications for believers' lives. He presents a model of Christian identity based on **belief, obedience (works), and relationship (love)**, arguing these are intertwined aspects of a life transformed by God's grace and emphasizing that authentic faith is demonstrated through these qualities. Finally, he discusses the purpose of 1 John, the sufficiency of **eyewitness testimony** to Jesus, and the **joyful fellowship** offered through Christ.

Briefing Document: Here is a detailed briefing document reviewing the main themes and most important ideas or facts from the provided excerpts of Dr. Robert Yarbrough's lecture on the Johannine Epistles:

Briefing Document: Review of Dr. Robert Yarbrough's Lecture on 1 John (Session 5, Section 1: 1 John 1:1-2:6)

Source: Excerpts from "Yarbrough_JohannineEp05_English.pdf"

Date of Lecture: Session 5 (Specific date not provided in excerpt)

Lecturer: Dr. Robert Yarbrough

Focus: 1 John, Session 5, Section 1:1-2:6, "Full Scale Faith, Central Burden"

I. Introduction to 1 John and its Context

- **Placement within the Johannine Epistles:** This lecture is the fifth in a series on the Johannine Epistles (1, 2, and 3 John), following lectures on introductory issues, theological themes, 3 John (Letter to a Trusted Friend - Gaius), and 2 John (Letter to a Trusted Church).
- **Audience and Purpose:** Yarbrough suggests 1 John was likely written for reading and application in the church addressed by 2 John, possibly throughout Asia Minor. The series title, "Balancing Life in Christ," reflects a core concept of these letters: a balanced life incorporating different factors.
- **Emphasis on "Love":** A striking feature of John's writings, including 1 John, is the remarkably high frequency of the word "love" (agape, agapao). Yarbrough presents a graph showing this frequency compared to other New Testament writings, supporting the title "Apostle of Love" not just due to John being called the Beloved Apostle, but due to his thematic focus on love.

II. Structure and Central Theme of 1 John 1:1-2:6

- **Byzantine Church Divisions:** Yarbrough notes that the ancient Greek Church divided 1 John into seven portions for reading and reference, reflecting early liturgical practices. The first portion covers 1:1 to a point in chapter 2.
- **"Central Burden: God is Light":** Yarbrough identifies the "central burden" of the opening section (and the epistle) as the nature of God, specifically articulated in the message "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1:5).
- **Context of the Roman World:** This emphasis is seen as addressing the prevalent Greco-Roman polytheistic society, where religion lacked scriptures, ethical guidance, and a concept of personal relationship with deities. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the God of Jesus Christ, in contrast, is a personal Savior God who enters into relationship and redeems.
- **Nature of God as "Light":** This symbolism points to God's holiness, purity, excellence, perfection, and transcendence. Light represents his blinding radiance and distinction from created beings. It also signifies that God is active and his nature has direct implications for the community of believers.

III. Gospel Identity According to John

- **Definition:** John conceives of Christian identity not primarily as "Christian," but as "children of God" or "little children."

- **Process of Becoming Children of God: Believing in Christ's Name:** This involves receiving Jesus and believing in his true identity as the Son of God who died for sin and rose again. John 1:12 is cited: "to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right or the authorization to become children of God."
- **Born of God:** John immediately qualifies this by stating that this status is not achieved through human will (blood, flesh, or man's will) but "of God, born of God" (John 1:13).
- **Compatibilism:** Yarbrough highlights the concept of compatibilism present here – both human agency in believing and God's greater, mysterious agency in enabling that belief ("Behind the scenes of our believing in God, there is something more fundamental and something mysterious at work"). This prevents believers from taking credit for their salvation, which is a gift of God.
- **Corollaries of Receiving Christ: Divine Love:** Receiving Christ results from and leads to "a staggering quality of divine love." Encountering God through the gospel introduces a transformative love previously unknown.
- **Balanced Christian Life (X, Y, Z Coordinates):** Yarbrough introduces a model to depict the balanced Christian life, represented by three intertwined coordinates:
- **X-axis (Doctrine/Faith):** Belief in the gospel message. Moving from unbelief to belief ("believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved").
- **Y-axis (Works/Obedience):** Behavior and ethics, acting in sync with belief. James' emphasis on faith and works is noted.
- **Z-axis (Relationship/Love):** A personal, interior relationship with God, resulting from God's work in transforming hearts. This is described as having a "rapport with God," wanting to grow in personal relationship, and feeling a "compulsion" to do God's will.
- **Integration:** These three aspects are not separate requirements for becoming a Christian but are intertwined results of God's work through the gospel. When God claims a person, He grows trust in Christ, knowledge of Him relationally, and changes behavior.
- **Avoiding Imbalance:** John addresses potential imbalances in the church where people might claim one coordinate but lack another (e.g., faith but no works, works but no faith, belief and works but no love). The true believer is in the "upper right-hand quadrant" (using the X/Y analogy) and also has the Z coordinate of love/relationship.

- **Assurance and Knowing God:** True assurance comes from a relationship with God (the Z coordinate). Yarbrough contrasts this with those who only have "faith and works" without a true relationship, citing Matthew 7 ("I never knew you"). Knowing God personally is key.
- **God's Agency and Human Responsibility:** While God is working "behind the scenes," believers also have agency and responsibility to "work out our salvation from our side." This is an active, not passive, relationship.

IV. John's Witness and Purpose (1:1-4)

- **Eyewitness Testimony:** John asserts his authority and the truth of his message by claiming to be an eyewitness to Jesus Christ, the "word of life," whom they "heard," "seen with our eyes," "looked upon," and "touched with our hands." This highlights the reality and physicality of the incarnation.
- **Proclamation:** John and the other disciples proclaim this "eternal life, which was with the Father... and was made manifest to us."
- **Goal: Joyful Fellowship:** The purpose of writing is "so that you too may have fellowship with us," which in turn is fellowship "with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." The ultimate aim is "so that our joy may be complete." Christianity is presented as leading to the "deepest gratification" and being "at peace with our God."
- **Theocentric and Christocentric:** Yarbrough reminds the reader that despite dealing with social issues, 1 John is primarily focused on God and Christ, not being merely "anthropocentric."

V. Implications of God's Character (1:5-2:2)

- **The Message: God is Light (1:5):** This foundational declaration has immediate implications for the community John addresses.
- **Contrast with Darkness (Sin):** Walking in darkness (sinning) is incompatible with claiming to have fellowship with God (1:6). Such claims are lies and contradict the truth.
- **Walking in the Light:** Conversely, walking in the light (obeying God, responding to relationship, believing truth) leads to fellowship with one another and cleansing from sin by the blood of Jesus (1:7).
- **Addressing Denial of Sin:** John directly confronts those who deny having sin:

- "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1:8).
- "If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us" (1:10).
- These verses imply a "bogus confession of God" where people claim to know God but deny their sin or live in ways out of sync with God's nature.
- **Way to True Fellowship:** Verses 7 and 9 offer the path:
 - Walking in the light.
 - Confessing sins: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and forgives us our sins, and cleanses us from all unrighteousness" (1:9). This is a positive step towards dealing with sin and maintaining fellowship.

VI. Appeal and Assurance in Light of God's Character (2:1-6)

- **Pastoral Concern:** John addresses his readers as "My little children," showing love and commitment.
- **Goal: Prevent Sin:** The immediate purpose of writing is "so that you may not sin."
- **Provision for Sin:** John provides assurance that if someone *does* sin, there is a solution:
- **Advocate:** "we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (2:1). Jesus, the sinless one, intercedes for believers from heaven.
- **Propitiation:** Jesus is the "propitiation for our sins" (2:2), meaning his death satisfied God's judgment or wrath against sin.
- **Scope of Propitiation:** Jesus is the propitiation "not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world" (2:2).
- **Special Grace Benefit:** This certainly applies to the "sins of all believers at all times who come into a relationship with God through faith." Salvation comes through Christ's atoning death.
- **Common Grace Benefit:** Yarbrough also suggests this could imply a "common grace benefit" to the whole world – God stays his hand of judgment and provides a "day of grace" for the world because of Christ's mission, allowing the possibility of salvation for anyone who hears and believes.
- **Knowing God and Keeping Commandments:** A key test of knowing God is keeping his commandments (2:3).

- **False Claims:** "Whoever says I know him but does not keep his commandments is a liar and the truth is not in him" (2:4). This reinforces the interconnectedness of the X (belief) and Y (works/obedience) coordinates.
- **Genuine Faith:** Keeping his word is evidence that "in him truly the love of God is perfected" (2:5). This shows the integration of all three coordinates: faith, love, and obedience working together.
- **Abiding in Christ Implies Living Like Christ:** "Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked" (2:6). While believers cannot perfectly emulate Christ's unique messianic role (sinlessness, virgin birth, atonement), they should strive to reflect his character in areas like service, reverence for God, prayer, love, and integrity.
- **Confirmation of Assurance:** God's love and Christian assurance are confirmed through living in this way, reflecting the life of Jesus.

VII. Conclusion (of this section)

- **Summary of Key Points:** The goal is for believers not to sin, but provision exists if they do.
- Sin and death do not have mastery over the Christian in union with Christ.
- Confession leads to forgiveness.
- Christ's death is both a special grace for believers (salvation) and possibly a common grace benefit for the whole world (staying judgment, day of grace).
- Communion with God necessitates compliance with his commandments (the X, Y, Z coordinates are intertwined).
- God's love and Christian assurance are evidenced by living a life analogous to Christ's walk, even in imperfection.

Overall Significance: This initial section of 1 John establishes the foundational truth of God's nature as light, the real and historical basis of the gospel through eyewitness testimony, the transformative nature of being born of God, and the interconnectedness of faith, obedience, and relationship (love) as indicators of genuine Christian life and fellowship with God. It immediately confronts false claims and provides the pathway to forgiveness and assurance.

Study Guide: Study Guide: Dr. Robert Yarbrough on 1 John 1:1-2:6, Central Burden

Quiz (Short Answer)

1. According to Dr. Yarbrough, what striking feature does the book of 1 John share with John's Gospel based on word frequency analysis?
2. What do the seven sections of 1 John in the Byzantine Church tradition primarily represent?
3. Dr. Yarbrough states that Greco-Roman religion, unlike the faith described in 1 John, did not emphasize what aspects of religious practice and belief?
4. What does Dr. Yarbrough identify as the "central burden" of the epistle of 1 John?
5. How does John conceive of Christian identity, according to Dr. Yarbrough, based on John's Gospel 1:12-13?
6. Explain the concept of "compatibilism" as Dr. Yarbrough describes it in relation to becoming children of God.
7. Briefly describe the three "lines" (X, Y, and Z coordinates) Dr. Yarbrough uses to depict the balanced Christian life.
8. What does John mean when he states that "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all"?
9. According to 1 John 1:6, what is implied about someone who claims to have fellowship with God while "walking in darkness"?
10. In 1 John 2:1-2, what "means of grace" is available to believers if they do sin?

Quiz Answer Key

1. Both John's Gospel and 1 John show an unusually high frequency of the words (noun and verb) for "love" compared to other New Testament writings.
2. These sections were lectionary markers used for reading Scripture in church and for referring to specific portions of the text.
3. Greco-Roman religion did not have scriptures, did not talk about morals or ethics, and did not involve a personal, saving relationship with a god or goddess.
4. The central burden of 1 John is the nature of God, specifically the message that "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all."

5. He conceives of Christian identity as being born of God (a work of God's will) through believing in the name of Christ (human agency).
6. Compatibilism means that both human agency (believing in Christ) and God's greater agency (being born of God) are at work when someone becomes a child of God.
7. The X-coordinate represents belief or faith (doctrine), the Y-coordinate represents works or obedience (ethics), and the Z-coordinate represents relationship or love (interpersonal).
8. This means God possesses a quality of holiness, purity, excellence, perfection, and transcendence, and his activities reflect this character, with no presence of evil or sin in him.
9. It implies that such a person is lying and not practicing the truth, indicating a disconnection between their claim and their actions.
10. They have an "advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous," who is the "propitiation for our sins" and intercedes for them.

Essay Questions

1. Discuss the significance of the high frequency of the word "love" in John's writings (Gospel and 1 John) as highlighted by Dr. Yarbrough, and explain how this theme connects to the nature of God and the Christian life as presented in the reviewed text.
2. Analyze Dr. Yarbrough's explanation of Christian identity in 1 John 1:12-13, focusing on the interplay between human agency and God's work. How does this understanding inform the themes of belief, works, and love discussed later in the text?
3. Explain Dr. Yarbrough's three-dimensional model (X, Y, Z coordinates) of the balanced Christian life (belief, works, and love). How does he use this model to address potential imbalances or shortcomings in professing Christians, drawing examples from the reviewed verses?
4. Elaborate on Dr. Yarbrough's assertion that "God is light" is the central burden of 1 John. What are the implications of this truth for the community John addresses, and how does John contrast walking in darkness with walking in the light?

5. Discuss the concepts of sin, confession, and propitiation as presented in 1 John 1:7-2:2. How do these ideas relate to the possibility of believers sinning and the means by which they can have fellowship with God despite their sin?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Johannine Epistles:** The letters traditionally attributed to the Apostle John: 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John.
- **Full Scale Faith:** Dr. Yarbrough's term for the comprehensive nature of believing in God and Christ as described in 1 John.
- **Balancing Life in Christ:** Dr. Yarbrough's overall theme for his teaching series on the Johannine Epistles, emphasizing the interconnectedness of different aspects of Christian living.
- **Agape / Agapao:** The Greek noun and verb for "love," highlighted as having a significantly high frequency in John's writings.
- **Byzantine Church:** The historical term for the Greek-speaking Eastern Orthodox Church.
- **Lectionary Readings / Markers:** Divisions or markers in ancient texts (like the Byzantine tradition of 1 John) indicating portions of Scripture read in church worship services.
- **Central Burden:** Dr. Yarbrough's term for the core message or theme of a passage or book, in this case, "God is light" in 1 John 1:5.
- **Greco-Roman World/Religion:** The cultural and religious context of the Roman Empire during the time John wrote, characterized by polytheism and focus on religious experience over scripture or ethics.
- **Gospel Identity:** How John conceives of the identity and experience of those who believe the gospel, including being "born of God."
- **Born of God:** A concept in John's writings describing the spiritual new birth experienced by believers, originating from God's will.
- **Compatibilism:** The idea that both human free will (agency) and divine sovereignty (God's agency) are at work simultaneously, as seen in believers receiving Christ and being born of God.

- **Balanced Christian Life:** Dr. Yarbrough's model illustrating the interconnectedness of belief (faith/doctrine), works (obedience/ethics), and relationship (love) in a genuine Christian experience.
- **X-coordinate:** Represents the dimension of belief, faith, or doctrine in Dr. Yarbrough's model.
- **Y-coordinate:** Represents the dimension of works, obedience, or ethics in Dr. Yarbrough's model.
- **Z-coordinate:** Represents the dimension of relationship, love, or interpersonal connection in Dr. Yarbrough's model.
- **Theocentric:** Focused on God as the central point or theme. Dr. Yarbrough describes 1 John as a theocentric book.
- **Christocentric:** Focused on Christ as the central point or theme. Dr. Yarbrough describes 1 John as a Christocentric book.
- **Anthropocentric:** Focused on humans as the central point or theme. Dr. Yarbrough contrasts 1 John with being an anthropocentric book.
- **Incarnation:** The Christian doctrine that the Son of God became flesh and lived as a human being in Jesus Christ.
- **Eyewitnesses:** Individuals who personally saw and experienced Jesus Christ, whose testimony is considered sufficient proof by John.
- **Fellowship:** A state of sharing, participation, or communion, particularly with God and other believers, a key goal expressed by John.
- **Joyful Fellowship:** The complete joy that results from having fellowship with God and one another through faith in Christ.
- **God is Light:** The central message proclaimed by John about the character and nature of God, symbolizing his holiness, purity, and transcendence.
- **Walking in Darkness:** Living in sin, disobedience, or falsehood, contrasting with walking in the light of God's character.
- **Practice the Truth:** To live authentically according to the reality and nature of God revealed in Christ and the gospel.
- **Walking in the Light:** Living in obedience to God, responding to a relationship with him, and believing the truth about him.

- **Confess Our Sins:** To admit and acknowledge one's sins to God.
- **Advocate:** Jesus Christ, who intercedes with the Father on behalf of believers when they sin.
- **Righteous One:** A title for Jesus Christ, indicating his perfect sinlessness and conformity to God's law.
- **Propitiation:** Jesus Christ's death on the cross, which satisfied God's just judgment or wrath against sin.
- **Keep His Commandments:** To obey God's instructions and will as revealed in Scripture, a sign of knowing God.
- **Abides in Him:** To remain in a close, continuous relationship with God through Christ.
- **Walk in the Same Way in Which He Walked:** To live a life that emulates the character, service, love, and integrity of Jesus, within the limits of human capacity.
- **Means of Grace:** The avenues or resources God provides for believers to receive his grace, such as confession and the advocacy of Christ.
- **Special Grace Benefit:** The saving grace of God received by believers through the atoning death of Christ.
- **Common Grace Benefit:** A broader benefit extended to the whole world because of Christ's work and God's ongoing mercy, preventing immediate judgment and allowing a day of grace.
- **Communion with God/Christ:** A deep, personal relationship and shared life with God and Christ.
- **Compliance with God's Will:** Acting in accordance with what God desires and commands.
- **Christian Assurance:** The confidence a believer has regarding their salvation and relationship with God, confirmed through living in faith, obedience, and love like Jesus.

FAQs

1. What is the central theme of 1 John, according to Dr. Yarbrough?

According to Dr. Yarbrough, the central burden or theme of 1 John is the nature of God, specifically the message that "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all." This foundational truth about God's holiness, purity, excellence, and transcendence has significant implications for the Christian life and the community of believers.

2. How does John conceive of Christian identity in his writings?

John understands Christian identity as a gift of God, a work of God's will, where believers are "born of God." This new birth comes about through believing in the name of Jesus Christ. While human agency in believing is acknowledged, John emphasizes that this belief is fundamentally a result of God's mysterious work behind the scenes, bestowing upon believers a status they do not deserve.

3. What three intertwined aspects are crucial for a balanced Christian life in 1 John?

Dr. Yarbrough presents a model of the balanced Christian life with three crucial, intertwined aspects: faith (belief or doctrine), works (obedience or ethics), and relationship (love or a personal relationship with God). He argues that these are not separate requirements but rather integrated components of the life transformed by the gospel message.

4. Why is the frequent use of the word "love" significant in 1 John?

The remarkably high frequency of the word "love" (both the noun and verb) in 1 John, when compared to other New Testament writings, highlights its central importance in John's understanding of God and the Christian life. It signifies that encountering God through the gospel results in a staggering quality of divine love entering the believer's life, transforming them and deepening their relationship with God and others.

5. How does 1 John address the tension between faith and works?

While acknowledging the importance of both faith and works, Dr. Yarbrough explains that John assumes these are intertwined. If someone claims to have faith but does not keep God's commandments (works), John calls them a "liar." Conversely, keeping God's word indicates that the love of God is "perfected" in them, showing that authentic faith results in changed behavior and expressions of love.

6. What are the implications of God being light for the community John is addressing?

If God is light, then practices, teachings, and actions within the Christian community that are "out of sync" with God's nature are problematic. John addresses situations where people claim to follow God but walk in darkness (sin) and even deny their sin. The implications of God's character necessitate walking in the light (obeying God, responding

to a relationship with God, believing the truth), which leads to fellowship with one another and cleansing from sin through the blood of Jesus.

7. What is the role of Jesus Christ as an advocate and propitiation in 1 John?

Jesus Christ is presented as an advocate with the Father for believers who sin. He is the "righteous one," who lived a sinless life and intercedes for God's people. Furthermore, Christ is the "propitiation for our sins," meaning his death satisfied God's judgment or wrath against sin. This is a special grace benefit for believers, though John also suggests a common grace benefit to the world from Christ's death.

8. How is Christian assurance confirmed, according to the end of the first section of 1 John?

According to the closing verses of the first section of 1 John, Christian assurance is confirmed through communion with God/Christ, which implies compliance with God's will as expressed in his commandments. It is also confirmed through living like Jesus did, not in a way that emulates his unique Messiahship, but by reflecting his kindness, goodness, service, reverence for God, prayer life, and integrity in our own lives.