

Love, ethics and the Holy Spirit

1 John 1:5-2:3 and 3:16-24

Introduction:

So, today's book is 1 John. The book does not have the typical components of a letter. Like it doesn't say who wrote it and to whom it is addressed. For centuries, this has been called a Catholic letter. This doesn't mean that it is exclusively for the Catholic Church. A catholic letter would be universal letter, a general letter that does not address a specific situation.

I don't believe that is the case for 1 John. The letter is addressed to what scholars call "the Johannine Community" This is the community that is also addressed in the gospel of John. You know, in Greek, you don't say the gospel of John, you say the gospel "according to John."

Some say that that community was founded by teachers and theologians in the Johannine School. The teaching on that gospel again, represents the gospel according to John, probably the son of Zebedee.

From the text of 1 John we find that this community has gone through a difficult and probably bitter split. And John (if not John the apostle, then one who has been a follower of John or his school), writes this letter. Of

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course there are some scholars who wonder if this “letter” was written even before the gospel was written. Yet other scholars believe that this letter is written to make corrections on some of the interpretations of this gospel according to John.

One of the things we should keep in mind is the oral tradition of the gospel. There was a time when I used to think that the gospels were written as Jesus was walking the earth, you know? Perhaps his biographer, but no, the New Testament as we know it now was not written until between 20 and 60 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So, the Johannine community was formed in the oral tradition of the gospel according to John. It was then written, some say about the year 90 CE.

Some say that this letter is really a sermon, an exhortation. I don't know what the genre is but it is clearly written for a specific reason, that is, to encourage the church and to exhort them to continue in the things they received from the beginning and to tell them not to be deceived by the people who left the church.

The proclamation of the beginning

So the writer reminds them of the beginning of the proclamation saying:

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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-- we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1Jo 1:1-3 NRSV)

One thing to notice is that in Greek, the order of the words tells us where the emphasis goes. In the passage that I just read the emphasis is not on the “we declare”, but in the content of what was declared to them from the beginning. And this beginning would be in the witness of John the apostle or better yet, John the Baptist as described in the gospel of John:

⁶ *There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.*

⁷ *He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.*

⁸ *He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.*

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(Joh 1:6-8 NRSV)

So, the writer identifies the teacher as being part of a chain of people who were witness to this light that stretches back to Jesus and to those who were with him and about whom John would have written.

The message of those who proclaim coming through that chain gives the Johannine church the connection with Jesus Christ. In human or familial terms, this would be as when our parents tell us about our great-grandparents. Maybe we would have pictures to see them but when we hear their stories we feel a connection. We have communion with them.

Likewise here the writer says,

³ we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1Jo 1:3 NRSV)

The writer wants them to remember the message from the beginning. And this is a message about the connection that they had with a Jesus Christ who was at once divine

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and human. What was from the beginning as written in the gospel of John:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God.

(Joh 1:1-2 NRSV)

This verse testifies to Jesus divinity as the Son of God, but the writer of 1 John says, we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life. So, in that testimony, in that realization, they have communion with each other, but truly, he says, the fellowship is with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ.

He guides them back to their beginnings, to the message that unite them. The value of the message is worth living for and living by. And something that they already know because it has been the message from the beginning:

“God is light and him there is no darkness at all”

If God is light, and we have fellowship with God, then we walk in the light. We know this. They knew that.

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Knowing and obeying.

We walk in light when we have fellowship with God and with one another. This fellowship is made possible because everyone is illuminated by the same light, the light of God. So, we are together walking in the light. It is not a matter of saying, “I am going to be walking in light here and you walk in light there” We walked together in this light and have fellowship with one another and all of us have fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. As we walked together in fellowship, “the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” God is faithful. He provides the means by which this fellowship is possible.

And there are many things that can happen when a bunch of people walk along together. We are liable to offend the brother and the sister. We are liable to gossip. Somebody said a very unwise and offensive word or have a bad attitude. We deceive ourselves if we think that we are not able to sin against the brother, against the sister, and against God.

But at that moment, at the realization, we can confess, we must confess and he who is FAITHFUL,

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forgives us from our sins. He is the faithful one and his blood cleanses us from all unrighteousness. Sometimes we may offend our God and deviate towards darkness and sin, but John tells his readers, if you do that, confess and God is faithful.

In chapter 2:1 John give them the reason for writing what he what he wrote, *“Little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin”*. In other words, we should not get the idea that because God will forgive our sins that that is a license to sin. On the contrary, remember, *“God is light and in him there is no darkness at all”*

We must remember that there is an ethical responsibility when we walk in the light. And that responsibility is to live the commandment from the Lord and to love one another and God. But if we sin, we have an advocate, and here John says that our advocate with the Father is Jesus Christ the righteous. His blood is the means by which our sins are forgiven. He forgives ours sins and the sins of the whole world.

And here I want to talk a little bit about the passage that we read (1 John 1:5-2:3) passage and a passage that we didn't read. The passage is in Chapter 3:4-11

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“⁴ Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. ⁵ You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶ No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. ⁷ Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. ⁸ Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. ⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. (1Jo 3:4-11 NRSV)

This seems to contradict Chapter 1:8-2:2 but is it?

⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us

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from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

1 John 2:1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; ² and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (1Jo 1:8-2 NRSV)

There has to be an explanation to this, or maybe there isn't.

Important Interpretive tool:

Maybe the solution is found in the situation that these churches were going through. Apparently they were going or just gone through a bitter split. The party that split left the community. By what the text say, there were some disagreements, theological disagreements in these churches. And the disagreements seem to be related to the person of Jesus Christ.

Today we would call that disagreement a Christological disagreement over the nature of Jesus. Most evangelical churches accept the nature of Jesus as being fully human and fully divine. In fact, I believe that

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that is what the gospels teach. And John insists on that in this letter as well.

Perhaps he doesn't use our current scholar terminology, but he defends Jesus nature as being fully human and fully divine. In chapter 2:23 he writes "no one who denies the Son has the Father; everyone who confesses the Son has the Father"

In the gospel according to John, we read about a conversation that Jesus had with his disciple Phillip:

⁸ *Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied."*

⁹ *Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"*

(Joh 14:8-9 NRS)

The opponents

So, who are the people who left? Well, John tells us who they are:

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¹⁸ *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.

¹⁹ *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 belongs to us.*²⁰ *But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge.*

²¹ *I 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.*²² *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.*²³ *No one who denies the Son has the Father; everyone who confesses the Son has the Father also.*²⁴ *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.*

(1 John 2:18-23 NRS)

And

1 John 4:1 *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.*² *By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come IN THE FLESH is from God,*³ *and*

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every spirit that does not confess Jesus 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.

(1Jo 4:1-3 NRSV)

For John, you cannot deny that Jesus came in the flesh and have fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. Apparently the opponents believed in a Christ that somehow descended upon Jesus at Baptism and left him when Jesus gave out his Spirit on the cross. This would have been a Jesus who was not born, and who didn't die. If he didn't die then his blood would be irrelevant for the forgiveness from sin.

So, for John the only way for the forgiveness of sins is in Jesus Christ. There is no other way, "*and he (Jesus) is the atoning sacrifice or the sacrifice provides the means by which the sins of the entire world are forgiven*" For John, a divine only Christ who did not die, cannot forgive sins. In John 5:6 writes, "*This is the one (Jesus Christ) who came by water (or at baptism) and blood (at death Jesus Christ, not with water only but with the water and the blood*" Living beings have blood. Spirits don't. The blood of Jesus testifies to his humanity.

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Love and belief

So, what is the relation between love and belief? Believing in Jesus Christ leads to love God and our brothers and sisters. In a way, if the opponents had believed this, they would have loved their brothers and sisters. They would not have left.

By believing in a divine Christ, but not in a human Jesus, they accepted pagan duality or dichotomy, that the spirit is good, but the flesh is bad. And if that was the case, they would not be concerned about the sins of the flesh, after all the flesh is bad. They would be just like their pagan friends. This would create a lack of love for the neighbor and for the needy. They would not be concerned about the poor, and they would not be concern about their brothers and sister.

In Chapter 2:10 writing about the new commandment that is not really new, he tells them, “whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such person there is no cause for stumbling. And in 3:11 he writes, “For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another” If we disregard Jesus humanity, we are in danger of lacking love and compassion. When we follow the example of Jesus and

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his earthly teaching we come to understand his love and compassion and we want to follow him closer. We want to become like him.

The Holy Spirit in all this

John assures the church that they know that they abide in him because of the work of the Holy Spirit. They have the Holy Spirit and they can rest in the confidence that they are abiding in Jesus.

4: ¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. (1Jo 4:13 NRS)

The Holy Spirit constantly let us know that we abide in him. The work of the Holy Spirit in all this is important. It has been important. Thank God for the Holy Spirit. We can rest and be assured that the Holy Spirit is with us always. I pray that the presence of the Holy Spirit is always with us. I pray that his presence will give us peace and confidence in the midst of the storms of life.

Little children keep yourselves from idols

Apparently, the opponents were not done; they probably had an aggressive campaign to gain the

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Johannine church for them. Throughout the letter, he warns them of the opponent's efforts to deceive the church, in 2:26 he writes,

“I write these things to you concerning those who would deceive you”

and in 4:5, he writes,

“They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them”

In the end, he seems to qualify their spiritualism as idolatry. Idolatry in the first century was permeated by this belief that the spirit was good and that the flesh was bad, therefore, they could use and do to their bodies whatever pleasure they wanted to indulge in. Earlier he had written,

*15 Do not love the world or the things in the world.
The love of the Father is not in those who love the world;
16 for all that is in the world-- the desire of the flesh, the
desire of the eyes, the pride in riches-- comes not from the
Father but from the world.
(1Jo 2:15-16 NRSV)*

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Concluding thoughts

America is divided right now. That is no news.

Christians are divided, perhaps not for the same reason the Johannine church was but nevertheless the hurt and the pain is just the same.

What does one do with a divided church? John gave words that comforted and assured the church of the communion with each other and with God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. That is a comfort. By the work of the Holy Spirit they could take comfort and rest assured that God was with them.

We can also know that God is with us. He has not forgotten or forsaken us. He loves us. I guess one the ways we can truly experience this communion is by loving. We need to love, love and love some more. We need to love always, just like God has loved us in such a way that he has made us his Children. We are his children.

In practical ways, I think that we will experience and know God when we live in obedience to love one another.

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The atoning death of Jesus is capable of forgiven our sins, but not just our sins but the sins of the whole world. We need to remember this.

Let us continue to study the Scriptures and wrestle with it and allow the Holy Spirit guides us to all truth and knowledge of God.

Let us continue our service to God and to those who are in need. Jesus receives the glory when we do that. and it also shows that we believe that God cares for those who suffer. He does. God's hand works in and through us when we are able to help people who are in need.

Let us be encouraged! We serve a living Jesus Christ and look forward to the day when we will see him face to face.