

Let God Be True and Every Man a Liar: A Mandate for Global Evangelization

I John 1:5 – 2:2

Introduction: 1) Why does the world need a Savior, an advocate (2:1), a propitiation (2:2)? Answer: sin. Humanity has a sin problem. It is our main problem. Or, is it? 2) In 1973 psychologist Karl Menninger shocked modern sensibilities with his book entitled *Whatever Became of Sin?* If people were shocked then they would be offended in our day. Sin. What a quaint and outdated idea. In this book Menninger provided a scathing critique of modern day preaching and the noticeable absence of the “S” word, the word “sin”. In a chapter entitled, “The Disappearances of Sin: A Eyewitness Account”, Menninger writes,

In all of the laments and reproaches made by our seers and prophets, one misses any mention of “sin”, a word which used to be a veritable watchword of prophets. It was a word once in everyone’s mind, but now rarely if ever heard. Does that mean that no sin is involved in all our troubles – sin with an “I” in the middle? Is no one any longer guilty of anything? Guilty perhaps of a sin that could be repented and repaired or atoned for? Is it only that someone may be stupid or sick or criminal – or asleep? Wrong things are being done, we know; tares are being sown in the wheat field at night. But is no one responsible, no one answerable for

these acts? Anxiety and depression we all acknowledge, and even vague guilt feelings; but has no one committed any sins?

Where, indeed, did sin go? What became of it?...

The very word “sin,” which seems to have disappeared, was a proud word. It was once a strong word, an ominous and serious word. It described a central point in every civilized human being’s life plan and life style. But the word went away. It has almost disappeared – the word, along with the notion. Why? Doesn’t anyone sin anymore? Doesn’t anyone believe in sin?

Congress voted some years ago to require the President to proclaim each year a national day of prayer, and Truman began it in 1952. The following year (1953) President Eisenhower made his first proclamation and in it he made a reference to SIN. He borrowed the words for his proclamation from a call issued in 1863 by Abraham Lincoln, the country’s first Republican and most theological President:

“It is the duty of nations as well as of men to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon.”

An Article in *Theology Today* has this to say about Eisenhower's use of the word "sin":

“None of Eisenhower's subsequent calls to prayer mentioned *sin* again. The word was not compatible with the Commander-in-Chief's vision of a proud and confident people. I cannot imagine a modern president beating his breast on behalf of the Nation and praying “God be merciful to us sinners”...’

It is surely nothing new that men want to get away from acknowledging their sins or even thinking about them. Is this not the religious history of mankind? Perhaps we are only more glib nowadays and equipped with more euphemisms. We can speak of error and transgression and infraction and mistakes without the naïve exposure that goes with serious use of that old-fashioned pietistic word “sin.” ’ (pgs. 13-15, 24). Later Menninger would add, “The [pastor] cannot minimize sin and maintain his proper role in our culture” (p. 198).

3) My friend, Russ Moore spoke at a liberal Episcopalian Church in New Albany, Indiana a number of years ago, explaining what Baptists believe. During a Q&A session, a woman spoke up and said, “My daughter is 10 and she has never sinned and I don't think she ever will. I don't think she has it in her.”

4) Obviously sin is not a popular subject in our day. People will go to great lengths to hide it, rationalize it or deny it. But understand this, when they do **“THEY CALL GOD A LIAR!”** They challenge His Word and question His character. They say sin is not serious and Jesus did not need to die. They fall in line with Liberal feminist theologian Delores Williams (formerly of Union Theological Seminary in New York) who said at the Reimagining Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota (in 1993), “I don’t think we need a theory of atonement at all. I think Jesus came to show us something about life...I don’t think we need people hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff.” In one sense she is right. If we have no sin then we have no need of a Savior.

Transition

1. The apostle John has an altogether different understanding both of sin’s severity and a Savior’s necessity. He recognized the danger of calling God a liar and warns his “little children” (2:1) to be on alert. Find out what a person believes about Jesus and what he thinks about sin, John says. It will tell you a lot.
 2. 1:5 is the basis for 1:6-2:2 and the foundation for 1:6-3:10, the first half of John’s Letter.
- 1:5 -3:10 emphasizes God is light.

3:11-5:12 emphasizes God is love.

Following his declaration in v. 5 that “God is light”, John will weave together 6 “if” clauses and 3 “if we say” statements (1:6, 8, 10) in 1:6-2:2. 9 times he will use the word “sin”, 2 times the word “darkness.” To think correctly about Jesus you must think correctly about sin. When you see sin for what it is you will immediately see your need, the world’s need, for Jesus as your advocate (2:1) and your “atoning sacrifice” (NIV) (2:2). You will also avoid the error of calling God a liar.

I. The world must know what God says about Himself. 1:5

The *New English Translation* renders v. 5 this way, “Now this is the gospel message we have heard from Him...” This translation captures, I believe, the heart of what John wants us to understand. We have a gospel, “a good news” message, the world needs. This message concerns Jesus Christ who is identified as:

- 1) “that which was from the beginning” (1:1)
- 2) “the word of life” (1:2)
- 3) “the eternal life” (1:3)
- 4) the “Father’s Son” (1:3)
- 5) the source of “fellowship” (1:3)
- 6) the source of “joy” (1:4)

This is God's witness to His Son and our Savior. This is what He thinks about Jesus Christ. Having met this Savior in repentance and faith, we have a divine assignment that involves the proclamation of a specific gospel with a universal scope (2:2). This message is for the whole world.

1) We have a gospel message to announce.

- This gospel message is what we have heard and it is still ringing in our ears (perfect tense). Further, it is a message we heard “from Him”, from Jesus Himself. And, it is a gospel message we continually “proclaim” (present tense) to others, to all 16,500 plus people groups in the world, with 7,100 still unreached.
- This message is one that has not changed and it never will. There is an abiding and permanent quality to the gospel message we proclaim, that we “declare” (NIV). There also is an abiding and permanent mandate to get it to the nations.
- That “God is light” is an embedded aspect of faithful gospel proclamation. It highlights the contrast between who God is and who we are without Him. The word light occurs in some form over 275 times in the Bible (95X in the NT). It is a popular theme throughout the Scriptures.

- Psalm 27:1 – “The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid”.
- Psalm 36:9 – “For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light”.
- Isaiah 60:1 – “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you”.
- Isaiah 60:3 – “And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising”.
- Isaiah 60:19 – “The sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give you light; but the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory.”
- Isaiah 60:20 – “Your sun shall no more go down, nor your moon withdraw itself; for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended.”
- Micah 7:8 – “Rejoice not over me, O my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise, when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me.”

- John 1:9 – “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”
- John 8:12 – “Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”
- John 12:36 – “While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.”
- John 12:46 – “I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.”
- God who is light and gives life has come to us as the “light of the world” in His Son Jesus Christ. The apostles saw this and they proclaimed it for all the world to hear. As Isaiah said, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined” (Isaiah 9:2).

2) We have a basic truth to affirm

- An essential component of faithful gospel proclamation is an understanding of the nature and character of God. This is a theme that John will raise several times. For example he teaches us that:
 - God is light (1:5)
 - God is love (4:8, 16)

-God is true (5:20)

- Here he writes literally, “God light is and darkness in Him not is none.” The double negative is used to emphasize this truth. For us a “double negative” is bad grammar. However, it is excellent theology. As we just saw the image of light appears often in the Bible in reference to God. Sometime it points to God’s holiness, moral purity and goodness. Other times the focus is on truth and revelation. It is certainly possible John wished to communicate all these ideas here. But, is any one of them the primary thought? In light of how John used the concept of “light” in his gospel, I believe another idea may have been at the forefront of John’s intention.

John 1:4 – “In him [Jesus] was life, and the life was the light of men.”

John 8:12 – “I [Jesus] am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

Here the statement “God is light” means God has as His very nature and being the source of life. In our God there is light that leads to life. There is not the slightest hint of darkness and death. Martin Luther

said, “There is no darkness in him, not even the slightest.” (quoted in Akin, 69). There is no “dark side” in this God!

- Light in this instance equals life (cf. Job 33:28, 30). This light leading to life is found in the gospel message about Jesus (1:5) and proclaimed (vs. 3, 5) by those who have met Him in conversion, the new birth (3:9; 5:1, 4, 18). In the light of God is the fullness of the life of God, and there is no lack of life in him at all.
- This is a non-negotiable in faithful theology and faithful gospel proclamation. This is a message we must be passionate to share with the world. We who has received the light must be a light to the world (Matt 5:14).
- John Falconer said, “I have but one candle of life to burn, and I would rather burn it out in a land filled with darkness than in a land flooded with light.” C.T. Studd would add, “Some wish to stay within the sound of a church or a chapel bell. I’d rather run a rescue shop within a yard of hell.”

II. The world must know what God says about Sin 1:6-10

- In a real sense the essence of sin is our attempting to take the place of God. We want to be in charge. We want to establish the ground rules and playing

field. And, we want to provide our own definitions of what is right and what is wrong, what sin is and what sin is not.

- John is not interested in human opinions on the matter of sin. Divine revelation will set the bar and establish the truth. John says let's hear God's mind on the matter. We will discover that He takes sin very seriously.
- John rhetorically uses 3 "If we say" statements to help us see sin as we ought, to see sin as God sees sin. In the process a healthy theology of "lying" is addressed.

1) Do not lie to others 1:6-7

- Using an inclusive "we" (anyone saying anywhere at anytime is the idea), John makes a negative (v.6) and a positive observation (v.7).
- If we say we have fellowship with God, that God is our friend intimately known in light and life, and yet we walk in darkness, in death and all that accompanies spiritual death and darkness (see Eph 2:1-3) we 1) lie and 2) do not practice or live out the truth. "Walk" is in the present tense and speaks of a continuous and consistent pattern of life. In essence we say to others I know God but our beliefs and behavior contradict our talk. Denying Jesus is

God in the flesh and downplaying the seriousness of sin, we lie to others about who we are.

- In contrast v.7 says if we live our lives in the realm of light as God is in the light, 1) we indeed have fellowship (intimate friendship) with one another, with God and his family (vs. 3-4), and 2) the blood of Jesus his Son (cf. v. 3) keeps on cleansing us from all sin.

- I love what Martin Luther said about Christ's cleansing blood:

“It is strange that although we preach about the blood and the suffering of Christ every year, yet we see so many sects bursting forth. Oh, the great darkness of the past! But if we cling to the Word that has been made known, we have this treasure, which is the blood of Christ. If we are beset by sins, no harm is done. The blood of Christ was not shed for the devil or the angels; it was shed for sinners. Accordingly, when I feel sin, why should I despair, and why should I not believe that it has been forgiven? For the blood of Christ washes sins away. The main thing is that we cling simply to the Word. Then there is no trouble.”

2) Do not lie to yourself. 1:8-9

- Those who live in death and darkness do not just lie to others, saying one thing while believing and living another. Eventually they lie to themselves becoming self-deceived. Their internal spiritual and moral compass goes haywire and their consciences, as Paul said, “are seared” (I Tim. 4:2).
- John introduces his 2nd “If we say statement.” Here we discover what appears to be a claim of sinlessness, a declaration that we are free from the guilt and penalty of sin. This spiritual posture says I have no sin and I do not need Jesus as advocate (2:1) or atonement (2:2). John’s judgment on such persons is quick and pointed: 1) you deceive yourselves and 2) the truth is not in you. You say you have no sin but God says you do. You say you have no need of a Savior but God says you do.
- Having set forth the liars’ negative proclamation a 2nd time, John again follows up with the positive and correct theological antidote in v. 9. It is one of the most beloved and memorized verses in the Bible. A free paraphrase of it may help us capture afresh the heart of its marvelous truth:

“If we are characterized as those who are continually agreeing with God about our sin, both its nature and its acts, God is both

faithful and just (true to Himself) to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

- John says look! There are sayers who cover and conceal their sin. They are liars. There are also confessors who acknowledge and admit their sin. They are forgiven. Proverbs 28:13 reminds us, “Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.”
- The great Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon got it exactly right, “The idea of having no sin is a delusion; you are altogether deceived if you say so; the truth is not in you, and you have not seen things in the true light; you must have shut your eyes to the high requirements of the law, you must be a stranger to your own heart, you must be blind to your own conduct every day, and you must have forgotten to search your thoughts and to weigh your motives, or you would have detected the presence of sin. He who cannot find water in the sea is not more foolish than the man who cannot perceive sin in his members. As the salt flavors every drop of the Atlantic, so does sin affect every atom of our nature.” (Honest Dealings with God,” June 20, 1875).

By the way: the apostle John does not deny our need to be seen as sinless. He simply notes that we cannot find it in ourselves. We need an advocate. We need an atonement. We need another.

3) Do not lie about God 1:10

- In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky writes,

“The one who lies to himself and believes his own lies comes to a point where he can distinguish no truth either within himself or around him, and thus enters into a state of disrespect towards himself and others. Respecting no one, he loves no one, and to amuse and divert himself in the absence of love, he gives himself up to his passions and his vulgar delights and becomes a complete animal in his vices, and all of it from lying to other people and himself.”

- John says something similar but more simply: lie to others (1:6) and lie to yourself (1:8) and soon you will lie about God. In fact you will actually call God a liar.
- John introduces his 3rd “If we say” statement. Again the theological declaration is that we now live in a state of sinlessness. We claim to be right with God, believe the truth and live without sin. John says with a double punch we are twice wrong. First, we

make God a liar because he says we are sinners. Second, His Word is not in those who claim they have no sin problem.

Someone else's word says we have no sin problem. God says we are sinners and need a Savior. False teachers say we are not sinners and need no Savior. The question is clear isn't it? Who are you going to believe?

III. The world must Know what God says about Jesus 2:1-2

Modern studies on the historical Jesus can be fascinating. They can also be deceiving and disappointing because they are so far removed in truth and time from the Jesus revealed in the Bible. In a book entitled *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, it is noted that modernist options include:

“an eschatological prophet, a Galilean holy man, an occultic magician, an innovative rabbi, a trance-inducing psychotherapist, a Jewish sage, a political revolutionary, an Essene conspirator, an itinerant exorcist, an historicized myth, a protoliberation theologian, a peasant artisan, a Torah-observant Pharisee, a Cynic-like philosopher, a self-conscious eschatological agent, a socioeconomic reformer, a paradoxical Messianic claimant and, finally, as one who saw himself as, in some sense, the very embodiment of Yahweh-God.” (p.53)

I would argue that it is the last one that matches up with Scripture. And, this one who is “the very embodiment of Yahweh-God” is both our advocate and atonement in His work of redemption. Who could have ever imagined or made up anything like this?! This Jesus may not be a Jesus we can be comfortable with, but He is the Jesus we and the whole wide world needs! In the *Chronicles of Narnia* it is asked concerning Lion-King Aslan, “Is He safe?” The answer: “No! But, He is good!” Oh how true that is of the Lion-King of Judah!

1) Jesus is our advocate 2:1

- For the 1st of 7 times in this letter John uses the phrase “my little children”. It is a term of endearment and fatherly concern. John sees himself as their spiritual father and they as his spiritual children. They stand in striking contrast to the liars of chapter 1.
- John says “I am writing to you as a spiritual father, now a spiritual grandfather (see Deut 6:1-9), these things, the things of 1:5-10 so that “you may not sin.” John has made it clear that in this life we cannot be sinless (but note the future promise of 3:2!), but he does believe we can sin less because we are now in intimate fellowship with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ (1:3).

- However, we will still sin until we are glorified. What do we do when that happens? Well in 1:9 he told us to confess our sins. Now in 2:1 he tells us to flee to our Savior who is our “advocate with [face to face] the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”
- The word “advocate” is *parakletos*, paraclete. The word occurs 5 times in the New Testament (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; 1 John 2:1). Four times it refers to the Holy Spirit. Only here is it a reference to the Lord Jesus who is able to be our advocate because He is “the righteous”. Isaiah 53:11 may be echoed here. There our Lord is called Yahweh’s “righteous Servant.” This advocate is sinless, undefiled and spotless in His nature and in all of His actions. There is no one else like Him. The word advocate means “helper”, one who is called to come alongside in a time of need. This helper helps us when we sin. He is the cleanser of sin (1:7), the forgiver of sin (1:9), and the helper when we do sin. Isn’t the gospel amazing? We have a helper in our heart (the Holy Spirit) and a helper in heaven (Jesus Christ the righteous one). Or as Paul says, we have an intercessor in our hearts (Rom. 8: 26-27) and an intercessor in heaven (Rom. 8:35). As a result, no sin can

“separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:39).

2) Jesus is our atonement 2:2

- John now informs us why Jesus can be our advocate. It is because He made “propitiation”, atonement for our sins. The word “propitiation” is a very important word in the New Testament. It is the word *hilasmos*. The word occurs in some form in the context of the work of Christ in 4 crucial texts: Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10. The word carries the idea of satisfaction. Jesus Christ, by His bloody sacrifice on the cross, satisfied God’s holiness and turned away His righteous wrath from sinners.

-The wrath that should have been poured out on sinners was poured out on Jesus.

-The judgment that should have been experienced by sinners was experienced by Jesus.

-The hell that should have been experienced by sinners was experienced by Jesus.

“God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself” (2 Cor. 5:19).

- Feminist theologian Delores Williams is wrong when she says, “There is nothing divine in the blood of the cross” (*Sisters in the Wilderness*, 61).
- Episcopal bishop John Spong misses it when he says, “Neither do I want a God who would kill his own son” (*Daily Record*, N. J., 1-27-00).
- Steve Chalke is in error when he says the orthodox understanding of the cross is a form of cosmic child abuse, “a vengeful father, punishing his son for an offence he has not even committed... [a] twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith” (*The Lost Message of Jesus*, 182-83).
- No, the work of atonement accomplished by Christ on the cross is where God’s holiness and God’s love meet, where God’s judgment and God’s mercy kiss. Yes, it pleased the Father to crush His Son and put Him to grief (Isa. 53:10) and it pleased the Father “to highly exalt Him and bestow on Him the name that is above every name” (Phil. 2:9).
- And note: there is a universal component to this atoning work: it is “for the sins of the whole world.” No one is beyond its reach. No one. A universal provision has been made so that as the redeemed so

awesomely sing in Revelation 5:9, “Worthy are you [Lord Jesus] to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation...”.

Conclusion

- The wonderful Church Father Augustine (A.D. 354-430) well said,
“We could never have been delivered even by the one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ, had he not been God as well. When Adam was created, he was of course righteous, and a mediator was not needed. But when sin placed a wide gulf between mankind and God, a mediator was called for Who was unique in being born, in living and in being slain without sin, in order that we might be reconciled to God and brought by the resurrection of the flesh to eternal life.”

Augustine, *Enchiridion*, p. 108

- Malcolm Muggeridge (1903-1990) would add,
“I have looked far and wide, inside and outside my own head and heart, and I have found nothing other than this Man and His words which offers any answer to the dilemmas of this tragic, troubled time. If His light has gone out, then, as far as I am concerned, there is no light.”

- The light has not gone out. It has come in the person of Jesus Christ. So, let us flee to it. Then, let us take it to the world, a world for which He and He alone is the propitiation, the perfect atoning sacrifice.