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Responding in Love

JAN HAILEY

Several years ago, when my husband was doing postdoctoral work at the University of California at Berkeley, it was my habit to do some work for him on campus. I regularly passed by Berkeley's answer to Hyde Park—a large, low, stone and concrete table used frequently as a platform for “free speech” of any kind. Usually there were shouting and heckling going back and forth from the crowd to whoever was speaking passionately about some controversial issue. What caught my attention this time was the way the crowd was quietly listening to the young man read. He was dressed fairly conservatively, for Berkeley at least, but was not remarkable in any particular way. As I stopped to listen, I recognized the familiar passages from 1 John: He was reading the whole Epistle without comment as the people stood around the table. Some of them were listening without expression, but others had their heads cocked to one side with puzzled looks on their faces. The picture became an image to me of the confrontation between the story of the love of God and a secular, unchurched mass of students.

“They haven't a clue what he is talking about. He's telling them about God's love for the world, and they don't get it,” I thought to myself as I watched. That picture and the question that accompanied it have stayed with me for a number of years. How do we explain who Jesus is and what God is like to a lost world?

The writer of John's Gospel and the First Epistle of John undertakes to answer that question with utmost gravity.¹ An explanation of purpose for the author emerges from John 20.30-31: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” The theme of witness, or testimony, is consistent through the texts of John² and 1 John as well. In the Epistle, the opening paragraph of the letter carefully sets the theme of the testimony of the revealed Lord: “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us.”

The testimony is a God who has reached out to the world with both the revelation of his love and the revelation of his very self through his son. In an effort to encourage a struggling church, the author of 1 John assures the community that the life revealed by the Son—the new light shining as the old world passes

1. The question of the relation between the Gospel of John and the Epistle of First John is a complex issue, and subject to argument on the part of many scholars. For the purpose of this paper, I accept the view that these two books, if not authored by the same person, have a consistency of perspective and theological stance that are remarkably similar. It is certainly academically defensible to accept a common author or school of thought.

2. The word *marturia*, and all its cognates, generally translated witness or testimony, are used almost fifty times in the Gospel of John, and thirteen times in 1 John.

away, the forgiveness of sin, the promise of eternal life as children of God—is indeed the truth. Regardless of the lies and false teaching of the antichrists, the lawlessness of those not fathered by God the Father, regardless even in the face of the condemnation of their own hearts, the One in whom they continue to abide is faithful to his nature.

The very essence of God is love, but it is not a static quality. It is an active, dynamic love that seeks after, yearns for, protects and redeems his beloved children. The evidence is overwhelming. The compelling nature of his love infuses itself into his children so thoroughly that to know God is to love. The test of the strength and power of love is not the kind of love his children have for him, but the love he reveals by the depth of the sacrifice of his only Son. He listens to their requests and answers their prayers. He anoints them, gives them his mark. He remains in them and they remain in him. God's love demands confidence, for fear has no place in the strength of its aggressive goodness.

The knowledge that illuminates God's people is not universal, however. Those who do not know him do not know love. They do not obey his commands. They murder, tell lies, hate his children, and deny Jesus Christ. The expectation of the world's response to God as the personification of love is sadly conditioned by an inability to understand, and the decision to reject God's love, deliberately choosing evil. John 12.37-17 presents a disappointing picture of the world in contrast to the faithful followers. The truth of Jesus' atoning sacrifice has not changed in 1 John; the whole world is included in the invitation (2.2), but the church is cautioned not to be surprised if they receive hate from the world rather than blessing (3.13).

Although love is indeed foundational to the nature of God, it is not the only characteristic of God's nature. As J.I. Packer asserts, "'God is love' is not the complete truth about God so far as the Bible is concerned."³ One can say "God is love," but one cannot say "Love is God." This kind of statement assumes that the fullness of God's nature can be captured in an abstraction. In the same way as the nature of God is love, the writer of 1 John also affirms "God is light."⁴ Smalley,⁵ following Westcott,⁶ gives a helpful three-fold description of meaning: (1) in a "physical connotation of light," God exists in perpetual glory; (2) in the truth of God one finds an intellectual dimension of light; and (3) in the holiness of God, the moral nature of light completes the picture, with all the dimensions of the Jewish and Hellenistic understanding.

Although God's love extends to all mankind, truth demands that it must be received. His holiness demands justice from those who choose to refuse it. Part of righteousness includes the response of recognizing that the Almighty is God, and man is not. The difficulty in trying to grasp the expanse of the divine nature comes in the points of tension between categories that seem mutually exclusive, like loving grace and righteous judgment.

The task is clarified for God's redeemed community by John's teaching that the only revelation of the fullness of God rests not in characteristics but in the person of Jesus Christ. God sent his Son into the world to save the lost, an extreme act of atoning love. The incarnation must be recognized and received to atone for sins. God's love, not based on merit but freely poured out to redeem a fallen world, brings salvation, but it also brings judgment as an inherent by-product of response. Jesus Christ is the crisis (*krisis*), the point of judgment. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God." (John

3. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 108.

4. 1 John 1:5, "This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all."

5. Stephen S. Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary, 51 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984), 20.

6. B.F. Westcott, *The Epistle of St. John. The Greek Text with Notes*. 4th ed. (Abingdon, Berkshire: The Marcham Manor Press/Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966), 16.

3.17-18) As Hawkin and others maintain, “Christian faith is rooted in the response to God’s love.”⁷ Those in the world who choose not to accept the light and the love of God revealed in Jesus stand under condemnation.

The church is the new creation that comes about based on the loving response to the One whom the world rejects. The necessity of response as formative for the church as God’s children also points to the reason for the “insularity” of the inward focus of 1 John. Some⁸ have suggested this turning inward, coming from their own sense of rejection, has been responsible for the Johannine community’s message in both the Gospel of John and 1 John. The small group of apostles being prepared for the rejection of their Lord (through the treachery and departure of one of their group) and their own scattered flight, and the fractured, troubled community of 1 John do share many similarities.

Almost without exception, scholars note the lack of unity present in the church to which the Epistle is directed. Smalley⁹ summarizes the nature of the factions in a community split into three or four different ways. The problems were both theological and ethical in nature. One group was formed by those who were still committed to the apostolic gospel of Jesus as they had initially received it. Another was probably comprised of those of Jewish background who were drawn to heresy,¹⁰ perhaps from their high view of the law and a low view of Christ. A third group was made of those from pagan or Hellenistic background characterized by unorthodox beliefs and practices (a high view of Christ and a low view of the law). Both the second and third groups were ignoring a Christ-centered context of Christian faith and love. The fourth group had begun to break away or had already left. They may have been in line with the genuine believers at first, but were unable to sustain their faith, or they may never have really belonged to the church because they never really belonged to God.

For all these groups, the writer of 1 John provides a balanced Christology, one holding the tension between Jesus as God and Jesus as human. The ethical error of “stressing love as a universal”¹¹ is refuted by combining the directive “love one another” (3.11) with “we love because he first loved us” (4.19), drawing attention to the sacrificial nature of the death of Jesus. It is likely that 1 John may be an expansion of the teaching of the Gospel of John for those in the community who, though taught from the teaching in the Fourth Gospel, were now understanding it differently and erroneously.¹²

In John’s Gospel, Jesus prayed in the last final hours before his crucifixion not for the world, but for his disciples, that they might be unified and protected. He gives them a new commandment (13.34) that is to be integrated with the other two great commandments. They must be ready to die not only for Christ but also for one another. Then he washes their feet as a service or ministry that Jesus performs for his church, and also as an example of their own ministry to one another.¹³ They must also serve one another humbly and

7. David J. Hawkin, *The Johannine World* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 123. See also Glen Tinder, *The Political Meaning of Christianity: An Interpretation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 75.

8. D. Moody Smith, *Johannine Christianity: Essays on its Setting, Source, and Theology* (University of South Carolina Press: 1984), 219. Cf. Raymond Brown, *The Epistles of John*, AB 30 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 19-30. Smith suggests that “the tendency to reject the world in favor of the beleaguered community, and thus to see God as rejecting the world in favor of that community, is strongly at work in the Johannine literature.”

9. Smalley, xxiv-xxv.

10. Smalley states, “. . . [heresy] implies a doctrinal definition which made an appearance later than the formation of the New Testament.” The church had room for diversity of thought and the gospel could be interpreted differently from the beginning, but the full-blown heresies, Gnosticism in particular, did not develop until later. There was, however a crossover between Jewish and Greek worlds which fostered the development of Gnosticism.

11. *Ibid.*, xxvi.

12. *Ibid.*, xxvii.

13. Smith, 211, 215.

sacrificially. And, what seems to be perfectly obvious, his disciples must accept his service to them. Peter's resistance, however, is characteristic of many followers who have their own ideas about what they will accept from Jesus. The response from Jesus that his resistance means, "you have no part with me," is foundational for the community as well. The community of Christ must willingly accept the work of the incarnate God just as the church today must be willing to accept the work of the Spirit of God. Finally, they must be ready to remain faithful, even through the first disappointing period of failure and disunity.

The instructions to the community of 1 John in the "last hour" (2.18) are for their fellowship, for the completion of their joy, and the working of perfection of the love of God in them. It is a letter for insiders, not for the world, and thus has echoes of the last hours of the Fourth Gospel. John's teaching centers around the following as their ministry: They must walk in the light, following the example of Jesus (1.7), so they might maintain their fellowship and be cleansed from sin. They are to recognize their sins, honestly confess them, and be cleansed (1.9). They must obey the commandments (2.13) and have the love of God perfected in them (2.5).

The redeemed community also receives warnings about the world. They must not love it or the things in it. They can recognize the presence of the antichrist in the world, thus having a realistic expectation of the presence of evil. They must remain faithful to the message "from the beginning" and be careful who teaches them. They are to be taught by anointing rather than by men. The Christian is one who is able to give testimony about eternal life, and should not accept earthly testimony of men who don't know God.

As a part of their encouragement, the writer assures them with legitimate tests—the rubric of God's children—as he reminds them to reject the world's assessment. The most basic test is the way they act toward one another, particularly their generosity and the physical provision they are willing to make for one another. Telling the truth, having a consistency between what they say and do about loving a brother, is significant. One who loves God will love his or her brothers and sisters in Christ. There are no "lone wolf" Christians in the Johannine community, and anyone who claims to know God but does not love his children is lying. Although it may seem surprising, those in the community who have tender hearts are warned that the heart may condemn a person, but if it does, that one should test oneself by actions taken on behalf of brothers and sisters (3.18-19). Actions are more accurate than feelings. Returning again to the question of the ministry of the church, one might ask if this focus on the church community weakens the ministry of the church to the world. Is there a limitation of the realm in which the imperative to love is taken to apply? D. Moody Smith speaks to this,

Ministry in John is self-giving service. It is conceived, at least in the first instance, as an intramural relationship. As Jesus lays down his life for his friends, so they are willing to lay down their lives for one each other. Through this ministry, however, a positive relation to the world may be established, i.e. people may be converted. As to the concrete and specific form this ministry may take, it is usually less dramatic than laying down one's life. Washing one another's feet, of which a modern equivalent is difficult to produce, is neither sacramental nor sentimental. It is the symbol of that practical ministry which defines the very life of the Johannine community. The community lives in and for such mutual service. Apart from it there is, effectively, no revelation, no faith, and particularly no ministry and no church.¹⁴

He continues, "Mission then comes about as, so to speak, an overflow from the world's observation of such expressions of love."¹⁵

As I think back about the young man reading the good news to a secular crowd, their attention, even with the bemused response of some, makes clear the importance of the community of faith. The gospel of

14. *Ibid.*, 220.

15. *Ibid.*, 221.

Jesus Christ is a truncated gospel without the good news of the church, the body of Christ. Many of the people obviously heard the words being read, yet clearly did not understand. Scripture warns us that we must have realistic expectations of the world's response to the light. God's word will bear fruit beyond what we can expect or imagine, but many in the world will prefer the darkness. Their darkness, however, will never be able to overcome the light of the people of God.

In addition to the truth of the resurrected Lord, the world needs to see the word alive in the resurrected community of the Church to truly understand the love of God, the holiness of God, and God's righteousness and justice at work in human lives and circumstance. They must be offered a glimpse of God's Spirit at work in their everyday world. We dare not neglect the hard, sacrificial work of loving one another with our diverse personalities, backgrounds, personal preferences, and whatever else is possible to separate us into fragments of a temple of living stones.

No matter what our zeal to tell the story of Jesus and God's love for mankind may be, our zeal to live in love and peace with one another must also be a part of the story. We need the church for our own support and edification; the world needs to see the church, the loving response to our exemplar and savior Jesus Christ.

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