

Homiletics Analysis: 1 John 5

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

First John 5 brings the letter's cumulative argument to its climax and conclusion. John has been weaving three interlocking tests of genuine Christianity throughout the letter — doctrinal confession, moral obedience, and brotherly love — and in this final chapter he draws them together under the governing category of *faith that overcomes*. The chapter opens by grounding love for God's children in love for God Himself, and grounds love for God in obedience to His commands, and insists that obedience is not burdensome because genuine faith overcomes the world (vv. 1–5). John then marshals a threefold divine witness to the Son — the Spirit, the water, and the blood — against the background of the false teachers who were apparently denying the full humanity or full deity of Jesus (vv. 6–12). The christological argument reaches its peak in verse 12: “He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.” The chapter then turns pastoral, assuring believers of their confidence in prayer (vv. 13–15), addressing the intercession question raised by a “sin not leading to death” (vv. 16–17), and issuing three crystalline “we know” affirmations (vv. 18–20) before the abrupt, almost jarring closing command: “Little children, guard yourselves from idols” (v. 21).

This Text — Intent

John is writing with urgent pastoral purpose. His readers are shaken — false teachers have departed from the community (2:19) and have left behind doubt, confusion, and possibly defection. John's intent throughout the letter, stated explicitly in 5:13, is to produce *assured* belief, not merely correct belief: “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.” The intent in chapter 5 is not primarily to add new doctrine but to bring the letter's cumulative case to a landing point — to move the reader from belief that is tentative, wounded, or confused into belief that is confident, anchored, and overcoming. God is seeking to produce in the reader a settled, unshakeable assurance that life — real life, eternal life — is possessed now, in the Son, and that this possession changes everything about how one lives in a world that opposes it.

Subject Sentence: Faith in the Son secures life, overcomes the world, and grounds unshakeable assurance.

Primary Claim: God is calling His people through this passage to stop living in the fog of spiritual doubt and to take hold of the assured knowledge that possessing the Son means possessing life — right now, without qualification — and that this certainty is the very thing that enables obedience, love, and victorious living in a hostile world.

Interpretive Evaluation

The **“water and blood” of verse 6** is the passage’s most contested interpretive question and the one with the most significant expositional consequences. Three principal readings compete:

The **sacramental reading**, associated most prominently with Roman Catholic and some Anglican and Lutheran interpreters, takes “water” as baptism and “blood” as the Eucharist. On this reading, the verse grounds assurance in the sacramental life of the church. This reading must be *refuted* on textual grounds: the verse says Jesus “came by water and blood,” not that the sacraments testify to believers. The subject is Jesus’ historical advent, not the church’s ongoing worship. The grammar points backward to incarnation and atonement, not forward to sacramental practice.

The **baptism-and-cross reading**, held by most Reformed, Lutheran, and evangelical commentators (including I. Howard Marshall, John Stott, and D.A. Carson), takes “water” as Jesus’ baptism (the formal inauguration of His public messianic ministry) and “blood” as His death on the cross. The Docetic or proto-Gnostic false teachers against whom John is writing apparently taught that the divine Christ *descended upon* the human Jesus at baptism but *departed before* the crucifixion — so that the one who died was merely human, not the eternal Son. John’s polemical counter is precise: the Son came *not by water only* (the false teachers could accept the baptism) but by water *and blood* — the same Son was present at both the Jordan and Golgotha. This reading accounts for the polemical force, fits the anti-Docetic context of the letter, and is exegetically the most defensible. It is to be *preferred* as the Reformed verdict.

The **Spirit, water, and blood as three present witnesses** in verses 7–8 presents a related but distinct question. The infamous *Comma Johanneum* (the Trinitarian addition in some manuscripts of verse 7 — “the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit”) is absent from the earliest and best Greek manuscripts and is almost universally recognized by textual critics across traditions as a late Latin interpolation. Reformed, Lutheran, and evangelical scholarship is united in setting it aside. The three witnesses — Spirit, water, blood — are three ongoing testimonies to the Son’s identity: the Spirit’s internal witness to the believer (cf. 1 John 3:24, 4:13), the historical witness of Jesus’ Spirit-inaugurated messianic ministry, and the historical witness of His atoning death.

The **“sin leading to death” in verses 16–17** generates significant interpretive divergence. Several readings circulate:

The **apostasy reading** (held by Arminian and some Wesleyan interpreters) takes “sin leading to death” as the sin of final unbelief and apostasy — a sin for which intercession cannot avail because the person has definitively and finally rejected Christ. This reading is *qualified*: it correctly identifies the gravity and finality implied in the phrase, but it tends to generate pastoral anxiety rather than resolve it, and it does not account well for the fact that John’s whole letter is addressed to people tempted toward precisely this kind of defection.

The **Gnostic teachers’ blasphemy reading** (held by many Reformed commentators including Stott and Smalley) identifies the “sin leading to death” as the specific, definitive, willful rejection of Jesus as the Christ exhibited by the false teachers who have departed. This is not simply a pattern of sin but a decisive, settled repudiation of the Son. On this reading, John is not establishing a general taxonomy of mortal and venial sins (contra Roman Catholic use of this passage) but is saying something specific about the false teachers: their denial has become so definitive, so settled, that intercessory prayer for their *restoration* is not the mode of engagement John has in mind. The community’s life is not structured around praying the teachers back in. This reading is to be *preferred*: it coheres with the letter’s anti-Docetic purpose, it does not generate the theological machinery of a “mortal sin” category (as Roman Catholicism applies the passage), and it accounts for John’s pastoral tone — he is releasing his readers from guilt over not interceding for those who have definitively turned.

Roman Catholic use of verses 16–17 to establish the mortal/venial sin distinction must be *refuted* on contextual grounds. John is not constructing a systematic taxonomy of sin severity for purposes of sacramental discipline. The passage’s concern is particular and polemical, not universal and systematic. Reading it as a foundation for the mortal/venial distinction imposes a later theological grid that the text does not carry.

The three “we know” statements in verses 18–20 present no significant inter-traditional controversy, though their cumulative assurance-building function is often underweighted in expository treatments that treat them as a summary list rather than a climactic affirmation. The identity of “the true one” and “his Son Jesus Christ” in verse 20 as the ground of eternal life is to be read christologically — “this is the true God and eternal life” refers to Jesus Christ, not to the Father abstracted from the Son. This has significant anti-Arian and Trinitarian implications and should be preached with that weight.

Key Canonical Support

- **John 20:31** — “These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” The Gospel of John and 1 John share the same purpose: not merely informing but producing life-giving, assurance-generating faith in the Son.

- **Romans 8:31–39** — Paul’s “Who shall separate us?” climax parallels John’s “we know” affirmations: both passages are written to move believers from uncertainty and fear into a confident, unshakeable grasp of their security in Christ. Canonical bookend to 1 John 5’s assurance framework.
- **Deuteronomy 19:15** — The legal principle of two or three witnesses underlies John’s threefold witness structure (Spirit, water, blood) in verses 7–8. God’s own testimony about His Son is presented as legally sufficient — more than sufficient — to establish the case.
- **Hebrews 7:25** — “He always lives to make intercession for them” grounds the confidence in prayer (vv. 14–15) in the Son’s own ongoing high-priestly work. Assurance of answered prayer is not a function of the believer’s spiritual performance but of the Son’s perpetual intercession.
- **John 1:4; 14:6** — “In him was life” and “I am the way, the truth, and the life” provide the Johannine theological ground for 1 John 5:12’s stark binary: life is in the Son, and only in the Son. No Son, no life — not as a threat but as a structural christological reality.

Aim: To move the reader from fragile, doubt-ridden belief into the settled, concrete assurance that possessing the Son means possessing eternal life now — and that this certainty liberates obedience, fuels love, and empowers victory over a world that offers only counterfeits.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
5:1	Everyone who believes Jesus is the Christ is born of God; love for God includes love for His children	Connects birth from God, faith, and love in a single verse — the letter’s three tests converged
5:2	We know we love God’s children when we love God and keep His commands	Grounds love for people in love for God, not the reverse — guards against sentimental love divorced from obedience
5:3	This is love for God: to keep His commands; His commands are not burdensome	Key pastoral claim — obedience is not slavery; the new nature finds the yoke light

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
5:4	For everyone born of God overcomes the world; this is the victory that has overcome the world — our faith	“Has overcome” — perfect tense; the victory is already accomplished, being claimed in the present
5:5	Who overcomes the world? Only he who believes Jesus is the Son of God	Christological focusing — victory is not a spiritual technique but a person; faith in <i>this</i> Jesus
5:6	This is he who came by water and blood — Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood	Anti-Docetic polemic; the Spirit testifies because He is the truth
5:7–8	Three witnesses: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; these three agree	Legal sufficiency; God’s testimony exceeds human testimony (v. 9)
5:9	We accept human testimony; God’s testimony about His Son is greater	<i>A fortiori</i> argument: if you accept lesser testimony, how much more divine testimony
5:10	He who believes has the testimony in himself; he who does not believe calls God a liar	Sharp binary — unbelief is not neutrality but an accusation against God’s veracity
5:11–12	God’s testimony: He gave us eternal life, and this life is in His Son; life/no life binary	The starkest statement of the letter; life is not a reward awaiting — it is possessed or not possessed now
5:13	“I write these things to you who believe...that you may know you have eternal life”	The letter’s stated purpose — not belief but <i>assurance</i> of belief; knowledge, not mere hope
5:14–15	Confidence in prayer: if we ask according to His will, He hears; if He hears, we have what we asked	Prayer confidence grounded in alignment with God’s will, not the believer’s spiritual intensity
5:16–17	Instruction on praying for a sinning brother; “sin leading to death” — John does not say pray for that	Difficult passage; likely refers to the false teachers’ definitive rejection — not a mortal/venial taxonomy

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
5:18	“We know that everyone born of God does not keep on sinning; the one born of God protects him”	The new nature breaks the pattern of settled, ongoing sin; the Son’s protective work
5:19	“We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one”	Stark two-kingdom reality — not a reason for fear but for clarity about where allegiance lies
5:20	“We know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding...this is the true God and eternal life”	Climactic christological affirmation; Jesus Christ identified as the true God and eternal life itself
5:21	“Little children, guard yourselves from idols”	Abrupt but fitting close — the world’s counterfeits must be actively resisted; live out what you know

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	5:1–5	Faith, Love, and Obedience Converge — The Life That Overcomes
2	5:6–12	The Threefold Witness to the Son — Sufficient, Divine, Definitive
3	5:13	The Purpose Stated — Written for Assurance, Not Merely Information
4	5:14–17	Confidence in Prayer — Aligned with the Will of the One Who Hears
5	5:18–20	Three Things We Know — The Settled Certainties of Those Born of God
6	5:21	Guard Yourself — The Letter’s Final Command and Its Implicit Claim

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

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Primary Claim: God is calling His people through this passage to stop living in the fog of spiritual doubt and to take hold of the assured knowledge that possessing the Son means possessing life — right now, without qualification — and that this certainty is the very thing that enables obedience, love, and victorious living in a hostile world.

Applications (Five)

1. The assurance you have been told to wait for, you are told here to *take hold of now*. (*Mind/belief*)

First John 5:13 does not say “I write these things so that you might eventually arrive at assurance after sufficient spiritual performance.” John writes so that you *may know* — present tense, active possession — that you have eternal life. The letter’s purpose is to produce certainty, not to describe a distant destination. If you are trusting in the Son, the assurance is not a reward for believing hard enough — it is the thing you are being offered right now. The false teachers wanted to destabilize these believers’ confidence. John’s response is not “try harder” but “here is the case — receive it.” Stop treating assurance as something you need to earn your way toward and receive it as the gift it is: you have the Son, you have life.

2. Your obedience is not the price of God’s love — it is the expression of a love already received. (*Affections/worship*)

First John 5:3 insists that God’s commands are not burdensome. They were burdensome to you before — when you were trying to earn something, or when you obeyed out of fear, or when you kept the rules without knowing the Father behind them. But John’s logic runs in a specific direction: love for God *produces* obedience, not the reverse. If obedience still feels like a crushing burden, the question is not whether you need to try harder but whether you have actually received the love that is meant to motivate it. Let the passage diagnose the root: joyless obedience is often the sign that assurance has been lost and performance has taken its place. Return to the love — the Father’s love declared in the Son — and find the commands light again.

3. The world’s alternatives to life in the Son are not just dangerous — they are empty. (*Affections/worship*)

Verse 12’s binary — “he who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son does not have life” — and verse 21’s closing command — “guard yourselves from idols” — together

frame the world's alternatives to Christ as idols: things that promise life but cannot deliver it. The world lies in the power of the evil one (v. 19) and offers a thousand counterfeits. The application is not primarily behavioral ("stop doing bad things") but affectional and diagnostic: identify what you have been treating as a source of life that is not the Son. Security found in achievement. Identity grounded in how others regard you. Peace purchased by control. These are idols — not because they are categorically evil but because they are offering you something only the Son actually possesses. Name the idol. See it for what it is. It does not have life to give.

4. Your faith is not a feeling — it is a victory already secured. (*Mind/belief*)

Verse 4 says "this is the victory that has overcome the world — our faith." The verb is perfect tense: the victory *has been won*. Faith is the channel through which a finished reality is claimed, not the spiritual performance that earns the outcome. When you feel overwhelmed by the world's opposition — its pressure to conform, its mockery of Christian conviction, its seductive alternatives — you are not being called to generate sufficient faith to tip the balance. You are being called to believe what is already true: the one in whom you trust has already overcome. Faith, here, is not an athletic achievement. It is looking at the scoreboard and trusting what it says even when the crowd is still making noise.

5. Pray with the boldness of someone whose requests are heard by a Father who has already said yes to the most important thing. (*Will/behavior*)

Verses 14–15 tie confidence in prayer to alignment with God's will — "if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us." This is not a loophole that makes prayer risky ("but what if my prayer isn't in His will?") — it is an invitation to pray with greater boldness, not less, because the God who hears is the same God who gave His Son (v. 11) and who keeps those born of Him (v. 18). Practically: bring the specific thing before Him. Not a general, hedged request shaped by unbelief dressed up as humility, but a real request made in confidence that the Father who secured your eternal life is the same Father attending to your present need. Pray as someone who knows he has the Son, and therefore knows he has life, and therefore knows he is heard.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: First John 5 makes some of the most direct and load-bearing christological claims in the New Testament. The identification of Jesus Christ as "the true God and eternal life" in verse 20 is one of Scripture's clearest affirmations of Christ's full deity, standing alongside John 1:1 and Titus 2:13 as a direct christological ascription. But the chapter's theological weight is not only christological — it is simultaneously soteriological. The life that is *in* the Son (v. 11) is not a future commodity to be received at death but a present possession secured by faith. This is Johannine realized eschatology at its sharpest: eternal life is not merely ahead, it is *had*. The passage also establishes the legal sufficiency of divine testimony (vv. 9–10), the inseparability of faith and obedience

and love as marks of the born-again life (vv. 1–3), and the protective work of the Son over those who belong to Him (v. 18) — all of which contribute to a coherent, integrated doctrine of salvation that cannot be reduced to any single category alone.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: First John 5 is a pastoral application of doctrines that Reformed theology holds with particular force: the perseverance of the saints (v. 18 — “the one born of God protects him”), the inseparability of justification and regeneration (you cannot have life without having the Son; you cannot have the Son without loving and obeying), and the absolute sufficiency of God’s own testimony over human feeling or experience as the ground of assurance. The chapter pushes back against two perennial distortions that Reformed pastoral theology has had to guard against on both flanks: *antinomianism* (you can have the Son without love and obedience — vv. 1–3 refute this) and *legalism* (obedience is the ground of your standing rather than the fruit of regeneration — vv. 4–5 and 13 refute this). The Bullmore principle is in full force here: God is not merely communicating true things about assurance — He is *producing* assurance in the reader by presenting a case that is legally sufficient, personally warming, and christologically grounded. The preacher’s task is to do the same.

Main Takeaway

You have the Son — which means you have life. Not someday, not conditionally, not after sufficient spiritual improvement. Now. The same Son who overcame the world, who came by water and blood, who is testified to by the Spirit, who is the true God and eternal life — He is yours, and His life is yours with Him. Stop living like you are waiting for something to be decided. The Father decided it in the Son. Know it. Live from it. Guard everything that would try to take His place.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Treating the “sin leading to death” passage (vv. 16–17) as a systematic theology of sin categories.** This is the most common misuse of this passage, particularly in Roman Catholic and some Baptist contexts where it is read as establishing a mortal/venial distinction or a ranked taxonomy of sin severity. John is not doing systematic moral theology here — he is addressing a pastoral and polemical situation specific to his community. The preachers who departed represented a settled, definitive rejection of Christ, and John is releasing his readers from the

anxious obligation to intercede for those who have made their repudiation clear. Preach the pastoral intent, not the imported taxonomy.

- **Turning the threefold witness (vv. 7–8) into a textual puzzle that swallows the sermon.** The Comma Johanneum question is legitimate and should be handled honestly, but a sermon that spends significant time on textual criticism of verse 7 has prioritized the preacher’s scholarly credibility over the congregation’s need. Dispose of the question briefly and honestly (the Trinitarian addition is not in the best manuscripts), then move to the actual claim: God’s testimony about His Son is legally sufficient and greater than any human testimony. That is the claim that needs preaching.
- **Reducing verse 3 (“his commands are not burdensome”) to motivational optimism.** The passage is not saying “following God is easy” or “Christianity is not hard.” It is making a specific claim about the *nature of the regenerate life*: those born of God have a new nature that finds obedience to be the expression of love rather than the price of acceptance. Preaching it as encouragement (“cheer up, it’s not that bad!”) misses both the theological precision and the pastoral power. Preach it as a diagnostic: if obedience feels crushing and joyless, what has been lost is assurance of love, not spiritual toughness.
- **Preaching the life/no-life binary of verses 11–12 as threat rather than invitation.** “He who does not have the Son does not have life” is often preached primarily as a warning to unbelievers — and it is a warning, and should be heard as one. But in context, the verse is addressed to *believers* and its primary function is to calibrate what they already have. John is saying: you have the Son, which means you have life — the real thing, the only thing, the thing the world cannot touch or take. Preach the positive before the negative, in proportion to John’s own intent in verse 13.
- **Missing the escalating “we know” climax of verses 18–20.** These three affirmations are not a casual summary — they are John’s culminating pastoral declaration, the “we know” anchors that are meant to leave the reader in a different place than they started. Preachers who treat them as a list of minor closing points fail to honor their climactic function. Each “we know” needs weight: we know sin does not define us (v. 18), we know which kingdom we belong to (v. 19), we know who has come and who we are in Him (v. 20). These are not footnotes. They are the landing.
- **Treating verse 21 as a throwaway conclusion rather than the letter’s final summary claim.** “Guard yourselves from idols” sounds abrupt, almost tacked on, and preachers often apologize for it or skip past it. But it is the fitting seal of everything John has said: because you have the true God and eternal life in the Son, everything else that offers to be your source of life is a lie — a counterfeit — an idol. The command is only abrupt if you have not been tracking John’s cumulative

argument. In context, it is the sharpest possible application of everything the letter has established.

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