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# Life Together: An Introduction to 1 John

THOMAS H. OLBRICHT

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**T**he most important clue for understanding 1 John is that, toward the end of the first century, a jarring incident disturbed the churches in Western Asia Minor, where John the aged apostle now lived.<sup>1</sup> A number of church members, perhaps some of longer standing, turned their backs on their fellow believers and departed.

They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belonged to us (2.19).

We don't know exactly what these people did when they departed. We do know that they were dissatisfied. We know that they disdained the brothers and sisters they left behind: "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen" (4.20). The secessionists claimed special experiences and insights. They alleged that they were anointed in a special manner unlike those who remained in the "humdrum" churches. They felt called upon to teach others their superior understandings.

I write these things to you concerning those who would deceive you. As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him (2.26-27).

Those who departed also apparently made claims as to sinlessness since John assures those to whom he writes that they can make the same claim. Those who left clearly did not love their brothers and sisters, and in this they sinned, despite claiming sinlessness.

Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God's seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God. The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters (3.9-10).

Most biblical scholars from the fourth century to the eighteenth century believed that John the son of Zebedee wrote 1 John, and also authored 2 John and 3 John, as well as the Gospel and Revelation. This consensus has increasingly eroded since the late seventeenth century. If we follow the traditional view, after the resurrection of Jesus, John stayed in Jerusalem as long as he was permitted. All the Christians left Jerusalem, as did most of the Jews, after the Roman army destroyed it in 70 A.D. It was after 70 A.D. that

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1. For additional information on 1 John, see my recent commentary, Thomas H. Olbricht, *Life Together: The Heart of Love & Fellowship in 1 John* (Webb City, MO: Covenant Publishing, 2006).

John, who according to later writers lived longer than any of the other twelve apostles, worked his way into a leadership role among the growing churches in Western Asia Minor. From the history of Eusebius, we learn that John was involved in planting several churches out of Ephesus. Eusebius believed that John wrote Revelation on the island of Patmos, then wrote the Gospel of John and the three Epistles later, when he was released from his island exile (*Ecclesiastical History*, Book III, 24). Eusebius also reported that John was buried in Ephesus, "John, who leant back on the Lord's breast...a martyr and a teacher; he too sleeps in Ephesus" (III, 31). Raymond Brown believed that the Gospel of John was written about 90 A.D. and the Epistles about 100 A.D. The dating of the Epistles would be too late for John the Apostle to be author.<sup>2</sup> The date of the Epistle is likely no later than 94 A.D., and the Gospel may be much earlier than the date proposed by Brown. The churches addressed in 1 John met in houses and there may have been several house churches in the same larger town or city. Those who left the Johannine churches were no doubt influenced by Jewish Hellenism, but had moved much farther in the direction of religio-speculative Hellenism than those who remained. I think it is important in considering the Hellenistic backgrounds of those who left to examine their perspective on God. They embraced a view of reality in which a superior transcendent God has indirect influence over an inferior earthly realm but who is himself distinctly wholly other. Because of their doctrine of God, those who left also had a different prospective on soteriology, Christology, ecclesiology and ethics.

#### ITEMS ADDRESSED IN 1 JOHN

The Epistle of John opens by affirming a God who speaks so that humans may hear, who enters into human life in such a manner that he may be seen, and who assimilates into human flesh so that he may be touched. He is a God who enters into *koinonia* (fellowship) with humankind (1.1-4). He became one with humanity through the entry into the flesh of his Son Jesus Christ. All the pointers in this Epistle suggest that those who have departed affirm a different sort of God who is so constituted that he cannot make direct contact with material reality. A transcendent God is radically other than someone who can be seen, heard and touched.

Since the secessionists believed that God and matter are diametrically opposite, they probably declared it impossible for God to become man. The Christ might inhabit a human, but he cannot at the same time be human. John opposed this conception by declaring, "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). In other words, there were those who claimed that the supra-sensible Christ inhabited Jesus, but that Jesus the man was not as such the Christ. God himself, as well as his Son, the Christ, because of their very nature negated a genuine rapprochement with the flesh. The Spirit is superior to the flesh. For this reason, those who are spiritually discerning are justified in turning their backs on those who are spiritually inferior. It is quite proper for them to go out from among those who are a reproach to true spirituality (2.19)!

It seems to me that Cerinthus, as early church historians maintained, held views of the sort that were at least similar to those of the secessionists. Cerinthus lived in Asia Minor about 100 A.D. According to Irenaeus, John wrote his Gospel against the teaching of Cerinthus.<sup>3</sup> In the Christology of Cerinthus according to Hippolytus, Christ occupied the human Jesus but did not fully assimilate into his humanity since to do so would be foreign to the very nature of God. About the views of Cerinthus, Hippolytus wrote:

But a certain Cerinthus...supposed that Jesus was not generated from a virgin, but that he was born son of Joseph and Mary, just in a manner similar with the rest of men, and that (Jesus) was more just and more wise (than all the human race). And (Cerinthus alleges) that,

2. Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in the New Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 97.

3. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haeres*, 3.11.1.

after the baptism (of our Lord), Christ in form of a dove came down upon him, from that absolute sovereignty which is above all things. And then, (according to this heretic,) Jesus proceeded to preach the unknown Father, and in attestation (of his mission) to work miracles. It was, however, (the opinion of Cerinthus,) that ultimately Christ departed from Jesus, and that Jesus suffered and rose again; whereas that Christ, being spiritual, remained beyond the possibility of suffering.<sup>4</sup>

The author of 1 John unmistakably implies that he himself heard, saw and touched the “word of life” who is clearly the Son Jesus Christ (1.3). What the author and other disciples apprehended was the word of life, and that life is eternal (1.3). The Father and the Son were involved in *koinonia*. The life of the believer in Jesus Christ consists of fellowship both because the crucial attribute of God is *koinonia*, and because those who likewise love God must replicate his *koinonia* in the body of believers. The first believers were incorporated into eternal life because they shared *koinonia* with “the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1.3). God is a God who seeks fellowship. The disciples reached out to extend this *koinonia* to others, “so that you also may have fellowship with us...” (1.3). John expresses his own interest in extending *koinonia* to all who will receive it by declaring that in writing about the divine *koinonia* he is completing his joy. “We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete” (4.2).

### THE RESULTS OF WALKING IN THE LIGHT

In the next section John declares that God is light (1.5-7). In what sense is God light? I think that since the emphasis on fellowship precedes the statement about light and occurs again following the statement, we must say that the light of God is his *koinonia*. God in his very being reaches out to the world and to the creatures he has brought forth. His reaching out defines who he is. *Koinonia* is the light of God. To walk in the light of God in this text clearly means to engage in fellowship (*koinonia*) just as God engages in fellowship. Walking in darkness contrariwise is to walk by oneself or with a limited group of associates. “Whoever says, ‘I am in the light,’ while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness” (2.9).

God, who is himself *koinonia*, does not receive those who turn their back on *koinonia*. “...but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1.7). The conclusion is stark. Those who have fellowship one with another are continually receiving the forgiveness of their sins because of the blood of Jesus Christ the Son of God. Those who have departed from the fellowship, that is the church, are no longer in the light, but in darkness. Their sins are no longer being forgiven.

These persons about whom John writes have a wrong-headed ecclesiology as a result of their bad theology. For them, just as it necessary for God to keep his distance from humans, it is also quite appropriate for humans to distance themselves from those of inferior or lackadaisical religious commitment. The crisis in the churches to which John wrote came about as the result of certain “superior” Christians departing and therefore destroying *koinonia*. “They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us.” Bad theology results in bad ecclesiology.

### CLAIMS OF PERFECTION

Apparently those who departed made some claim about perfection. It is not clear exactly what their claim may have been. It is known that a century or more after the Epistle was written, some Gnostics claimed perfection upon the grounds that they were born of God who was perfect. Others claimed that being born of God redeemed their soul so that though their fleshy self might commit sin, the spiritual self (which is what ultimately counts) does not. John wants to make sure that it is perfectly clear that, despite the pervasiveness

4. Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* VII, 21.

of sin in even the believer's life, sin will be forgiven upon confession (1.9, 2.1-2). Because of the Greek construction it is appropriate to translate 1 John 3.9, "Those who are born of God do not *continue* to sin," rather than, "Those who are born of God do not sin."

### **THE ANOINTING OF THE SPIRIT (2.20-27)**

Those who left claimed some special anointing of the Spirit. John reminded those who continued in the churches that they were anointed at the beginning with the Holy Spirit or *paraklētos*, the word used in the Gospel (John 14.26). "But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge" (2.20). Whatever the enlightenment or anointment boasted of by those who departed, John assures those who remain that they were anointed at the beginning of their Christian journey. This anointment is also a part of what they were taught when they first became believers.

### **THE COMMANDMENT OF LOVE FROM THE BEGINNING**

"For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another" (3.11). Where do we see such love manifested concretely in believers? First, we see love exhibited in the final great act of our Lord on the cross. "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our life for one another" (3.16). What impressive steps do Christians sometimes take when they see a sister or brother in need? Why do they reach out in such an unprecedented manner? One presumes they do it because of the extreme action of the Lord on their behalf. John thinks this should take a very concrete form. "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" (3.17)

Love is from God. That is the center of his very being. Love likewise must be the *raison d'être* of the believer. "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God" (4.7). The departure from the children of God is a denial of God's love. God demonstrated his love concretely. "God sent his only Son into the world to be the atoning sacrifice for our sin" (4.10). We are reminded of the much-quoted statement in John 3.16, "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." God is not a God who refrains from every contact with the material world that he has made. Rather, since his very being is love, he does not abstain from *koinonia* with everything he has made, including fleshy humanity made in his image. Love does not originate with humankind. It originates with God. It touches everything his hand has touched. And it likewise must be the passion of those who believe. "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another" (4.11). God is transcendent to human life, nevertheless his love penetrates the very being of humankind. "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us" (4.12).

### **TESTING THE SPIRITS**

John lays out the necessity of examining every claim and not immediately accepting it at face value. "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). Notice how this parallels, "so now many antichrists have come" (2.18). How then can one test whether the spirit is from God? John provides two tests (4.2-6). The first is the right doctrine regarding Jesus Christ. The second is listening to the right source of teaching, which is either that of John himself or what all the apostles taught from the beginning.

Those who left possessed a deviant Christology. They believed that Jesus, the man, was not God, even though the Christ inhabited him. They believed that God separated himself from humanity in Jesus. They therefore concluded that it was appropriate for them to break *koinonia* (2.19), to separate themselves from those inferior believers who lacked special knowledge (*gnosis*) (2.21-22) and Holy Spirit anointment (2.20).

What additional test is needed to determine whether Christians authentically love or are involved in God's *koinonia*? The test that John proposes for checking out the false prophets is determined by whether or

not they will listen “to us.” He wrote, “We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error” (4.6). The “we” are the leading teachers of the whole church. In my judgment, therefore, a major way of checking out the teachings of various “false prophets,” of testing whether the spirits be of God, is to compare their teachings with those received from the beginning – the apostolic teachings. First, the teacher must confess that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Second, the instruction of the teacher must past muster of those affirmations proclaimed at the beginning. Third, the teacher must not only proclaim love but likewise demonstrate *koinonia* in life’s concrete activities. The secessionists missed the mark on all counts, and perhaps most obviously in their failure to love. The most concrete indicator of their failure to love is the fact that they departed from the Johannine churches.

### THE TESTIMONY WITHIN

In addition to the three exterior testimonies, the Spirit, the water and the blood (5.8), “Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts” (5.10). Believers have assurances as to their involvement in the *koinonia* in which “the blood of Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin.” This assurance comes about because of the witnesses, first from heaven (1.7), then from those who saw the actions of God in Christ, and third, the witness “in their hearts” (5.10). What is this witness in the heart? John does not elaborate. Can this witness be the love found in the heart which encourages those in *koinonia* to “lay down our lives for one another” (3.16)? The believers know that they have committed their lives to God. They know therefore by how they act whether or not they are showing the love that is concomitant with that commitment. The testimony within is not (as it is in a number of religious traditions) simply a warm, heart-felt assurance. The believer knows within whether or not the results specified by John accrue in lived existence before God and fellow believers.

### THE SIN UNTO DEATH

The next verses, 5.16-17, have likely received more comments than any other statements in 1 John. John first declared that if anyone sees a believer committing a sin that is not mortal, or unto death (KJV – which is stark but I think the better translation), they may pray for the sinner and God will forgive, or “give life” to such a one. But there *is* a sin that is mortal, that is, a sin unto death. John recommends that they not pray about the sin unto death. Presumably, the point is that it is senseless to pray about the sin unto death for God will not forgive the person who has committed a sin unto death, that’s why the sin is so deathly. John clarifies further by declaring that all sin is wrong, however, there are sins that are not unto death. The age-old question is, what is the difference between a sin that is unto death and one that is not? The additional question is, why should one not pray for the sin unto death?

It is wise to focus on the sin unto death, because to do so also defines other sins – those which are not sins unto death and are forgivable. Various proposals have been made, for example, that the sin unto death is a severe sin such as murder or sexual perversion, the penalty for which is death. Another proposal is that it is a sin for which the church may assign death, such as the deceit of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. A third possibility is that it is a sin so despicable that the church sets out to withdraw fellowship or excommunication, for example, Julian the Apostate (332-363 A.D.), who offered sacrifices in pagan temples. Still others have equated the sin unto death with blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as presented in Mark 3.28-30. In the Gospel of John it may be pointed out that the rejection of Jesus as the one sent by God is an unforgivable sin. “I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he” (John 8.24).

The sin unto death is therefore to conceive of God and his Son as sealed off from the world of humankind. The claim is that they do not, in fact, love the world nor are they in fellowship with it. I first came to think this way about the sin unto death through reading the Epistle and Willi Marxson’s *Introduction to the*

*New Testament*. He put the point succinctly, “He who cuts himself off from the Church commits the ‘sin unto death’” (v. 16).<sup>5</sup>

It is now possible to comment on the statements about prayer. The believers should feel free to pray for any sins they see their brothers and sisters committing except for the sin unto death. The reason is apparent. These brothers and sisters are in the fellowship of the church. John has already declared that the blood of Jesus Christ removes all sins for those who faithfully remain in the church. “For if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1.7). All of the sins of those in the fellowship of the body of Christ may be forgiven. But, “There is a sin that is mortal; I do not say that you should pray about that” (5.16). In other words, John says, don’t pray for those who left the church: “Father, forgive them for leaving us,” or something similar. The secessionists are no longer in the place where sins are being forgiven, that is, in the body of the believers. It might be appropriate to pray that, “they come to their senses and return.” But it appears that John thinks their departure is permanent and they will not return regardless of how many prayers might be uttered.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion we may judge the Epistle as successful in affirming the readers in their confidence that they are headed in the right direction and should stay the course. It’s the people who have left, who exuded a superior confidence that their anointment and understanding of God placed them head and shoulders above the remaining pew sitters, who are in trouble with God. The remaining believers should be bold in their attestation that the Son of God became fully human and therefore in complete *koinonia* with those who believe in him, love him and keep his commandments. It is they who walk with their heads up before God for they walk in his light, “and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses [them] from all sin.”

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5. Willi Marxsen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. G. Buswell (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 263.