

THE JOHANNINE LETTERS

Introductory Matters

As brief and as apparently simple as they are, the three Johannine letters have stirred enormous controversy, both academic and popular. The Greek is deceptively simple; two of the three letters boast fewer than three hundred words; some of the principal themes of 1 John are elucidated in the Fourth Gospel. Nevertheless disputes abound, focused not least on the following areas.

1. *The setting of the letters.* The majority view, probably correctly, argues for a setting towards the end of the 1st century, as the church (probably in Asia Minor) is beginning to face the pressure of incipient Gnosticism. That stance has a bearing on how we understand some of the biblical-theological issues, especially in 1 and 2 John.

2. *The concrete setting of 3 John* is particularly difficult to construct, with its sharply polemical language by the 'elder' regarding Diotrophes and those he controls. All reconstructions, of course, involve some 'mirror reading', the attempt to infer what the other side is saying when one can listen in to only one side of a debate or a conversation. In this instance, the most radical proposal is that Diotrophes represents the 'orthodox' church leader who is attempting to hold the line against an invasive and power-hungry 'elder'. Thus the 'wrong' side made it into the canon. That sort of reconstruction necessarily makes a number of judgments about the Johannine writings generally that are far from persuasive. In any case, the issue is not merely technical; one's perception of the contribution of 3 John to biblical theology depends rather heavily (as we shall see) on one's conclusions regarding such debates.

3. Somewhat less important, from the perspective of grasping these letters' biblical theology, is *their chronological relation to John's Gospel*. Were they written before the Gospel, or after? Or some before, and some after? Judgments on these matters affect some of the 'fine tuning' of the exegesis (and therefore of the biblical theology), but do not significantly modify the most central points.

4. *The assumption that they are written by the same hand, and by the same hand that wrote the Fourth Gospel*, enables the interpreter the more easily to appeal to parallels among these documents for mutual clarification; but these two assumptions are constantly challenged.

The Biblical Theological Contribution of 2 John and 3 John

Of the three Johannine letters, 1 John and 2 John are the closest in terms of theme, while 2 John and 3 John are the closest in terms of form and brevity. Unlike the first two Johannine

epistles, 3 John makes no specific mention of heretical beliefs or practice. The elder assumes that Diotrephes ought to receive his messengers, but that he does not do so because he ‘loves to be first’ (v. 9, NIV) and is engaged in a power play that has manipulated his local church into a stance that excludes the elder and his emissaries.

This much is undisputed. But these raw elements have a bearing on three important issues. *First*, the most reasonable answer to the question of why the elder thinks he should [p. 352] have a fundamental hearing in the church where Diotrephes is in charge is that this particular elder is the apostle John. Like Peter, John thinks of himself as a fellow elder (1 Pet. 5:1). Just as Paul faced opponents in a variety of churches he oversaw, and insisted on obedience (*e.g. 1 Cor. 14:37–38), so also here; John knows that Diotrophes’ love of pre-eminence is not only intrinsically evil in the church of the crucified Redeemer, but if it leads to excluding the authority of the apostolic witness the dangers are extreme. *Secondly*, this brief epistle offers a vignette of church governance just before a major shift took place. Since the work of Lightfoot, it has been widely recognized that during the NT period there were only two offices in the local church: the deacon, and the elder–pastor–overseer (= bishop). In other words, extension of the bishop’s work to include oversight of other elder-pastors did not take place until the second century, after the writing of the NT documents was complete. The apostles and their emissaries maintained a supervisory role, but their status could not, in the nature of the case, be institutionalized. But as John faces dangers towards the end of the 1st century, dangers from powermongers within (3 John) and from schismatic heretics without (though they had originally split off from the church; 1 John and 2 John), his solution is not to introduce a new level of supervisory administration, but to call the church back to what was ‘from the beginning’ (a recurrent phrase) and was tightly bound up with apostolic witness. In later centuries, the church often tried to identify itself through its succession of bishops; John insists that the church identify itself by its maintenance of what was ‘from the beginning’ and taught by the founding apostles. *Thirdly*, the elder’s denunciation of Diotrephes discloses what should be clear from any careful reading of the NT documents; qualifications for Christian leadership include not only doctrinal firmness but also a certain gentleness, a transparent humility, even when strong action must be taken (*cf. 2 Cor. 10–13; 1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9). This is not an optional extra for specially endowed leaders. Rather, it is mandated for all leaders of the followers of the Crucified. The desire to be first is a disqualification for Christian leadership.

If 3 John finds the elder threatening a church that has become too narrow because of the manipulative control of a Diotrephes, 2 John finds him warning a church (under the guise of ‘the chosen lady and her children’, v. 1) to be careful of itinerant preachers who are full of what we would today call ‘spirituality’ but who have left behind what the Christians had learned ‘from the beginning’ (v. 6). The love of novelty combined with admiration for piety easily breeds an irresponsible tolerance for theological rubbish. One remembers the wisdom of the old preacher: ‘You say I am not with it? / My friend, I do not doubt it. / But when I see what I’m not with / I’d rather be without it.’

The Biblical Theological Contribution of 1 John

Readers who pay close attention to the text of 1 John cannot fail to notice the close similarity between its language and the language of John's Gospel. Yet the differences are at times almost as striking. 1 John 1:1 seems at first glance, like the Johannine prologue (John 1:1, 14), to assign the title 'Word' to the incarnate Son who was heard and seen and touched. Yet 1 John 1:2 promptly takes a slightly different direction: it is the 'life' that appeared and was seen, rather than the Word. Again, both documents insist that the purpose of writing was to encourage people to believe; yet the Gospel casts this in terms of fundamental mandate (John 20:30–31), while the first epistle tells us it was written to grant assurance to those who believe (1 John 5:13).

Even a quick and superficial reading of 1 John discloses that John circles around three themes. He insists that genuine believers hold certain truths about Jesus, in particular that he is the Christ, the Son of God, while those who deny this point are liars and deceivers (2:22–23; 4:2). Moreover, genuine believers are obedient to Christ's commands (2:3–6; 3:7–10); the heretics whom John condemns and who were once members of the church (2:19) are conspicuous for their disobedience. And finally, genuine believers are characterized by transparent and practical love for one another (2:9–11; 3:11–18), while the defectors display a haughty condescension.

Since the time of Robert Law (*The Tests of Life*), these three themes have often been referred to as John's three 'tests': the truth test, the moral test, and the social test; or, [p. 353] otherwise put, the test of doctrine, the test of obedience, and the test of love. Yet one must recognize that in John's hands these 'tests' are not so much presented as standards by which the church may exclude certain people (for in this case the defectors have already withdrawn and do not need to be excluded), even though they could conceivably exercise that role. Rather, John writes 'these things', *i.e.* about these tests, so as to reassure the genuine believers (5:13). It appears that these believers, perhaps under the pressure from those who had left them for a more 'advanced' spirituality, were in danger of doubting their status.

Four additional characteristics of these so-called 'tests' may illuminate John's contribution to biblical theology. *First*, although it is common to speak of three discrete tests, in the last two chapters of his first epistle John intertwines them. If Jesus commands us and we must obey, one of his commands (indeed, his primary command) is to love. Moreover, if one loves God, then of course one will obey him (5:2). Thus the test of obedience and the test of love are tightly tied together. Moreover, it is the person who believes the truth (that Jesus truly is the Christ) who is born of God, and whoever is born of God will surely love others who are born of God (5:1). Further, the person who overcomes the world and therefore obeys God's commands is none other than the one who believes 'that Jesus is the Son of God' (5:5). Thus the truth test is interlocked with both the love test and the obedience test. In fact, John multiplies such links, so that one should perhaps not speak of three tests so much as of three facets of one comprehensive vision. One cannot pass one or two out of three of these tests; in John's view, they stand or fall

together. Christian authenticity can never rightly be negligent of love while virulently defending the truth, or vice versa. John sees the holism of the Christian vision. Moreover, he is in line with other NT passages that threaten the severest penalties for those who teach major doctrinal deviation (*e.g. Gal. 1:8–9), who conduct themselves in massive disobedience to God (1 Cor. 6:9–11), or who prove persistently loveless and divisive (Titus 3:10); the so-called three tests of 1 John carry many faces in the NT documents. Intertwined, they make it clear to the Christian believer that the presence of these elements of Christian belief and conduct makes its own contribution to Christian assurance (1 John 5:13), and, further, that the only alternative to the total bundle is sheer idolatry (5:21).

Secondly, although contemporary scholars commonly speak of three tests in 1 John, a handful add a fourth. For several passages speak either of an ‘anointing’ (presumably of the Holy Spirit) that has been given us, or of the Holy Spirit directly (2:20, 27; 3:24), in contexts designed to engender assurance: ‘But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth’ (2:20); ‘And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us’ (3:24). Some link such passages to the ‘witness of the Spirit’ theme of which Paul speaks (Rom. 8:15–16). But the question that must be asked is this: does 1 John present this ‘anointing’ or this work of the Spirit as something discernibly different or at least distinguishable from the three tests that lie on the surface of the text? In other words, does the anointing constitute a fourth and separate evidence for the work of God? Or does the context of each passage suggest that the manifestation of the Spirit’s anointing is precisely in the observable three tests to which reference has already been made? Contextually, the latter appears to be the more defensible position. In any case, to add or subtract one more test is not of ultimate importance in a book which so diligently intertwines its tests in order to emphasize that Christian doctrine, life and love stand or fall together.

Thirdly, although the three tests are used by John to engender assurance (5:13), and although all of them are in the domain of observable conduct, it would be quite mistaken to infer that John ultimately *grounds* Christian assurance on personal conduct. It is not as if John is saying, ‘Your beliefs, your obedience, and your love are so rich that you are entitled to Christian assurance.’ After all, he recognizes that the Christian’s confidence before God, when we sin, finally turns on Jesus Christ and what he accomplished on the cross (2:2), and this in turn is grounded in God’s matchless love in sending his Son (4:7–12). On this point, John is in entire agreement with Paul. But John insists that there is another element in Christian assurance, viz. the evidence of a transformed life. Such evidence provides not the ultimate ground of confidence (that is reserved for Christ and his [p. 354] cross), but a subsidiary appeal to the confirmation of a life transformed by the gospel, since it is unthinkable that a life that has truly known the power of the gospel should not have been changed by it.

Fourthly, John’s style of writing, not least the implacability and absolutism of his tests, serve as a necessary complement to other canonical writings. Not for John the anguished searching of Ecclesiastes or Job; not for him the intricate theological argumentation of Romans. Nevertheless, his voice is not less important than theirs. True, absolute criteria without the voices

of anguish or of even-handed evaluation could easily become harsh, legalistic, even demeaning; on the other hand, anguished voices and even-handed evaluation ('on the one hand', 'on the other hand') easily dissolve into moral relativism without the absolutes of a John to stiffen their spine. Christianity is not infinitely plastic. It embraces truth, the denial of which merely proves one is not a Christian; it defines conduct, the systematic flouting of which demonstrates one is outside the camp. Precisely because our age thinks that ambiguity and relativism are signs of intellectual and even moral maturity, John's immovable tests are the more necessary as we seek to construct inductively-shaped biblical theology.

Other themes come to unique expression in 1 John, even though they are tied to broader NT structures. 'Remaining in' is a favourite locution: the truth remains in believers, believers in Christ, and so forth. In common with much of the NT, John lives with the tension between inaugurated and futurist eschatology, but he applies it not only to the Christian's hope (3:1-3) but also to the antichrist; the antichrist expected at the end (whose coming John does not deny) has already appeared in many antichrists (2:18). Many biblical writings describe the love of God, but only this epistle sums the matter up with the declaration 'God is love' (4:8), which can never be reduced to mere sentimentalism because the ensuing discussion presupposes that the most spectacular display of God's love is in the cross. Numerous phrases and expressions connect this letter with the Fourth Gospel and its larger theological framework (*e.g. 'No one has ever seen God', 4:12, *cf.* John 1:18; 'the Saviour of the world', 4:14, *cf.* John 4:42).

Finally, although 1 John never cites the OT in an unambiguous and extensive citation, and although the only OT person named in the epistle is Cain (3:12), there are several deeper links that are sometimes overlooked. Some of these are covenantal in nature (see J. Pryor, *John*). One of the most important is bound up with John's strong and repeated insistence that his readers, because of the anointing from the Holy One, already know the truth, and do not need anyone to teach them (2:20, 27). Sceptical critics (*e.g. R. E. Brown) detect in such passages little more than Johannine hypocrisy: after all, what is John doing but teaching them himself? But that question misses the point. John is almost certainly thinking of passages such as Jeremiah 31:31-34. They promise that under the new covenant the people of God will no longer need teachers to tell them, 'Know the Lord', for they will all know him, from the least to the greatest. Within the framework of the old covenant there were appointed prophets, priests and kings whose first task was to mediate God to the covenant community at large. Under the new covenant, however, all would have genuine knowledge of God. Jeremiah does not so much anticipate the abolition of teachers as the abolition of mediating teachers, teachers with privileged access to God. Under the new covenant, there is no need for mediating teachers, for all know God, any more than for priests, for all are priests. Such teachers as the new covenant prescribes are seen as members of the body rather than as priestly mediators. John's readers, intimidated by those who claimed some sort of super-spiritual access denied to others, needed to be reminded of this fundamental feature of the new covenant: no one may legitimately claim a privileged status with God, on the basis of some role or office or experience. It is a biblical-

theological emphasis not uncommon in the NT (however variously it is shaped), and it is needed no less today than in John's day.

Bibliography

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