

The Epistles of John

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The name “John” attached to all four of these books reflects the fact that early on, by the second century in fact, Christian tradition identified their author as John the son of Zebedee, one of the twelve apostles. It is important to note, however, that no author’s name actually appears in the text of any of these writings. The amount of development in the theology and the historical circumstances suggested by these books makes it unlikely that any of them was written by an apostle. Also, on the whole, there are good reasons to think that “the elder” who wrote the letters is not the same person as the author of the Fourth Gospel. P2

It is common for scholars to think of a distinctive Johannine community. Although this community likely did exist, we don’t really know where it was located. Traditions exist that it may have been around Ephesus, although that is very uncertain. The references to traveling in 2 and 3 John suggest that the “community” may have been spread out in several nearby cities and towns. P3

Both tradition and scholarship suggest that John was the last of the four New Testament Gospels to be written, coming into being perhaps in the 90s of the first century. The letters, then, would probably date to the period shortly after 100. P3

In 1 and 2 John, there are two main themes: belief in Jesus Christ and love for one another. In fact, these two themes are brought into such close relationship with one another that it is impossible to treat them completely separately. First John considers love and belief together as a single, two-sided response to the fact that God sent Jesus into the world as a sacrifice for our sins. We *act out* our belief in our life of love, and our love is *grounded in* what we believe about Jesus. This is the good news, the gospel message, according to the Johannine letters: God is love, God sent Jesus into the world out of love, and we now have an opportunity to love. For the elder, love is not law, but gospel. “Believing in Jesus,” as these letters understand it, means more than just holding a correct doctrinal position. The belief is real only if the believer loves as Jesus loved, loves as God is love. True faith is doing; true action is believing. Real love, divine love, spiritual love arises from the recognition that the divine entered our world as one of us, and it results in down-to-earth, physical acts of caring for other human beings. P4-5

An honest discussion of the Johannine letters (and the Gospel of John, too, for that matter) requires that we notice that the form of their love commandment is “Love *one another*.” This refers to other members of the believing community, not to the world at large, which tends to be considered a hostile place in these writings. “Love one another” does represent a limitation on love, and it is important to remember that Jesus himself had a more expansive understanding: “Love your neighbor as yourself,” he said (Mark 12:28-34), and even “Love your enemies” (Luke 7:27-36) p5-6

First John not only declares that God is love, but reminds its readers that this God abides in us and we abide in God. This claim to divine presence is demonstrated by God’s gift of the Spirit, and above all by our love for one another, as well as by our belief

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in Jesus. A reflective reading of these texts, especially 1 John, leaves one with the sense that Christian life is a deeply intimate relationship with a completely loving God. The question of sin is not ignored, however, particularly by 1 John. Unfortunately, the letter treats this topic in such an obscure, even contradictory, way that the reader is often left baffled as to what is intended. At one point we read that children of God, unlike children of the devil, cannot and do not sin (3:4-10); at another we find comforting assurances of forgiveness if we do sin, and encouragement not to deny our sins (1:5-2:2); at another, both kinds of claims are put side by side (5:16-18). P6

Our author may be “the elder,” and may speak of the readers as his “children,” but he never forgets that in the end, they are all equally children of one Father, all brothers and sisters. The primary authority, especially for teaching, was the Holy Spirit. Yet it is clear in these letters that this state of affairs was under stress, and that new relations between tradition and Spirit, and among community members, were being developed. Some people were claiming that the Spirit was leading them in ways contrary to traditional understandings of Jesus and of mutual love. Some people had left the community, or at least the elder’s group; some went about teaching unfamiliar doctrines. There was conflict, there was confusion, and there were most certainly church politics. In the midst of these unstable developments, the elder sought to unite tradition and claims to the Spirit around the core of a belief in Jesus Christ, fully human and fully divine, that was expressed as love for one another. Neither tradition as such nor the Spirit as such could be the basic standard for deciding what was true. That standard could only be Jesus Christ, come in the flesh, the revelation of the God who is love. P7

The reference to “flesh” in 1 John 4:2 most likely refers to physical, visible human reality, including not only the body but the mortality and various weaknesses that distinguish human life in this world from the immortal life of the spirit. In some way the opponents denied that Christ shared that reality with us; or at least they denied that his humanity was meaningful for the salvation that he brought. This teaching is not very surprising when we realize that in the cultural context of early Christianity, the spirit or mind was often valued much more highly than the flesh or body. We see something similar in 1 Cor 15, where Paul has to work mightily to convince his readers that there will be a resurrection of the body. The docetists, from a Greek word that means “to seem,” since their idea was that Christ only seemed to be human, was prevalent in the second century. Cerinthus taught that the Christ was a divine being who descended on the human Jesus at his baptism, and departed from him before his crucifixion. That would fit in fairly well with what the elder says about people who “deny that Jesus is the Christ,” and with his insistence on believing and confessing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Whatever the nature and origin of the opponents’ teaching, the elder responds by emphasizing the identity of Jesus with the Christ, the Son of God, precisely in his offering an atoning sacrifice for our sins, as the one who came not only with water (perhaps referring to his baptism) but with water *and blood* (5:6-8). The elder also insists that belief in this Savior, divine and human, is inseparable from a life of love for one another. This insistence may imply that the opponents did not regard material acts of mutual love as essential to the Christian life; they are certainly unlikely to have seen the sacrifice of Jesus as a model for their own daily lives. They may have believed that, having a heaven-sent eternal life of the spirit, they were beyond ethical concerns in

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general. They may have believed that they were incapable of sin, or at least shielded from the guilt of sin, no matter what they did, which flies in the face of common experience and widespread biblical conviction. The difficulty of course is that the author himself makes exactly this claim in 3:4-10. P12-13, 21

“We declare to you what was from the beginning...” He speaks of what was from the beginning, not of One who was in the beginning. “The beginning,” here as elsewhere in these letters, seems to refer not to the beginning of time but to the beginning of the Christian tradition of the Christian community. The “word of life,” moreover, is not a personal being in whom life was created, but a message that brings life. P16

Our author relates God’s righteousness to forgiveness rather than punishment; and he encourages the reader by appealing to the faithfulness of God. P22

For 1 John, any claim to intimate relationship with God that is not accompanied by the love for other people that Jesus both commanded and exemplified is simply a lie. On the first side, to know God, to love God, to abide in God: these are the terms of relationship that 1 John emphasizes. Knowing God, in biblical terminology, means having a direct, personal, and indeed intimate acquaintance with God. On the other side, we do need to inquire how broadly the term “brother or sister” is meant to extend here. Though Jesus’ answer to that question was as broad as possible – indeed, he stretched love to include even our enemies – in the love commandment of the Gospel of John we find it to be more restricted: “Love *one another*.” It seems clear that this refers specifically to fellow-disciples, fellow-believers; and the same range is evident in 1 John as well. Such a focus on love within the community is often found in small, socially isolated groups, as is the hostility toward the outside world that we find in the very next passage of 1 John (the Essene writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls furnish another example from antiquity). It is somewhat dismaying to think of Christian love as limited in this way. P26-27

The imitation of Christ becomes central to 1 John’s ethic of love. As elsewhere in the New Testament, this imitation does not focus on the details of Jesus’ lifestyle, nor does it seek to make the disciple his equal through moral effort. Rather, it focuses on his self-giving love. Love is the way to “walk just as he walked,” to walk in the light as God is in the light. P28

In ancient thought, a person’s name encompassed his or her entire identity. Our author later refers to Jesus’ name as the object of Christian belief (3:23; 5:13) p31

“Do not love the world or the things in the world.” (2:15) The Christian readers may have conquered the evil one, but they still need to be admonished about the seduction of the world that is ruled by the evil one (1 John 5:19). It is not a harsh admonition, but it reminds us once again of 1 John’s way of seeing everything in terms of stark oppositions: one can love God or one can love the world; but no one can love both. The contrast between God and the world in 1 John may be the sharpest in the entire New Testament. As in the Gospel of John, 1 John can present the world both as the object of God’s love and salvation, and as fundamentally opposed to God and to the Christ sent to save it, and to those who believe in him. Terms like “flesh” and “world” mean the force in

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human nature that drives us to center on ourselves and our own wants, rather than on the needs of others, or the will of God. p32-33

Those who love the world, that is, who love their own desires, lose sight of a love that extends beyond themselves, reaching up to the God who made and redeemed them and out to the other people who need them. The teaching of our culture is, "If only I had that, I would be what I long to be." The teaching of 1 John, of Jesus, of Paul, and of a multitude of heroes and heroines of the Christian faith is, "If only I gave that away, I would be what I was made to be." P35

When 1 John speaks of the antichrists, this is an actual group that can be pointed out as those who "went out from us," people well known to the readers themselves. Unfortunately, they are not so well known to us, and it requires some work to understand who they were. We learn that they have left the community; that in some way they "deny that Jesus is the Christ"; and perhaps also that they were or sought to be teachers. The author characterizes these opponents as "antichrists." This term has become so much a part of the Christian vocabulary that it may be surprising to learn that 1 and 2 John are the only writings in the New Testament that use it. The Greek word "antichrist" in itself suggests something like "substitute messiah." They bring a message that they claim is from the Spirit of God but which the author considers a deception. The author of 1 John transforms the use of the term "antichrist" in three important ways. First, he makes it plural: "many antichrists have come" (since the opponents were not one person but many). Second, he claims that these antichrists have already come, rather than looking for them in the future. Third, he identifies them, not with an arch-deceiver from outside the Christian community, but with rival teachers *within* the community. Unfortunately, by identifying "the antichrist" with his opponents, the author set a fateful course for the Christian treatment of theological disputes. Again and again, one party in a disagreement has stuck the label "antichrist" onto the other, making their opponents not merely erring human beings but demons and agents of the devil – just as our author demonizes his opponents in chapter 3. One way of dealing with fundamental theological differences has always been to declare that the members of the other party are simply not true Christians, and never were. P36-37 Claiming that your opponent is a tool of the devil means that it is no longer possible to consider what he or she says thoughtfully; there is no chance that any portion of their reasoning could be correct or worthwhile, or that they could have any good intention or faithfulness to Christ. P72

Could some members of this Christian community actually have been denying that Jesus was the Messiah? Of course, that had been precisely the issue between Christians (mainly of Jewish origin) and the many Jews who did not join them in the early days of this community's history. It seems unlikely though that many people who belonged to the community would have gone backward into that kind of denial. Rather, in 2 John 9 the opponents are accused of going *forward*. Here, too, the author urges the readers to "let what you heard from the beginning abide in you." Therefore it seems likely that the denial in question refers to something else, some new development that separated the identity of Jesus from that of "the Christ." There were Christian groups with gnostic tendencies in the second century that did something similar to this, and it may be that,

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like them 1 John's opponents distinguished between Jesus, the human being, and the Christ, the Son of God, the divine being who came down from heaven. In so doing, they would apparently have seen spiritual significance only in the heavenly Christ, not the human Jesus. p39

There are tensions in this passage (1 John 2:18-27) that have continued to be at work in the history of the Christian church through all its ages. One of these tensions is between authoritative teachers and the freedom of the individual believer to be taught by God. Another is between the force of tradition, "what you heard from the beginning," and innovative responses to new circumstances. The author says, "Listen to the tradition, and listen to the Spirit." But what if voices claiming the Spirit seek to modify the tradition? There can be little doubt that the opponents also claimed to have the Spirit behind their innovations, and they were not completely without justification in doing so. They may have appealed to a tradition such as the one found in John 14:25-26 and 16:12-13, which promises precisely that the Spirit will guide the community into truth not given them earlier. Throughout Christian history, the Spirit has often been claimed as a force challenging traditional teachings and institutions, while the church's teaching authorities have often invoked tradition in order to limit both appeals to the Spirit and the interpretive freedom of individual believers. P41

Since the world fails to know God, it fails to know those who come from God – both Jesus and those who are God's children because of Jesus. This understanding of the believing community in relation to "the outside world" is common in countercultural groups and the communities that sociologists define as "sects," groups that are relatively closed off, often due to rejection of their message and persecution by the dominant society. However, some otherwise relatively well-situated groups and leaders intentionally foster a sense of cultural isolation, sometimes even while claiming to represent a societal majority and seeking to gain political power. First John is not interested in taking over the world. Instead, it reflects the true circumstances of the Johannine community. p45

The elder contrasts children of God with children of the devil. The test to discern one from the other is that of conduct, expressed in terms of righteousness and sin. The author does little to define these concepts in the abstract. It is the action, not the abstract quality, that interests 1 John. It should be remembered, however, that "righteousness" represents a Greek word that can often be translated "justice," suggesting that the author is not thinking in terms of a purely personal morality. In fact, "doing what is right" is equivalent to "loving one's brothers and sisters." For 1 John, at least, righteousness does not consist of moral goodness in general or following a list of ethical or moral values. It means love – just as the only commandment specifically noted in 2:3-11 is the new commandment of love, and just as the God who is "faithful and just (in other words – righteous)" (1:9) is also identified as love (4:7-18). 3:16-17 leads to the giving up of one's own interests for the sake of others, even to the point of laying down one's life. That understanding of love is based on the actions of Jesus. p46

Jesus' self-giving death shows that love is more than warm feelings or soothing words or an uplifting doctrine. The New Testament in general does not think of love in terms of

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feelings but of actions (note 1 John 3:18). Jesus' teaching "Love your enemies" does not mean that we should somehow conjure up pleasant thoughts and sweet affections for those who hate us. It means that we should do for them what we do for the people we love: pray for them, give to them, do good to them, show mercy to them as God has shown mercy to us (Luke 6:27-36). No one can generate kind feelings by the willpower or on demand; but anyone can perform the actions of love if they are willing. It is the will to act in love, to do good, that is required, not a particular emotion. 1 John 3:17 does offer one specific example of the kind of self-giving action that the author is looking for. Perhaps it was the most needed action in the community's current circumstances: caring for the poor among them. P56

The way to life passes through death, not only Jesus' death but our own death. The death we must die is to our self-interest, our self-concern, that which places our needs and desires at the center of the universe, or at any rate at the center of our lives. That center can only rightly be occupied by God; and when God's love abides there, then we are both enabled and required to give away all else to our brothers and sisters in need. P58

In the early decades of the church, and indeed well into the second century, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit played an important and sometimes controversial role in Christian congregations. It is commonly said that as reliance on the direct work of the Spirit became less of a factor in the church the role of institutional structures became greater. This is obviously true; but at the same time those institutional structures have also claimed the guidance of the Spirit. Moreover, renewal movements of various sorts have reasserted the importance of the gifts of the Spirit throughout Christian history. A number of these movements were declared heretical; others have managed to find some acceptance and to demonstrate doctrinal orthodoxy. In the tradition represented by the Gospel and letters of John, the Spirit was most closely associated with teaching. We should never underestimate the role that charismatic experience played in the life of the early Christian churches. Take note sometime of all the references to joy and rejoicing in Acts and the letters of Paul. We may be quite certain that all this exuberance was not because the worship service got finished by noon! Many of the New Testament writings attest a glad sense of divine intervention and divine presence in the life of the church and the lives of Christians, and much of this intervention was attributed to the Holy Spirit. Claims to be a teacher, healer, or prophet inspired by the Spirit could produce controversy however. Not everyone accepted all of these claims. Even Paul recommends weighing and testing the words of prophets. We find a surprising number of references to false prophets, messiahs, apostles, and teachers. P66-67

The specific area of teaching that the author disputes concerns ideas about Jesus. The opponents may have distinguished between Jesus, a physical human being, and the Christ, a spiritual divine being who "came" into the world to bring a purely spiritual salvation. The coming of this being, and the bringing of salvation, would thus not have been "in flesh." The Jesus of human flesh might be at most a temporary vehicle, a kind of carrier, but would have no significance in himself for salvation. The author of 1 John rejects this idea. For him, Jesus Christ, human being of flesh and divine Son of God, brought salvation in to the world precisely "in flesh," in his physical human nature; for it

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was in his body that he made known the God who is love by sacrificing his mortal, fleshly life for us. The New Testament Gospels present him as a prophet and a teacher, which might make him the equivalent of Moses or Muhammad; and as a man deeply in touch with the divine, which could perhaps put him in a league with the Buddha. But Christianity persistently refuses to accept these categorizations and claims something utterly unique for Jesus. For this reason, Christianity itself is uniquely *about* Jesus. Judaism is about God and God's Torah; Islam is about obedience to Allah; Buddhism is about enlightenment. Christianity is about Jesus. To some people, this seems to be assigning too high a place to someone who was, after all, a man like others. But our claim is not simply that this man was God; it is that God became this man. The Creator of the universe made the human race in love, and came to us, not in a law, a ritual, a text, or a philosophy, but in a human being. God met us in our own condition, and chose to do so in the man Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore it is this person, uniquely embodying both the highest of human spirituality and the fullness of the presence of God, who is at the center of Christianity. P69-70

The author says that his opponents were many and that "what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them." This suggests that they may have tried to shape their presentation of Christianity to fit the popular ideas of the time, and that they were having some success. P71

"Spirit of truth" is a typical designation for the Holy Spirit in the Gospel and letters of John. It is not found anywhere else in the New Testament, though it is found in the Dead Sea Scrolls and some other ancient Jewish writings. This is one of a number of indications that some of the ideas in this Gospel and letters may have originated among the more esoteric branches of ancient Judaism. P72

The assertion that God is love has to do not with the essence of divine being as a matter of abstract theological speculation but with what God does. Love is an activity, not a quality, and saying that God is love suggests an active and dynamic God, not a remote, "hands-off" deity or a static intellectual concept. Moreover, since love cannot really exist without an object, the claim that God is love also provides a Christian theological starting point for understanding the nature of God as Trinity and the creation of the world. These implications go well beyond what 1 John is interested in, however. Our author speaks of God as love in order to present a model for Christians to imitate. Patterning our actions after the love of God, the love that God is, provides the clearest indication that we are genuinely in relationship with God, that we are God's children and know God. P74

1 John's understanding of God may be one-sided, but it seems to be an understanding that has been deliberately chosen and consistently portrayed. God is not pictured as a wrathful judge, a nitpicking accountant, or an avenger lying in wait. Rather, God is represented as generous, self-giving, and compassionate; in a word: God is love. P76

There is nothing more intimate, more personal, in human life than relationship with God, where our own deepest and most individual reality meets the reality that loved us and brought us into being. Yet 1 John insists that this most utterly interior and private

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phenomenon receives its true validation in the public and outward practices of love and confession of Jesus. The concept of a personal religion that has no relation to the outward facts of our lives, or a private spirituality that has no bearing on our conduct toward other people, is as remote as it could possibly be from this author's understanding of what it means to abide in God and have God abiding in us. Modern Western society has tended toward an extreme individualism, and religion (or spirituality, if you prefer) has also tended to become highly privatized. P78

In perfect love, in the love of God brought to its conclusion in our love for one another, there is no fear. "No fear of the Judgment" is what the author obviously means, given the context. However, if we have no fear of that, what need have we to fear any of the trials and traumas that this life can bring? God's love, brought to its completion in our love, casts out fear, expels it, throws it away. P80

The world, the system of human society that rejects and opposes God and God's commandments, will naturally try to keep them from carrying out their loving obedience. The world, in this sense, is not only hostile to God's children (3:1, 13), but is understood as seeking to prevent them from obeying God's commandments, because it is focused instead on self-gratification and self-will. The readers need not fear this opposition, however. Precisely as children of God, they have conquered the world. P86

Given all this, what do we make of the contrast between "water and blood" and "water only"? Where water alone appears (John 1:32-34), it has to do with baptism, which is natural in a Christian context. Specifically, it has to do with Jesus' baptism, the occasion when the Spirit descended from heaven to rest on him. The idea that he came "with water only," against which 1 John is arguing, may then have something to do with Jesus' baptism. For instance, the opponents may have claimed (as some second-century groups are known to have done) that what happened at Jesus' baptism was that the divine Christ, a spirit from heaven, descended on the human Jesus. Later events – including the death of Jesus – would have had little or no significance for revelation or salvation, in their thinking. (It is even possible, though speculative, that the opponents saw in John 19:30, where Jesus "gives up the spirit," an indication that the heavenly spirit left Jesus at his death, which therefore meant his death had no "spiritual" meaning.) Not so for our author, for whom the "coming" of Jesus Christ, that is, his coming to bring salvation, did not occur in water only, but in "the water and the blood." The mention of blood would lead us to think of the death of Jesus. It is the death of Jesus Christ that is the true moment of revelation and salvation. We are used to thinking of the cross as a religious symbol, but that was not its meaning when Christianity began. If it symbolized anything, it symbolized shame and defeat, the weakness of occupied territories and enslaved persons, and the brutal power of the imperial government to enforce the social and political status quo. It may be the greatest miracle in early Christianity that when Christian apostles and preachers declared that a man who had suffered this fate was the Savior sent from God, anybody believed it at all. It is likewise not surprising that some groups, especially those who were concerned to make the Christian message more palatable and understandable to their contemporaries, might want to restrict the revelation in Christ to "the water only." P90

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Eternal life means not only life that never ends but “the life of eternity.” It refers not just to the quantity of life, but to its quality. It means a life that is characterized by eternity, by the world of God that transcends the present world. Eternal life is divine life, the very life of God. “This life is in his Son.” Indeed, divine life as such, the life of God, is present in Jesus, the Word made flesh, and those who believe in him have this divine life now, without waiting for the Last Judgment. P93

The author speaks of the specific prayer that should be made for one’s brother or sister who has sinned. This is a kind of prayer that may be unfamiliar to many of us today. Our responses to sin within the church may range from indifference to silent anguish or not-so-silent gossip. First John assumes that sin is our business, if the church is a community of brothers and sisters in an intimate relationship of love for one another. But the only one whom the author suggest we tell is God. The sin in question need not have been committed against the one who is doing the praying, nor does 1 John speak of confronting the sinner, whether in public or in private (contrast Matt 18:15-17). It is a matter of one Christian observing another Christian’s improper conduct and taking it to God. There is a certain humility in this, since the one praying makes no assumption of moral superiority – the author does not recommend asking that the sinner learn to be righteous like the person doing the praying. P96