

# **The Message of the Beloved Disciple**

Studies in the Johannine Letters

by

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## Preface

Since Irenaeus in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, it has been assumed that the Beloved Disciple is the Apostle John. While an explanation of this tradition is not within the scope of this study (see the introductions to the New Testament), it is an assumption with which I concur. More important for our purposes here, however, is the fact that the four documents which are associated with the name John and hence called the Johannine Literature are patently pastoral in character. John wrote to a Christian community, and if one is to also accept the tradition of Irenaeus, it was the Christian community at Ephesus.<sup>1</sup>

The Johannine community was threatened with a corruption of the true teaching about Jesus of Nazareth. It had suffered a rupture, and it was beset with opposing voices. Into this maelstrom of theological conflict, the Beloved Disciple wrote his gospel and letters. Needless to say, they are highly pastoral as well as theological. This conclusion, of course, is more apparent in the letters, due to their obvious intent. However, it is no less true of the Fourth Gospel. It is the pastoral objective of John's letters that we seek to explore in the following little commentaries.

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<sup>1</sup> *Against Heresies*, II.xxii.5; III. iii. 4.

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## Introduction

Together with the Fourth Gospel, the Johannine Letters form a distinct group in the New Testament. The theology, vocabulary and style are strikingly similar. While the letters are formally anonymous, the second and third have the title “the elder” (*presbyteros*) as the signature (2 Jn. 1; 3 Jn. 1). It is generally agreed that the letters originate from the same source, though this is sometimes debated.<sup>2</sup> Depending upon how one interprets the first person plural pronouns in 1 John 1:1-4, the author could be either an eyewitness to the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth (in which case the pronoun “we” would refer to himself and his fellow disciples), or he could be one who speaks from within the received testimony of the whole church (in which case the pronoun “we” would refer to the apostolic community, many of whom knew Jesus personally). The tradition of the early fathers clearly points to John the Apostle as the author of 1 John, and it is from this tradition that we derive the titles for all the letters, 1 John, 2 John and 3 John. Though scholarly questions of composition are ongoing, here we shall assume that John is the author.

## Historical Context

Of more serious import for interpreting the letters is the question of historical context. Several things are clear about this context that can be derived from the letters themselves. The letters are clearly aimed at a heresy promoted by a group that was ostensibly once a part of the Christian community (1 Jn. 2:19, 26; 3:7; 4:4-5). Enough information is given to indicate that the essence of this heresy was a devaluation and a distortion of the apostolic teaching about Jesus of Nazareth. Members of the opposing party claimed to “know” Jesus (1 Jn. 2:4), and they insisted that they were “in the light” (1 Jn. 2:9). However, they denied that Jesus was the Messiah (1 Jn. 2:22), and they refused to accept the apostolic message that he appeared in the flesh (1 Jn. 4:2-3; 2 Jn. 7). Such a position was not only a blunt denial of apostolic teaching, but according to John, it was a blunt denial of God’s own testimony about Jesus (1 Jn. 5:10-11). As might be expected, such controversy fostered an attitude of hatred and created a schism (1 Jn. 2:19; 4:20).

The nature of this heresy bears important affinities with what we know of the Johannine Community’s struggles within itself as well as what we know of gnostic ideas in the second century AD. Both of these areas form important background

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<sup>2</sup> D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1970) 864-869; W. Kummel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975) 442-445, 449-451.

material for the study of the Johannine Letters.

## **The Johannine Community**

When speaking of the Johannine community, it is necessary to delve briefly into the structure of the church in the apostolic era. Different apostles became recognized leaders in particular areas. While a given city might have several house churches, each with its own leadership (cf. Ro. 16:5; 1 Co. 16:19; Col. 4:15), each house congregation seems to have looked beyond itself to a common apostolic leader. James, for instance, was the recognized leader in Jerusalem (Ac. 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Gal. 1:19; 2:9, 12). Paul was especially important for the congregations he established in Asia Minor, Macedonia and Achaia (1 Co. 4:14-17; 9:1-2; 1 Th. 1:6-7).<sup>3</sup> The dominant tradition of the church fathers associates the Apostle John with Ephesus in the later years of his life, and it is from here that tradition testifies to John's authorship of the Fourth Gospel, the Johannine Letters and the Apocalypse.<sup>4</sup>

If the Fourth Gospel and the letters 1, 2 and 3 John are to be grouped together as having a common source and addressed to a common community, then we may expect them to reflect the character of the communities to which they were addressed. Such an expectation is obvious in the letters, but it is quite possible in the Fourth Gospel as well. In fact, one may reasonably assume that if the four gospels were written to specific Christian communities, then the evangelists who wrote them chose stories about Jesus and teachings from Jesus that would relate to particular church situations. This may in part explain the difference in subject matter between the Fourth Gospel and the synoptics.

On the basis of these assumptions, scholars have attempted to reconstruct the progress of the Johannine community from its inception by examining the kinds of stories in the Fourth Gospel and the content of the Johannine letters.<sup>5</sup> To the perceptive reader, several groups of individuals are discernable in the Fourth Gospel.

## **Groups Who Did Not Believe in Jesus**

Groups who did not believe in Jesus fall under the categories of the world, the Jews and the disciples of John the Baptist.<sup>6</sup> The "world" is the most general category,

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<sup>3</sup> Scholarly explorations into the relationship of specific communities to apostolic leadership may be found in R. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (New York: Paulist, 1984) and R. Brown, *Antioch and Rome* (New York: Paulist, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> F. Filson, "John the Apostle," *IDB* (1962) II.954.

<sup>5</sup> Two such reconstructions may be seen in O. Cullmann, *The Johannine Circle*, trans. J. Bowden (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) and R. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979).

<sup>6</sup> The importance which John attaches to the categories of the world and the Jews in the Fourth Gospel can be seen by a simple usage comparison with the other gospels.

and while Christ's mission was to the world (Jn. 3:16-19); 6:51; 8:12; 9:5; 12:47), it is clear that the world at large rejected him (Jn. 1:10; 3:19; 7:7; 14:17; 15:18; 16:20). In the Johannine Letters, the world continues as the alien culture opposing Christianity (1 Jn. 3:1, 13; 5:19). The false teachers are themselves products of the world (1 Jn. 4:5)

In one sense "the Jews" may be subsumed under the world (Jn. 8:22-23), yet they form a special group addressed repeatedly in the Fourth Gospel. For the most part, a severely negative tone accompanies their mention. Such references should not be taken as anti-semitism nor can they hardly refer to all Jews, since Jesus' own disciples, not to mention Jesus himself, also were Jews. The Jews in the Fourth Gospel refer especially to the Jewish leaders and the Jewish culture that rejected Jesus as the Messiah. The references to the Jews would have had special relevance in the history of the church during the mid-80s, when the synagogue authorities introduced the specially designed *birkat ha-minim* (curse on the deviators) into their liturgies in order to identify and expel those who confessed Jesus as the Messiah.

The sectarian "disciples of the Baptist" were those who thought John the Baptist himself was God's promised one. Traces of them are to be found in the New Testament (Ac. 18:24-25; 19:1-4) and later writings that indicate they survived well into the Christian era and eventually became opponents of Christianity.<sup>7</sup> The opening chapter in the Fourth Gospel may well be an apologetic toward the sectarian Baptist group.

### Groups Who Claimed to Believe in Jesus

Groups who claimed to believe in Jesus include those who claimed faith but refused to publicly admit their faith, those whose faith rested primarily in miraculous signs, and those whose faith was clearly in the apostolic tradition.

The first group, those who claimed to believe in Jesus but refused to confess their faith out of fear of being expelled from the synagogues, is mentioned in Jn. 12:42-43. John judges them to be more concerned about human opinion than God's opinion. The story of the blind man who publicly confessed his faith and was

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	<i>kosmos</i> (world)	<i>Ioudaios</i> (Jew)
Matthew	9 times	5 times
Mark	3 times	7 times
Luke	3 times	5 times
John	79 times	71 times

The category of the Baptist and his sectarian disciples is less apparent than the categories of the world and the Jews, but there is sufficient evidence to warrant seeing such a category, cf. R. Brown, *The Gospel According to John [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) I:LXVII-LXX.

<sup>7</sup> A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds., "Recognitions of Clement," *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), VIII:91-93 (I.54 and I.60).

expelled may be an apologetic toward such a group of timid and private believers (Jn. 9:22, 30-38). To such a group, if it lasted into the apostolic era, the *birkat ha-minim* of the Jewish synagogues would have been a watershed.

Jesus distrusted the second group, those whose faith rested primarily on miraculous signs (Jn. 2:19-25; 11:45-46). They were willing to eat miraculous bread and fish, but they were not willing to accept Jesus' exclusive claims (6:41-42, 60-66). While in one sense Jesus' miracles were signs of his messiahship, Jesus took a dim view of using miracles in and of themselves to prove his authenticity (7:3-6). True faith rested in believing Jesus' exclusive claims, not merely admitting to his works of power (20:24-31). Even those who were said to "believe" (8:31) are later shown to have inadequate faith if they rejected Jesus' claims (8:33-59).

The third group, those whose faith fit the apostolic pattern, was the one whose faith in Jesus included his exclusive claims (Jn. 6:67-69; 16:29-31; 17:6-10, 20; 20:31).

## Incipient Gnosticism

In addition to the struggles of the Johannine Community with its various levels of faith and unbelief, an important stream of thinking to consider is gnosticism (a term derived from the Greek word *gnosis* = "knowledge"). Scholars long have noticed striking parallels between the Asian heresy of 1 and 2 John and what is known of gnostic thought. A fully developed gnosticism did not appear until the second century, but very probably an incipient gnosticism emerged toward the close of the first century.<sup>8</sup>

Gnostic thought was characterized by a radical dualism, that is, the idea that the created world and all matter was evil, totally separate from and in opposition to the good world of spirit. Humans who possessed a divine spark were kept imprisoned within their material existence and were barred from ascending to the spirit world after death. Salvation was brought by a divine redeemer from the spirit world who descended in a disguise and enlightened the ones who had the divine spark, revealing to them that they had an imprisoned *pneuma* (spirit). Through such knowledge, humans who died could escape from the material world and ascend to the spirit world. Such a concept, if embraced by a Christian, would drastically alter his/her conception of Jesus Christ, for it would forbid any real incarnation. Even if the divine redeemer was believed to have been Jesus, he could not have "become flesh" since matter was inherently evil.

Among gnostics who claimed an identity with Christianity, there were two

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<sup>8</sup> J. Drane, "Gnosticism," *NBD*, 2nd. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1982) 424-426.

answers to the problem posed by the apostolic view of the incarnation. One, Docetism (from the Greek word *dokeo* = “to seem”), was that Christ only seemed to be a real human. He appeared to have a real human body, but in reality he did not. This was his “disguise.”<sup>9</sup> Some apocryphal literature asserted that Christ felt no pain on the cross, that the divine Christ was not even in the body of Jesus when he was crucified, and that sometimes when one touched Jesus it was though he did not have a material existence at all.<sup>10</sup> The other answer, Cerinthianism (from Cerinthus, a contemporary of John at Ephesus), was that Jesus Christ was two separate beings. Cerinthus claimed that the man Jesus was born of Joseph and Mary. The divine Christhood only came upon him at his baptism and departed before the crucifixion.<sup>11</sup> A famous anecdote told by Polycarp (70-155 A.D.) and recorded by both Irenaeus (2<sup>nd</sup> century) and Eusebius (4<sup>th</sup> century) describes the Apostle John going into a bathhouse in Ephesus. When he discovered that Cerinthus was there also, he fled, exclaiming, “Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of truth is within.”<sup>12</sup>

## Chronology and Dating

The chronology and dating of the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Letters is debated. Most scholars favor the chronology that the gospel preceded the letters inasmuch as 1 Jn. 5:8 seems to presuppose Jn. 19:34 and 2 Jn. 7 seems to presuppose 1 Jn. 2:18, 4:3. On the basis of 3 Jn 9, it would seem that 3 John was written after 2 John.<sup>13</sup> If this is so, then the canonical order is also the chronological order. Precise dating of the letters is also debatable, but if the gospel was written in about AD 90 (a date with which most scholars concur), then the letters were written sometime afterward, probably within the decade.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> W. Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 5-7.

<sup>10</sup> A. Hunter, *Introducing the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) 179.

<sup>11</sup> Barclay, *John and Jude*, 7-9.

<sup>12</sup> E. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 439-440.

<sup>13</sup> R. Fuller, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (London: Duckworth, 1971) 179.

<sup>14</sup> Kummel, 451-452.

# 1 John

## 1:1-4 The Prologue

The prologue to 1 John bears obvious and striking similarities with the prologue to the Fourth Gospel. The following major themes are present in both: Jesus Christ as the Logos, his preexistence, his manifestation in visible and tangible form, his identification as the Light and the Life, the struggle against the opposing forces of darkness who represent an alien world in opposition to Christ, the special role of witnesses, and the relationship between the Divine Son and God the Father, the Son being with the Father prior to his earthly appearance.<sup>15</sup> These same themes, which figure so prominently in the prologue, are repeated throughout the first letter.<sup>16</sup>

When John penned the prologue to the first letter, he had more in view than merely an abstraction of theology. While highly theological in content, the prologue begins laying important groundwork for a refutation of the Asian heresy. The

<sup>15</sup> The Greek vocabulary in both prologues contain the following parallel expressions:

<u>FOURTH GOSPEL</u>		<u>1 JOHN</u>	
<i>en arche</i> (1:1)	“in the beginning”	<i>ap' arche</i> (1:1)	“from the beginning”
<i>ho logos</i> (1:1)	“the Word”	<i>logou tes zoes</i> (1:1)	“Word of life”
<i>pros ton theon</i> (1:1-2)	“in company with God”	<i>pros ton patera</i> (1:2)	“in company with the Father”
<i>zoe</i> (1:4)	“life”	<i>logou tes zoes</i> (1:1)	“Word of Life”
<i>to phos</i> (1:4)	“the Light”	<i>ho theos phos</i> (1:5)	“God is Light”
<i>skotia</i> (1:5)	“darkness”	<i>te skotia</i> (1:5)	“the darkness”
<i>oudeis heoraken</i> (1:18)	“no one has seen”	<i>heorakamen</i> (1:1-3)	“we have seen”
<i>etheasametha</i> (1:14)	“we beheld”	<i>ho etheasametha</i> (1:1)	“the one we beheld”
<i>monogenous para patros</i> (1:14)	“uniquely be gotten from the Father”	<i>patros/tou huiou autou</i> (1:2-3)	“Father/his Son”
<i>monogenes theos [huios]</i> (1:18)	“God the uniquely be-gotten [Son]”		
<i>hina martyresei</i> (1:7-9)	“in order that he should witness”	<i>martyroumen</i> (1:2)	“we are witnessing”
<i>he zoe ephanerothe</i> (1:2)	“the life was manifested”	<i>ho logos sarx egeneto</i> (1:14)	“the Word became flesh”

<sup>16</sup> Pre-existence from the beginning (2:13-14); the Word (2:14); the Life (2:25; 3:14-15; 5:11-13, 20); the Light vs. the darkness (1:6-7; 2:8-11); Christ as manifestation (3:5; 4:2-3, 9; 5:20); the witnesses (4:14; 5:6, 8-11); the relationship of the Father and the Son (2:22-24; 4:15; 5:1, 5, 9-11, 20).

opposition party made claims of “knowing” Jesus and of being “in the light.” However, in denying the messiahship and divine Sonship of Jesus, they betrayed that they did not truly know him. Furthermore, their denial of apostolic tradition threw into question that they knew God at all, for true knowledge of God depended upon his manifestation in Jesus the divine Son. The apostolic proclamation was that the Word of Life, which was with the Father from the beginning, was manifested, seen, observed and touched. True fellowship with God and other believers was grounded upon such a confession of faith.

### **1:5--2:2 Walking in the Light**

A marked ethical demand issues from having true fellowship with the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. The heretics apparently claimed to have passed beyond good and evil, and their claims are mirrored in three succinct statements, each repeated and addressed by the author:

*If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in darkness.... (1:6)*

*If we claim to be without sin.... (1:8)*

*If we claim we have not sinned.... (1:10)*

It is probable that the three preceding claims were maxims of the heretics. In addressing these maxims, John appeals to the nature of God as light, especially as it is expressed in the person of the Lord Jesus in the Fourth Gospel (1:4-5, 9; 9:4-5, 39-41; 12:35-36, 44-46). Since God is Light, a true knowledge of God requires an ethical rejection of darkness. Here, light and darkness become metaphors for right and wrong conduct.

### **The Claim of Fellowship**

The claim of fellowship with God is more than a verbal assertion or even the affirmation of orthodox doctrine. It also involves Christian conduct (cf. Jn. 3:20-21). The true Christian will live in transparent honesty, allowing the ethical light of God to examine and search his life (cf. Ps. 51:6; 139:23-24). When he or she so lives, genuine fellowship with God and with other Christians is possible, for the ongoing cleansing effect of Christ’s atonement is constantly at work. Fellowship with God and fellowship with other Christians are relationships that stand on common ground. Neither exists independently of the other.

In these assertions John shows that the sectarianism and the lifestyle of the false teachers demonstrate that they do not have true fellowship with God (cf. 2:19). True fellowship with God demands the recognition and acceptance of all those who accept and follow the proclamation of the apostolic tradition. True fellowship with God equally demands a Christian lifestyle that turns away from evil and follows righteousness.

### **The Claim of Innate Perfection**

The claim of innate perfection is the denial that sin exists within one's nature. If the heretics made their claim on the basis of gnostic thought, they may have argued that since their real personal essence was the spark of the spirit (now enlightened by *gnosis*) rather than the physical body, they were beyond good and evil. Any evil that sprang from their physical bodies was not theirs at all, since the body was the dispensable prison of the spirit. Sin was a matter of the flesh and did not affect their true self, which was spiritual.

John bluntly labels such a claim to be a self-deception. The proper course of action for the Christian is not a claim of innate perfection, but rather, the humble confession of sinfulness directly to God. God is faithful to his covenant promises (cf. Je. 31:34). His forgiveness, which is offered on the grounds of Christ's atoning sacrifice, is offered in righteousness, not because he is indulgent and easy-going but because Christ bore the penalty for sin in behalf of men and women (cf. 2:2). God leaves room for failure among his people without condoning it. While there is no excuse for sin, there is certainly a solution for it, and this is the security of the believer.

### **The Claim of External Perfection**

Those who claim external perfection may admit that there is an internal disposition toward sinning while at the same time asserting that they have perfectly resisted this inward drive. Such a claim makes God out to be a liar, for the consistent witness of Scripture is that sin is universal (cf. 1 Kg. 8:46; Ps. 14:3; Ecc. 7:20; Is. 53:6; 64:6).

### **Christ, the Defense Against Sin**

John's purpose in pointing out that Christians have both an inward propensity toward sin as well as an outward exhibition of sinfulness was not intended to encourage sinning. John holds in balance the proper Christian perspective of sin, that is, "that you should not sin" and "if anyone does sin..." there is a solution. It is possible to be either too lenient or too severe. It is too lenient to say that since Christians sin under grace, sin is insignificant. Alternatively, it is too severe to say that since Christians are called upon to live apart from sin they should expect to live perfectly.

The defense against sin is neither in minimizing its evil nor ignoring its existence. Rather, it is in the recognition that sin already has been handled in a once-for-all historical event, the cross of Christ. Jesus Christ is the believer's Paraclete.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The Greek term *parakletos*, used only here and in the Fourth Gospel (14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7), refers to someone

Since his/her atonement was universal, it is certainly effective for those who believe.

## **2:3-11 Two Tests of Christian Faith**

John follows up his ethical discussion with two tests of Christian faith, the test of discipleship and the test of love.

### **The Test of Discipleship**

The false teachers claimed to know Christ. However, it is obvious that John held a distinction between an intellectual knowledge of Jesus and a disciple's knowledge of Jesus. To truly know Christ, at least in the Christian sense, was to be his disciple. Anyone who claimed to know Christ but did not follow him made a false claim. John was looking for a higher level of "knowing" than merely being acquainted with the stories about Jesus. He was looking for committed Christians who were willing to "walk as Jesus walked." A life of discipleship is a true test of Christian faith.

### **The Test of Love**

A further test of Christian faith is the test of love for other Christians. Jesus had left his disciples with a "new commandment" on the night of his betrayal (Jn. 13:34-35; 15:12, 17). It was "old" in that they had certainly heard it from the beginning of their Christian lives, yet it was "new" in that it always needed to be renewed in Christian lifestyle. The principle of love was true in Christ because of his atoning work, and it was true in the believers because they had allowed Christ to work in them by bringing them into a new age.<sup>18</sup>

Partisanship, hatred, jealousy and factionalism cannot exist if one walks in light. The sectarian spirit that one sees in some strands of Christendom betrays, at best, an inferior quality of Christianity. If anyone claims to walk "in the light," as apparently the heretics were claiming, then the proof of such a claim must issue in an acceptance and a support of all others who hold to the apostolic traditions. To be

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who is called to another's aid, a helper or an intercessor, cf. *BAG*, 618. It probably has a legal nuance here, suggesting that Christ is like a defense lawyer who defends the believer against any judgment for his/her sin because of the finished work of the atonement, I. Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 116. Paul and others use similar imagery (Ro. 8:26-27, 34; He. 7:25).

<sup>18</sup> The New Testament interpretation of the ages held the Christ event as the determining factor for the beginning of the new age. The Jews primarily saw the ages as two, "this age" and "that age" (the present age and the future age). However, for Christians the new age was inaugurated even before the old age had passed away. There was, in effect, an overlapping of "this age" and "that age." The old age would not end until Christ returned the second time; the new age already had begun in Christ's first advent, O. Cullman, *Christ and Time* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964) 81-93; G. Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952) 63-98. It is in this sense that John could say that "darkness is passing, and the true light is already shining" (2:8).

sure, John himself does not hesitate to call for a separation from those who deny apostolic tradition (2 Jn. 10-11). At the same time, those who deny apostolic tradition and who separate themselves from believers in the catholic (universal) church are self-condemned.

## **2:12-17 The Status of Believers and Their Relationship With the World**

### **The Threefold Address**

The lines in 2:12-14 are poetic in character, set off by a threefold address, which is repeated in succeeding lines.<sup>19</sup> The address to “children,” “fathers,” and “young men” is probably a metaphor referring to different levels of spiritual maturity rather than age.<sup>20</sup> By setting the statements side by side, one can see that John has taken the claims of the false teachers and adjusted them until they are in line with proper Christian theology.

#### **To the Children**

Against the claims of inward or outward perfection, the true Christian claim is in the certainty of forgiveness. Christians are not sinless persons--they are forgiven persons. It is in this forgiveness that they truly know God the Father.

#### **To the Fathers**

Against the claims of the false teachers who assert that they know God, John links the knowledge of Christ with the knowledge of the Father. When he says, “We have known him who is from the beginning,” he is speaking specifically of Christ, the incarnate Logos (1:1-4). It is in knowing Christ that one truly knows the Father. One cannot say that he/she knows God the Father while rejecting Christ.

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<sup>19</sup> The NIV has opted for a translation that renders the verb *grapho* the same each time in each of its six appearances, even though the first three are present tenses and the second three are aorists. This is due to an exegetical decision that the last three verbs (aorists) are epistolary, that is, they are written from the standpoint of the reader, Cf. W. Chamberlain, *An Exegetical Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1941) 78. If these verbs are to be translated as aorists, however, they may indicate that John had written an earlier epistle which is now lost to us, that 2 John was written before 1 John or that John was referring to the Fourth Gospel, cf. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982) 294-296.

<sup>20</sup> Other options are that the threefold address refers specifically to age, that the latter two categories refer to groups of church officials, or that each title refers to all believers inasmuch as all believers are children, fathers and youth in some sense of the word, cf. R. Brown, *Epistles*, 297-300.

## To the Young Men

Against the claims of the false teachers who assert that they are beyond good and evil, John asserts that there is an evil one to overcome, and young, strong Christians have overcome him. They are not beyond good and evil; rather, they avoid evil and worldly lifestyles, because they are overcomers in whom God's word lives.

## Believers Must Not Be Indifferent Toward the World

John already has made a strong distinction between light and darkness in ethical terms. Here, he enlarges on the category of ethical darkness, which he calls "the *kosmos*." The Greek term *kosmos* (= world) can have a wide range of meanings in the New Testament.<sup>21</sup> John refers to the alien system which is at enmity with God, the same system about which the false teachers are apparently unconcerned in their careless lifestyles. It is clear that for John true believers must be concerned about avoiding a love affair with such a system. It is worth noting that what John calls worldliness<sup>22</sup> has to do primarily with attitudes and human affections, not merely external behavioral taboos. To love the world is to heap upon oneself every temporal desire ("lust of the flesh"), to indulge in unrestrained materialism ("lust of the eyes") and to exult in the ownership of things and the station one achieves in life. In modern parlance, John gives a flat condemnation of the "movers and the shakers" as well as the obsession with the will to power.<sup>23</sup> Such a lifestyle should not characterize one who wishes to do God's will. If the false teachers so live, their own lifestyle betrays their true loyalties.

## 2:18-28 The Heretics Are Antichrists

Up to this point, John has addressed the false teachers indirectly by the literary devices "the one who says" and "if anyone claims." Now he launches a direct frontal

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<sup>21</sup> In different contexts, *kosmos* can mean the universe, the earth, the human race, the arena of earthly possessions, and the system which that Christ and/or that is at enmity with God, lost in sin, ruined and depraved, of. F. Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1965) 120. In Johannine literature, it usually means the latter.

<sup>22</sup> It is also worth pointing out that the word "worldliness," which in popular pietism often is defined in terms of certain taboos, does not even appear in the KJV.

<sup>23</sup> It is instructive to compare English translations at this point:

KJV - "the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.

Moffat - "the things our physical nature and eyes crave for, and the proud display of life"

NEB - "all that panders to the appetites, or entices the eyes, all the glamour of its life"

JB - "the sensual body, the lustful eye, pride in possessions"

Phillips - "men's primitive desires, their greedy ambitions and the glamour of all that they think splendid"

NAB - "carnal allurements, enticements for the eye, the life of empty show"

attack in which he unambiguously aims his comments at those who have separated from the Christian community.

### **Antichrist and the Last Hour**

The “last hour” or comparable expressions are not unfamiliar to the reader of both the Old and New Testaments. The phrase “last days,” used by the prophets of Israel, is a way of referring to the eschatological future, that is, the end of the ages when God will conclude the drama of history (cf. Is. 2:2; Mic. 4:1). For the New Testament apostles and prophets, the last days had arrived in the first advent of Christ, even though the old age had not as yet run its course (cf. Ac. 2:16-17). This is why John could say, “...the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining” (2:8). It seems apparent that the New Testament writers did not conceive of a two millennia church age intervening between the first and second advents of Christ. Paul certainly spoke as though he lived on the brink of the end (Ro. 13:11-12; Phil. 4:5), and so did others (1 Pe. 4:7; Ja. 5:8-9). One would pass beyond the bounds of the evidence to assert that the apostles predicted the second advent of Christ in their own lifetimes, but it can safely be said that they at least expected it as a possibility. Thus, when John says that it is the “last hour,” he affirms what all Christians since the apostles have affirmed--that the first advent of Christ has put us in some sense into the final segment of God’s redemptive history.

One of the common expectations of the last hour was the coming of antichrist. John alone uses this nomenclature, though parallel terms, such as, the “abomination of desolation” (Mk. 13:14), the “man of lawlessness” (2 Th. 2:3ff.) and “the beast” (Rev. 13:1ff.), probably have the same figure in view. Yet John emphatically stated that many antichrists already had arrived, early manifestations of the same blasphemous spirit that would ultimately come (cf. 2 Th. 2:7). When John says, “they went out from us,” the antecedent of “they” is the word “antichrists.”<sup>24</sup> In this way, John clearly indicated that he considered the false teachers to be of the spirit of antichrist, that is, the spirit of the last great deception. Their rejection of other Christians, particularly those of the apostolic tradition, made clear their true colors.

### **Knowing the Truth**

John’s emphasis in 2:20 is similar to Paul’s in Colossians where he argues that there is not some super-level of spirituality beyond Christ (2:3, 9-10). Similarly, in 2 Corinthians Paul argued against those who prided themselves on their Jewish ancestry and their ecstatic experiences (10:1; 11:5-6, 12-15, 18-21; 12:1, 11-12). In the same vein, John argues against those who advocate that Christ is not enough. He

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<sup>24</sup> The pronoun “they” in English translation is, of course, part of the verb in Greek.

makes it clear that the anointing is not for just a select few. The “you” of 2:20 is inclusive of all believers. There is no esoteric level of truth reserved for a special group, such as the gnostics would have it. Rather, all God’s people who know Christ know the truth. The one who is a liar is the one who rejects Christ, and specifically, the one who rejects his messiahship. To reject Jesus as the messiah is to reject both the Father and the Son. Denying that Jesus is the Son of God is the essence of the great eschatological deception to come (2 Th. 2:9-12). In the Fourth Gospel, the assertion is repeatedly given that a true knowledge of the Father is only possible through his Son (1:18; 8:19; 14:7). Thus, when John says that all believers know the truth, he means that all believers know the truth if and when they accept the apostolic tradition about the teachings and self-claims of Jesus.

### **Remaining Steadfast in the Apostolic Tradition**

Eternal life is grounded in faithfulness to the apostolic teaching. John sees a direct connection between what he calls “the anointing” and what he calls “the truth.” By “the truth” he surely means the truth about Jesus, the apostolic preaching of the gospel. However, “the anointing” is not so easy to define, for John seems to be using the expression as a metaphor, and there are two quite plausible interpretations. First, it may be noted that John seems to equate “the anointing” with the phrase “what you heard from the beginning” (2:24a, 27a). On this basis, it can be argued that “the anointing” is a metaphor for the gospel.<sup>25</sup> If one replaces the word “anointing” in 2:20, 27 with the word “gospel,” the meaning is quite comprehensible. On the other hand, the idea of anointing is commonly enough connected with the gift of the Spirit (Lk. 4:18; Ac 10:38; 2 Co. 1:21-22), and if this is John’s meaning, then he is affirming that all believers have received the gift of the Holy Spirit through their faith in Jesus Christ. Once more, if the word “anointing” is replaced with the phrase “gift of the Spirit” the phrases in 2:20, 27 make good sense. It may well be that the bond between believing the gospel and receiving the Spirit is so close that one ought not to attempt a separation. Paul, for instance, makes clear that one receives the gift of the Spirit when he/she believes the gospel (Gal. 3:2; Ep. 2:13). All things considered, most interpreters see the “anointing” as a metaphor for the gift of the Spirit.

If the anointing does refer to the gift of the Spirit, it cannot be separated from the content of “what was heard from the beginning” (2:24). The point John is making concerns apostolic tradition and the heretics’ departure from it. There is no need for other teachers to introduce a new message. The gospel itself, validated and confirmed by the Holy Spirit, is the true foundation for all faith as well as eternal life.

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<sup>25</sup> See discussion in Brown, *Epistles*, 346-347.

## 2:28--3:3 The Christian Hope

In contrast to the heretics who seemed content to do without Christ, John shows that the final Christian hope is wrapped up in Jesus, in his resurrection life and the expectation of his return. In speaking of being confident and unashamed at the coming of Christ, John introduces the ethical dimension of the *parousia*, that is, the fact that when Christ comes he will come to judge the world. This in turn reflects on Christ's righteousness, and if he is righteous, surely his people must also live righteously. A righteous lifestyle is the result of being "born again," "born again" being the metaphor for conversion found also in the Fourth Gospel (1:12-13, 3:3-8). In this letter, John provides certain tests which measure whether or not one has truly been "born again."<sup>26</sup>

The hope of believers will be realized because of God's lavish love, which has enabled them to be called his children. Though all believers are children of God, they live incognito in the world. Because the world did not recognize Jesus as God's one and only Son, they will not recognize believers as sons of God either (cf. Jn. 8:19, 55). Because they are his children, they can rest in the hope that when Christ returns they will share in his resurrection life. Such a hope impels the believer to live a pure life, even as Christ is pure.

## 3:4-10 Knowing Who the Children of God Are

Because of the theological parting of the ways between the Johannine community and the heretics who seceded, John enlarges on the fact that true children of God do not continue a life of sin.<sup>27</sup> Christ's coming into the world was to remove sin, not enable us to continue sinning with impunity. Those who advocate sinning with impunity betray their allegiance to the devil, who sinned from the beginning (cf. Jn. 8:44). The incarnation of the Son of God was precisely to destroy sin. It is to be noted that the Greek tense of the verbs used in 3:9 connote habitual sinning. One who is truly born of God cannot continue a lifestyle of sin. (They do not mean that it is impossible for a Christian to sin).<sup>28</sup>

The expression *sperma autou en auto menei* (= God's seed remains in him) is

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<sup>26</sup> One is born again if...

- ...he or she does what is right (2:29)
- ...he or she does not continue a life of sin (3:9; 5:18)
- ...he or she lives a life of love (4:7)
- ...he or she believes that Jesus is the messiah (5:1)
- ...he or she overcomes the world (5:4)

<sup>27</sup> This is the first of John's definitions of sin, that is, the "transgression of law" (3:4) and "wrongdoing" (5:17).

<sup>28</sup> See discussion, J. Stott, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 126.

ambiguous, both because it is not clear as to what the “seed” refers and because it is not clear as to who is the antecedent of the pronoun “him.” The following are all grammatically possible from the Greek:

- ♦ “God’s offspring (i.e., a believer who is the child of God) remains in God”
- ♦ “God’s offspring (i.e., Christ who is the Son of God) remains within the Christian”
- ♦ “God’s sperm (i.e., the gospel) remains in the Christian”
- ♦ “God’s sperm (i.e., the Holy Spirit) remains in the Christian”

If it is to be taken as sperm, which is the more common interpretation, then John is saying that the power or the germ of new life abides in believers, and presumably by sperm he means either the Word of God (cf. Ja. 1:18; 1 Pe. 1:23) or the gift of the Spirit. As such, the “seed” and the “anointing” would be different metaphors for the same thing. It is possible that John here creates a play upon a gnostic idea. Gnostics said that God sowed seeds into the world through which the world was being perfected, and particularly, they claimed that they themselves were the ones who had received those seeds as their human souls.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, John says that all believers have been given the “seed” of God, not just an elite group, and because they have this inner seed, they cannot continue a life of habitual sin.

One thing is clear: John’s purpose is to distinguish those who are God’s children from those who are not by their lifestyles of righteousness and love for the Christian community. In all, John has delivered three tests to determine who are truly the children of God in the world:

- 1) The test of the apostolic confession (i.e., Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who came in the flesh)
- 2) The test of ethics and a righteous lifestyle (i.e., a child of God must forsake sin and walk as Jesus walked)
- 3) The test of love for the Christian community (i.e., the child of God must love his Christian brothers).

### **3:11-18 Brotherly Love, the Mark of the Christian**

Drawing from his earlier statements about the believers’ fellowship and love for those within the Christian community (1:7; 2:5, 7, 9-11, 19; 3:10), John now chooses to elaborate upon this love. Again, he recalls the words of Jesus on the night of his betrayal, when he gave the “new commandment” (Jn. 13:34-35; 15:12, 17). The antithesis of brotherly love is exemplified in the fratricide committed by Cain,

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<sup>29</sup> Barclay, 78-79.

and drawing from the Fourth Gospel tradition, John labels Cain's act of murder as evidence that he belonged to Satan (cf. Jn. 7:19-20, 25; 8:37, 40, 42-44; 10:10). John obviously appeals to the higher definition of murder as expounded by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:21-22). It is only to be expected that if Cain hated Abel, the same antagonism would reoccur between the world and the community of faith, and here again, John draws directly from the farewell discourses of Jesus (Jn. 15:18-25; 16:1-4; 17:14). Just as hatred and murder immediately identify one with the Evil One, so brotherly love within the Christian community indicates that one has truly been born again. Love is the supreme manifestation of the new life, and anyone who does not demonstrate this love does not have new life.

John is not content merely to speak of love ambiguously. He defines it in terms of action, particularly the action of Christ in his sacrificial death as he himself explained it in the sermon on the Good Shepherd (Jn. 10:11, 15, 17-18). Within the Christian community, love is demonstrated in the sacrificial giving of material things to other Christians who are in need. John's remarks would have the immediate effect of pointing out that those who had divided the Johannine community thereby betrayed their own loyalty to the world (2:15-17, 19).

### **3:19-24 Assurance Before God**

Many Christians through the ages have struggled with misgivings about their spiritual status, especially when they confront others who pass judgment on them or who wish to dispute complicated theological issues. This was apparently the same for members of the Johannine community. A split in the Christian community had left each faction claiming they were in the right. In order to affirm to the believers that they could have assurance before God, John appeals to their Christian love. It is the demonstration of Christian love that is the acid test of being a true believer, and whenever an inner voice questions the reality of one's new life in Christ, the action of Christian love provides an objective answer in the affirmative. A further objective test of one's new life in Christ is in his/her obedience to Christ's commands, especially the obedience that confesses the truth about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This confession, of course, involves the various creedal-type statements found throughout the letter (2:22-23; 4:2-3; 5:1). In the final analysis, the essence of obedience to Christ's command can be summed up in two directions: it is to believe in Christ and to love the Christian brotherhood. It is the Holy Spirit himself who inspires such obedience (1 Co. 12:3b).

### **4:1-6 A Test Against Spiritual Subjectivism**

One might well assume that the final phrase in chapter 3 is intended to give a

subjective proof for a believer's genuineness. However, John intends a far more objective sort of proof. It is not unlikely that opponents of the Johannine community were themselves claiming the Spirit as a subjective support for their position, much like Paul envisioned someone who might deny Christ but claim that the Spirit prompted him to do so (1 Co. 12:3). Gnosticism itself was inundated with subjectivism, particularly the claim of subjective knowledge. For John, the genuineness of spiritual inspiration was not in a subjective feeling, a subjective experience or subjective knowledge. Rather, it was in the objective confession of Christian faith, which was in line with the apostolic tradition, and the objective demonstration of Christian love.

It is on this objective basis that John challenges the community to "test the spirits." The test of a prophet is not a subjective feeling; it is the objective content of what the prophet says. If he makes the Christian confession, which is in line with apostolic tradition, then he can be received. If he does not, he is to be rejected as part of the great eschatological lie, the spirit of antichrist. Essential to that confession of faith is the apostolic testimony that Jesus Christ came in the flesh. The importance of such a confession is obvious in the context of a gnostic heresy.

A corollary of John's advice is that even the humblest Christian has the right of private judgment concerning so-called spiritual utterances (cf. 1 Co. 14:29; 1 Th. 5:20-21). This is not an excuse to dismiss such things altogether, but it does mean that Christians should not be gullible.

Because the Johannine community had remained faithful to the apostolic tradition, it had "overcome" the false teachers. The Holy Spirit of truth within them was greater than the spirit of error in their opponents. The heretics belonged to the world with its materialistic, immoral and philosophical viewpoint. Those who were in the world's system of evil warmly received them. The Johannine community, on the other hand, had its origin in God. This origin had objective proof in that the community had remained faithful to the apostolic tradition.

## **4:7-12 The Challenge Toward Brotherly Love**

By this time the reader can see why many theologians describe the Johannine letters as circular in development. Unlike Paul, whose logic moves from point A to point B to point C, John's progression of thought keeps revolving around the same primary themes:

- 1) The confession of faith based upon the apostolic tradition,
- 2) The lifestyle of righteousness that true believers exhibit, and
- 3) The demonstration of brotherly love within the Christian community. Here he recapitulates the theme of brotherly love.

Love originates in God, and a lifestyle of love can only issue from a new birth. Those who do not love do not know God. Once more, the emphasis on “knowing” is a counterpoint against the *gnosis* of the heretics. Similar to Paul, who sees the demonstration of God’s love in the cross (Ro. 5:8), John sees the demonstration of God’s love in the entire Christ event, which climaxes in the cross. Several important theological concepts are implicit within John’s words. First, the preexistence of the Son of God is suggested in that God “sent” his Son. Second, the death of Jesus was not merely a martyrdom or an unfortunate murder. It was an atoning sacrifice for sin.<sup>30</sup> Third, God is invisible. Thus, if God is to be “fleshed out” so that his existence can be perceived, it will be through the tangible lifestyles of love that Christians demonstrate. God’s love finds its completion when his people love each other.

## **4:13--5:5 The Certainty of Christian Faith and the Practice of Christian Love**

### **The Question of Certainty**

Once more John reemphasizes the issue of certainty, and once again he asserts that such certainty derives from the gift of the Spirit. As before (3:24b--4:3), John makes sure that his readers do not judge the certainty that comes from the Spirit as merely a subjective thing. The certainty that comes from the Spirit is objective in that its essence is the confession of faith that is in line with apostolic tradition, that is, what was “seen” and what was “testified about.” Jesus as the Son of God and as the Savior of the world is the truth to which the Holy Spirit testifies (cf. Jn. 14:16, 20, 26; 15:26-27; 16:12-15). It is important not to sever the assurance given by the Spirit from the apostolic tradition witnessed by the apostles. If John had failed to keep these two elements together, his opponents could simply have argued, “But we too have the Spirit, and we too have certainty that we are correct.” Such a position would have produced a standoff, something that John certainly would have wanted to avoid. As it is John maintains the connection between the inner witness of the Spirit and the apostolic tradition. One without the other is not truly the Holy Spirit’s witness. It is only when the proper confession of faith is made that one can be certain of God’s indwelling. The Christ event, which the believer confesses in his/her faith, is the believer’s assurance of God’s love.

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<sup>30</sup> This is the second time John has employed the noun *hilasmos* (cf. 2:2), which the NIV renders as “an atoning sacrifice.” A good deal of scholarly discussion has arisen over the use of this word, since in classical usage it implies the appeasing of an angry deity, a metaphor that seems to fit somewhat awkwardly with the Christian conception of God. The RSV opts for the word “expiation” rather than the traditional “propitiation” to avoid such consequences. An instructive discussion of the word is to be found in L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 144-213.

## The Perfection of Love

1 John contains two direct equations: God is light (1:5) and God is love (4:8, 16). In both cases, John uses them to explain how Christians, who claim to know God, ought to live. Perfection in love is accomplished when God dwells in his people, and they love each other (4:12). On the basis of this perfection of love, the believer can rest in confidence as he/she anticipates God's final judgment. Just as God was pleased with Christ in the world, so he is pleased with his children who are in the world, since as his children they stand in the same relationship to himself as did Christ. This kind of perfection in love banishes fear. One who fears judgment does so because he/she fears punishment. But if the believer stands before God in the same relationship as Jesus the Son stands before God, then there is no cause for fear. Those who live in fear have a weak assessment of God's love.

God's initiative in loving humans compels them to respond in love, both to God and to others.<sup>31</sup> To respond in hatred while claiming to know God, the sort of response and claim made by the heretics, is a contradiction in terms.

## Recapitulation of the Tests of Faith

By now the reader is familiar with John's three tests of genuine Christianity--the doctrinal, social and moral tests. John appeals to them yet again. All genuine Christians make a common confession: Jesus is God's Son. If one claims to love God the Father, he must also love God's Son. John's opponents, who devalued Christ, showed by their devaluation that they did not truly love God the Father. If a person loves God he/she also will obey God by making the Christian confession and demonstrating love to fellow Christians (3:23). Those born of God overcome the evil world's system by their Christian faith. 1 John 5:4 is the sole occurrence of the noun *pistis* (= faith) in either the Johannine letters or the Fourth Gospel. It probably refers not so much to the internal act of faith as it does to the public profession of what one believes, especially as it appears in the context of John's consistent appeal to the apostolic tradition.

## 5:6-12 The Confirmation of Faith

In summing up his remarks, John appeals to three witnesses in order to confirm the truth about Jesus: the Spirit, the water and the blood. These verses are

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<sup>31</sup> The Greek texts vary in 4:19 between:

“We love...” (NIV, NASB, NAB, NEB, RSV, ASV, JB)

“We love God...”

“We love him...” (KJV)

The original text is almost certainly the first one listed, cf. B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: UBS, 1971) 713.

among the most difficult in 1 John to interpret with precision, not only because there is a textual problem with the Textus Receptus,<sup>32</sup> but because the terms are capable of several meanings. All agree that the term Spirit refers to the Holy Spirit. Alternative interpretations for water and blood are varied:

### **Baptism and the Lord's Table**

This interpretation, dating back to the fourth century and upheld by Luther and Calvin, usually is tied to Jn. 3:5 (where the word “water” is thought to refer to baptism) and Jn. 6:54-56 (where the word “blood” is thought to refer to the Eucharist). However, if this view is correct, it is a rather obscure way of referring to such Christian practices, and it seems difficult to see how such a reference would prove anything in particular in light of John's opponents.

### **Incarnation**

This interpretation looks to the words “water” and “blood” as representative of the birthing process (and generally sees the term “water” in Jn. 3:5 in the same way). Such a position has the advantage of making sense if John was rebutting his opponent's contention that Jesus did not really come in the flesh. However, in this view of the matter, the words “water” and “blood” refer to the same thing, and here John intends them to act as two distinctive witnesses.

### **Crucifixion**

This interpretation recalls the Johannine account of the death of Jesus in which both blood and water flowed from the puncture in Jesus' side (Jn. 19:34). However, it is difficult to see in what sense this could be a “coming” of Jesus.

### **Baptism and Death**

This interpretation sets the words “water” and “blood” against the background of gnostic thought, which denied the humanity of Jesus. As such, the term “water” refers to Jesus' baptism in which he was physically put in the water. In his baptism, Jesus made the final act of dedication to his public ministry, and so “came” by water. Similarly, the term “blood” is a synecdoche for Jesus' death in which his physical suffering and decease substantiated the fact that he had a real body. This view has the advantage of explaining the emphasis of 5:6b (“not by water only, but by water and blood”). Cerinthus taught that the “Christ” came upon the man “Jesus” at his baptism

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<sup>32</sup> 1 John 5:7 contains the famous interpolation that appears in the KJV but is eliminated in all other versions. It is the overwhelming consensus of scholars that the words in question are not a part of the original text. They have no Greek manuscript authority earlier than the 16th century, Cf. discussion F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1963) 210-211.

but left him before he died. John would be asserting, in opposition to Cerinthianism, that Jesus was the Son of God, not only in his baptism, but also in his death.<sup>33</sup> This interpretation is the most commonly accepted and probably the best.

The three witnesses, the Spirit, the water and the blood, all stand or fall together. If one rejects the witness of the water or the blood, he cannot at the same time accept the witness of the Spirit. Rather, the testimony of the Spirit works in and through the events signified by water and blood to testify that the one who was baptized in Jordan and who died at Calvary was truly God's Son.

Since God's testimony about Jesus is greater than even a credible human testimony, one should by all means accept it. The question arises, however, as to just what that testimony is. Does the expression "God's testimony" refer to the three witnesses just discussed, or to the voice at Jesus' baptism (Mk. 1:10-11), or to the inner witness of the Spirit? Any of these are conceivable. In a broader sense, the testimony of God might be the aggregate of inspired witness concerning Jesus. Certainly the Johannine writings are very much concerned with this concept of witnessing, particularly as expressed by the noun *martyria* (Jn. 1:7, 19; 3:11, 32-33; 5:31-36; 8:13-14, 17; 19:35; 21:24) and the verb *martyreo* (Jn. 1:7-8, 15, 32-34; 2:25; 3:11, 26, 28, 32; 4:39; 5:31-40; 8:13-14, 18; 10:25; 12:17; 15:26-27; 18:37; 19:35; 21:24; 1 Jn. 1:2; 4:14). If this latter is correct, then "God's testimony" might be another way of describing the apostolic tradition that God inspired. Yet there is an inner side to this witness as well, for the one who truly believes the apostolic confession has the witness of God "in himself" (*en auto*), an idea similar to that of Paul (Ro. 8:16). To refuse the testimony of God the Father about Jesus the Son is to make God out to be a liar. God's witness centers in Jesus Christ. To claim to accept God's witness without accepting the Son of God is impossible, for God mediates eternal life through Jesus.

## 5:13-21 Conclusion

In bringing his epistle to a close, John emphasizes the same sort of motives that inspired the Fourth Gospel--a desire to produce certainty and faith, especially concerning a proper understanding of who Jesus Christ was (cf. Jn. 20:30-31; 21:24-25). He speaks of believing in the "name" of the Son of God. John is particularly concerned that the community of faith not reject the fact that Jesus was truly "God's one and only Son." We should not take the term "name" to refer to a given name, like "Jesus." In that case, there would be no special significance inasmuch as the name "Jesus" (the Greek form of Joshua) was common enough among the Jews (cf. Ac. 13:6; Col. 4:11). Rather, John emphasizes the name "Son" since the common

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<sup>33</sup> F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 118-119.

Christian confession was that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God. New Testament Greek does not recognize the careful nuance between names and titles as is done in English. In this passage, the “name” is the “Son of God.”

### **Asking and Receiving**

In the Son is eternal life. Whatever believers ask, providing they ask in line with God’s divine purpose, God will do (cf. Jn. 14:12-14; 15:7, 16; 16:23-24). Every genuine prayer is a way of recapitulating our Lord’s example in prayer: “Thy will be done.” The statement about asking and receiving is not intended to give a naked freedom or to assume that Christians can always know God’s divine purposes. In many cases they do not (cf. Ro. 8:26). Rather, this statement is intended to provide assurance and confidence so that the community of faith will always approach God in prayer with confidence.

### **The Sin Unto Death**

Interpreters have struggled with the expression “sin unto death.” Is this death physical or spiritual? Could John be referring to the schismatic group as having committed the sin unto death? It is natural to assume that John is referring to those who had withdrawn from the Christian community, though such a conclusion is not forced, and other similar descriptions of such a sin are to be found in other contexts. Jesus, for instance, speaks of an unforgivable sin as being the attribution of the gracious works of God to demonic powers. To identify Jesus Christ with the devil is unpardonable (Mt. 12:22-32). The writer of Hebrews speaks of apostasy as irremediable (He. 6:4-6). Paul writes of Christians who had died because of their abuse of the Lord’s Table (1 Co. 11:29-30). God executed Ananias and Sapphira for lying to the Holy Spirit (Ac. 5:4-5, 9-10). The Corinthian man living in incest was threatened with the “destruction of the flesh” (1 Co. 5:5). Whatever John has in mind specifically, the following may at least be said about the sin unto death:

- 1) The sin unto death must be something that can be objectively identified, else there would be no way of recognizing it, and John’s comments would be inappropriate.
- 2) The sin unto death must involve a total rejection of God, for where there is an attitude to seek God, there is hope (Mk. 3:28; Jn. 6:37; 1 Jn. 1:9; Ro. 10:12-13).
- 3) The sin unto death must be deliberate and not accidental. John explains that not all sin leads to death, and presumably he refers to sins arising from human weakness. The sin which leads to death would be other than human weakness; it would be a deliberate rejection and defiance of God.

Though John does not define with precision the sin unto death, he certainly

encourages intercessory prayer for all other Christians who have sinned. Sin that is committed by Christians is neither encouraged nor ignored; it is a matter for prayer. At the same time, one truly born of God cannot continue a lifestyle of sin. God keeps his own, and Satan cannot have control of God's children. One cannot be God-possessed and demon-possessed at the same time. Satan is forbidden to enter at will into the new creation which is in Christ. It is the world that is under the control of the forces of evil.

John's final words assert that God's children know who they are; they are the ones who truly have *gnosis*. Their knowledge is neither secretive nor esoteric. It is the common apostolic tradition that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Even stronger, the apostolic confession, especially championed by Trinitarian orthodoxy in the Arian controversy as well as by Luther and Calvin, is that Christ is truly God.<sup>34</sup> The final warning to keep clear of idolatry infers that those who would withdraw from the apostolic tradition in their rejection of Christ as the Son of God had set up a false god of their own.

And so John closes with three positive affirmations: "We know....

... that Christians are not sinners, for God keeps them from evil."

... that we are truly God's children."

... that God's Son has come and given us true understanding."

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<sup>34</sup> See discussion in O. Cullmann, The Christology of the New Testament (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 309-310; Stott, 196.

## 2 John

### 2 John 1-3 The Chosen Lady and her Children

If indeed the Johannine community was in the large seaport area of Ephesus, it is probable that there were a number of house churches in the city. Already by Paul's time in the early 50s a tremendous Christian outreach was under way (Ac. 18:19-21, 24-26; 19:1-10). Four decades later, at the time the Johannine Letters were being written, there were quite probably various nearby cities and towns affected by the Christian gospel, each of them containing various house churches. 2 and 3 John may well have been addressed to provincial house churches outside Ephesus inasmuch as there is no clear indication that they were written to the same group as that of the first letter. It may even be that the heresy addressed in 1 John was now spreading outward to these provincial areas.<sup>35</sup> Whatever the case, 2 John continues to repeat the same themes as 1 John.

#### The Lady

At first glance one might be tempted to treat 2 John as a letter to an individual. However, the phrase "the Chosen Lady" is probably a personification of the community itself. Peter, in a similar way, uses a feminine pronoun to describe a Christian community (1 Pe. 5:13), and John seems to imply that he is writing to a group rather than to an individual when he shifts from the singular form (verses 4, 5 and 13) to the plural form (verses 6, 8, 10, 12).<sup>36</sup> The Lady's children, then, are the members of the Christian community, and the children of her chosen sister are the members of the Christian community from which John was writing.

#### The Greeting

In his greeting, John emphasizes the central themes he has already expounded in 1 John. The word "truth," which appears four times in the greeting, is an obvious antithesis to the heresy of the schismatics. Here, it represents the apostolic tradition. Like Paul, John has replaced the standard salutation *chairein* (= greeting) with the

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<sup>35</sup> Brown, *Community*, 98-99.

<sup>36</sup> The singular and plural forms of the word "you" are apparent in Greek, though not in English.

Christianized version *charis* (= grace).<sup>37</sup> It is noteworthy that John has lengthened the phrase about the Father and the Lord Jesus to emphasis that the Fatherhood of God cannot be divorced from the Sonship of Jesus. Instead of saying, “God the Father and Jesus our Lord,” or some similar phrase, such as Paul might have used, John pointedly says, “God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son of the Father” (literal translation).

## 2 John 4-6

As in the first letter, John stresses the three tests of genuine Christianity: apostolic tradition (the “truth”), love for the Christian community, and a lifestyle of obedience to God’s commands. Love is the overriding challenge, the new commandment that Christians have had from the beginning.

## 2 John 7-11

From the qualities of genuine Christianity, John turns to the dangerous teachings of the heretics. He informs the church that any teaching denying the incarnation is to be associated with the figure of antichrist. His warning is terse: to entertain such notions is disastrous, and it will cost them in the eternal reckoning. The phrase, “Anyone who runs ahead...” refers to anyone who would add authoritative teaching beyond that of the apostolic tradition. Because it was not part of the apostolic tradition itself, at a surface level it might seem advanced; in reality, it would be a betrayal of the gospel. If any traveling preachers should pass through who were not faithful to the apostolic tradition, John warns the church not to receive them. To receive them would be to contribute to the deception of the church.

## 2 John 12-13

John was well aware that his brief letter would neither answer all the questions it might raise nor fully explain the motives behind it. The length of the letter (as also is the case for 3 John) seems governed by the fact that it would just fit onto a single papyrus sheet.<sup>38</sup> John’s intention was to personally visit the church at which time he would explain himself more completely. He closed the correspondence by greeting the church from the sister congregation where he was presently ministering.

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<sup>37</sup> W.Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973) 29.

<sup>38</sup> The word rendered “paper” is *chartes* (= papyrus), and a short letter like 2 or 3 John would fit on a single papyrus sheet of normal size, cf. Bruce, *Epistles*, 143.

## 3 John

### 3 John 1

3 John, like 2 John, probably was written to a congregation within the Johannine circle of churches. John addressed this short epistle to Gaius, probably an elder in the church, since John treats him as one who stands in a position of leadership and responsibility. Gaius was a common name in the Roman world, perhaps the most common name.<sup>39</sup> As the contents of the letter will show, John still is preoccupied with the three themes he stressed in the other letters, that is, the apostolic tradition, the Christian lifestyle of righteousness and the demonstration of love. It may well be that the heresy described in 1 John was spreading. In response, John wished to send to these other Johannine churches some representatives who were coming on a mission to maintain the purity of the gospel.

### 3 John 2-4

The greeting John sends to Gaius is a standard courtesy in letters from the Greco-Roman period.<sup>40</sup> John had received reports of Gaius' loyalty to the gospel, demonstrated in both his doctrinal integrity as well as in his Christian lifestyle. If the situation behind this letter is the same as that of 1 and 2 John, then "the truth" is the truth of the incarnation, the messiahship and the Sonship of Jesus Christ.

### 3 John 5-10

John particularly wished to thank Gaius for his hospitality toward certain traveling missionaries whom he evidently had put up for lodging, even though they were "strangers." What their mission entailed, we are not told, but it seems likely that

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<sup>39</sup> Barclay, 147. Other Christians named Gaius in the New Testament besides this one are mentioned, cf. Ac. 19:29; 20:4; Ro. 16:23; 1 Co. 1:14.

<sup>40</sup> For instance, in a letter from a ship's captain to his brother, the greeting reads: "Continually I pray that you may be in health, even as I myself am in health", cf. Barclay, 147. This sort of courtesy was so common that in Latin letters it was often expressed simply by the initials S V B E E V (*si uales, bene est; ego ualeo* = if you are well, that is good; I am well), cf. Bruce, *1 John*, 147.

they were emissaries from John himself. It was a usual practice to send letters of recommendation with emissaries or to mention the courier if a letter was being delivered (cf. Ro. 16:1-2; Ep. 6:21-22; Col. 4:7-9). In this case, Gaius was encouraged to “send them on their way” (*propempe* = either to accompany or to send along), an expression that indicates a call for help in making provisions for the journey, such as, money, food and clothing (cf. Ac. 15: 3; 20:38; 21:5; Ro. 15:24; 1 Co. 16:6, 11; 2 Co. 1:16; Tit. 3:13). Their missionary work was “for the Name,” that is, for Christ Jesus the Lord.<sup>41</sup> They received no help from non-Christians; their dependence was solely on the community of faith.

Apparently, John hoped that Diotrephes, either a leader in another house church in the same city or a self-promoted personality in Gaius’ church, would have put up his emissaries. He had written to that effect, but his request had been ignored. Diotrephes was at odds with John and the rest of the Johannine community, and he would not accept the brothers. Perhaps Diotrephes was party to the heresy of 1 John. In any case, he was actively separating himself from apostolic Christianity, and according to John, he engaged in both slander and excommunication for all who were loyal to John and the apostolic tradition.

### 3 John 11-12

John’s counsel was that Gaius should avoid such behaviors of exclusivism and judgmentalism. Using the same sort of reasoning as is found in 1 John, the apostle draws the conclusion that if Diotrephes is engaged in evil, he must not be truly Christian. Demetrius, on the other hand, had shown his stability in doctrine and reputation. It is probable that Demetrius was the courier of the present letter, and the mention of his character was the apostle’s guarantee of his Christian integrity. When John says that Demetrius was well spoken of by “the truth itself,” it is quite possible that this is a personal reference to the Lord Jesus. If so, the translation should read “the Truth Himself.”<sup>42</sup> Certainly John was quite willing to vouch for Demetrius.

### 3 John 13-14

In closing, John states his intention to visit the community. He exchanges greetings from the other Christian brothers and sisters who were with him.

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<sup>41</sup> It is pointless to attempt to decide whether by “name” John meant “Jesus”, “Christ” or “Lord.” All are names in the New Testament sense of the word, and all apply to the Son of God.

<sup>42</sup> In the fragments of Papias, a disciple of John who later became the bishop of Hierapolis, this very same phrase is used to refer to Jesus. It reads: “I did not take pleasure in those who have so very much to say, but in those who teach the truth; nor in those who relate foreign commandments but in those (who record) such as were given from the Lord to the Faith, and are derived from the Truth itself,” cf. J. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (1891 rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956) 263-264.