

I JOHN

All quotes and comments by Clifton Black unless otherwise noted

Introduction to the Johannine epistles – the major themes:

1. “God is light and in him there is no darkness at all”: The nature of God.
2. “What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you”: The traditional context for theological understanding.
3. “Children, it is the last hour!”: The eschatological context for theological understanding.
4. “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh”: Who Jesus is.
5. “He is the expiation for our sins”: What Jesus does.
6. “Beloved, let us love one another”: The shape of Christian existence.

1) John Wesley re: 1 John: “How plain, how full, how deep a compendium of genuine Christianity.” Probably all three letters attributed to “John” were written by the same person but questionably by the same author who wrote the Gospel of John. Perhaps he **was** John, son of Zebedee. However, 2 and 3 John begins with “the elder” and it is likely that 1 John was also written by “the elder.” Probably sent from Ephesus, c100 AD, as a “general” letter. Not known whether written before or after the 4th Gospel. Considerable debate as to when it was written. (JB: Does it matter?) First John implies, and 2 & 3 John expressly indicate, that there was a network of Christian congregations within a Johannine network, for which those letters’ author assumes an advisory and perhaps supervisory responsibility. /// First John may not have been a letter; 2 & 3 definitely were. First John may have been a sermon, circular, essay, whatever, but can be classified with 2 & 3 as epistles. /// “The opening “we” suggests that the author belongs to a “group of authorized teachers (who provide) a formal backdrop for the individual who writes these instructions to the community.” /// Unlike the 4th gospel, where confrontation between new Christians and Jewish leaders is a dominant theme, 1 John does not reflect this opposition.

A comparison:

1 John

“from the beginning”

“what we have looked at” (*etheasametha*)

“the word” (*logos*)

“life”

“with (*pros*) the Father”

John 1

“in the beginning”

“we have seen (*etheasametha*) his glory”

“the word” (*logos*)

“life”

“with (*pros*) God”

- 2) 1:1-3 -- Cf first four verses of the Gospel of John. The difference: John highlights the pre-existent glory of the Word. First John stresses the empirically verifiable reality of the Son, but the NRSV and doesn’t capitalize “Word”; the NIV correctly does. John highlights the pre-existence of Jesus, whereas 1 John highlights the empirical reality of the Son. /// The Greek word used here for “have fellowships” is “koinonia,” literally “active participation” – a partnership or joint ownership of a concern.
- 3) 1:4 -- Some ancient mss read “your joy.” Cf John 20:19-31 where Thomas believes only when seeing the resurrected Jesus, and Jesus blesses those who believe without seeing him.
- 4) 1:5 – “God is light.” James 1:17: Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation no shadow due to change. Psalm 27:1: The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? Psalm 36:19: For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light. Psalm 1b-2a:

You are clothed with honor and majesty, wrapped in light as a garment. Job 24:13: There are those who rebel against the light, who are not acquainted with its ways... 1Corinthians 4:5: Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness... 2 Corinthians 6:14c: What fellowship is there between light and darkness? (Many more!) /// A favorite passage of Helen Keller.

- 5) 1:7 – “Walking in the light,” not pretending flawlessness, but owning up to sins that rupture communion, both divine and human, and to acknowledge God’s Son as the agent of reconciliation. John 8:12: Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” John 11:9b-10a: Jesus: “Those that walk by day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble because the light is not in them.” Romans 13:12: The night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Ephesians 5:9-10: For the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. (Many others!) /// “Cleansed by the blood of Christ” harkens back to Exodus 30:10 and Leviticus 16:15 where the smell of blood on the altar is pleasing to God. (JB: I don’t understand how I can be “cleansed” by Jesus’ blood being shed on the cross!)
- 6) 1:10 – JB: Why? Jesus a liar because we claim not to have sinned? Nonsense!
- 7) 2:1 -- Only in John and his epistles is Jesus the Advocate -- an intercession provided by the Holy Spirit. In Greek: *paraclete* -- called to a friend’s side. Yet the image of Christ as intercessor between humanity and God is employed by both Paul (Rom 8:34) and the author of Hebrews. (7:25, 9:24).
- 8) 2:5-8 -- First of 52 references to “agape” love in 1 John, with another 10 in 2 & 3 John. An ambiguous phrase in v 5: “love of God here” (NRSV). In three other translations it’s “love for God,” “God’s own love,” “Divine love.” Subtle differences. But in context, it means fulfillment, through obedience of our love for God. /// Another commonly used word is “mene,” “to abide in him.” -- used 40 times in John, 24 in 1 John, 3 in 2 John, and 1 in Revelation. /// Apparent contradiction: The “old” commandment is to love one another. The “new” commandment is the same, but brought to realization in Christ. It is old because it harks back to the primal testimony of Jesus as “the word” that the church has heard “from the beginning.” It’s new because it crystallizes the ethic of an era newly inaugurated through Christ. /// Modern readers may be troubled by the sharp distinction between love and hate, would rather stifle that starkness with love-like-indifferent-dislike-hate. But for the elder, there is light and there is dark. Another major difference between the elder and the 4th evangelist and Paul and Jesus in the synoptic gospels is that he restricts his love commandment to the Christian community. (Ivan Karamazov (in *The Brothers Kamazov*) says he wonders how anyone can love his neighbor because it’s just him who it is impossible to love at close quarters!) The elder is not animated by the kind of sociological insecurities that tempt the modern church to forgo catecheries and to confuse worship with entertainment. (JB – clapping for every musical number?)

9) REFLECTIONS 2:1-6

The Johannine letters correct our “nostalgic myopia” that the early church was a golden age of purity. Luther said that the early church wasn’t as holy as we believed it to be. In a survey of modern churches, 98% believed in “personal sin,” but two-thirds thought they themselves were not sinners, just made mistakes.

- 10) 2:12-14 – This passage **is** intrusive. But it can be considered a “pep talk.” It does recall the language and concerns of 2:1-6 and provides a counterweight to the negative concerns in 1:5-16. The rhythmic repetition tends to amplify, with vividness, the elder’s reassurance of its readers. It should be noted that the word in Greek translated here as “because” can also be translated as “that,” which completely alters the meaning. (JB: “because” makes more sense.)
- 11) 2:15 – The elder is commenting on the 4th gospel by restating that “love of the world” is in mutual opposition to “love of the Father.” Jesus was sent into the world by God and believers are sent into the world by Jesus. By being lovers of the world makes you hostile to God. The elder asks the question and then answers it. Are we going to ultimately trust ourselves to this world’s bogus promises of salvation by beauty, financial security, and creature comfort? Or to God’s guarantee of our full restoration through the love of Jesus Christ? The elder gives us encouragement that we will choose wisely because we have **already been chosen by God.** /// In most Bibles, “things in the world” is translated “flesh.” To the elder here, and in John and elsewhere (Rom 13:14, Gal 5:17, Eph 2:3, 1 Peter 2:11) “flesh” does *not* equal sex; rather, the entire domain of humanity which is distinct from God.
- 12) 2:17 -- On Dwight L. Moody's tombstone.
- 13) 2:18-25 – “Many antichrists.” 1) The lawless one described in 2 Thess 2:3-9: “Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come unless a rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction.” **First**, described in Daniel 9:27: “He (Nebuchanezzar) shall make a strong covenant for one week and for half of the week he shall make sacrificing and offering cease; and in their place shall be an abomination that desolates, until the decreed end shall come to the desolater.” Probably referring to sacrificing pigs on the holy altar. This abomination was repeated in the Maccabean War against Antiochus IV in c 135. Although the abomination then was thought to be a statue of Antiochus with a pig’s face. Mark in 13:14 warns that in the end times the abomination will be “set up where it ought not to be.” 2) Antinomian errorists, those who believed that once they were saved they could sin in any way they wanted to because their salvation was already assured. 3) Judaeizers who believed that only if a convert accepted all the laws of Moses first, including circumcision, could he become a Christian. /// The elder recognizes the deep schism in the church – between those who deny that Jesus is the Christ and those who affirm him as the Christ. But the elder doesn’t explain how they could still be in the Christian community while denying Christ. This passage is more troubled than any other in I John because it shows a Christian community undergoing deep disturbance without explaining why. The depth of the elder’s distress must be directly proportionate to the closeness he once shared with those who have broken away from the church. If they hadn’t been close, their departure would have been met with indifference.
- 14) 2:27 -- “Him” refers to God or Christ “revealed,” is sending the “spirit of the Lord,” as in 1 Samuel 16:13 (“and the spirit of the Lord came mightily on David”), Isaiah 61:1, 2 (“the spirit of the Lord God is upon me” to bring good news, bind up the broken-hearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, etc), Corinthians 1:21-22 (“giving us his Spirit in our hearts.”) (Emmaus Candlelight Night round, “You have given us your Spirit.”) /// The original Greek and the KJV read that the anointing by God or Jesus taught them what they needed to know. The NIV and NRSV both dilute this by saying that the anointing “remains (abides) in you.” Not sure what the anointing was. Unlikely to be baptism because the secessionists would also have been baptized. Probably the coming of the Holy Spirit, attested to us in the

4th gospel five times and in 1 John three times.

- 15) 2:28-3:3 – It's unclear whether the elder is expecting God Jesus is to be manifested in the "end time." The Greek word is *parousia*, originally used for the arrival of a potentate, then adopted by early Christians for describing the second coming of Jesus. V 3:1 emphasizes our *kinship* with God, unlike the 4th gospel that emphasizes the *oneness* with God.
- 16) 3:4-10 -- This text seems to contradict 1:8-2:2. Even Augustine said it put "minds on the stretch." Perhaps the elder differentiates momentary lapses from a life of sin. Or, "at once justified and a sinner," Martin Luther. Or, perhaps the comments derive from different sources. /// "God's seed" -- being the children of God, they cannot sin. Or, another nuance: there is a "divine seed" within the created order, especially in humans. Either way, the point is metaphorical: birth from God is not a one-shot occurrence. Those who are begotten of God have within them "permanent evidence of their recognizable character as children of God."

17) REFLECTIONS 3:4-10

The Common Lectionary decided to include only 3:1-7, thus eliminating the asperity of vv 8-10 which bothers modern readers but you can bet that doing so would have displeased the elder. The elder insists that sin be regarded with a seriousness that doesn't come easily in a Western culture more comfortable speaking of crimes, misdemeanors, inappropriate behavior, and "no fault" in almost everything rather than "sin." As a society we inoculate ourselves to the injustice of injuries great and small, resulting in a repudiation of God. The flip side is that we forget that the good we do does not come from our own natural aptitudes and dispositions rather than from the stirring of God within us. Others may focus on personal salvation rather than helping others to achieve it.

18) OVERVIEW 1 John 3:11-5:12

"Cognate themes tumble upon one another, amplifying and deepening the church's reassurance of its indestructible life with God."

3:11-18 – love for one another

3:19-24 – the criterion of truth

4:1-6 – the spirit of God

4:7-12 – the manifestation of God among us

4:13-21 – the mutual dwelling of God and the believer

5:1-5 – love for God's children

5:6-12 – God's testimony in the Son

- 19) 3:11-18 -- The elder points out that the "enemy" is now friction within the church, rather than from without, as it was when the Gospel of John was written. He anticipates Walt Kelly's Pogo who said, "We have met the enemy and he is us." The elder equates the obvious church breakdown (hatred and indifference to need) with Cain's murder of Abel. From the story of Cain and Abel, the elder zeroes in on the character of life and death. He redefines death as not a biological state but as an existential condition: "whoever does not love abides in death." By hating his brother, Cain spiritually predeceased Abel. Jesus's sacrifice of his life for us is a mirror image of Cain's murder of Abel. V 18 reminds us of James 1:22: "Be doers of the word, not only hearers." The church is to manifest love in word and deed, in speech and truth.
- 20) 3:19-24 – The elder now tells us how to do that (11-18). Throughout the Bible "the heart" refers to the seat of religious and moral conduct. Here the elder says that if our hearts condemn us without the full amount of evidence, God as a higher court will overrule the judgment

because he knows everything. In v. 22 we must read into it that God grants us everything we ask for only if asked for in the name of Jesus, what is good for the church, nothing capricious or self-serving. For the elder, “belonging to the truth” (v. 19) is synonymous with “abiding in Jesus” (v 24) and “abiding in the light” (2:10). With those words the elder reassures his community (and us) that they don’t need to feel guilty about their affluence because as Luther said many centuries later, “Conscience is a drop, the reconciled God is a sea of comfort.” We don’t have to feel guilty when we wonder if we’re strong enough to lay down our life for a friend as Jesus did for us. /// The Venerable Bede: “A two-pronged command: Without faith in Christ we are not able to love one another properly, nor can we truly believe in the name of Jesus Christ without brotherly love.”

- 21) 4:1-6 – Following the mention of the Spirit in 3:24, the elder introduces the theme of “testing the spirit.” In both cases the rift within the church provokes the comment that the false prophets have gone out into the world. This is not the only time a biblical book warns about false prophets but the danger is real now, a real infection that must be combated. How does one test the spirits? By judging whether or not the spirit confesses that Jesus has come “in the flesh from God.” The Christian must accept that Jesus’s humanity is as important as his divinity. Don’t, the elder warns, underestimate the fact that he lived and died. This is what split the church. Scholars debate just what happened. The debate boils down to the elder opposing any underestimation of Jesus’ incarnation. The final test is whether or not the person (people) listen to us. In effect, the elder is warning us in the modern church not to treat the church as a club, a religious recreational facility, a YMCA. But a place where one should find hard questioning and reasoned deliberation. He warns against docetism, the notion that Jesus was not really human but only appeared to be.
- 22) 4:7-12 – **The most profound analysis of Christian love in the NT, surpassing even the better known 1 Cor, chap 13.** “Love” appears as a verb or noun 13 times in these six vv. Jesus is God’s one-of-a-kind Son. V. 10 is reflected in the apocryphal Odes of Solomon, “For I should not have known how to love the Lord had he not continually loved me.”
- 23) 4:13-21 – The elder points out that love is not an inherent human aptitude. He returns to the divine origin of our loving: we love because he first loved us.
- 24) 5:1-5 – Like the 4th gospel, in 12 places, this passage claims that belief in Jesus both defines and validates belief in God. To deny Jesus as the Son is to lose God as the Father. If Christ occupies the center at which faith comes into focus, then other things, however important, do not.
- 25) 5:6a -- Three possibilities: 1) water/baptism, blood/Eucharist, 2) water/Jesus’s baptism, blood/crucifixion, 3) water and blood recall Jesus’s death with water and blood from his side. Clifton Black prefers #3.

26) REFLECTIONS 5:6-12

It is not that we love God, but that he loved us so much that he sent his Son to die for the expiation of our sins. Expiation implies sacrifice and sacrifice means death. Why death? That’s how we know what love is: Jesus Christ lay down his life for us.

- 27) 5:13 -- Just as John and 1 John begin alike, so do they close alike. Compare this vs. with John 20:31.
- 28) 5:16-17 -- The deadly or mortal sin was considered at first to be a refusal to love, or hatred, for one’s brother. Now most interpreters consider it to be an outright denial of Jesus. John Wesley construed a “sin toward death” to be “total apostasy from both the power and form of godliness.” /// Tertulian (c 160-225) classified seven sins as unpardonable: murder,

idolatry, injustice, apostasy, blasphemy, adultery, fornication. Thomas Aquinas differentiated those mortal sins that were forgivable only by God from venial (ordinary) sins, and defined modes for their remission. The seven cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude, faith, hope, love. /// The elder is so vague about what constitutes a “deathward sin” that commentators have tried to fill in the blanks. It might be an outright denial of Jesus.

29) 5:18 – Blatantly inconsistent with vv 16-17 where he recommends intercessory prayer for those who have sinned. Perhaps the elder is emphasizing the Christian’s divine parentage and protection from the power of the evil one.

30) 5:21 -- No explanation for this abrupt ending -- the problem has not been mentioned in the entire epistle. Probably a Johanine church in Asia Minor (now western Turkey). “Keep away from anything that might take God’s place in your heart.”