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"They Went Out From Us": A Study of 1 John 2.18-28

BRUCE E. SHIELDS

My intent in this article is to look at the schism indicated by the content of 1 John and to draw from this study some insight into the importance of doctrinal issues for the unity of today's church and its ministry. I will first examine the possible causes of the division in these early churches, then turn to a summary of how the author of 1 John deals with the division or the dangers left in its wake, and finally draw out lessons for our ministries today.

DIVISION IN THE JOHANNINE CHURCHES

A glance at any recent critical commentary on the Johannine Epistles shows the variety of opinions about just what the issue was that caused 1 John to be written. Some have insisted that it must have been related to the polemic of the Gospel of John, which means it had something to do with the separation of Christians from the Jewish synagogues with which they had originally been associated.¹ Others have pointed out that the total lack of reference to the Hebrew Bible indicates that 1 John is not directed either to Jewish believers or to issues related to Judaism. This has led some to conclude that 1 John was meant for a Gentile audience and deals with doctrinal aberrations related to Hellenistic thinking, especially Gnosticism.² However, studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls have shown some interesting parallels between the thinking and terminology of 1 John and the writings of the Qumran community. This would mean, then that the issue could relate somehow to at least sectarian Judaism.³ Other scholars have argued that the rhetoric of 1 John is just that—Hellenistic rhetoric that has nothing to do with an actual historical situation.⁴

Several things seem clear. First, there is little or nothing in 1 John to connect the schism directly with the separation from the synagogue that appears so prominently in the Fourth Gospel. Second, there is no hint in the Fourth Gospel of the kind of strong and bitter feelings portrayed in 1 John about those who once were in the community and have now left it. In fact, what bitterness does appear in the Gospel is connected to synagogues expelling believers, which means the Christians were the ones leaving. Third, the strong terms used to designate those who had left seem to me to point to a real situation and not just to rhetorical flourishes. Fourth, it is evident from 2.18-28, the text I will focus on, that whatever caused the division, it is

1. James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: A Study of the Origins of Antisemitism* (London: Soncino, 1934; reprint New York: Atheneum, 1969) and C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: S.P.C.K., 1955, 2nd edition 1978), 134-144.

2. Rudolf Bultmann, *Die Drei Johannesbriefe*. KEK 8th Edition (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), cf. 23; English: *The Johannine Epistles: A Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, trans. R. Philip O'Hara, Lane C. McGaughey and Robert Funk (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 38f., and Robert Law, *The Tests of Life: A Study of the First Epistle of St. John* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1909), 25-38.

3. John C. O'Neill, *The Puzzle of 1 John* (London: S.P.C.K., 1966).

4. PHEME PERKINS, *The Johannine Epistles. New Testament Message 21* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1979), xii-xxiii. For a good overview of the history of this issue, see John Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John*, Sacra Pagina Series Volume 18 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 1-26.

seen as very serious and as leaving a residue that could cause further departures from the faith. So we need to look more closely at this passage:

¹⁸Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour. ¹⁹They 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 belongs to us. ²⁰But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge. ²¹I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and you know that no lie comes from the truth. ²²Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. ²³No one who denies the Son has the Father; everyone who confesses the Son has the Father also. ²⁴Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. ²⁵And this is what he has promised us, eternal life.

²⁶I write these things to you concerning those who would deceive you. ²⁷As 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.

²⁸And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming.⁵

2.18 puts the warnings to follow in an eschatological perspective: *eschatē hōra estin*. “Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour.” John’s Gospel uses *tē eschatē hēmera* (the last day) eight times to refer to the day of resurrection and judgment. “Last hour” appears here to refer to the time just before the day of resurrection, as does the plural, “the last days” in 2 Timothy 3.1 and 2 Peter 3.3.

Verse 19 then states, “They went out from us.” This is serious business. First the perpetrators of the problem are labeled “antichrists,” thus historicizing an expectation of the Johannine community that one would appear at the end time to oppose Christ.⁶ Then they are described as having left the Christian community. So it is clear that 1 John is not written to the schismatics, but to those who remained in the community. There is no indication that the author hopes to restore those who had left. His purpose now is to strengthen the faith and confidence of those remaining, warning them against following the schismatics. He does this by pointing out the doctrines and practices of those who had left, while teaching and admonishing them to believe and do the right things. This is no minor disagreement within the community. This is division in the ranks. “They went out from us.”

This makes it clear that these early Christians could identify the boundaries of the faith. There are definitely insiders and outsiders; and these folks “went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us.” This identification appears to be made on the basis first of faith. Those inside “know the truth.” Those outside are liars who deny “that Jesus is the Christ.” This faith is not wishful thinking; it is founded on “what they heard from the beginning,” which reminds the reader or hearer of the opening words of the Epistle,⁷ where the recipients are reminded of the eyewitness testimony of the incarnation on which their faith rests. Therefore, the people to whom the Epistle is

5. *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989). All English quotations will be from this version.

6. Georg Strecker. *The Johannine Letters: A Commentary on 1, 2, and 3 John Hermeneia*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 62-63.

7. I recognize the controversy over the genre of 1 John, caused by the lack of normal signs of Hellenistic letters; but my purpose is not affected by genre, so I’ll use terms as they are traditionally used.

addressed are exhorted to "abide in him" who abides in them. In other words, stay inside and don't be led away by those who have chosen to move outside.

There are also a number of emphatic uses of second person plural pronouns here that could point to exclusive claims of the schismatics. Did they claim to have a special anointing from the Holy Spirit? The author writes, "But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge" (v. 20). There is a text question here, with some ancient texts reading "you know all things." However, the reading that best explains the variants (as attempts to make it correspond with verse 27) is "all of you." This puts the emphasis on an inclusive knowledge, as contrasted with a presumably exclusive (as in Gnosticism) group with special knowledge. Then verse 24 gives us a string of these pronouns: "Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father." All of these pronouns are plural, again emphasizing that the whole community (not just an elite class) shares this close relationship with God in Christ. Then in verse 27 we have five more of these pronouns in the original Greek, "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." As the NRSV translation indicates, the first of these pronouns is not grammatically necessary, since the verb ending is second person plural, and this indicates that it is used for emphasis, made even more obvious by its position as the second word in the sentence, following only the conjunction. This verse, echoing as it does verse 20, closes a neat section in which apparent claims of exclusivism are counteracted by assurances of inclusivism.

What can we understand, then, about these outsiders? There are seven statements in 1 John that appear to be positions of the schismatics against which the author writes:

- 1.6—"If we say we have fellowship with him [God] while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; ..."
- 1.8—"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."
- 1.10—"If we say that we have not sinned, we make him [he who is faithful and just] a liar, and his word is not in us."
- 2.4—"Whoever says, 'I have come to know him [Jesus Christ],' but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist..."
- 2.6—"Whoever says, 'I abide in him [Jesus Christ],' ought to walk just as he walked."
- 2.9—"Whoever says, 'I am in the light,' while hating a brother or sister is still in the darkness."
- 4.20—"Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or 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."

In addition to these quoted claims, the author also indirectly accuses the schismatics of a denial of some of the central tenets of the faith. He does this by writing negative statements. In 2.22-23a, he writes, "Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father;" Then in 4.3 he says, "...and every spirit that does not confess Jesus [Christ come in the flesh] is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world." Again, in 4.5 he contrasts his audience who are from God with the others: "They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them." He continues the contrast in the next verse, "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." Then in 4.8, "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." Two more of these negative statements appear in chapter 5. Verse 10b says, "Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing the testimony that God has given concerning his Son." And verse 12b, "whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life." Both of these last statements are in contrast to corresponding positive statements about the faith of true believers.

Add to these observations the implied exclusive knowledge we saw earlier, along with the emphasis on loving actions, and we have a group of people who reject or at least reinterpret the Johannine understanding of the incarnation, doing so on the claim of special elite knowledge, and teaching in a very unloving manner that has led them to separate themselves from the main part of the community.

Can we put a label on these who left the Johannine community? Not without getting into a controversy. As with many similar issues (compare Colossians) these statements do not perfectly fit any one known group inside or outside the Christian movement. There are those who continue to argue for Gnosticism, or at least incipient Gnosticism, especially since the discovery and study of the texts from Nag Hammadi⁸ Certainly the emphasis on the reality of the incarnation (“Jesus Christ came in the flesh” 4.2-3) could refer to docetic Gnosticism⁹ that held that Christ merely appeared to be human. However, some of the other accusations do not fit that heresy so well. My take on it is that each schism in the early church, as has been true throughout history, had its own peculiarities, determined to a great extent by local influences. More important than identifying the particular heresy is learning from the author something about dealing with schismatic heresy in general.

HOW THE AUTHOR DEALS WITH THE CHALLENGE

One of the first things a reader notices in 1 John, especially when we compare it with other New Testament Epistles, is the proliferation of vocatives. These forms of direct address bring into serious question any attempt to treat 1 John as a general epistle. There appears to be a specific group of people in the author’s mind here. The way the author addresses his audience is always positive and loving. The designation that appears most often is *teknia* (little children), a term of endearment that sounds even more tender in 2.1 as *teknia mou* (my little children). It appears also in 2.12 and 28, 3.18, 4.4, and 5.21, the last verse of the book. Four times he addresses them as *agapētoi* (beloved). Then in 2.12-14, he adds to *teknia* the terms *pateres* (fathers), *neaniskoi* (young people), and *paidia* (children). The latter he then repeats in 2.18, which indicates that the author is using *paidia* as a synonym for *teknia*, which he has used as a designation for all believers to whom he is writing. Addressing fathers and young people (literally young men) appears to be a way of clarifying in this rather poetic passage that everybody (all ages) are included in his exhortation. These five forms of address, appearing sixteen times in five chapters, are tender and loving, showing great affection and respect, so that his warnings and encouragement would be seen as his concern for their well-being.

A second characteristic of the approach that we notice is the emphasis on the positive. Even as we recognize the negative statements listed above, we see that the preponderance of statements is positive. The author usually uses negative statements in contrasting constructions, where the positive gets the emphasis by order in the syntax or by the weight of the words used. In 2.18-28 the three contrasts contain 84 words in the negative statements and 140 words in the positive ones. This appears to hold true in the rest of the document; and between those contrasts is positive teaching both about the nature of God and Christ and the way we are to live in response to our salvation and the revelation of God’s love for us.

A more detailed exposition of several of these 1 John texts is presented by other writers in this issue, so I have concentrated on 2.18-28, which, as we have seen, contains a larger than usual concentration of negative statements.

8. See Morris M. Womack, *1, 2, & 3 John* The College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1998), 18-22.

9. Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, trans. Jörg Frei (London: S.C.M., 1989), 62f., and footnote 48, pp. 185f. Original, *Die johannische Frage: ein Lösungsversuch* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1989).

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM 1 JOHN?

In the first place, we should recognize that the issue or issues that the author of 1 John was faced with are serious issues of both faith and life. There are other passages in the New Testament that instruct us or give us precedents on how to deal with disagreements or with believers who fall into some kind of sinful activity. We should turn to Matthew 5.21-26, Romans 14.1-15.13, Galatians 6.1-5, and other similar passages for help in these cases. However, when we are faced with outright, active false teaching accompanied by unloving behavior on the part of people who either leave the fellowship or are expelled from it, the example of our author can be helpful.

Our primary concern at that point should be the welfare of those still in the community. Such desertion or expulsion is always painful for all involved. Pastoral comfort is called for. Church leaders should address the situation with whatever terminology and action seem appropriate to show continuing affection for the sisters and brothers. Sometimes what is worse than bumbling in our dealing with such a tragedy is trying to ignore it. We are well advised to tackle the problem head on, but to treat the remaining members of the community tenderly.

A second lesson we can take from this study is to accentuate the positive. We dare not eliminate the negative, but we can learn to overbalance the negative warnings with a preponderance of positive teaching. At times this is difficult because the leaders themselves have been deeply hurt by the schismatics or by the way the whole episode has unfolded. However, as Christians we should be able to lean on the God of love and display the characteristics of the love of God. In doing so we can also, as did our author, teach not only what we would consider high Christology but also the high Christian ethic of love for one another.

A third consideration is the centrality of Christology. If we can't get that right, nothing else will fit into this faith of ours. A Christology that sees Jesus as so divine that he can display no human emotions, attitudes or actions leaves us without a Lord who can really empathize with our weaknesses. On the other hand, a Christology that understands Jesus of Nazareth as a human actor in a play who is controlled somehow by God for a time and then left to die leaves us dependent on our own human devices in life's struggles. Or if we see Jesus merely as an outstanding ethical teacher, we are left with the same fear of death that haunts the unbeliever. In other words, we need to be sure our households of faith have their Christology straight; not that we can fully understand the incarnation, but that we believe the testimony of the New Testament about our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ.

And finally, we should teach love—"not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (4.10). The *agapē* that God showed in the giving of the Son of God for our sins is the love we are to show to one another in the community and even to those outside. To put it that way is to point up one of the strange (from the viewpoint of the world) paradoxes of the Christian faith. We can love indiscriminately while at the same time being acutely conscious of who is inside and who is outside our community. Our author does not hesitate to identify "them." He even labels them (antichrists, liars, etc.). He then reminds the faithful of the love of God and their responsibility to love. As is true with other paradoxes of our faith, we must be content to live in the creative tension of a well-defined boundary around the community of faith that is expected to love as God loves.

God help us. Amen.

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