1, 2, & 3 JOHN

Epistola s. Ioannis prima.

Die erste Epistle St. Johannis.

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The Johannine Epistles are short in length but weighty in contents. These three terse letters divulge a fiery debate about Jesus’ identity among early church leaders that resulted in a devastating schism tearing apart a network of Christian churches in western Asia Minor at the end of the first century. The authors’ desire to defend the truth of their tradition and draw the boundary of their fellowship may seem zealous, but like a pure gold nugget produced in a refining furnace these passionate letters have provided the later church with invaluable resources for its development of liturgy, ethics, and theology. Beyond their immediate circumstances, their influence on the faith and life of the church has run deep and wide. First John 1:8-9, for instance, is often cited to prepare worshippers for confession in Morning Prayer and Sunday service: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and
just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Another popular verse, 1 John 3:11, underscores reciprocal love as the quintessential principle of community life: “For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another” (also 1 John 3:23; 4:11; 2 John 5). And 1 John 4:16 boldly proclaims a divine quality as the reason for spiritual formation: “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”

Many splendid ideas notwithstanding, these letters also give us such labels as “antichrist,” “liar,” and “false prophets,” which were used to demonize opponents in theological debates (1 John 2:18, 22) and have been used, unfortunately too often, in ecclesial inquisitions in the history of the church, a legacy deserving to be critically reassessed. For their value as witness to a historical case of the church’s attempt to discern a doctrinal truth between tradition and innovation and the strug-
gle to redefine its communal border in the aftermath of schism, these letters are a must read for churches facing similar challenges in the Anglican Communion and elsewhere.

Who is the author of these letters? The fact that they are clustered with the Epistle of James and the Epistles of Peter in the NT canon indicates that, in the early church, they were believed to have been written by another apostle, John, son of Zebedee. However, none of the three letters refers to “the apostle John” as author, and all are not written in the form of letters. The authors of 2 John and 3 John identify themselves as “elders” (2 John 1; 3 John 1) and follow the conventions of epistolary structure and formulae: salutation, body of the letter, and final greetings. The author of 1 John, however, does not reveal his identity or status, and his “letter” reads more like an exhortation or homily. He characterizes his writing as something important to “declare” (1 John 1:1) and to “proclaim” (1 John 1:5). Judging by
the similarities in writing style and historical situation, 2 John and 3 John were probably written by the same elder. The similar theological diction and pastoral concerns found in 1 John and 2 John, in turn, suggest that the same elder may have also written 1 John. As a leader of the Johannine community with teaching and governing responsibilities, the author held a position of seniority and wrote with authority, as evident in his frequent use of direct address (“I am writing to you...” 1 John 2:1, 12, 13, 14) and imperative sentences (“Do not love the world,” 2:15; “And now,... abide in him,” 2:28; “Let us love,” 3:18; “Do not believe every spirit,” 4:1).

Why do people think these anonymous letters were written by the apostle John? The main reason is that their theological language (“in the beginning,” “eternal life,” “truth”) and major themes (“abide in God,” “commandment of love,” Holy Spirit as “advocate”) are strikingly similar to those
found in the Fourth Gospel, traditionally believed to have been written by the apostle John, even though neither the Beloved Disciple nor the final editor of the Fourth Gospel ever self-identifies as John. The striking similarities in theological language and doctrinal ideas make it highly probable that both the Fourth Gospel and the three letters shared the same traditions of Jesus Christ in the so-called “Johannine School” and were written for the same network of churches centered at Ephesus. Since the three letters assume a prior knowledge of the Fourth Gospel, and the problems they face are internal debate and painful split rather than external tension with the synagogues or suffering from persecution, they were definitely written later than the Gospel. If the Fourth Gospel was written around 90 C.E., then these epistles could have been written around 100 C.E.

Because these three letters belong with the Fourth Gospel in the Johannine community, they are historically and
theologically connected with one another. Reading them as interrelated documents of the same faith community, one can gain a helpful vantage point for understanding their particular purposes in shared contexts. In fact, in these four documents a trajectory of theological debates over Christology (from Jesus’ divinity to humanity) can be traced and a sequence of social conflicts concerning human relationships (from external persecution to internal debate) may be detected. Facing false prophets and abominable secessionists, for instance, 1 John urges its readers to hold fast to their traditional teaching concerning Jesus Christ and to obey the commandment of love, both of which have been treasured from the founding time of their community. It would be advisable, therefore, to interpret the doctrinal debates of 1 John in light of the theological themes of the Fourth Gospel, the foundational text of the Johannine community. Second John and 3 John address the problems of schism
and hostility derived from the same theological disputes mentioned in 1 John, so they can be better understood when read in reference to the arguments of that first letter.

First John

The First “Epistle” of John has neither the epistolary salutation, which customarily begins with the writer greeting the recipients, nor the final epistolary greetings, signing off with well-wishes. In terms of Greco-Roman literature, it belongs to the genre of parenesis, a literary form in which a person with seniority, experience, and authority gives direct and general exhortations to encourage, remind, and advise his audience or readers, who are younger, less experienced, and inferior in political power, social standing, or family system. The goal of parenesis is to reinforce personal relationship, show concern and care, and change the attitude and/or behavior of its readers. Its rhetoric is characterized by constant
reminders of past relationship and shared tradition, frank talk on contemporary issues of concern, and repeated exhortations on values and virtues. Many of these rhetorical characteristics are evident in 1 John, such as the enamoring tone and familial terms the author uses to address his readers (“beloved,” 1 John 2:7; 3:2, 21; 4:1, 7, 11; “children,” 1 John 2:1, 12, 14, 18, 28, 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21), the blunt criticism against the “antichrists” and “false prophets” (2:18, 22; 4:1, 3), and the recurring emphasis on loving one another (3:11, 14, 16, 18; 4:7, 8, 11, 12, 20, 21). With his direct talk and constant repetitions, it is not difficult to “hear” the author’s urgent concerns and messages. The structure and flow of his arguments may be glimpsed in the following outline.

**Outline of 1 John**

- 1:1-4 Prologue: Our messages are based on authentic tradition
- 1:5—3:10 Message One: God is light, so we should walk in light
1:5-10 Premise: God is light, and in him there is no darkness

- 1:9 Confess our sins, and we shall be forgiven

2:1-11 Three purposes:

- 2:1 You may not sin
- 2:3 You may obey his commandment
- 2:8 You may love one another

2:12-14 Three reasons:

- 2:12 You are forgiven
- 2:13 You know God
- 2:14 You have overcome the evil one

2:15—3:10 Three advices:

- 2:15-17 Do not love the world or the things in the world
- 2:18-29 Resist antichrists; abide in tradition and the Spirit
- 3:1-10 Children of God do not sin, but do what is right

3:11—4:21 Message Two: Love one another, that we may abide in God
3:11 Premise: Jesus commands us to love one another

3:12-24 First admonition
   - 3:12-17 Be not like Cain who hates his brother (3:12)
   - 3:18-24 But love one another in truth and action (3:18)

4:1-21 Second admonition
   - 4:1-6 Do not believe every spirit, but test them (4:1)
   - 4:7-21 But love one another because it is from God (4:7)

5:1-12 Summary
   - 5:1-5 (1) Believers love others, obey God’s commandments, and conquer the world
   - 5:6-12 (2) The Son came in water and blood and was testified by the Spirit, God, and the eternal life

5:13-21 Epilogue: You may have eternal life and know Jesus Christ as true God

Prologue (1 John 1:1-4)
The author of 1 John begins by declaring that his writing concerns “the word of life” (ho logos tēs zōēs) that has
been faithfully passed down from “the beginning” (1:1). These two terms are clearly chosen to echo the “Word” (ho logos), which coexisted with God in “the beginning” in the logos hymn of the Fourth Gospel (John 1:1). The divine Word gave life to everything in the world (John 1:3) and became flesh in Jesus Christ to reveal God’s truth and love (John 1:14, 17), so some English Bibles translate the phrase, ho logos tēs zōēs, as “the Word of life” (NAB, NIV, NJB), with “Word” capitalized. In 1 John 1:2, however, the author singles out “the life”—instead of “the word”—to be identified with Jesus Christ who was with God and was revealed to the world in tangible human form, so it makes better sense to understand “the word” in 1 John 1:1 as referring to the early Christian testimony or proclamation about Jesus Christ the eternal life. For this reason, other English Bibles rightly translate the phrase as “the word of life” (NET, NRSV, RSV), with the term “word” in lower case.
The author also emphasizes that his testimony is a time-honored tradition passed down by a group of reliable eyewitness (“we”) from the beginning of Jesus’ ministry (1:1). He and other believers have seen, heard, and touched the revealed “life” incarnate in the person Jesus (1:1, 2, 3). It is his sincere hope that, by accepting his authentic tradition about Jesus Christ, his readers may have fellowship with him and thereby have communion with the Father and the Son Jesus Christ (1:3).

Why does the author emphasize that he has seen, heard, and touched the revealed “life”—Jesus Christ—from the beginning of his ministry? Why does he sound so eager to convince the readers to accept his testimony and join fellowship with him? If we have to reconstruct a social-historical context in which these two efforts might be prompted, it would seem that there was a serious debate in the community about the tangible nature of Jesus Christ and that the christological dispute had
caused some members to sever their relationship with the author. This polemical scenario becomes credible in light of the author’s urgent warning against the so-called “antichrists,” who have lied about Jesus’ identity and left his community (2:19). Concerning them he wrote: “Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son” (2:22). The use of derogatory language, calling his opponents “liars” and “antichrists,” reflects a heated dispute and a strong condemnation from the author. Just as Paul did not shy away from harshly denouncing the “Judaizing” teachers as “troublemakers” who came to the church of the Galatians to “pervert the gospel of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:7) because they would make Jesus “die for nothing” (Galatians 2:21), the author of 1 John used derogatory language unapologetically to censure his opponents because he believed that their denial of Jesus as the Christ and as the Son of God had
not only hurt the foundational truth of the gospel but also led many innocent members astray from their salvation. Sound doctrine was at stake and believers’ eternal life in danger. In other words, the author’s use of harsh language indicates how perilous the situation was! As a leader of the church, it is his responsibility to defend the truth and protect the members. So, he felt compelled to confront those liars and antichrists head-on.

The author also warned his readers against false prophets and instructed them not to believe in every spirit but to learn how to test the spirits:

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world. (4:2-3)
Evidently, some Christian prophets in the Johannine community had misguided some members by teaching that Jesus Christ was not from God. They refused to confess Jesus Christ as the Son of God who came in the flesh; hence, they were labeled as “anti-christs.” To refute them, the author insisted that Jesus was indeed the Christ, the Son of God, who came from God “in the flesh” and dwelled among his people, as declared in the logos hymn of the Fourth Gospel: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Because the Son of God’s humanity was the point of contention, the author found it necessary to emphasize that he has seen, heard, and touched Jesus in the flesh and that he has always testified to Jesus as truly the Christ, the Son of God. In other words, the theological debate among the leaders of the Johannine community was waged over a two-pronged issue of
Christology: Jesus as the Christ and the humanity of the Son of God. Placing this polemical scenario in its cultural and religious contexts of the first century, scholars have suggested that the false prophets who caused confusion and schism in the Johannine community may have held a high view of spirit and a low view of flesh as many Greek philosophers did. The Docetists mentioned by Ignatius, for instance, argued that Christ was so spiritual and so glorious that he could not have been bound by the material and the flesh and most definitely could not have been subject to a humiliating death on the cross. For the same reason, Cerinthus, mentioned by Irenaeus, taught that Christ was a spiritual being which descended on Jesus the human person at his baptism but left him before his crucifixion. The Gnostics in the second century also regarded the flesh as a prison of the soul and a deception to truth.

It does seem that the false prophets under criticism held similar views as
those held by these early Christian “heretics.” Apparently, though, their views were persuasive enough to attract some followers and turn them against the Johannine community. But why? One of the reasons is probably that their “high” christological view could be developed from some ideas in the Fourth Gospel. The logos hymn, for instance, confesses Jesus to be “the light” that gives life (John 1:4-5). John 3:16-21 states that God sent his only Son to the world as “the light” so that everyone who believes in him may be saved (3:19) and those who do what is true may come to “the light” (3:21). It is possible to interpret these passages to argue for a doctrine that sees the nature of the Son and the salvation of people to involve spiritual truth (symbolized by “the light”) rather than human flesh (necessary for the redemptive death of Christ and the transformation of believers’ life). It was no surprise, therefore, that some believers could have fallen for the false “high” view.
Why did the author of 1 John consider this spiritual view of the Son as a serious detriment to the truth of Christian faith? First of all, it contradicted directly the earliest testimony about Jesus being the Christ and the Son of God revealed in human form, on which the doctrinal tradition of the Johannine community was founded. Second, without Jesus’ body actually killed on the cross, his role as “the atoning sacrifice” for our sins would be undermined (2:2) and we could not be saved by his vicarious death. That was why, thirdly, the author also wrote, “This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood” (5:6) referring to Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist (John 1:31-34) and his redemptive death on the cross (John 19:34-35). How did the author know his incarnational view of Jesus Christ to be true? He insisted that it was the Spirit that testified to this truth in the hearts of true believers (1 John 5:6-10), a claim
apparently based on one of Jesus’ promises to the disciples in his farewell speech before the arrest: “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf” (John 15:26) and “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). As such, the author justified his incarnational view of Jesus Christ by means of the earliest tradition of his community and the confirmation of the Holy Spirit, citing both external and internal testimonies as warrants.

Besides the doctrinal debate on Christology, the author was concerned also about the unity of his community. His opponents had seceded from the community and broken fellowship with him (2:19). Obviously, their heated debates had resulted in a hurtful schism. The household of God was divided. Brothers and sisters were turned into strangers and friends became enemies. Anxious to restore their relationship, the
author kept encouraging his readers to abide in God (2:24, 27, 28; 3:17, 24; 4:13) and love one another (3:11, 14, 16, 23; 4:7, 11, 12, 20, 21; 5:2).

In order to address these two crises facing the community (false teaching and schism), the author wrote 1 John to remind his readers of two important and familiar messages (angelia) from their common tradition: a theological view that “God is light” (1:5) and a commandment to “love one another” (3:11). Based on these two messages, he developed forceful arguments to urge his readers to walk in the light (1:7) and to love others in truth and in action (3:18). Under the rubric of these two imperatives, he made several appeals and specific admonitions to meet the challenges of his community, to which we now turn.

**Message One: God is Light**

The first message the author recites from the Johannine tradition is the undisputed belief that “God is light and
in him there is no darkness at all” (1:5). On this premise, he makes his first appeal: Confess our sins (1:9). This is how he makes the case: Because God is light, to have fellowship with God means to walk in the light living a righteous life according to God’s commandments (1:7). Anyone who sins, in contrast, associates himself with the darkness and therefore cannot belong with God. But why should the readers care to know about this? Because this understanding has implications for their relationship with God. Since no one is so perfect as to never sin, the author argues, the best policy is to humbly confess our sins so that we may be cleansed and be acceptable to God (1:8). This is not only expedient but wise, because God, who is both faithful and just, has gracefully promised to forgive our sins (1:9). If we refuse to confess our sins, conversely, we are making a dangerous mockery of God who is light (1:10). So, the choice should be crystal clear: confess our sins.
The use of inclusive “we” in this appeal is noteworthy. By that, the author is saying that his readers and he himself all need to confess their sins. But why? When a community is divided by theological debate and broken by hateful schism, no one can claim innocence before the faithful and righteous God, who is light and expects his children to live in righteousness and justice.

After the initial call to confession, the author announces three main purposes for reciting the message concerning God as light from their tradition. First of all, he wants his readers to know that God is light so that they “may not sin” (2:1). God and sin are incompatible and irreconcilable. Recognizing the reality that all have sinned, however, he encourages them once again not to despair but to confess, saying that they can always count on Jesus Christ, their “righteous advocate” and “atoning sacrifice,” for the grace of forgiveness (2:1-2). In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus called the Holy Spirit
“another advocate” (John 14:16) who will come to accompany his followers, teach them the truth, testify on his behalf and condemn the world (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7). In agreement with other early Christian traditions, the author of 1 John believes that Jesus is the first advocate who has come to the world to embody God’s presence with us (“Emmanuel,” Matthew 1:23) and to teach the kingdom of God (Mark 1:15). With his vicarious death on the cross, he also serves as “the Lamb of God” that takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29) and becomes the “atoning sacrifice” to cleanse us from sin and reconcile us with God (Leviticus 16:16, 30; Romans 3:24-25). After his resurrection, he now sits “with the Father” in heaven to intercede constantly on our behalf (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25; 9:24). Calling Jesus the righteous advocate that evokes another advocate the Holy Spirit, the author hopes to remind his readers of the continuous care God has offered to his
children through the Son and the Spirit. Calling Jesus the atoning sacrifice, which evokes his suffering and death on the cross, the author wants to remind his readers of the incredibly generous love of God and the serious consequences of sin. In order to save us from the power and penalty of sin, God has offered a costly price, the life of his Son Jesus Christ. So, let us sin no more.

The author’s second purpose is to urge his readers to obey God’s commandments (2:3). How does obedience to God’s commandments relate to knowledge of God as light? If one truly knows God as the light that symbolizes truth and grace, the author argues, he or she will want to love God and abide in God; that is to say, to imitate God in everything he or she does and to maintain an intimate relationship with God (2:4-6). With such a holy desire it would be natural to want to obey God’s commandments and please God. By the same token, if one does not obey God’s
commandments, how can one prove that he or she really knows God is the light?

Since true knowledge and willing obedience are two sides of the same coin, the next question is: Which commandment of God is the most important? Here the author makes his third purpose known. He wants his readers to love other believers as brothers and sisters. They have heard the old commandment to believe the word of life mentioned in 1:1, namely, to accept the original testimony about Jesus Christ the Son of God (2:7) as born in the flesh to suffer and die on the cross to reveal God’s love for the whole world. Having experienced the generous love of God, they are now obliged to obey a “new commandment” to love one another as siblings (2:8) in the same way as God has done in Jesus Christ for all. The new commandment to love one another was issued by Jesus to his disciples after he predicted his suffering and death in Jerusalem (John 13:34) and again in his farewell discourse (John 15:12). If they
could love one another as he loves them, Jesus declared, outsiders will recognize them as Jesus’ disciples (John 13:35). In the author’s view, this new commandment is also linked to the premise of God as light, because he who lives in God is expected to walk in the light and love others as God does. By the same logic, he who hates his brothers or sisters still lives in darkness and as such not in God who is light (2:8-11).

After laying out three purposes, the author addresses his readers in three age groups twice in a row: little children, fathers, and young people. Group after group, he reassures them of his love and concern for them by reminding them repeatedly that they have been forgiven (2:12), that they have known God from the beginning (2:13, 14), and that they have conquered the evil one (2:13, 14). With these affective and affirming words, he intends to consolidate their relationship with him, boost their confidence in doctrinal knowledge and
spiritual strength, and encourage their acceptance of his exhortations and warnings.

Having set the emotional stage, the author begins to issue three specific advices.

1. **Do not love the world.** The first one is: “do not love the world or the things in the world” (2:15), because worldly things—such as fleshly desire, covetousness, and wealth—are all transitory and unreliable. These things divert our loyalty from God and take away our love from one another. They have no enduring value for our life now and in the world to come. Therefore, love God and obey God’s commandments, he writes, because only those who do the will of God can live forever.

2. **Resist antichrists.** The second advice is to resist the so-called “antichrists” who lie about Jesus (2:18). With this second advice the author unleashes his worries and warnings in some detail (2:18-27). Many antichrists
have showed up to teach erroneous ideas about Jesus Christ, he points out. These liars only prove that the last hour of history has arrived, however, because many early Christians believed that an “enemy of God” (2 Thessalonians 2:3-12) and many false messiahs (Mark 13:5-6, 21-22) will appear to disturb the world and mislead believers before the end of time. They also believed that these adversaries of God are outsiders. The fact that these antichrists are former colleagues who “went out” from the Johannine community (2:19) makes them fit that profile remarkably. Their departure from the Johannine community thus exposes their true identity as impious outsiders. Why does the author call them “antichrists”? Because they deny Jesus’ personal identity as the Christ (2:22) and the Son of God (2:23). Whatever their reasons or arguments might be, their denial of Jesus disavows the core belief of the Christian church, expressed in Peter’s confession to Jesus in Caesarea Philippi: “You are the Mes-
siah ("Christ" in Greek), the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). If Jesus is not the Christ or the Son of God, Paul’s gospel of Jesus Christ upon whom our salvation depends will be nothing but a big lie or fantasy (Romans 3:23-26). Of course, it would also turn the main message of the Fourth Gospel upside down: “But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). In denying Jesus, the author further argues, these antichrists also deny God, because Jesus as the Son was sent by the Father to reveal God’s love to the world. Thus, he who denies the Son denies the Father (John 17:3). Obviously and sadly, it seems that the antichrists have successfully led astray some members of the community. In order to bolster his readers’ confidence and understanding of their original belief and help them resist the malicious influence of those false teachers, the author reminds them
that they have already been anointed by God and have knowledge of God (1 John 2:20). They belong to God and are able to tell truth from lies. What they need to do is simply to allow what they “have heard from the beginning” (2:24) and the “anointing” of the Holy Spirit they have received abide in them. In other words, they need only to hold fast to the traditional teaching of the church that has been tested in time and listen to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in new situations. Tradition and the Spirit are God’s gifts to help the church discern truth from lies.

3. Do not sin. The third advice is to do what is right as children of God (3:7). Why is righteous behavior important? One good reason is that we will soon face the final judgment, the author argues. The crisis of antichrists is an important sign for the end time. It signals that the Parousia of the Lord—the second coming of Christ—is imminent. At that time, all people will be judged by their behavior as well as
their faith. If we do not want to be put to shame before the Lord, we should do right and be pure (2:28; 3:3). But fear about the judgment is not the only reason for doing what is right. More importantly, we should do good because we are children of God. As God’s children, we are expected to be righteous as God is (3:7). The author goes so far as to claim that, since we are born of God, we “cannot” sin (3:9). The author uses this claim as a hyperbole to emphasize how God is incompatible with, and intolerant of, sin. As God’s children, if and when we share God’s righteous nature to the fullest extent, we should develop a spiritual character so incompatible and irreconcilable with sin that we simply “cannot” sin. Indeed, those who sin prove themselves to be the children of the devil, who has been sinning from the beginning of the world (3:8). Here, the author calls his readers the children of God and pitches them against the children of the devil, because he wants them to live a righteous
life. This advice is particularly urgent, because the final day of reckoning is coming soon.

Following the author’s arguments concerning his purposes, reasons, and advices, it is worth noting that he looks at his community’s crises from an apocalyptic perspective, believing that they are living in a time when God will soon intervene to change the course of the world. He holds a dualistic view of the world in which spiritual forces are fiercely at war with each other: God vs. evil, light vs. darkness, righteousness vs. sin, divine will vs. worldly desire, truth vs. lies, Christian leaders vs. anti-christ-liars/false prophets, children of God vs. children of the devil, love vs. hatred, and so on. There is no gray area of compromises between the two spheres, forces, and options. Readers can only choose to be associated with one set over against the other and cannot stay neutral in position or take an abstention in making decisions. Rhetorically, the author often makes his
arguments and conclusions in an antithetical fashion (“If it is... If it is not...”; “If you do... If you don’t...”; e.g., 1:6-7; 8-10; 2:4-5, 10-11), by comparison and contrast, to persuade and compel his readers to make a choice between the two opposite sets of belief, value, behavior, and consequence. His exhortations and warnings are frequent, direct, passionate and urgent, partly because of the gravity of the crises that has devastated the faith and life of his community and partly because of his sense of timing in the larger scheme of God’s plan for the world. There is no doubt that, like many early Christians, he believes that the “last hour” before the end of time has now come and the Parousia of Christ is happening soon. So, his readers need to make right decisions regarding their understanding of Jesus and their way of life. The final judgment is looming near.

An apocalyptic worldview is a prevailing belief and fundamental assumption among biblical authors, as
evidently seen in the OT prophets’ hope for the “Day of the Lord,” Jesus’ proclamation of the “kingdom of God,” Paul’s expectation for the Parousia, the Petrine epistles’ comment on “the last day,” and the Johannine belief in the second “coming of Jesus Christ.” It is part and parcel of the Christian conviction of God’s presence and work in the world, in time and in eternity. It has motivated God’s people to find purpose, comforted them when suffering, and reformed their life to bear witness to God’s love and justice. In modern times, however, many people are skeptical about the apocalyptic worldview underlying biblical narratives. Among them some, such as Rudolf Bultmann, have tried to “demythologize” this worldview so that important messages and religious experiences embedded in the Bible may be extracted and translated into existentialist language to help modern readers understand and make informed decisions for their life here and now. Others simply
dismiss the apocalyptic worldview as a primitive mode of thinking and thus miss out on its life-saving messages and life-changing insights. Regardless of one’s opinion on the apocalyptic worldview, the author’s serious concern for the sound doctrine and right practice of God’s children cannot be ignored. To all readers in the past and now, the author’s frank questions remain challenging to us: If God is light and there is no darkness in him at all, can there be no difference in lifestyle between the children of God and the children of the devil? If God is just and his Son Jesus Christ died to forgive our sins, should there be no accountability for our behavior either now or in the world to come? If God is love and commands his children to love one another, is it right to walk away from our siblings and split the church?

**Message Two: Love One Another**

The author notes in 2:19 that the “antichrists” have caused not only a
furious debate but also a distressing schism in the Johannine community. The broken fellowship becomes a major pastoral crisis so grave and urgent that he devotes the second half of his writing to drive home an important commandment that his readers have frequently heard from the beginning: “love one another” (3:11). He issues two admonitions and advises them how to practice love in their community.

1. Be not like Cain. “We must not be like Cain”—the author begins his first admonition with the well-known story of the first fratricide in the Bible (3:12). Cain resented his brother Abel because God accepted Abel’s offering and he ruthlessly murdered him out of jealousy and rage. The author explains that the tragic outcome proves that Cain was from the evil one and his deeds were evil. Indeed, Christians can expect the world to hate them (3:13), because Jesus has forewarned that the world hates him first and will hate his followers who do not belong to the world
(John 15:18-19). But hatred from brothers and sisters is most hurtful and outrageous. Citing Cain, the author wants to warn his readers that those who hate their brothers or sisters are no less than “murderers” and will “have no eternal life” (3:15). Family feud is particularly despicable for believers, he continues to argue, who have experienced God’s love through Jesus Christ, who laid down his life for them, and should know very well that they ought to give up their lives for one another (3:16). With reference to Cain’s murder of Abel and Christ’s sacrificial death as contrasting examples, the author goes on to urge his readers to love their brothers and sisters “not in word or speech, but in truth and action” (3:18). Only good deeds of genuine love straight from the heart will be pleasing to God and will guarantee that their prayers be answered (3:22). There is one more good reason for acting in love to one another. Since it is God’s commandment, by obeying it, the au-
Author maintains, we will be able to “abide in God,” that is, to enjoy an intimate relationship with God (3:24), as Jesus has promised to his disciples: “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (John 15:10).

2. Do not believe every spirit. The second admonition has to do with false spirits: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world” (4:1). As in his earlier warning against the “antichrists” (2:18-27), the author is concerned about the false prophets who are leading people astray from the truth of Jesus Christ. It seems that these false prophets are persuasive to some because they claim to have the power of spirits, probably manifested in ecstatic speeches or miracles of some sort. So, the author considers it imperative to instruct his readers on how to test and discern the spirits, saying: “Every spirit
that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God” (4:2-3). This specific test uses two criteria for discerning the nature of a spirit: whether it confesses Jesus and what it confess Jesus to be. The first criterion is probably based on what Jesus has predicted about the Spirit of truth in his farewell discourse:

When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. (John 15:26)

He [the Spirit of truth] will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:14-15)

Since the Spirit of truth comes from God at Jesus’ request to testify and glorify him, it obviously cannot deny or contradict Jesus nor will it. So, this is a
good and reasonable criterion. The second criterion is most certainly based on the firm conviction that Jesus Christ is indeed God incarnate, which is a basic tenet of faith in the Johannine community attested in the logos hymn of the Fourth Gospel: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

To encourage his readers to stand firm on the belief in Jesus as the incarnate God against the docetic type of teaching from the false prophets, then, the author reminds them that they are from God but those false prophets are from the world. He also tells them that they have conquered the false prophets because the Spirit of God in them is greater than the one in the world (4:4-5). In other words, belonging with God they are already on God’s side and will have God’s wisdom from the Spirit to see through and resist any false teaching. Hence, he urges them to listen
to him, the keeper of the good old tradition of Jesus Christ, and accept the testimony from the Spirit of truth.

After teaching on testing the spirits, the author returns to the commandment of love and delivers a riveting treatise on “God is love” (4:7-21), whose profound concepts and sublime style are on a par with Paul’s poetic “love chapter” (1 Corinthians 13:1-13) and Jesus’ emotional speech on “abide in me” (John 15:1-17). The treatise on “God is love” begins with this powerful statement: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:7-8). This opening statement issues a direct appeal to the readers (let us love one another) and provides them with a theological reason (because love is from God). Then, in a chiastic form, the author contrasts two kinds of people (those who know God vs. those who do not) according to their responses to the
appeal (those who love vs. those who do not), to emphasize the inner-connection between knowing God and loving people. His logic is simple and clear: we should love one another, because we know God is love.

What kind of love is it, then, when we say God is love? The author answers: “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him” (4:9). This definition of God’s love is a paraphrase of the well-known verse in the Fourth Gospel: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). Based on this definition, the author develops three related points of argument. First, judging by the fact that God sent his only Son to be our atoning sacrifice while we were unworthy sinners, God must love us very much indeed (4:10). This love extraordinaire is the main reason and best model of our love for
one another. Second, because God loves us so much, we owe it to him to love one another (4:11). Once we experience God’s generous love, we are inspired and expected to emulate it as a fair and reasonable response of gratitude. If not, we are simply too selfish and ungrateful. Third, when we try to love one another, God’s love will be perfected in us and as a result people will be able to see the invisible God because of our acts of love for one another (4:12). In short, God’s love is a gift of life that invites us to respond in kind to one another and enable others to see God in us.

The author reasserts that he knows what God’s love is like, because he has the Spirit of God in him, has faithfully testified to the savior of the world, and has confessed Jesus as the Son of God (4:13-16). He then makes another important statement: “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (4:16b). Because God is love, those who act in love toward others will enjoy an intimate and
constant relationship with God. Communion with God is a spiritual blessing now, but there is also a benefit in the future. Those who love will be confident before God on the day of judgment because they have obeyed God’s commandment and “there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (4:17-18). Finally, the author reiterates two reasons why we should keep the love commandment. We love one another because God first loved us (4:19), and our love for one another is the first proof of our love for the invisible God (4:20).

This short treatise on God’s love provides insightful and moving arguments on the rationale, standard, and consequences of brotherly love in a faith community, valuable for all times and worthy of further reflection. They are particularly instructive to the church distressed and divided. As a matter of fact, many leaders of the church today are losing patience with each other and threatening to sever fellowship ties with
one another over never-ceasing controversies on doctrinal issues, theological positions, scriptural interpretations, liturgical practices, mission priorities, and budgetary allocations. How can the divinely inspired love for one another regain its role as the most abiding principle of our life together? How can our deeds of love for one another bear the best witness to God’s love in us? The author’s exhortation on brotherly love remains crucially important to the existence and the development of the church today.

Summary (1 John 5:1-12)

Having delivered the treatise on God’s love, the author recapitulates his major themes under two headings: believers of Jesus (5:1-5) and the Son of God (5:6-12). Those who believe in Jesus as the Christ are born of God, and true believers will love one another because that is God’s commandment, and they will conquer the world by their faith in Jesus as the Son of God. Again,
who is the Son of God? Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the author insists, and this fact is testified by the Spirit, the water, and the blood, which may refer to Jesus’ birth, baptism, and crucifixion proving his humanity. Jesus Christ as the Son is also testified by God in the hearts of true believers and by the eternal life which believers have received in his name.

**Epilogue (1 John 5:13-21)**

Using a concluding statement similar to that in John 20:31, the author expresses his final wish that his readers, having believed in the name of the Son of God, may know for sure that they have eternal life. Then he gives two final exhortations. The first is on how to pray (5:14-17). We can be bold in prayer, he insists, knowing that God will answer it when we ask according to his will. We should also intercede for others, knowing that their sins, if not “mortal,” will be forgiven. Some people might find it bothersome, however,
when the author makes an exception: “There is sin that is mortal; I do not say that you should pray about that” (5:16de). But why not?

This puzzling exception calls our attention to the irrevocable consequences of the “mortal sin,” one that defies the Holy Spirit’s testimony and denies Jesus as the Christ. This mortal sin has gone over the cliff, so to speak, so there is no point in praying about it. This advice shows that the author takes seriously Jesus’ warning to the scribes who accused Jesus of associating himself with Beelzebub: “whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin” (Mark 3:29). He also follows Jesus’ example at the night of his arrest who prays on behalf of his disciples but “not on behalf of the world” (John 17:9). The advice not to pray for the mortal sin may, therefore, serve as a wakeup call for many Christians today who have become
oblivious to the power of sin and its dire consequences.

The second exhortation is to trust the Lord because of what we know. In three statements introduced by “we know...” the author reassures his readers of God’s grace. (1) They are born of God, so “the one who was born of God” (i.e., Jesus Christ the Son of God) will protect them from the evil one. (2) They are blessed as God’s children, even as the whole world lies under the domination of the evil one. (3) The Son of God has given them true understanding that they may abide in Jesus Christ the true God and eternal life. Therefore, we should keep ourselves from idols, that is, anyone or anything that would usurp the place of God in our life.

First John is short, but its importance cannot be underestimated. It tries to deal with two challenging crises shattering the Johannine community: antichrists and schism. The false prophets are undermining community members’
faith in Jesus Christ and the split is threatening their fellowship with each other. While its polemic and *parenesis* intensely focus on the two theological and communal problems, the scope of its discussion is wide and deep. It covers several major themes in the Christian tradition from the beginning, including righteousness and sin, obedience and love, understanding and fellowship, God, the Son, the Spirit, the last hour, the Parousia, and the final judgment, and presents an amazingly coherent view that integrates all these themes.

This book also showcases a brilliant church leader teaching and ministering to a broken community. He has to honor the tradition and test the spirits in order to explain the truth of faith with persuasion. He has to chastise false prophets and encourage his readers to love one another so that their community can be protected and maintained. He rightly emphasizes that to know God is to love God, and to love God is to love one’s
brothers and sisters. The harsh language against opponents may sound unkind to modern ears, but it indicates his deep concern for the truth of Jesus Christ and the eternal life of his readers. The repeated appeals to love may sound sentimental at times, but they reveal his passionate love for the readers and their community. Read in its social-historical settings, 1 John shows that both right doctrine and right relationship are important for the integrity of the church. Above all, it teaches an enduring truth: God is love and God’s love bids us to love one another so that we may all abide in God.

Second John

Second John is a typical letter with a conventional tripartite structure: salutation, body of the letter, and final greetings. It is addressed to a church nicknamed “the elect lady and her children” (v. 1). The “elect lady” is a metaphor for the chosen people of God who are cherished as the “bride” (Song of
Songs 4:8-12; 5:1; Isaiah 62:5) and “wife” (Isaiah 54:6; Hosea 2:19-20) of God. Jesus’ followers and the church have also been compared to the “bride” of the groom that is Jesus (John 3:29; Ephesians 5:21-33; Revelation 19:7; 21:9). Her “children” reflects a vision of the church as a family in which God is the Father and all members are brothers and sisters. The author calls himself “the elder,” signaling his respectable position of seniority and authority in the Johannine community. As in 1 John, he is concerned about the “deceivers” who “do not confess Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” and are therefore justifiably called “antichrists” (v. 7). His main purpose is explicitly stated: “Be on your guard” against those deceivers (v. 8), which in reality means not to receive them into your house (v. 10).

How does the author persuade his readers to accept his viewpoints with this brief letter (13 verses)? First to be noted is the affectionate language he uses to show his loving care for the
readers and to strengthen their rapport with him: “whom I love” (v. 1), “I was overjoyed” (v. 4), “dear lady” (v. 5), and “I hope to come to you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete” (v. 12). Second, he highlights his two major themes (truth and love) with tireless repetition. In the salutation, for instance, he uses the word “truth” four times in three verses. He tells the church how he loves it “in the truth”; others who “know the truth” also love it; and they do so because of “the truth” that abides in them (vv. 1-2). In these cases, “the truth” (with an article) refers not to an abstract idea or teaching but to Jesus who says in the Fourth Gospel: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). So, the author is saying that his love for the readers is based on nothing but Jesus Christ who abides in them forever. Even though the fourth case (“in truth and love”) is an adverbial phrase that says God and Jesus Christ will “truly and lovingly” bless them with grace, mercy,
and peace (v. 3), the author uses “the truth” in reference to Jesus Christ again in v. 4 where he begins the body of the letter, saying that he is overjoyed to find some of them “walking in the truth.” It means to conduct their lives in a way pleasing and honoring Jesus Christ (v. 4). Then, he reminds the readers of an important commandment of Jesus that has been passed down from the beginning of their community: love one another (John 15:12; 1 John 3:11), and urges them to obey this commandment of love if they truly love Jesus Christ (John 14:15). Third, the author uses frank talk to expose the deceivers’ false teaching against the humanity of Christ (v. 7), to warn his readers not to lose “the reward” in the final judgment (v. 8), and to argue that denying Jesus Christ amounts to denying God the Father (v. 9). He also advises them to disassociate themselves from the false teachers. The instruction not to extend hospitality to them may sound off-putting, but in the author’s judgment, it
might be the safest way to fend off the evil intentions of the deceivers who are leading people astray from Jesus Christ and jeopardizing their eternal life.

Written to the same Johannine community of 1 John, which is trapped in the same crisis, 2 John reads like a compendium version of 1 John with exactly the same messages on the truth of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the commandment to love one another.

**Third John**

Third John is another letter probably written by the same elder who wrote 2 John. Different from 2 John, however, it is a personal letter addressed to Gaius (v. 1), a leader of a church related to the Johannine community. Gaius is a close friend (“beloved,” vv. 2, 5, 11) and may have been converted or taught by the author, who refers to him as one of “his children” walking in the truth (v. 4). The author commends Gaius for the hospitality he extends to the visiting Christians passing through his city even
though they are strangers to him (v. 5). He calls Gaius’ hospitality a “walk in the truth” (v. 4) and a deed of “love” (v. 6), which testifies to his “faithfulness to the truth,” meaning a visible testimony to Jesus Christ who is the truth or else a praiseworthy life according to right teaching. Evidently, hospitality to strangers is considered not simply an act of generosity to travelers in need but an act of faithfulness, love, and truth, as is the case in the story of Abraham receiving three strangers who turned out to be the angels of the Lord who came to predict the birth of his son Isaac (Genesis 18:1-10). In contrast, the author reprimands Diotrephes, another leader of the church, for refusing to acknowledge his authority because of pride (v. 9) and for refusing to welcome visiting Christians presumably associated with the author (v. 10). Worse yet, Diotrephes has spread malicious words to smear the author and expelled members of his church who extend welcome to the visiting Christians. It is
interesting to note that the author mentions that he has written something to the church, but Diotrephes does not acknowledge his authority (v. 9). The letter he has written earlier could be about anything else, but it is possible that it is 2 John. If so, it may explain why Diotrephes repudiates his (teaching) authority and why the author does not rehearse the christological debate but focuses on realigning personal relationships in the aftermath of the schism. It is noteworthy that, whatever the church leaders choose to do with regard to the debate and the schism, their actions reflect their theologies and become models of action for the community. Thus, the author concludes by urging Gaius not to imitate what is evil as Diotrephes is doing, but to imitate what is good that he has been doing, because whoever does good is from God (v. 11).

Besides the exhortation on hospitality, the author has two other specific purposes. First, he wants Gaius to sup-
port a group of missionaries who will soon travel through his city. We don’t know who they are, but they have embarked on an itinerant trip to preach the gospel accepting no help from non-believers (“Gentiles” in Greek) (v. 7). They do not want to burden anyone who is not Christian, perhaps because they want to make sure that all people may receive the gospel free of charge as Jesus instructed his disciples to do when he sent them out on a mission in Galilee (Matthew 10:8). It also seems that they try to follow the principle of complete trust while doing God’s work, which Jesus has announced when he sent out his disciples (Matthew 10:5-14) and Paul has practiced when he supported himself as a tent-maker (1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Corinthians 11:9). So, it is only right that we should support them “in the manner worthy of God” (v. 6), the author writes. Besides, by welcoming them we become “co-workers with the truth,” i.e., co-workers of Jesus Christ (v. 8). Second, the author men-
tions another person by the name of Demetrius, testifying favorably that he has the truth itself (v. 12). We do not know who Demetrius is. He could be one of the missionaries traveling to Gaius’ city or an envoy from the elder carrying this letter. It is clear, however, that the author is asking Gaius to receive him well. For these reasons, 3 John is also a letter of recommendation.

Third John does not discuss the problem of “antichrists” or “false prophets” as found in 1 John and 2 John, but it addresses practical issues on loving one another with which the author is also concerned in those two letters. It shows how hospitality was considered an important value and virtue in early Christianity. In those early times, traveling on the road or in the sea to far-away cities located in the vast territory of the Roman Empire was tiring, costly, and dangerous. Without a network of assistance and hospitality from relatives, friends or business associates along the way, the risks and stresses of
traveling were extremely prohibitive. Even with great faith and unyielding enthusiasm, missionaries traveling from cities to cities to preach the gospel (e.g., Paul, Barnabas) and envoys of the church dispatched to encourage or assist other churches (e.g., Timothy, Titus) could not have gone very far without aid. So, the hospitality of local churches that provided warm welcome, physical accommodation, and financial support was not simply a matter of convenience but an absolute necessity for the success of their journeys and missions. It is not an overstatement, therefore, to say that hospitality made it possible for the gospel to be spread in the Roman Empire and the relationship among local churches to be strengthened. It is a value and virtue that should be recovered and practiced again in the life of the church today.

Dealing with the challenge of personal conflict, 3 John also reminds us how easy and how sad it is for us to allow personal pride and power strug-
gles to break our fellowship in the Lord and take away our love for one another. It is imperative to follow the author’s final exhortation: “Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God” (v. 11).

For Further Reading


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