

**An Exploration of One's Present Possession of Eternal Life in Johannine Literature and Its
Implications for the Contemporary Church**

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Introduction

In the Sixteen Fundamental Truths of the Assemblies of God, “eternal life” occurs only under the fifth truth: Salvation of Man: “By the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, being justified by grace through faith, man becomes an heir of God according to the *hope of eternal life*,”¹ while “kingdom of God” is nowhere mentioned. In the Assemblies of God’s position paper “The Kingdom of God,” “eternal life” is not mentioned,² and yet “‘eternal life’ is basically John’s preferred way of referring to the kingdom of God,”³ and these concepts are used interchangeably throughout the gospels.⁴ When one takes into account that there are 56 occurrences in the Gospel of John and an additional 17 occurrences in 1 John of the ζωή (life)⁵ word grouping, it is apparent that “eternal life” is a major part of Johannine thought and doctrine. Contrary to the futuristic connotation of the phrase “the hope of eternal life,” John presents “eternal life” as a present possession of the believer (cf. John 3:15-18; 5:19-40; 6:35-59; 17:2-3; 20:31; 1 John 1:2; 3:15; 5:11-13, 20) and defining characteristic of a believer’s life “in Christ.”

It is the purpose of this paper to explore one’s present possession of “eternal life” as presented in the Johannine literature in order to encourage readers to embody such a life in the

¹ “Assemblies of God 16 Fundamental Truths,” The General Council of the Assemblies of God, accessed February 29, 2020, <https://ag.org/Beliefs/Statement-of-Fundamental-Truths>. Emphasis added.

² “The Kingdom of God,” The General Council of the Assemblies of God, adopted August 9-11, 2010, accessed February 29, 2020, <https://ag.org/Beliefs/Position-Papers/Kingdom-of-God>.

³ J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 246.

⁴ Marianne Meye Thompson, “Eternal Life in the Gospel of John,” *Ex Auditu* 5 (1989): 37-38.

⁵ David Asonye Ihenacho, *The Community of Eternal Life: The Study of the Meaning of Life for the Johannine Community* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 184. Seventeen of these occurrences are the full expression “eternal life.” Van der Watt argues that “life” and “eternal life” in the Johannine Literature are synonymous and are therefore addressed together for the purposes of this paper. J. G. Van der Watt, “The Use of ΑΙΩΝΙΟΣ in the Concept ΖΩΗ ΑΙΩΝΙΟΣ in John’s Gospel,” *Novum Testamentum* 31, no. 3 (July 1989): 227.

world today as a testimony to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. One's concept of the end determines one's approach and activity in the present, as C. S. Lewis once wrote: "If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next.... It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one."⁶ It is my hope that the reader will be encouraged and challenged to pursue the fulness of life given now in Christ (John 10:10) in anticipation of the age to come.

I will first address the Johannine concept of "eternal life" as presented in the Gospel, Epistles, and Apocalypse. I will then explore how the present possession of eternal life is interpreted at different stages of church history and in different church traditions. After this, a comparison will be made between a biblical view of eschatology and other philosophical views of the end to demonstrate the importance of a robust understanding of one's present possession of eternal life, and finally offer a section that discusses the pragmatic implications of eternal life for the believer and specifically leaders in contemporary churches.

Biblical Foundations

In considering the believer's present possession of eternal life, as posited in the Johannine literature, we will first discuss the phrase "eternal life" and related vocabulary generally, and then explore specific themes of community, kingdom, and resurrection as they relate to the Johannine expression "eternal life."

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis Signature Classics (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 2009): 134, quoted in Trevin K. Wax, *Eschatological Discipleship: Leading Christians to Understand Their Historical and Cultural Context* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2018), 1.

“Eternal Life” and Related Vocabulary

In the Johannine literature, David Ihenacho recognizes four linguistic concepts that are associated to or help explain the Johannine central symbolism of life: βίος (life, generally biological life), ψυχή (life, commonly understood as physical life or sometimes as soul, consciousness, or one’s psyche), ζωή (life, which can be used of life generally, but has specific connotation in John’s writings), ζωή αιώνιος (eternal life, or the life of the age or age to come).⁷ Βίος is found only in 1 John 2:16, “For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, and the pride of *life*—is not from the Father but is from the world,”⁸ and is specifically related to that which is in the world. Βίον (goods) occurs in 3:17 and is also related to the things of this world. This association leads Ihenacho to the conclusion: “it is quite clear that βίος does not have any relationship with the central symbol of the Johannine writing, ζωή, which is believed to reside in God’s innermost divinity.”⁹ Von Rad, et. al. agree: “ζωή does not take on its meaningful content in a βίος.”¹⁰

Ψυχή “is in the first instance the physical life.... The life which is always manifested in an individual,” and when compared to ζωή “is more concretely the life bound up with flesh and blood.”¹¹ Ihenacho asserts that ψυχή represents “the personal lives of Jesus, his disciples, and perhaps the later members of the community,” and is the most valued possession of any human

⁷ David Asonye Ihenacho, *The Community of Eternal Life: The Study of the Meaning of Life for the Johannine Community* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 181. Ihenacho only considers the Gospel and Epistle’s of John in his analysis.

⁸ All Scripture references are taken from the ESV unless otherwise noted. Emphasis added.

⁹ Ihenacho, 182.

¹⁰ Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1964-76), 2:863.

¹¹ Kittel, 9:638-9.

being; the loss of ψυχή meant the loss of a person's existence on earth.¹² While in the Synoptics it can be used to suggest the "true and full life as God the Creator made and fashioned it,"¹³ in the Johannine literature ψυχή is used specifically in "situations as when an individual's human life is about to end," often associated with the verbs "to give up" or "to lay down."¹⁴ Thompson asserts that in every case of the Johannine literature "*psychē* denotes human life which can be given up,"¹⁵ and in Revelation 12:11 it refers to "the physical life which the martyrs are not to preserve or love."¹⁶ It is this unique use of ψυχή that helps define ζωή: "In contrast to *psychē*, which one can give up or lay down, *zōē* is life which cannot be taken away, life which is imperishable. *Zōē* cannot be lost, since it is true, heavenly, God-given life. But *psychē* can be lost, since it is bound to this world, which is temporal and passing way."¹⁷ Even though John maintains this distinction between ψυχή (life in this world) and eternal life (John 12:25), "the two spheres are not just distinct, for the ψυχή is kept to eternal life. It is thus the true life which is already lived in this aeon if the disciple lives where his Master is, seeking the center of his life, not in himself, but in the One who has gone before him."¹⁸

ζωή, considered the central symbol of John's Gospel and letters, can be used to describe both physical life and the supernatural life of God. However, the Johannine tradition consistently

¹² Ihenacho, 183.

¹³ Kittel, 9:642.

¹⁴ Ihenacho, 182.

¹⁵ Thompson, 38.

¹⁶ Kittel, 9:653.

¹⁷ Thompson, 39.

¹⁸ Kittel, 9:644.

applies this term specifically to the life of God.¹⁹ Because it is the life of God, ζωή can only be given by God and cannot be possessed otherwise.²⁰ This understanding is reinforced by Van der Watt's observation of how "life" and "eternal life" are used throughout the Gospel of John: "The word αἰώνιος [eternal] is not used in reference to the life of the Father or the Son (1:4, 5:26). The reason for this is probably that the specific semantic dimension αἰώνιος aims at making explicit when it is used with ζωή, *is already explicitly present in reference to God.*"²¹ He explains that "eternal" refers to a never ending quality of life, a quality of life that is directly associated to God, which makes describing God's life as "eternal" redundant.²² As such, "Apart from the statement in the Gospel prologue about the Logos at creation, 'The life was the light of men' (Jn 1:4) where a pregnant 'life; comprises both the worldly and the otherworldly, John uses the unqualified noun 'life' and the phrase 'eternal life' synonymously to denote the latter."²³

The life offered by Jesus as a present possession in John, the ζωή, is unique in that it is "eternal," "a life that belongs *qualitatively* to the aeon (ὁ αἰών) to come; note the contrast of two aeons in John 12:25: 'He who hates his life *in this world* will keep it for *eternal life.*' It is coterminous with that age, which is, in Jewish and Christian reckoning, without end."²⁴ This is not merely an extension of ψυχή, one's earthly life that can be laid down. Instead, eternal life is

¹⁹ Ihenacho, 184. The ζωή word group occurs 56 times in John's Gospel, and 17 times in 1 John, far surpassing its usage in the Synoptics and Pauline writings. Rainbow observes, "Life is a theme that permeates all parts of John's corpus. John may be called 'the Evangelist of life.'" Paul A. Rainbow, *Johannine Theology: The Gospel, The Epistles, and the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 277.

²⁰ J. C. Davis, "The Johannine Concept of Eternal Life as a Present Possession," *Restoration Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (1984), 162.

²¹ Van der Watt, "The Use of ΑΙΩΝΙΟΣ," 218. Emphasis added.

²² *Ibid.*, 219.

²³ Rainbow, 278.

²⁴ *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

“life on a higher plane. It is life ‘more abundant,’ that is, life in its ‘superfluity’ or highest plane. It is the kind of life which the Father himself has.”²⁵ This is a fundamentally different essence of life than is experienced normally and is only received by faith in Jesus Christ. It is the life characterized by the age to come and given now to believers through the possession of the Holy Spirit (note the relationship between the anointing of the Holy One that the faithful receive and the promise of eternal life in 1 John 2:20-25). As Roberts notes, “‘Eternal’ describes the *kind* of life one has in Christ and not how long he will possess life.”²⁶

This kind of life is nothing less than the participation in the nature of God:

This seems to imply that ζωή αἰώνιος [eternal life] applies primarily to the new unity between the natural human life and the timeless ζωή [life] realized first in the person of the Johannine Jesus, who is the λόγος [word] incarnate. The adjectival complement αἰώνιος [eternal] though carrying the sense of a timeless enduring, permanence, etc., seems to apply specifically to the elevated status of the natural human life which has been inducted into the divine atemporal/eternal horizon because of the incarnation of the λόγος [word].²⁷

Paul Rainbow asserts, “For John, Christians exist in the present world order as unbelievers do, *but they belong to the celestial and coming world order in a way unbelievers do not.* Life on this higher plane is not due to any quality that was inherent in them prior to their birth from God; rather, it is an act of the Father, the ‘gift of God’ (Jn 4:10, 14), and is offered to everyone without price (δωρεάν [Apoc 21:6; 22:17]).”²⁸ Thompson describes the same thing: “those who have eternal life *share in something that characterizes and comes from God alone.* They share in

²⁵ J. W. Roberts, “Some Observations on the Meaning of ‘Eternal Life’ in the Gospel of John.” *Restoration Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (1963), 188.

²⁶ Roberts, 193. Emphasis added.

²⁷ Ihenacho, 189.

²⁸ Rainbow, 279.

God's own life.”²⁹ The eternal life of the believer is the participation in and expression of the very quality and nature of God’s life—the life lived and modeled by the Son of God, Jesus Christ, is the life given to believers in the present age. In other words, eternal life is the experience and product of the believer’s fellowship with God, and this fellowship with God can only be manifest in the context of community.

Eternal Life and Community

Even though “fellowship” (κοινωνία) is only mentioned four times in the Johannine literature (1 John 1:3 (2x), 6, 7), its prominent placement in the first epistle with repeated use of family terms and references to “one another” throughout the corpus suggest that it is a significant theme for John. In his analysis of themes in 1 John, Van der Watt writes, “Using terms like ‘birth,’ ‘life,’ ‘father,’ ‘child,’ ‘son,’ and even ‘obedience,’ ‘approaching the Father without fear,’ ‘asking what one wants,’ John creates what we can call a ‘metaphorical network’ based on the social reality of family life.”³⁰ Belief in Jesus redefines the people’s social network, effectively creating a “new family” consisting not only of “vertical fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ, but also horizontal fellowship with one another.”³¹

This supports Ihenacho’s emphasis on one’s experience of eternal life only as members of the faith community:

Johannine life essentially consists in the pre-existent communion of God and Jesus, and a post-incarnational communion between Jesus and Christians *achieved existentially and sacramentally in the community* through κοινωνία [fellowship] in the Spirit.... For the Johannine Christians, life consists in a permanent and lasting union of God and Jesus on

²⁹ Thompson, 40. Emphasis original.

³⁰ J. G. Van der Watt, “Ethics in First John: A Literary and Socioscientific Perspective,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (July 1999): 495.

³¹ B. A. Du Toit, “The Role and Meaning of Statements of ‘Certainty’ in the Structural Composition of 1 John.” *Neotestamentica* 13 (1981): 98.

the one hand, the divine trinity (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) and the Christians on the other.³²

Thompson agrees: “John's conception of ‘life’ is not so highly individualized as has been argued, for in John life is not given to disparate individuals, but rather *to a community of believers*. After all, it is the Fourth Gospel that insists there must be ‘one flock, one shepherd.’ God gives life to the righteous and faithful people of God.”³³ This is borne out in the biblical text through the emphasis given to the “love command” (John 13:34-35; 1 John 3:23; 2 John 5) and the emphasis placed on the loving character that is expected in the relationships between believers (John 17; 1 John 3:11-5:4; 3 John [though “love” is present only in the greeting, the expectation of hospitality to fellow believers clearly embraces the concept]). According to Ihenacho, it appears that the Johannine author seems to

insist that stability and unity in the community, which they technically refer to as *κοινωνία* [fellowship], is a *sine qua non* for experiencing eternal life.... It enjoins the Johannine Christians to maintain the community's unity by listening and following after the true shepherd, who is Jesus, who offers them both protection and salvation (eternal life). For the Johannine Christians, abiding in the community is an ‘insurance’ against destruction and forfeiture of abundant *ζωή* [life].³⁴

In other words, Ihenacho sees the believer's participation in relational community that reflects the divine expression of love as the manifestation of the “eternal life” that God gives. Eternal life is expressed in the selfless, loving relationships that make up the community of God's newly created family that is defined by its faith and obedience to Jesus Christ. Karl Schmidt seems to agree when he writes with respect to *βασιλεία* (kingdom), “Immanence is never preached at the expense of transcendence in the proclamation of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is

³² Ihenacho, 151-52. Emphasis added.

³³ Thompson, 48.

³⁴ Ihenacho, 197.

beyond ethics. To orientate oneself by ethics is to think of the individual. In Jesus and the apostles, however, the individual does not stand under the promise as an individual. *It is the community which stands under the promise; the individual attains salvation as its member.*”³⁵

Thompson states regarding the Fourth Gospel,

There is an inescapable social dimension to the concept of life. Indeed, no Gospel emphasizes so adamantly the importance of love for others in the fellowship of believers. Love is not merely the human response to each other or to God; love comes from the same source as life, and these are not two entirely differentiated entities.... Not surprisingly, in the Johannine tradition those who fail to love are those who take the life of others: the devil, Judas, Cain. Love is life giving; and life produces the fruit of love. God’s gift is not merely given to individual believers, but to a *community*: the people of the Messiah.³⁶

It is, in fact, the love believers have for one another that is consistently portrayed in 1 John as the evidence assuring them of their possession of eternal life.³⁷ By loving one another the community *knows* that they abide in God and God in them by the Spirit whom He has given them (1 John 3:24), and it is the Spirit with which the readers have been anointed (2:20), which abides in them and teaches them about everything (2:27), which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (4:2), and which affirms the apostolic testimony they professed. As such, the role of the Spirit in 1 John “is... to offer assurance to... readers that they are the true possessors of... a life that cannot truly be realized, understood, or properly discerned apart from the Spirit,”³⁸ that is, eternal life. In these passages, obedience to the love command, the possession

³⁵ Kittel, 1:586. Emphasis added.

³⁶ Thompson, 47.

³⁷ “1 John was written out of pastoral concern for a community of believers whose faith had been rocked by a recent schism in their community to *assure them of the certainty of the eternal life that they possess in Christ*” (see 1 John 5:13). Stephen Rockwell, “Assurance as the Interpretive Key to Understanding the Message of 1 John,” *The Reformed Theological Review* 69, no. 1 (April 2010): 20-21. Emphasis added.

³⁸ Donald William Mills, “The Concept of Sinlessness in 1 John in Relation to Johannine Eschatology” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1998), 298.

and activity of the Spirit, and the faith of the individual are brought together as evidence for the community's assurance of eternal life. The emphasis on obedience to the love command and the offer of Jesus as the model believers are to follow (1 John 3:16) means that ethical considerations in the faith community are of supreme importance: "By constantly using Jesus and his behavior as exemplary for the behavior of the believers, John dramatically broadens the base of his ethical reflection. The ethical guideline is not a set of rules; it is established by the attitude and behavior of Jesus, actualized in the believers through the Spirit."³⁹ While we will explore the ethical implications of the faith community's present possession of eternal life in the praxis section of this paper, it suffices for now to note that there is an undeniable link between the two.

In sum, belief in Jesus as the Christ ushers the individual into a new experience of divine life that the believer can only participate in as a member of the faith community. This communal participation in eternal life is to be a tangible expression of the quality and character of life God exhibited through the incarnation of Jesus Christ as divine love. The divine love is best characterized by the giving up of one's life (*ψυχή*) for another, and the reception of eternal life (*ζωή αἰώνιος*). This is not a transaction or act of merit on the part of the believer. Rather, it is the gracious gift of God given to the believer on account of his or her faith which is then manifest in the believer's life. Having received *ζωή*, the community of faith is compelled to live out that *ζωή* in love to one another. With that, one now turns to a consideration of eternal life and the kingdom of God.

Eternal Life and the Kingdom of God

While "kingdom" language is quite prominent in the Synoptics Gospels, it is relatively

³⁹ Van der Watt, "Ethics in First John," 505. Family terminology is also prominent in the Gospel of John and the Apocalypse is addressed to "the seven churches that are in Asia," likely signifying the church at large and certainly the churches themselves as they represent a community of believers as opposed to individual believers.

rare in the Johannine corpus. “Kingdom” occurs only in John 3:3, 5; 18:36; Revelation 1:6, 9; 5:10; 11:15; and 12:10.⁴⁰ As mentioned in the introduction, however, “eternal life” is John’s preferred way of speaking about the kingdom of God,⁴¹ and Jörg observes, “Where Jn 3,3 and 3,5 use the phrase ‘kingdom of God’ (βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ), which is well-known from the earlier Jesus tradition, several sayings later in the chapter, such as Jn 3,15.16 and 3,36, introduce the term ‘eternal life’ (ζωὴ αἰώνιος)... The development in Jn 3 shows that ‘to have eternal life’ is introduced as a substitute for the phrase ‘to see’ or ‘to enter God’s kingdom.’”⁴² The means by which one enters God’s kingdom and receives eternal life is the faithful acceptance of and belief in God’s Messiah, Jesus the Christ, which is the very reason the Fourth Gospel was written (John 20:31). Jesus is then depicted in Revelation as reigning with God in the new cosmic order (cf. Revelation 22:1).

Paul Rainbow suggests that “John retains ‘kingdom of God’ as a staple term of Old Testament and Jewish eschatology and places it ahead of [eternal life], because even in an outlook that accents the present foretaste of eschatological blessings, a proper definition of eternal life takes the future kingdom of God for its proper setting,”⁴³ and it is the Messiah, the Christ, that inaugurates the kingdom of God on earth and is seated in authority over it. This is in line with Old Testament messianic expectation: “In the coming age, when God establishes his rule over the whole earth, the Messiah will reign on his behalf and preside over the administration of judgment and salvation in the new age. Thus both God, and the Messiah as his

⁴⁰ “King” also occurs in relation to Jesus at John 1:49; 6:15; 12:13, 15; 18:33-19:21 (11x); Revelation 15:3; 17:14; and 19:16.

⁴¹ Middleton, 246.

⁴² Jörg Frey, “Eschatology in the Johannine Circle,” in Van Belle, 73.

⁴³ Rainbow, 232.

representative, can properly be described as kings... there is no fundamental distinction between the rule of Yahweh and the reign of his chosen king.”⁴⁴

In the Fourth Gospel, the enthronement of this chosen king is depicted in the passion narrative of Jesus. In John 19:1-3 Jesus’s coronation by the Roman soldiers is depicted: “who put ‘a crown of thorns’ (v. 2) on His head, dressed Him in ‘a purple robe’ (v. 2), and sarcastically lauded him as ‘King of the Jews’ (v. 3). In antiquity a crown and purple garments were emblems of royal dignity.... The soldiers' derisive praise points to their scornful attitude behind the ‘salutation’ of Jesus as King. The mock coronation of Jesus by the *Gentile* soldiers is an ‘oblique’ affirmation of His universal kingship.”⁴⁵ Jesus is then presented before the people in both robe and crown and proclaimed: “Behold the man!” and “Behold your King!” (19:5, 14), functioning as a mockery of a royal acclamation.⁴⁶

In Revelation,⁴⁷ kingdom language returns and the role of Christ is to establish God’s kingdom on earth, to turn the “kingdom of the world” into the “kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” (Revelation 11:15).⁴⁸ Bauckham notes the allusions to Psalm 2 that run throughout

⁴⁴ Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Theology: A Thematic Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 288.

⁴⁵ Mavis M. Leung, “The Roman Empire and John’s Passion Narrative in Light of Jewish Royal Messianism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168, no. 672 (October 2011): 437. Emphasis original.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 438.

⁴⁷ There is not space here to discuss the complex relationship between Revelation and the rest of the Johannine corpus. For now it is sufficient to note that the author accepts the hypothesis of modern conservative scholars and the witness of church tradition that the Fourth Gospel, the Johannine Epistles, and Revelation were composed by the same author, and that author is likely the apostle John, son of Zebedee, the beloved disciple. ⁴⁷ D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), 139-145. This conclusion is shared by Köstenberger: Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Encountering John: The Gospel in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999), 25.

⁴⁸ Richard Bauckham, *New Testament Theology: The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 67.

Revelation, affirming that “Messiah is God’s son, whom he sets as king on mount Zion.... Fundamental to Revelation’s whole understanding of the way in which Christ establishes God’s kingdom on earth is the conviction that in his death and resurrection Christ has already won his decisive victory over evil.”⁴⁹

The consideration of Christ’s kingship is important when one considers two phrases in Revelation regarding the kingship of the believers: “To him [Jesus Christ] who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and *made us a kingdom*, priests to his God and Father,” and “and you have *made them a kingdom* and priests to our God, and *they shall reign* on the earth” (1:5-6; 5:10, emphasis added). The grammar in these verses suggests that the kingdom is a present reality or possession of the faithful. Bandstra highlights the parallelism of past tense verbs in these two verses, suggesting that the faithful community had *already been appointed* to be royalty, thus they already participated in the kingship.⁵⁰ He translates βασιλείαν in these passages as “kingship” (instead of “kingdom”) because he prefers the “the more ‘dynamic’ or ‘active’ sense; that is, ‘to be a kingship or royalty for God,’ and even, ‘to reign in the name of God.’” He takes this view because Revelation 5:10b states that “[believers] reign (or will reign) on the earth;” the reference to persons fits better with a reference to “royalty” or “kingship” compared to the notion of a realm; 1:9a depicts John as a fellow participant in “the tribulation and the *kingdom* and the patient endurance;” and because βασιλεία (royal power, rule, dominion, kingdom) occurs six additional times in Revelation, all but one functioning in the active sense.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Bauckham, 69. Note how this agrees with the Fourth Gospel’s depiction of Christ’s death as His coronation as king. This is portrayed in Revelation 5 as John hears the “Lion of the tribe of Judah” (v. 5), a royal image, but turns around to see “a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain” (v. 6).

⁵⁰ Andrew J. Bandstra, “‘A Kingship and Priests’: Inaugurated Eschatology in the Apocalypse,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 27, no. 1 (April 1992): 14-18.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

He also notes that the external evidence found in the Alexandrinus manuscript, 10th-12th century miniscules, and the majority text tradition support a present tense reading of Revelation 5:10.⁵² Bauckham seems to agree as he notes that Jesus's death and resurrection not only won the comprehensive victory over all evil, but also created "a people, drawn from all the nations, *who are already God's kingdom* in the midst of opposition in this rebellious world."⁵³

Not only have we seen a connection between the Johannine concept of eternal life and the kingdom of God in John 3, the coronation of Jesus as King in John 18-19, and Jesus functioning as King in Revelation, but we have also seen that eternal life is the present possession of the believer in John 5-6. If one can carry the connection between eternal life and kingdom of God in John forward to Revelation, then it is possible to see in Revelation 1:6, 9 and 5:10 a reference to the believer's possession of eternal life. This life cannot be taken away from those who overcome and conquer by the word of their testimony and the blood of Christ. They conquer by laying down their lives (ψυχή; 1 John 3:16; Revelation 6:9; 12:11) and receive ζωή as conquerors: "tree of life" (Revelation 2:7; 22:2, 14, 19), "crown of life" (2:10), their names are written in the "book of life" (3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27), and they are given access to "living water/river of life" (7:17; 21:6; 22:1, 17). Those who overcome as Jesus overcame receive the life Jesus gives: participation in the very life (and by extension, rule) of God—that is, eternal life, and culminates in their resurrection (20:6).

Returning to John 3, we find alongside the parallel between "kingdom of God" and "eternal life" a parallel between "born again; born of the Spirit" (vv. 3, 6, 8) and "believe" (vv. 12-18, 36). The implication seems to be that those who believe in Jesus as the Son of Man have

⁵² Bandstra, 18.

⁵³ Bauckham, 104.

received his testimony and possess eternal life because they are now born of the Spirit, whom God gives without measure (v. 34). It is the Spirit that is promised to Jesus's followers in the farewell discourse (John 14-16), that they received after His coronation (death and resurrection) (20:22), in whom they abide and who abides in them (1 John 2:20, 26-27), who they know (4:2-6), who testifies to the Son (5:6-10), and is the power of the church's prophetic witness to the world (John 15:26-27; Revelation 11:4; cf. Zechariah 4:14). Therefore, a discussion of "eternal life" in John's corpus would be incomplete without addressing God's Spirit.

Eternal Life and the Spirit of God

John's emphasis on one's present possession of eternal life through the Spirit is highlighted by noting how this contrasts with the Synoptic Gospels: "John likely replaced Jesus's end-time teaching found in the Synoptic Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24, pars.) and the pervasive Synoptic emphasis on the kingdom of God with an eschatology that focused on the *experience of eternal life in Jesus through the Spirit already in the here and now.*"⁵⁴ Not only does one enter the kingdom of God (receive eternal life) by being "born of the Spirit" (John 3:5-6), but it is the Spirit himself who gives life (ζωή) (6:63). Because eternal life is the present possession of the believer (cf. 6:47), the Spirit who gives life must also be a present possession of the believer once Jesus is glorified (7:39), which was fulfilled after His resurrection (20:22).⁵⁵ In 1 John, it is the Spirit with which believers have been anointed (2:20), which abides in them and teaches them about everything (2:27), which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (4:2), in

⁵⁴ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 297-98.

⁵⁵ There is considerable debate regarding how the giving of the Spirit in John corresponds to the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost in Acts 2. While there is not space in this paper to explore this relationship, it is sufficient to realize that in both narratives the Spirit is given as a present possession to those who believe in Jesus as the resurrected, thus enthroned, Son of God.

whom they overcome the world (4:4), who affirms the apostolic testimony they professed (5:6-8), and this testimony is that eternal life is given through God's Son (5:11-12). The present possession of the Holy Spirit is also seen in Revelation, as Bauckham observes:

The seven Spirits are the presence and power of God on earth, bringing about God's kingdom by implementing the Lamb's victory throughout the world. Thus John's understanding of the seven Spirits corresponds broadly to the common early Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit's relation to God and to Christ, *as the divine power which is now the Spirit of Christ, the manner of the exalted Christ's presence in the world and of the present effect of Christ's past work...* The implication is clear that *the seven Spirits are the power of the church's prophetic witness to the world, symbolized by the ministry of the two witnesses.*⁵⁶

In Revelation, the testimony about Jesus is proclaimed by the church, symbolized as the two witnesses who are described as "the two olive trees and the two lampstands" (11:4), imagery borrowed from Zechariah 4:10b-14. The overall effect of this imagery reinforces the truth that "the new Israel, the church, as God's spiritual temple on earth, is to draw its power from the Spirit, the divine presence, before God's throne in its drive to stand against the world."⁵⁷

Rainbow describes the Holy Spirit in the Johannine corpus as "the dynamic presence of God in human experience, a sweeping force from the transcendent otherness and moral perfection of God."⁵⁸ In other words, the presence and impact of the Holy Spirit is understood to be fully comprehensive in the life of the faith community.

In John's Gospel, it is the Spirit that is given as the paraclete to aid and comfort the disciples as they "stand against the world." The identification between Jesus and the Spirit He gives is that "it will be as if Jesus himself were taking up residence in [His followers]. Thus

⁵⁶ Bauckham, 113. Emphasis added.

⁵⁷ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 577.

⁵⁸ Rainbow, 236.

Jesus can refer to the Spirit's coming by saying, 'I will come to you' (14:18, emphasis added)."⁵⁹ Hoeck affirms this when he writes, "The Spirit should be seen as the *continuing presence of Jesus with his disciples*, empowering them to continue to *do the same works as he did* during his earthly ministry."⁶⁰ Earlier, it was established that eternal life was the quality of life God possesses. The description of the Holy Spirit as "another Helper" (14:16), inferring Jesus as the first helper, suggests that the divine life in which Jesus walked is the life now given via the Spirit to the faith community and by which they will do the works that Jesus did, and even greater works (14:12). These works are "clearly [Jesus's] miraculous works, the 'signs'" Jesus performed "that confirm the word spoken by him... The assertion then is made that the believer in Jesus will... have power to perform the works such as those done by Jesus in his earthly ministry,"⁶¹ and these all point to the main truth and message of the Gospel that eternal life and the kingdom of God are only available through belief in Jesus.⁶² Or, as Thompson writes, "according to John, *the signs are to lead people to faith so that they may have life* (20:31), and *the signs themselves image the gift of life that God bestows*. Because Jesus shares in the very life of God, he also shares the prerogatives of God to bestow life,"⁶³ and through the church's possession of the Holy Spirit, it should be expected that the church will do similar signs that affirm its witness to the life-giving Christ. The Holy Spirit's Johannine function, then, centers around the Christological witness of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Spirit

⁵⁹ Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters*, 396-97.

⁶⁰ Andreas Hoeck, "The Johannine Paraclete: Herald of the Eschaton," *Journal of Biblical and Pneumatological Research* 4 (Fall 2012): 27. Emphasis added.

⁶¹ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary 36 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 254.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 255.

⁶³ Thompson, 44. Emphasis added.

empowers signs (John 14:11-17); brings remembrance of what Christ taught (14:26); bears witness about Jesus through the believers (15:26-27); convicts the world of sin (16:7-8); guides the believers into all truth, even declaring things yet future,⁶⁴ and glorifies Jesus (16:13-14).

Regarding 1 John, Coetzee argues that “the Spirit is the one who testifies...” (5:6ff.) is the climax of the epistle, occurring immediately before its purpose statement “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” (5:13),⁶⁵ emphasizing the Spirit’s role in bearing witness to the physically resurrected Christ. Only in 1 John, this witnessing function is for the encouragement of the believers who are dealing with false teachings from those who “went out from us” (2:19) who bore the testimony of the antichrist: “every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist” (4:3). As referenced above regarding the two witnesses of Revelation, the Spirit is active in the church as they bear faithful witness to Christ.

In the Johannine corpus, there is a clear connection between eternal life and the giving of the Spirit. The Spirit then enables those who believe in Jesus as God’s Son to bear witness about Him through the signs that Jesus performed, causing them to persevere in their witness even unto death. The Spirit affirms to the faithful audience of 1 John that they have, indeed, received eternal life through their faith in Jesus and their loving actions toward one another (4:13-21). Rainbow comments on the parallels between this passage and John 15:1-7 that “we see that for persons, divine and human, to abide in one another reciprocally is to know and love one another,

⁶⁴ Crinisor Stefan, “The Paraclete and Prophecy in the Johannine Community,” *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 273-96.

⁶⁵ Coetzee, J. C. “The Holy Spirit in 1 John.” *Neotestamentica* 13 (1981): 44-45.

and this love is fostered by the Holy Spirit.”⁶⁶ This concept will be explored in greater detail in the praxis section below. For now, it is enough to know that the Spirit is the presence of God in the believing community that bears witness to the living Christ by declaring God’s message and living in God’s life that it presently experiences, which is characterized by divine love. Even though the emphasis so far has been focused on the community’s *present* possession of eternal life, that does not negate the reality of a future aspect of eternal life, to which we now turn.

Eternal Life and Resurrection: Present vs. Future

So far in this paper the Johannine concept of “eternal life” has been presented as a present possession of those who believe in Jesus as God’s Messiah (John 3:15-18; 5:19-40; 6:35-59; 17:2-3; 20:31; 1 John 1:2; 3:15; 5:11-13, 20), and while the phrase “ἔχει ζωὴν αἰώνιον (‘has eternal life’)” in John 3:36 is interpreted by some commentators as a “futuristic present,” or a reception of the *promise only* of eternal life, not a tangible possession of eternal life, J. C. Davis argues that this phrase and its grammar clearly suggests a present possession of eternal life. He refers to A. T. Robertson who interprets “has eternal life” as a “descriptive present,” “the most common use of the present for an act in progress. It vividly represents the act as now going on.”⁶⁷ In fact, Davis goes on to write,

No Greek grammar consulted by this writer interpreted ἔχει [has] in the above passages as a “futuristic present.” *The Expositor's Greek Testament* points to the significance of the perfect tense in John 5:24, “he has passed from death into life” (μεταβέβηκαν ἐκ τοῦ θανάτου εἰς τὴν ζωὴν). The perfect shows that the previous ἔχει (“has”) is an actual present, and does not merely mean “has in prospect” or “has a right to.”⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Rainbow, 269. See also the themes of love, unity, and the hope that the world would believe in Christ in John 17.

⁶⁷ Davis, 163.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

This helps affirm Middleton's point that "although the future is not excluded, 'eternal life' in John's Gospel refers not primarily to some postmortem reality (after temporal life is over), but rather to a new quality of life *in the here and now*."⁶⁹ Schreiner agrees: "eternal life denotes the life of the age to come. John emphasizes that the life of the age to come already belongs to those who believe in Jesus (John 5:24), so that he stresses the present realization of end-time promises,"⁷⁰ and yet the future aspect of John's eschatology is not absent. John 5:28-29 mentions an hour that "is coming (i.e. future) and is now here when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment." This seems to portray at the very least a two-stage experience of eternal life: the reception of life presently when one believes in Jesus, and a future resurrection, as Schreiner states elsewhere: "The present experience of eternal life is not the consummation of God's purposes; instead, eternal life in the present age is, so to speak, the guarantee that believers will experience physical resurrection in the same way as Jesus the Christ."⁷¹

"Resurrection" (ἀνάστασις in John 5:29; 11:24-25; Revelation 20:5-6), or "raise up" (ἀνίστημι in John 6:39-40, 44, 54; 11:23-24; 20:9) in John's writings all occur in reference to the future except when referring either to Jesus's own resurrection (John 20:9), or his direct action (raising Lazarus in 11:23).⁷² "Raise up" is directly related to the concept "the last day" in all but the two occurrences just mentioned. Regarding the Lazarus passage, Beasley-Murray comments,

⁶⁹ Middleton, 246. Emphasis added.

⁷⁰ Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 27-28.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁷² "Resurrection" in John 11:23 could be taken as either or both present and future. Beasley-Murray, 190.

“it is the crucified and risen Lord who is the Resurrection and the Life. In union with him the believer *has* the Life, and is assured of its consummation in the ‘last day.’”⁷³ From this we see a Johannine distinction between the present possession of eternal life, the “God quality life” that believers have now by faith, and the future resurrection that is achieved through faithful perseverance (i.e. 1 John 5:4-5; Revelation 2:7, 22, 17, 29; 3:5, 12, 21; 12:11). This perception of “now” and “not yet” harmonizes well with the rest of the New Testament eschatological view commonly labeled “inaugurated eschatology.”⁷⁴ Emphasizing either the present or the future at the expense of the other leaves one either lacking the significance of Christ’s life and empowerment of His Spirit, or missing the assurance that God will complete what He has begun. Turner concludes: “John clearly emphasizes what has come to be known as inaugurated eschatology, ‘the presence of the future,’ more than the future itself.”⁷⁵ In Johannine thought, *what is* is described in light of and anticipates *what will be*, which has already begun!⁷⁶

Models

The different eschatological ideas presented in the Johannine corpus have led theologians throughout church history to find different ways to understand and explain them, some even going so far as to completely ignore one or the other of future or present considerations presented in John’s eschatology. Jörg Frey recognizes three general approaches: a) John’s writings are

⁷³ Beasley-Murray, 201. Emphasis original.

⁷⁴ Tim O’Donnell, “Complementary Eschatologies in John 5:19-30,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (October 2008): 760. It should be noted that O’Donnell prefers the concept of complementary eschatologies because a truly inaugurated eschatology would incorporate both life and judgment now, which seems contrary to how John 5:24 reads. It also renders the present possession of life as limited or provisional in the present, potentially reducing the sense of urgency that John 5:24 seems to convey (760-61, 65). For the purpose of the present paper, it is enough to recognize the distinction made between “eternal life” and “resurrection.”

⁷⁵ David L. Turner, “The Doctrine of the Future in John’s Writings,” in Bingham and Kreider, 225.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 212.

explained as examples of the general tension between “already” and “not yet” that is characteristic in the early Christian understanding; b) some interpreters chalked it up to poor or lacking logical skill of the presumed author or redactors; and c) some have claimed that only one or the other view was legitimately agreeable with the evangelist’s actual perspective: generally, a radical notion of present eschatology is associated with the assumed author, and any future eschatology must either be interpreted *as* present, or is the result of later redactors.⁷⁷ Rainbow succinctly summarizes the history of interpretation of Johannine eschatology:

Patristic, medieval and post-Reformation interpreters took the futuristic scenario quite literally but for the most part failed to appreciate how radical was John’s assertion that its elements are being actualized. For Christian rationalists and liberals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the apocalyptic language was a husk to strip away while retaining the moral and spiritual truths of the superior religion of Jesus. Around the turn of the twentieth century this outlook was shattered by a pair of celebrated German studies that restored Jewish apocalypticism to its rightful place in the fabric of Jesus’s preaching and teaching. In reaction, the British scholar C. H. Dodd proposed the concept of ‘realized eschatology’ to bring attention back to the inbreaking of God’s kingdom in the ministry of Jesus, though in later publications he moderated his view and made more allowance for the future even in John. Rudolf Bultmann aggressively uprooted all futurist eschatology from the Fourth Gospel by his hypothesis of a redactor who interpolated the passages that contain it.⁷⁸

The tension between present and future as seen in the Johannine writings has been observed regarding the New Testament generally from as early as apostolic times:

From the beginning there has been a twofold emphasis in the Christian doctrine of the last things. While stressing the reality and completeness of present salvation, it has pointed believers to certain great eschatological events located in the future.... Interwoven... with this ‘realized eschatology’... was an equally vivid expectation that the wonderful outpouring of grace so far accomplished was only the beginning and would in due course, indeed shortly, receive its dramatic completion.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Frey, 49-51.

⁷⁸ Rainbow, 281-82.

⁷⁹ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperOne, 1978), 459. Kelly’s chief concern in his discussion of early church eschatology is on futurist elements, but he does offer a brief discussion of “the more characteristic aspect,” i.e. the present elements of eschatology, as well.

Because many of these historical perspectives worked to harmonize Johannine theology with the Synoptic tradition, or with the New Testament as a whole, this section of the paper will explore the concept of inaugurated eschatology more generally from different periods and traditions in the church's history.

Early Church Fathers

In his analysis of early church doctrines, Kelly notes that after the first generation of Christians many scholars allege a transformation in the prevailing eschatological focus that gets expressed by the early church fathers: "The assurance of living in the Messianic age and enjoying the first-fruits of the Spirit, so powerfully evident in the Epistles, is held to have yielded place to the conception of God's kingdom as a region or state, located exclusively in the future, which is reserved as a prize for those who have struggled manfully in this life."⁸⁰ He then refers to Clement of Rome, 2 *Clement*, Justin, and Tertullian for evidence of this, concluding

In thought of this type the Christian's confident and joyous assurance that the age to come has already broken into the present age has faded into the background. He looks upon God, not as the divine Father to Whom he has free access, but as the sternly just distributor of rewards and penalties, while grace has lost the primarily eschatological character it had in the New Testament and has become something to be acquired. It is unnecessary to multiply instances, for the temptation to degenerate into a pedestrian moralism in which the 'realized' element in its authentic eschatology finds no place was one to which Christianity was as much exposed in the patristic as in every other age.⁸¹

However, even though this "loss" of the present aspect of eschatology seems to be the general trajectory of history, Kelly notes that "In the early centuries, as indeed in other epochs, wherever religion was alive and healthy, the primitive conviction of enjoying already the benefits

⁸⁰ Kelly, 460-61.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 461

of the age to come was kept vividly before the believer's consciousness."⁸² For instance, Brian Daley suggests that the early fathers had a

sense of constantly living in history's final age, of facing, amid persecutions and natural disasters, the end of society and the more immediate end of human life. It was their eschatological hope that enabled them to face these threats not only with equanimity, but with the assurance of life and happiness in a world without an end, and with a conviction of God's unfailing providence and readiness to judge human actions.⁸³

He notes that in the second century work, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, that "the building of the tower that represents, for Hermas, the perfect community of the final age, *is already well advanced*, but there is still time for individual 'stones' to be trimmed and hewn, to form part of its structure. *It is an eschatology of the not-quite-final hour*,"⁸⁴ which seems to suggest a sense of inaugurated eschatology is present in the Shepherd's thinking. This sense seems to be expressed as well by Irenaeus as he describes the Eucharist as consisting of two realities: earthly and heavenly, and compares these to the believer's body, arguing that when one receives the eucharist they are no longer corruptible, but have received the hope of the resurrection.⁸⁵ Kelly affirms the importance of the sacraments for maintaining the present alongside the future:

True enough, the resurrection and judgment, along with the Saviour's second coming, lay ahead in the temporal future. But already, through baptism, the faithful catechumen participated in the resurrection; he had died and risen again with Christ, and now lived the life of the Spirit. The age of fulfilment had thus effectively dawned; and, as further proof of the fact, the new people of God were already feasting in the eucharist on the eschatological banquet prophesied by Isaiah.⁸⁶

As history moved into the third century and the church faced the rise of Gnosticism, the

⁸² Kelly, 461.

⁸³ Brian Daley, "Eschatology in the Early Church Fathers," in Walls, 91. Emphasis added. Daley notes that early Christian eschatology is under-researched in the history of theology and religious practice (104).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 95-96.

⁸⁶ Kelly, 461.

Apologists tended to focus more of their effort on justifying a physical resurrection over against the gnostic claims limiting the resurrection to only a spiritual experience.⁸⁷

One of the themes Kelly mentions that developed in eschatological thought around this time was that of the deification of the Christian: “According to this, the final flowering of the Christian hope consisted in participation in the divine nature and in the blessed immortality of God.”⁸⁸ While the phrase “final flowering” clearly suggests a future perspective, as is Kelly’s chief concern, it should be pointed out that the concept of “participation in the divine nature” parallels the Johannine concept of receiving “eternal life” discussed above as participating (abiding in/walking in) the quality of life that emanates from God.

In the fourth and fifth century, Tyconius sees the faith community as the holy city Jerusalem but in hidden form: “The present age of the church, in Tyconius’s view, was also the millennium of peace described in Revelation 20:3-6. The faithful, raised from the ‘death’ of sin in the ‘first resurrection’ of baptism, *now reign with Christ on earth and enjoy the blessings of his kingdom in an anticipatory, spiritual way*, and Satan’s power to harm is restrained.”⁸⁹ Augustine later adopted Tyconius’s interpretation of Revelation 20 as a figure for the present church and understood that “the Christian hope of eternal salvation does not involve... a loss of our limitations, but a transformation of our present, fluid state into the participated changelessness of eternal beatitude or eternal self-destruction, determined by the response of each creature to the self-communicating grace of God.”⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Kelly, 467-69.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 469.

⁸⁹ Daley, 99. Emphasis added.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 100.

Theodore of Mopsuestia, while making a sharp distinction between the present age and the transformed age to come, still sees the age to come as having been inaugurated by Christ. However, instead of seeing the church participating in the life of God in the present age, he believed that it was quickened by the hope of this future transformation, but does not yet experience it or actively participate in the life of God in the present. Theodoret of Cyrus, shared similar views, but believed that the believer presently shares a foretaste of the resurrection through the gifts of the Holy Spirit.⁹¹

Based on these observations, it becomes evident that both future and present perspectives on eschatology were held in tension throughout the early centuries of the church, with some theologians emphasizing certain aspects in response to the heresies or needs of the time in which they lived. This is a trend that continues in Catholic and Protestant views of eschatology.

Catholicism & Protestantism

Before Vatican II (1962-1965), “Roman Catholic eschatology was by and large a reiteration of biblical and creedal affirmations concerning the afterlife.”⁹² These were generally seen as realistic descriptions of what happens after a person dies and much of their importance for present life and how one ought to live were commonly overlooked. Vatican II, however, changed this considerably by “restoring eschatology to its rightful place in Christian theology. Eschatology was brought from the margins to the center of Christian thought and was linked with the key doctrines of the Christian faith.”⁹³ Specifically, the chapter 7 of *Lumen Gentium* “places *eschatology in the context of the church pilgrim people of God*. Eschatology is no longer

⁹¹ Daley, 102.

⁹² Peter C. Phan, “Roman Catholic Theology,” in Walls, 216.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 217.

conceived as a descriptive report on the afterlife but *as that which defines the very nature of the church,*” and emphasized that the final age of history had already been inaugurated by Christ, is characterized by the activity of the Holy Spirit and the church in the work of transforming the world.⁹⁴ Eschatology was now “not only individual and otherworldly but also and primarily collective and this-worldly.”⁹⁵ Modern Catholic scholars Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann also hold the “already-not yet” tension of inaugurated eschatology, which “is accepted by most Roman Catholic theologians not only because it seems to best account for the New Testament data on the end time but also because it coheres well with Vatican II’s teaching on the *church as a sacrament of God’s reign...* and with the Roman Catholic typically inclusive, “both-and” rather than dialectical style of theologizing.”⁹⁶

Protestant theology has also embraced a variety of views regarding the present aspect of everlasting life and inaugurated eschatology. For instance, Martin Luther, in preaching on John 3, testifies that “everlasting life and resurrection from the dead are *ours after this temporal life,*”⁹⁷ indicating a futurist perspective whereas Calvin, commenting on John 5:24 states, “There is no impropriety in saying that we have already *passed from death to life,*”⁹⁸ seems to indicate a sense that one enjoyed a present possession of eternal life. Calvin, commenting on John 3:3, even

⁹⁴ Phan, 217. Emphasis added.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 218. Ihenacho, a Catholic scholar, emphasizes community in his consideration of eternal life.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 212. The church as a sacrament of God’s reign seems to parallel the point above about the church currently having been made into a kingship of God (Revelation 1:6, 9; 5:10).

⁹⁷ Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Luther’s Works*, vol. 22, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 1-4* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1957), 479. Emphasis added. It should be noted that the references to Luther and Calvin are not comprehensive analysis of their respective theologies, but simply examples illustrating the point that both present and future emphases of eternal life and eschatology were present in the earliest period of Protestant theology.

⁹⁸ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 7, *The Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Associated Publishers and Authors, n.d.), 680.

makes a similar claim to the one posited above that “the kingdom of God” does not signify heaven, “for it rather means *the spiritual life*, which is begun by faith in this world, and gradually increases every day according to the continued progress of faith.”⁹⁹

Based on this limited sampling, one recognizes that in the time of the Reformation there was a concept of a present possession of eternal life and a future hope of resurrection. Together, these beliefs encouraged and empowered those who endured persecution to endure faithfully, even unto death, as Luther preaches, “If you hear this message [‘He who believes in the Son has eternal life’] and believe that it is true, even though appearances may contradict it, then you can declare: ‘Even if the whole world were full of devils, even if death and devil menaced, even if hunger and distress loomed, even if the future bore promise of good or evil days—I do not care. I close my eyes and valiantly pass through it all.’ Happy are you; eternal life is yours,” later commenting, “There I am assured that I shall have eternal life, that the devil will not devour me, that death will not consume me, and also that the poverty which oppresses will work no harm.... This was also a source of consolation for the martyrs.”¹⁰⁰ The connection between eternal life and resurrection, of present possession and future promise, together encourage the saints of past and present to press on in faith, living today the divine life anticipating the fullness of God’s inbreaking kingdom that will be consummated in the last day.

More recently certain circles of Protestant theology were impacted heavily by the advent of historical criticism where eschatology became one of the most problematic issues for scholars.¹⁰¹ As mentioned above, one way scholars dealt with this was to credit the futuristic

⁹⁹ Calvin, 634. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁰ Pelikan, 498-99.

¹⁰¹ Frey, 53.

passages of John to redactors, as was the practice of Hans-Hinrich Wendt and Julius Wellhausen, and later advocated by Rudolf Bultmann, who would influence many other scholars worldwide.¹⁰² Bultmann's view, summarized by Gerhard Sauter, was that eschatology

*is the exceptional 'here and now,' ... The cross of Jesus Christ is the definitive crisis of all reality and the human perception of it, insofar as here, 'history has reached its end.' Therefore, the church 'is the community of the end-time, an eschatological phenomenon.' ... Bultmann dismisses all notions of last things found in the New Testament as later additions, when early Christianity gradually lost its sense of the radical character of faith and hope; so he commits these expectations to demythologization.*¹⁰³

This resulted in many commentators, scholars, (and later churches) "holding a critical position towards miracle stories, concentrating his message on the word and the spirit and removing most of the apocalyptic expectations which could not be viewed as a part of the Christian truth anymore."¹⁰⁴ These views sought to resolve the eschatological tension between the "already" and "not yet" of John by cutting out and discrediting the texts that did not fit one's preconceptions.

The result:

the text is not explained sufficiently, and the reasons as to why a certain element of the text should be emended, are hardly ever compelling.... In view of this problem Ingo Broer has rightly stated that the job of the interpreter is done only if future and present eschatological utterances are understood in their differences and if an attempt is made to understand both in their textual and theological interrelation.¹⁰⁵

Dispensationalism & Pentecostalism

And finally, we explore how present and future eschatological views are represented in Dispensationalism and Pentecostalism. Dispensationalism, developed by John Nelson Darby in

¹⁰² Frey, 52.

¹⁰³ Gerhard Sauter, "Protestant Theology," in Walls, 257.

¹⁰⁴ Frey, 54.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 55.

the 1830s and popularized by the Scofield Bible,

advocated a series of dispensations throughout history that occasion God's different ways of dealing with humanity. Essential to the system was a radical separation between Israel and the church and the different covenants established by God between them. The idea was that the church age *is not the era of the Spirit promised in the Old Testament* but occurs as a mere delay in the fulfillment of this era in Israel after Christ's return, during the millennial reign.... This view grants the Spirit-empowered mission of the church in history no role to play in the fulfillment of the kingdom promised in the Old Testament.¹⁰⁶

This view of the church age led many fundamentalist-dispensationalists to deny not only the church's present kingship, but Christ's as well,¹⁰⁷ while also believing that the gifts of the Spirit were only relevant during the apostolic age and not relevant for modern times. This is significant here because of the relationship between the reception of the Holy Spirit and one's present possession of eternal life as discussed above. This view pushes one's hope of eternal life and resurrection to the future and encourages a pessimistic view of current age in which a disempowered church can do little more than evangelize and wait until it is taken away by the rapture,¹⁰⁸ which is decidedly different from the modern Pentecostal view, and was in many ways absent from early Pentecostalism as well.¹⁰⁹

Pentecostalism is defined more by its views on the coming of the Holy Spirit as the empowering presence of God for accomplishing His mission in the world, and is thus much more optimistic than traditional dispensationalism: "For Pentecostals the emphasis on eschatology belonged more naturally to the sense of a final glorious revelation and outpouring of the Spirit in

¹⁰⁶ Frank D. Macchia, "Pentecostal and Charismatic Theology," in Walls, 283-84. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁷ Bandstra, 20.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 284.

¹⁰⁹ See Sheppard's analysis regarding early Pentecostal eschatological views and how they progressively adopted more dispensational ideas from the 1930s through the 1950s in Gerald T. Sheppard, "Pentecostals and the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism: The Anatomy of an Uneasy Relationship," *Pneuma* 6, no. 2 (Fall 1984): 5-33.

the last days, than, as with fundamentalists, to the dark prospect of impending destruction for those not suddenly taken out of this world.”¹¹⁰ Macchia asserts that the modern Pentecostal view embraces the belief that “Humanity in all of its capacities created by God is allowed to *participate fully in the new life of the kingdom* and its ultimate fulfillment when Christ returns.”¹¹¹ As such, escapism is not the only eschatological response, as may be assumed by more dispensational thinkers.

Instead, Pentecostals like Macchia seek to integrate the future and present aspects of eschatology and the experience of eternal life by viewing the kingdom of God “as the new life that comes from our full participation in God’s redemptive work through the Spirit.”¹¹² In other words, Pentecostal theology recognizes that God’s kingdom has come through the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, which is affirmed by the sending of His Spirit and empowering of His church to be active participants in the quality of life that comes from God as a witness to the world. “Eschatology for Pentecostals is not simply about the end times as the last chapter of a theological system. *It is a living hope that affects the entire Christian life.* Christ as the coming king integrates and defines Christ’s saving work, Spirit baptism, and healing. This is the Pentecostal understanding of the Christian Gospel, and it is eschatological through and through.”¹¹³ The next section seeks to explore the importance of viewing the entire Christian life as thoroughly eschatological and the believer’s present possession of eternal life.

¹¹⁰ Sheppard, 9.

¹¹¹ Macchia, 288. Emphasis added.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., 282. Emphasis added.

Philosophy: Why Possessing Eternal Life Now Matters

“The End Starts at the Beginning” is the title of the first chapter of Gladd and Harmon’s work (written by G. K. Beale) and serves to remind readers that the Bible and the whole grand narrative of Scripture is thoroughly eschatological. It has been said, “In the beginning” (Genesis 1:1), implies an ending. This broad view of eschatology is taken up by Trevin Wax: “Seen in this light, eschatology functions as something of an umbrella that encompasses all of Christianity and its doctrines. To put it another way, eschatology refers to the story line as it moves to its climax and culmination; it is the element that drives the plot forward to the promised resolution.”¹¹⁴ Wax goes on to write of the eschatological importance of Jesus’s death and resurrection for “how they impact our *reading of history before and after*. The apostolic testimony to the truth of the cross and resurrection, therefore, ‘*renarrates the whole of human life*’ so that one sees the world in light of God’s action in the person and work of Jesus Christ.”¹¹⁵

By viewing eschatology in this broad manner, it becomes clear that its study carries far greater significance for Christian life and practice than is often communicated by its traditional placement as the last chapter of a theological system. It also demonstrates the importance of a thoroughgoing consideration of the present aspects of eschatology as opposed to “useless speculation about end-time doomsday scenarios.”¹¹⁶ Based on this view, Wax agrees with Moltmann, who “sees eschatology not as the end itself but as *the entire course of history in its*

¹¹⁴ Wax, 30.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 31. Emphasis added.

¹¹⁶ Macchia, 285. Macchia, a Pentecostal himself, notes that Pentecostal’s priority regarding eschatology has consistently been the empowerment of the Spirit, and yet under the influence of a Dispensationalist hermeneutic, the present author has witnessed multiple teachings on these end-time doomsday scenarios from Assemblies of God preachers via television broadcasts, and in both large and small churches alike.

movement toward the end.”¹¹⁷ Eschatology, then, is central to the Christian faith and is the outlook of all Christian proclamation and experience, which accords with the New Testament view that “the life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus have ushered in the ‘latter days,’ as promised in the OT. Therefore, the ‘latter days’ *encompass the entire time period between the first and second comings of Christ. As a result, eschatology is not limited to the ‘last chapter’ of what God will do in this world but rather frames all that God has done and will do in Jesus Christ.*”¹¹⁸

Understanding eschatology in this manner is especially relevant to one’s interpretation of Johannine eschatology and present experience of eternal life: “John does not, as was common in Jewish thought, perceive eschatology as the future ‘age to come’ replacing the ‘present age.’ Instead, for John, in Jesus the distinction between these two ages has collapsed, *so that believers in Jesus are able to experience end-time blessings already in the here and now, most notably eternal, abundant life* (e.g., John 3:16; 5:24; 10:10).¹¹⁹ The present and the future overlap in Christ. Believers can experience eternal, abundant life now as they follow Jesus while looking forward to the hope of resurrection.

This overlap of the ages also helps explain why Jesus’s disciples experience resistance, persecution, and tribulation (θλιψις) in the present age. In Revelation, tribulation is attributed to the faithful in four of its five occurrences (1:9, 2:9, 10; 7:14), and even its use in Revelation 2:22 is used of members of the church, though these are specifically the ones who tolerate “Jezebel” (2:20). This usage is in accord with the rest of the New Testament: “Those who experience

¹¹⁷ Wax, 29.

¹¹⁸ Benjamin L. Gladd and Matthew S. Harmon, *Making All Things New: Inaugurated Eschatology for the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), xi. Emphasis added.

¹¹⁹ Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters*, 297. Emphasis added.

affliction are members of the Church.”¹²⁰ This form of suffering is “*inseparable from the Christian life in this world...* is the suffering of Christ, who is afflicted in His members... [and] *is eschatological tribulation.*”¹²¹ In 1 John 3:13 the readers are told to not be surprised that the world hates them. John 15:18-21 explains that because the disciples are not of the world due to having been chosen out of the world by Jesus (on account of their faith), “therefore the world hates you.” If the world persecuted Jesus, it will also persecute his followers. To endure the things Jesus did is to fulfill his call in John 12:26, “If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also.” The faithful are called to follow Jesus to His cross.

The only way this is possible for the church is through the divine exchange of one’s physical life (ψυχή) for God’s life (ζωή αιώνιος): “Whoever loves his life (ψυχή) loses it, and whoever hates his life (ψυχή) in this world will keep it for eternal life (ζωή αιώνιος)” (John 12:25). Without a sound apprehension of one’s present possession of eternal life in John’s writings, the promise of future resurrection, and a clear concept of how these work together (inaugurated eschatology), the church is prone to encourage its members to embrace an escapist theology that seeks to avoid tribulation and instead preserve their lives until Jesus whisks them away to their future state. One wonders if adherents of an escapist view fully appreciate the implications, based on the verses just referenced, of their position.

Unlike the pessimism often found in dispensationalist thought, however, the present possession of eternal life and inbreaking of God’s kingdom offers incredible hope to the faith communities, which ought to lead to their faithful, missional activity in the world that extends far beyond mere evangelism. Macchia, seeking to integrate future and present eschatological

¹²⁰ Kittel, 3:143. Emphasis added.

¹²¹ Ibid., 3:144. Emphasis added.

perspectives, references the Blumhardts who “did not see the kingdom of God as either wholly from above nor as a result of human effort but as the new life that comes from our full participation in God’s redemptive work through the Spirit.... Humanity, in all of its capacities created by God, is allowed to participate fully in the new life of the kingdom and its ultimate fulfillment when Christ returns.”¹²² Macchia then challenges Pentecostals to recognize that “social transformation can be viewed as a legitimate sign of the redemption yet to come in Christ,” and encourages recognition of the “gifts of the Spirit through natural talents that function as signs of grace in ways that bear witness to *the fulfillment of life in Christ*.”¹²³ In other words, embracing one’s present possession of eternal life and the “already” of inaugurated eschatology leads the church into highly active, redemptive behavior in all facets of life.

This naturally leads to how possessing God’s life now impacts personal and societal ethics, or personal and communal discipleship. Wax writes, “A shrunken view of discipleship [personal spiritual growth only] misses eschatology, and a shrunken view of eschatology [future/present only] fails to impact discipleship. The result is that Christians may be left without the necessary tools to read the signs of our own times or navigate the darkness of the contemporary age. We may fail to see how discipleship equips us to see current challenges in the light of God’s coming kingdom.”¹²⁴ Later, he adds, “Christian ethics are grounded in eschatology and ecclesiology. The grand narrative of the Bible not only shows us what the future is but marks us out as a people belonging to that future. We not only *know* the ultimate future of the world,

¹²² Macchia, 288.

¹²³ Ibid. Emphasis added.

¹²⁴ Wax, 2.

but we also *embody* that future.”¹²⁵ Embodying that future, the new heavens and the new earth, is expressed through the believing community’s present possession of eternal life. It is through abiding in God and His Spirit, and in turn God abiding in us, that this ideal is fulfilled, and it is accomplished through faith and obedience: faith in the Son of God, Jesus the crucified and resurrected Christ, and obedience to His command: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 3:34-36; cf. 17:20-26; 1 John 3:23ff.; 2 John 5; Revelation 2:4, 19).

This ethical framework is at odds with the world system, what Wax describes as “a confrontation between *time lines*, or *calendars*, or better put, the underlying, often unstated vision of history and the future that influences one’s life and choices—in other words, eschatology.”¹²⁶ Wax then goes on to compare biblical eschatology to the eschatologies of enlightenment thinking, the sexual revolution, and consumerism. In each of these systems, their eschatologies end in individualism that promotes self at the expense of the other and the commoditization of the world, the very antithesis of the love and community that reflects the divine life the church is called to embody and the final fulfillment of God’s promises in establishing the new heavens and earth. The call of Christ to act in light of what will be places eschatology in the context of “a deep commitment to the transformation of the world and human history, thereby rebutting the Marxist charge that religion, especially Christianity, is the opiate for the masses.”¹²⁷ Understanding one’s present possession of eternal life, one is awakened by

¹²⁵ Wax, 33. Emphasis original.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 96. Emphasis original.

¹²⁷ Phan, 218.

the vitality of God, the indwelling of His Spirit, and moved in love to participate in His redeeming activity in the world.

Praxis

In light of the preceding sections, a couple questions arise: How ought one lead the community of faith considering the nature of eternal life that the community presently possesses? What does it mean for the community of faith to truly embody the life of God in word and deed? While space prohibits a thorough exploration of these and other questions, the goal here will be to summarize the implications of believers' possession of eternal life on the Johannine imperatives to believe in, to love as, and to follow Christ.

Receiving Eternal Life through Believing in Jesus

It has already been mentioned that receiving eternal life in John's Gospel is the result of believing in Jesus as the Son of God (John 3:15-16, 36; 5:24; 6:27-29, 40, 47; 11:25-26; 20:31). In the first epistle, the readers are assured of their possession of eternal life on account of their testimony to the life that was manifested to them (1:2), and the testimony of God and the Spirit concerning Christ (5:6-11). The testimony of 1 John is likely that of the physically resurrected Jesus, not just of his physical incarnation. Although 1 John nowhere directly references Jesus's resurrection, the major themes of eternal life, belief, and eyewitness experience are all found in the Gospel's resurrection narratives. Smalley notes that the word "manifest," occurring twice in 1 John 1:2, is used of Jesus's resurrection appearances in John 21, and 1 John's reference to what they had "touched with their hands" (1 John 1:1).¹²⁸ Matthew Jensen compares the confession

¹²⁸ Stephen Smalley, *1, 2, 3, John*, rev. ed. Word Biblical Commentary 51 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 8-9.

“Jesus is the Christ,” (1 John 2:22, 4:2, 5:1) to grammatically similar constructs found in the apostolic confessions of Acts 5:42, 9:22, 17:3, 18:5, and 18:28.¹²⁹ Throughout Acts, the confession of Jesus as the Christ is consistently identified with the resurrection itself, and Jensen argues that this connection is key to interpreting 1 John, thus the testimony of 1 John is of the physical resurrection of Jesus. The emphasis on the resurrection of Jesus is also found in Revelation 1:5 where Jesus is identified as “the first born of the dead,” and 1:17b-18 “I am the first and the last,¹⁸ and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore.”

Before anyone even receives eternal life, this is the message that both leaders in the church and believers generally are called to proclaim. They bear witness to the Son of God, Jesus the Christ, who through his physical death and resurrection has been glorified and now reigns on the throne of heaven. Without this witness, the teaching of the church is watered down to pithy wisdom sayings and shallow self-help talks. Leaders, then, *must* be faithful in proclaiming the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and teaching the body of Christ to do the same.

As people believe in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, leaders do well to take seriously their subsequent possession of eternal life. As was mentioned above, to possess eternal life is to participate in the very life of God, to take on His character and nature. This leaves no room for “loving the world” (see 1 John 2:15-17). By receiving eternal life, one has also received God’s Spirit, who is given without measure (John 3:34), and who teaches them (John 14:26), bears witness to Christ in and through them (15:26-27), convicts the world of sin (16:8-11), guides them into all truth and declares the things to come (16:13), gives them knowledge (1 John 2:20), assures them of their abiding in Christ (3:24), enables them to love like Christ (4:13), and

¹²⁹ Matthew D. Jensen, “‘Jesus Is the Christ’: A New Paradigm for Understanding 1 John,” *The Reformed Theological Review* 75, no. 1 (April 2016): 8.

empowers them for witness (John 14:12; Revelation 11:4ff.). This is good news! By helping new believers understand and apply these truths, leaders can intentionally walk people into greater and greater freedom from sin (1 John 3:6; John 8:31-32, 36) and powerful witness to Christ in word and deed. In other words, it is not enough to lead someone *to* faith (“I believe, now what?”), but to intentionally lead them to fully embody the new life they have received. Faith is not something to be had but lived. The noun form of “believe” does not occur in John’s Gospel. However, its verb form occurs 98 times: “Thus faith in the Gospel of John is always dynamic and rightly described in terms of an action, or better, an active journey powered by encountering others along the way.”¹³⁰

In the author’s present ministry function, these concepts have been implemented in children’s ministry by ensuring that each lesson is contextualized both in the grand redemptive narrative of Scripture and in light of the death and resurrection of Christ. As lessons discuss moral behavior, they are set in the context of the life God has given them through Jesus. When children are led in prayer or taught about the Holy Spirit, they are encouraged to recognize their position before God in Christ and how having His life enables them to do His works, with the hope that their faith is strengthened and eventually they too will see signs and wonders as they share Christ with others. In every way, kids are encouraged to act on account of their faith in Jesus by seeking ways to enable them to imitate the life God has given them: “One of the most important ways the New Testament vision of discipleship transcends the boundary between ‘information’ and ‘imitation’ is its emphasis on the believer’s union with Christ... the reality that

¹³⁰ Sherri Brown and Christopher W. Skinner, eds., *Johannine Ethics: The Moral World of the Gospel and Epistles of John* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 4.

disciples are acting in accordance with the Christ who indwells them,”¹³¹ which is done in community.

Expressing Eternal Life through Loving Like Jesus

Believing in Jesus ushers one into a new community that finds its identity in the nature and character of God, which has clear ethical implications for the group. Faith in Jesus “refocuses their total moral behavior, since now their examples for behavior come from the Father and his Son. Through faith believers receive a new identity. They are reborn as members of the family of God.”¹³² As a result, “[b]elievers are drawn into a group that is fully determined by the love of God, which is mediated through Jesus and results in eternal life. Loving reaction to these gifts comes in the form of obedience that is expressed in concrete actions. In this way actions, commandments, and identity are intricately and inseparably linked.... Who you are leads to whom you listen to and that leads to what you do.”¹³³

An example of this is clearly seen in John 13 as Jesus “loved them to the end” (v. 1). By starting the foot washing narrative this way, John connects the act to the cross. Jesus’s command to love one another (v. 34), then, is related to Jesus’s sacrificial death. This is borne out in 1 John 3:16 as he defines love through Jesus’s laying down his life and then asserts that “we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.” And yet, in the same way Jesus connected sacrificial love to a practical, humble act (foot washing in John 13), John connects the giving of one’s life to practical behavior in verses 17-18: “But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in

¹³¹ Wax, 11.

¹³² J. G. Van der Watt, “Ethics and Ethos in the Gospel According to John,” *Zeitschrift Für Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft Und Die Kunde Der Älteren Kirche* 97, no. 2 (2006): 158. Ihenacho calls this family the community of eternal life.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 165.

need, yet closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? ¹⁸ Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.” Because God is love (4:8, 16), His life is characterized most fully by love. As a result, the faith community is called to embody the same character of life; they love as Christ loved. Van der Watt describes this as

loyalty that is constantly ready to be expressed in productive activity. No matter what the situation, the believer must act to the benefit of the group or family. By describing love in this way, *all* possible situations are covered, because the simple question that determines what the loving action in a particular situation should be is: how can I benefit my brother or sister? Love is thus constantly focused on protecting, expanding, serving, and maintaining the family of God.¹³⁴

By calling his readers to live in loving action towards one another, “John is concerned to underline what is appropriate behavior within the community. The image of light and darkness, the concept of truth and falsehood, and the experience of forgiveness and loving one another within the circle of the fellowship of believers, all combine to strengthen the sense of community, and to define its limits.”¹³⁵

It should be emphasized that the reception of eternal life and admittance into the faith community is accomplished by faith alone as the gracious act of God. Once this gracious gift is received, the individual then has an obligation to live in light of the gift he or she received: “A profession of faith is a saving one only if it results in the keeping of God’s commandments and love for his offspring. Performance of the commandments is without value unless it recognizes God in his Son and has fellowship with God’s church. True love stems from a relationship with God through his Son and takes the form of fulfilling his commandments.”¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Van der Watt, “Ethics and Ethos,” 165-66. Emphasis original.

¹³⁵ Terry Griffith, “A Non-Polemical Reading of 1 John: Sin, Christology and the Limits of Johannine Christianity,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 49, no. 2 (1998): 261.

¹³⁶ Rainbow, 307.

The Johannine call to embody the life of God through embracing God’s moral and ethical character is not limited solely to the faith community. Participating in God’s life and walking according to His love involves “human beings in God’s project of restoring and bringing to fulfilment his good creation.”¹³⁷ As mentioned above, Macchia calls the church to embrace the insight that “social transformation can be viewed as a legitimate sign of the redemption yet to come in Christ.”¹³⁸ The call to social transformation, then, leads the church to embrace the Johannine love ethic in areas of social justice. As Thompson states, “Those who have life must be *committed to life for the world*, whether through the proclamation of the one who is life, the alleviation of physical pain, or the healing of emotional distress.... Reception of life demands a commitment to life.”¹³⁹

In the context of ministry, this means emphasizing the way eternal life defines and shapes the community’s internal and external relationships. First, how the community members relate to each other ought to reflect the inner relationships of the Trinity: divine love embodied throughout the community. In children’s ministry, activities, games, crafts, and projects are leveraged to create space for children to experience and practice what loving community is like. Children are led to pray for one another, encourage one another, sacrifice something for the benefit of another, and shown how this models Jesus’s own sacrificial love. Second, the church, even children’s ministries, can embrace social issues and work towards social transformation. Leading missions trips and educating people about global needs can help them develop the compassion of Christ and take loving action together as they embody a commitment to life.

¹³⁷ Hans Boersma, “A New Age Love Story: Worldview and Ethics in the Gospel of John,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 38, no. 1 (April 2003): 106.

¹³⁸ Macchia, 288.

¹³⁹ Thompson, 51. Emphasis added.

Leaders can further facilitate this by bringing people alongside them in various projects to help them develop skills, uncover gifts, and experience what participating in God's life entails.

Embodying this ethic of love, to love one another as Jesus did while bearing witness to who He is as the Christ, however, will inevitably lead to resistance from the world. In light of this resistance, understanding one's possession of eternal life is paramount for enduring well as he or she follows Christ by laying down his or her life as He did.

Receiving Eternal Life Fully through Following Jesus

Finally, understanding one's possession of eternal life can prepare the church to endure well when persecution and tribulation happens. As Jesus laid down his life, He calls His followers to lay down their lives to receive eternal life, and if anyone serves Him, they must follow Him (John 12:25-26). When Jesus said this to His followers, He was preparing to go to the cross, and calls all who believe in Him to go to the cross with Him. Jesus then explains that as the world hated Him, it will hate His followers as well, and in the same way it persecuted Him, the world will persecute them as well (15:18-20). In the world Jesus's followers will have tribulation, and yet He has overcome the world (16:33). It is the victory Jesus won on the cross that He calls the faith community to participate in (1 John 2:13-14; 4:4; 5:3-5), and they achieve this through their faithful witness to Christ and participation in His death (Revelation 12:11).

Bauckham comments on Revelation 12:11, "the whole verse requires that the reference to 'the blood of the Lamb' is not purely to Christ's death but to the deaths of the Christian martyrs, who, following Christ's example, bear witness even at the cost of their lives."¹⁴⁰ It is, in fact, this sacrificial act of the faith community that is the catalyst for the nations to come to repentance:

¹⁴⁰ Bauckham, 75.

“What has not been revealed, except in hints which John now draws out, is the role of the followers of the Lamb in *bringing the world to repentance and faith through their witness and death.*”¹⁴¹ Later, Bauckham writes regarding the content of the scroll from Revelation 10:8ff.,

The content of the scroll... is that their [believers'] *faithful witness and death is to be instrumental in the conversion of the nations of the world....* God's kingdom... is to come as the sacrificial witness of the elect people who already acknowledge God's rule brings the rebellious nations also to acknowledge his rule. The people of God have been redeemed *from all the nations* (5:9) in order to bear prophetic witness *to all the nations* (11:3-13).¹⁴²

The church's victory, achieved through faithful death, is not merely victory for themselves, but leads to the salvation and subsequent victory of those who receive the church's prophetic witness and respond in repentance. Their “conquering” leads to the conquering and salvation of others, and it is brought about as the church willingly lays down its lives (*ψυχή*), participating in the love and sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. Revelation does not predict that every Christian will die in their witness for Christ, but that all must be prepared to die: “Not every faithful witness will actually be put to death, but all faithful witness requires the endurance and the faithfulness (13:10) that will accept martyrdom if it comes.”¹⁴³

Possessing eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ means the church embraces the loving, self-sacrificial nature of God's life:

The ethics of the cross are eschatological to the core, and therefore our embodiment of them is likewise eschatological. The ethics of the cross revolutionizes our entire worldview. When we likewise suffer end-time affliction, we can be confident that we are participating in God's kingdom and ruling over the devil. Additionally, when Christian leaders embody the message of the cross, they become an example to others. Church congregations inevitably look to their leaders for direction. Leaders must consciously

¹⁴¹ Bauckham, 83.

¹⁴² Ibid., 84.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 94.

conduct themselves in light of this ever-present, end-time-reality.¹⁴⁴

Leaders are called to lead their churches based on this reality. Evangelism and mission *must* include more than reciting the main tenants of the gospel accurately; it entails personal sacrifice at potentially great cost to both the individual and the community. The church is at risk of giving up its greatest ability to influence the world for the kingdom of God by shying away from the sacrificial nature of witness. This does not have to be the case! Helping the faith community embrace the gift of eternal life that is given to them now through the Spirit can encourage and empower them to truly follow Christ and embrace the cruciform life He lived:

“Since believers are spiritually resurrected, members of God’s end-time kingdom, and part of the new heavens and earth, they have the power to overcome all forms of persecution. This is not ‘mind over matter,’ as commonly expressed in today’s culture. This is a power fueled by God’s Spirit, who binds believers to the future. The NT authors often encourage their churches to look beyond present affliction and lay hold of such power through faith.¹⁴⁵

How does the contemporary church lead its adherents in embracing such a difficult message? First, leaders are called to model it. Even though much of the Western church does not currently experience the kind of tribulation that is experienced in other parts of the world, opportunities abound to model sacrificial witness through humble service of others, generosity, and even yielding one’s “rights” for others. Leaders can create contexts and systems for the community members to encourage and help one another, modeling the ethic of love so that as the members embrace sacrificial witness, the other members rally around and support them. For new believers and children, extra time can be taken to explain the cost of following Jesus, and intentionally helping them grow in their trust and confidence in God to be with them through

¹⁴⁴ Gladd and Harmon, 109-10.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 95. In John’s writings, the concept of spiritual resurrection and participation in God’s kingdom are both expressed in the concept, “eternal life.”

difficult times and also helping them see and maintain the heavenly perspective. Bauckham comments that Revelation depicts the Christian's martyrdom as both victory for the church and for the beast. Which is it? "The answer depends on whether one sees things from the earthly perspective of those who worship the beast or from the heavenly perspective which John's visions open up for his readers."¹⁴⁶ Leaders, by helping the faith community recognize and live according to the eternal life they have received, enable the church to embrace this heavenly perspective and live lives of faithful witness to Christ.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper it has been argued that the faith community possesses eternal life in the present age as a gracious gift from God on account of their faith in Jesus as the Son of God. In the Johannine literature, this gift is distinct from the future physical resurrection that is anticipated by the church and foreshadowed by Jesus's own resurrection. In receiving eternal life, the church has received the Spirit of God and ought to anticipate His activity in their lives manifested through charismatic witness to the world while embodying the nature and character of God's life through sacrificial love towards one another. Experiencing the life of God in the present age also empowers the church to endure persecution, affliction, and tribulation, even at the cost of their own lives, because they understand that, like Christ, they have already laid down their ψυχή and have received ζώή. As such, by persevering in their faith, "They come to life and reigned with Christ... This is the first resurrection.... Over such the second death has no power" (Revelation 20:4-6).

Even though a doctrine of eternal life is not addressed in the Assemblies of God's

¹⁴⁶ Bauckham, 90.

theological documents or doctrinal statements, it remains an integral concept for how the community of faith participates in the inaugurated kingdom of God and is instrumental in establishing God's rule on the earth. Possessing eternal life now ought to shape the church's entire existence from its interactions with one another to its sacrificial witness to the world, and each individual is called to actively participate in the divine life they have been given.

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