

The Letters of John (Part 2):

“Believe in the Name of His Son Jesus Christ and Love One Another” (1 John 3:23)

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Read the Third Letter of John

Text

¹ The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.

² Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you
and that you may be in good health,
just as it is well with your soul.

³ For I was overjoyed when some brothers and sisters arrived
and testified to your faithfulness to the truth, how you walk in the truth.

⁴ I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

⁵ Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brothers and sisters,
even though they are strangers to you;

⁶ they have testified to your love before the church.

You will do well to send them on in a manner worthy of God,

⁷ for they began their journey for the sake of Christ,
accepting no support from nonbelievers.

⁸ Therefore we ought to support such people,
so that we may become co-workers with the truth.

⁹ I have written something to the church,
but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first,
does not welcome us.

¹⁰ So if I come,

I will call attention to what he is doing
in spreading false charges against us.

And not content with those charges,
he refuses to welcome the brothers and sisters
and even prevents those who want to do so
and expels them from the church.

¹¹ Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but imitate what is good.

Whoever does good is from God;
whoever does evil has not seen God.

¹² Everyone has testified favourably about Demetrius,
and so has the truth itself.

We also testify for him,
and you know that our testimony is true.

¹³ I have much to write to you,
but I would rather not write to you with pen and ink;

¹⁴ instead, I hope to see you soon,
and we will talk together face to face.

¹⁵ Peace to you. The friends send you their greetings. Greet the friends there, each by name.

Commentary

vv. 1-4 Letter opening and health wish

This opening (contrast 2 John 1-3) indicates that this is a private letter, not a communication read to an assembled church (contrast Philemon 1-3).

v.1: “elder” [Greek: Ο πρεσβύτερος - presbyter] . . .see 2-Jn 1 . . . a term that stresses the elder sense of authority over the leaders of the churches in his network and his role as - . . .”beloved” [ἀγαπητῶ] . . .The author calls Gaius “beloved” (vv.1.2.5.11). This concentration on the “beloved” form of address alerts the reader to recognize that love for the brethren rather than truth, the confession of faith, is the major issue of this letter. Of course, “Beloved” is a frequent epithet in Christian texts, e.g., check out Rom 12:19; 16:5.8.12; 1 Cor 15:58; 2 Cor 12:19; Phil 1:12.

. . .”Gaius” . . .the addressee, is a member of the Johannine community and appears to be the head of a household, since the elder praises him for his hospitality to travelling Christians. This individual is otherwise unknown to us. He is not to be identified with the Gaiuses mentioned in Acts 19:29; 20:4; Rom 16:23; 1 Cor 1:14). “It is unclear whether this individual was a member of the church addressed in 2 John. Reference to reports of Gaius from some of the brethren might indicate another community. If so, the three letters provide evidence of a circle of churches making up the Johannine community. On the other hand, it is more likely that the brethren were travelling missionaries” Dunn, *Eerdman’s Commentary*, 1526.

v.2: the author expresses a prayer for the well-being of Gaius.

vv.3-4: Reports from travelling missionaries/”brothers” confirm that Gaius was walking in the truth. Our author affirms that he has no greater joy than comes from such reports of his children.

v. 3: “friends” [ἀδελφοί Greek – lit. brothers] the term members of the group use to refer to one another (also vv. 5.10)

. . . “testified” [Greek: μαρτυρούντων σου – your bearing witness] . . . English ‘martyr’ is based on this Greek word.

v. 4: “my children” [τὰ ἐμὰ τέκνα] is the elder’s designation for Christians in fellowship with his teaching (See 1 Jn 2:1).

vv. 5-12 Letter body

vv. 5-8: commendation for providing hospitality to missionaries. The author commends Gaius for occasions when he has provided hospitality to travelling brethren, especially those who were strangers. Through these travelling “strangers” reports have reached our author.

v. 6: The travelling strangers made their report to the church, not privately to our author. οὐ ἐμαρτύρησάν σου τῇ ἀγάπῃ ἐνώπιον ἐκκλησίας = “they have testified to your love before the church.”

, . . .”send them on” . . . likely, provide financial support.

v.7: lit. “for they went out for the sake of the name accepting no support from the Gentiles [τῶν ἐθνικῶν], translated “non-believers” in the NRSV.

. . .”support”, see 1 Cor 9:3-12 . . . “Do we not have the right to our food and drink?”

The principle of hospitality upon which the mission depended probably went back to the principles of Jesus’ mission (Mark 6:10-11). “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place . . .”The principle was to accept hospitality from those who received the gospel.

v.8: the section ends with an expression of the obligation to provide hospitality, adding the incentive that by so doing we become “co-workers with the truth.”

vv. 9-10: critique of Diotrephes

V.9: the appeal to what was written to the church would fit with 1 John.

. . .”Diotrephes” . . . one in the community who snubbed the elder. He did not acknowledge the elder’s authority [lit. οὐκ ἐπιδέχεται ἡμᾶς. “does not welcome us.”]; rather he put himself first. Clearly there was a leadership struggle between these two, and this might have found expression in the schism mentioned in 1 John 2:19. In the community to which the elder wrote the division might no have been so clear-cut, with Diotrephes continuing to (from our author’s point of view) stir up trouble in the community.

That Diotrephes continued to wield authority in the community is evidenced by his criticism of our author (which he considers slanderous), his refusal to provide hospitality to missionaries connected to our author, and his ability to prevent others from providing hospitality, putting them out of the church (excommunication! See Matt 18:17). For this reason it has been suggested that Diotrephes provided evidence of the early emergence of the single local bishop whose local authority was challenged by itinerant charismatic authority. It is also likely that Diotrephes was a leading opponent who had broken away from our author’s community but who remained a dominant figure in Gaius’s community.

vv.11-12 Commendation of Demetrius

Again addressing Gaius as “beloved,” our author appeals to him to imitate, not evil but good, because good is of God. Naturally our author assumes that he and his supporters are of God.

v.12: It is on this basis that he appeals on behalf of Demetrius who was obviously one of his supporters. Demetrius, otherwise unknown, may be the bearer of the letter.

To bolster his testimony our author says that he has the testimony of the truth. It is unclear how this works, whether it was somehow meant to be self-authenticating or not.

Also, appeal to his own testimony to Demetrius is bolstered by “you know that our testimony is true,” thus indicating that he was expecting a sympathetic hearing from readers who were his supporters, even if this letter indicates that he was worried that Diotrephes might have undermined his authority.

vv. 13-15 Letter closing. (See 2 John 12-13)

The closing follows the same pattern as 2 John 12-13. Both letters indicate that the author has much to write and explain their brevity by referring to a prospective visit which was hopefully imminent in the case of 3 John. In each case these letters show a preference for face-to-face conversation.

At the very least, then, 3 John shows us a power struggle between two church leaders – the elder is pitted against a figure characterized as ambitious and malicious, perhaps a leader of those “ who went out from us” (1 John 2:19, 2 John 7).

Gaius, in contrast, is a local leader still in communion with the elder and willing to receive his delegates and teaching. Without such hospitality, the elder’s branch of the church would face extinction, for those who travelled “for the name” would or could take no support from “pagans”/ “non-believers” (v.7). This small aside reminds us of the sectarian tendencies inherent in all forms of Johannine Christianity. Now, however, those “outside” may even include dissident Christians. Those who provided refreshment and new out-fitting (“sending them on” v.6) for these messengers became their “fellow workers” and “friends”; the sharing of their possessions symbolized as well the sharing in their spiritual ideals.

Notes

“The dynamic of love opens always new insights into self and other. This interdependence of knowledge and love is especially pertinent for any human approach to God. Human love for God is a wonderful gift from God. However, it isa gift that always draws us more deeply into the entire network of loving relations. Whenever we love God, we are at the same time directed towards God’s creative and reconciling project, we are directed to the larger body of love which in Christian experience is desired as the body of Christ. Even the most intense experience and expression of our love of God thus involves the entire love story between God and God’s creation” (Werner G. Jeanron, *A Theology of Love*, London, 2010, p.242).

Part 2. “Believe in the Name of His Son Jesus Christ and Love One Another” – 1 John 3:23

Conflict and Schism

1-2-3 John are the products of a church in crisis (See Part 1 on 07-03-2022). We see in these texts the dynamics of church conflict. In particular, 2-John and 3-John seek to establish boundaries within a divided community

Overview of 2 John

A salutation identifies the letter as being from ‘the elder’ to ‘the elect lady and her children’ (vv.1-2).

The elder begins by highlighting faithfulness that has been exhibited by some (v. 4). He urges his readers to love one another and to keep God’s commandments (vv.5-6). Then he warns them to be on guard against deceitful antichrists and urges them not to welcome anyone who fails to keep to the teaching of Christ (vv. 7-11). He expresses hope to visit them soon and sends greetings from their ‘elder sister’ (vv. 12-13).

At the heart of the matter seems to be a doctrinal dispute, a disagreement over something so serious that the elder is prepared to claim that those who have the wrong teaching do not have God... “Everyone who does not abide in the teaching of Christ, but goes beyond it, does not have God; whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son” (2 John 9).

Also there appear to be power struggles within the church that are coming to a head over issues of hospitality. In 2 John the elder sets forth a policy that churches are not to provide lodging and meals for visiting representatives of the schismatic faction ... “Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching: (2 John 10).

Notice the strong prohibition that follows: those who do provide hospitality, even if they don’t subscribe to the teaching of that group, are participating in the evil deeds of those deceivers... “for to welcome is to participate in the evil deeds of such a person” (2 John 11).

Leadership in the Christian Communities: In General

(White, Michael L., “Christianity: Early Social Life and Organisation,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 1, (1992), 927-935.

During the early second century divisions within the followers of Jesus became more severe as competing forms of Christianity and internal group tensions jostled with one another. By the second century, those who knew Jesus had died, and even those who knew his early followers were passing from the scene. The expectation of Jesus’ second coming (parousia) faded but never disappeared. The vague organizational patterns of the early days were inadequate to cope with the problems that arose.

Theological differences also contributed significantly to the turmoil. Christian groups interpreted Jesus in different ways, appealing for authority to different people and documents.

There was no violence among them, but heated arguments, mutual verbal abuse, and the expulsion of dissenters were common. How was a person to decide what to believe and how to behave? It raises the issue of 'leadership.'

Jesus left no clear organizational blueprint that could have guided the Jesus movement. Only Matthew's gospel (16:18 and 18:17) attributes to Jesus the use of the word *ekklesia* (church), but there was no organizational or leadership blueprint visible in those few words. His early followers had to improvise organization or borrow it from the synagogues with which they were familiar. Judaism itself did not provide ready leadership models because of the firm belief that Israel as a whole was to be responsive to God's command "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2).

First Christians: Leadership was not a core issue in a situation where access to God depended on nothing but the trust and dependence of a child – "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (Mk 10:15).

Paul's Letters: "In Christ" all together are the Temple, where the Holy Spirit dwells (1 Cor 3:16). Paul has little to say about ecclesiastical offices. Paul's own self-presentation is as both 'slave'/'servant' and 'apostle:' "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God" (Rom 1:1).

For Paul, the various ministries as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers are gifts of Christ for building up the Body of Christ. "Regarding ministerial structures, Paul never mentions presbyters ('priests') in any of his letters, and he mentions bishops (episkopoi) and deacons only in Philippians 1:1. We do know that there were at least three ministerial roles in the churches of the '50s: apostles (that is, missionary leaders, in contrast to local, residential leaders), fellow workers (patrons and protectors, evangelists, and instructors in the faith, and local leaders (some of whom overlapped with 'fellow workers'). But even by the '50s the Church still had no cultic leaders who were called 'priests,' even though the Christian communities gathered regularly for liturgy (1 Cor 14:26). Significantly, none of Paul's letters says anything about who presided at the Eucharistic meals" (Richard P. McBrien, *The Church: The Evolution of Catholicism*, New York: Harper One, 2008, p. 43). Three roles in the churches of the '50s can be identified: apostles, fellow worker, and local leaders. The apostle of the Pauline letter was primarily a missionary leader, in contrast to local residential leaders or 'elders.' While it is recognised that apostle was not an office, those who were apostles had a clearly recognised authority in the communities they helped to establish.

Deutero-Pauline Texts (70's – 90's) After Paul's death, an informal network of Christian teachers looked back to Paul as the primary (or exclusive) apostolic leader of the church and attempted to interpret and adapt his message for later contexts. Strands of the Pauline tradition struggled or flourished in various locations, but Ephesus seems to have become the primary centre of the 'Pauline school.' The Pauline school continued and developed the practice that had made the letter form a means of apostolic instruction and direction. New letters were composed in Paul's name – 2 Corinthians, Colossians, Ephesians.

These letters emphasise that the Christian responsibility is to live in such a way that unity of God's people given by the Spirit is not destroyed. Maintaining the unity of the church, living together in a community that exhibits to the world that the walls that separate people have in fact been abolished (Ephesians 2:11-21), is a part of the church's mission. This unity is the expression and continuation of Jewish monotheism, manifest in one God, one Lord, one Spirit, one baptism, one church (the body), one faith, one hope. The Pauline idea that every member of the body receives a gift is reaffirmed, though without Paul's specific vocabulary. The risen Christ gives gifts to his church. These gifts are now understood in a semi-official

sense as the church's ministry. "When he ascended on high ... he gave gifts to his people. The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastor-teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ... We must no longer be children, tossed to and from and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery" (Eph 4:11-14).

As in Paul there is a variety of ministries bestowed upon the church by Christ. These ministries resemble the ministries in 1 Corinthians and Romans but the emphasis is now on maintenance of unity and purity of doctrine (See Eph 4:14 – "blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery").

At the turn of the first century: We can glimpse developing forms of organisation in the later first century. The sources reveal two sorts of leaders: some travelled (itinerant leaders), and some lived permanently in a particular community (elders). Paul stayed in a place long enough to establish a church, then moved on, driven by desire to preach to the ends of the earth before Jesus returned. He kept contact with his converts by the exchange of messengers, letters and occasional visits. He expected his churches to accept his supervision, although his letters make clear that they did not always do so.

The letter to Titus, perhaps written by a disciple of Paul (ca. 100 C.E.), referred to a time when an itinerant leader and elders (i.e. leaders of a local church) co-existed. "I [Paul] left you [Titus] behind in Crete for this reason, so that you should put in order what remained to be done, and should appoint elders in every town, as I directed you" (Titus 1:5).

Paul was not the only itinerant missionary, although he is the best-known to us. Many unknown people carried different versions of the Christian message to existing or new churches. They were crucial in the spread of the new religion. The itinerant missionaries continued their work during the first half of the second century, even after the last people who actually knew Jesus or his immediate followers had died. Some itinerant missionaries may have been active even into the third century. The Alexandrian scholar Origen (ca. 185-ca. 251) wrote that "some Christians, in fact, have made it their business to visit not only cities but even villages and country houses to make converts to God. And no one would argue that they did this for the sake of gain, since sometimes they would not even accept necessary support ..." (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, III.9).

Generally, the itinerant missionaries stayed in one place only temporarily. When they left the churches they founded on in which they had worked, some form of local organisation had to keep the communities in existence. We know the titles of some local leaders but not always what the title holders did or how they were chosen. Some churches had both bishops (*episcopi*, literally *epi-scopi*, 'over-seers') and deacons (*diaconi*, literally 'servants') – Phil 1:1; 1 Peter 2:25; 1 Tim 3:1-2; Titus 1:7; Didache 15). Other churches had local leaders called elders (*presbuteroi*, 'priests?') – see 1 Tim 4:14; James 5:14; Acts 11:30; 1-2-3-John). Local communities might also have influential charismatic members (literally 'those with spiritual gifts'). Especially in the later first and early second centuries, the local ministry was often subordinated to the authority and prestige of the itinerant ministry. For about a century after Jesus' death, the itinerant ministry was dynamic and dominant, whereas the local ministry was necessary but secondary.

The balance of authority and prestige between the travelling and the local forms of leadership was unstable. As years gave way to decades, local forms of ministry became more deeply rooted in their communities, while serious problems emerged in the itinerant ministry. The second-century itinerant apostles, prophets, and teachers were less and less able to claim authority on the basis of direct contact with Jesus' early followers. In addition, as the beliefs prevalent in local churches became more fixed, some travelling missionaries were rejected

for teaching what the local leaders thought was incorrect. Some itinerant ministers also enriched themselves financially at the expense of the local churches they visited.

The Didache: Discovered in 1873 in a monastery library in Constantinople (Istanbul), the *Didache* has made a significant impact on our understanding of the social and ritual practices of the early church. It is, in fact, the first ‘church manual’ to have survived from early Christianity. It was written in the early second century CE. The bulk of the book gives instructions for the ritual observances and social interactions of the Christian community. But near the end, that author addresses the problem of wandering missionaries.

The *Didache* was written when the itinerant ministry was still functional but local congregations were becoming wary about unorthodox teachers and freeloaders who claimed the venerable titles of apostle, prophet and teacher. After the anonymous author of the *Didache* had concluded brief instructions on baptism, fasting, prayer and the Eucharist, he continued: “And so, welcome anyone who comes and teaches you everything mentioned above. But if the teacher should himself turn away and teach something different, undermining these things, do not listen to him. But if his teaching brings righteousness and the knowledge of the Lord, then welcome him as the Lord. But act towards the apostles and prophets as the gospel decrees. Let every apostle who comes to you be welcomed as the Lord. But he should not remain more than a day. If he must, he may stay one more. But if he stays three days, he is a false prophet. When the apostle leaves he should take nothing except bread, until he arrives at his night’s lodgings. If he asks for money, he is a false prophet Elect for yourselves bishops and deacons who are worthy of the Lord, gentle men who are not fond of money, who are true and approved. For these also conduct the ministry of the prophets and teachers among you. And so, do not disregard them. For, these are the ones who have found honour among you, along with the prophets and teachers” (*Didache*, 11.1-6; 15:1-2).

Imagine telling Paul or Peter, who had been itinerant missionaries but who had been dead for many decades when the *Didache* was written, that they could stay only one day! But circumstances had changed by the second century. The itinerant ministry was fading, in part under the weight of Christian’s unhappy experience with the apostles, prophets and teachers, some of whom were money grabbers and taught things that the local leaders thought were wrong. But the *Didache* did not say never to receive an itinerant missionary. There must have been a period in the second century when acceptable itinerant missionaries mingled with the unacceptable.

As the itinerant ministry slowly faded in prestige, the local ministry grew in self-confidence and importance. One of the shortest documents in the New Testament gives a glimpse of a local community’s leader resisting the authority of a non-resident missionary. The author of the Third Letter of John (3 John) identifies himself not as ‘John’ but as ‘the Elder’ or ‘Presbyter.’ Except for what the letter says, we know nothing about the people mentioned in it. The Elder complained to a man named ‘Gaius’ that he had written a letter to an unidentified church, but a man named ‘Diotrephes’ “did not acknowledge our authority” and was spreading within the church what the Elder called ‘false charges’ against him.

Diotrephes refused to welcome brothers, perhaps itinerant missionaries, sent by the Elder, and he prevented other church members from giving hospitality to them. In fact, Diotrephes expelled from the congregation those who welcomed the Elder’s messengers.

Diotrephes was clearly a powerful leader in an unidentified local church – many members were following his orders. Otherwise, the Elder would not have needed to write a letter of complaint. The Elder had some local supporters, including the otherwise unknown Gaius, to whom he wrote the letter. What might be going on? Diotrephes, who is given no title in the letter but whom the Elder described as one “who likes to put himself first” was one of the

local leaders who no longer wanted this outsider, the Elder, to direct his congregation. In this brief letter we may see a local church leader and some of his congregation refusing to obey an itinerant missionary and his representatives. In any case, the Third Letter of John and the *Didache* point to a period in the first half of the second century when the local ministry was rising in influence even as the itinerant ministry was declining.

Overview: 3 John

The letter opens with a salutation from ‘the elder’ to a beloved man named ‘Gaius’ (v. 1). The Elder offers a prayer for Gaius’ health (v. 2) and commends him for providing hospitality for missionaries (vv. 3-8).

He then censures a church leader, Diotrephes, who has aggressively opposed support for these missionaries, rejecting the Elder’s authority (vv. 9-10).

Finally, he urges Gaius to avoid evil and do good, then offers a brief testimony on behalf of a highly regarded man ‘Demetrius,’ and concludes with travel plans and greetings (vv. 11-15).

Reading 3 John

In 3 John, we see the Elder receiving a taste of his own medicine: we discover now that there is a church led by Diotrephes that has begun a ‘no hospitality’ policy with regard to representatives of the elder’s community.

Significantly, the Elder does not identify Diotrephes as one of the secessionists or as someone who holds to any false doctrines himself. Rather, Diotrephes appears to favour a ‘pox on both your houses’ approach to the controversy: his church refuses to welcome representatives from either side.

Notice, the Elder attributes Diotrephes’ actions to personal dysfunction: he says that Diotrephes likes to put himself first and had problems acknowledging authority ...

“Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority” (3 John 9).

Thus, from the Elder’s perspective, Diotrephes is not maintaining neutrality but rather is exploiting the controversy to enhance his own position as leader of what will now be an independent church.

In any case, there can be no neutrality. The Elder sees things in line with Jesus’ words uttered in the midst of conflict: “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters” (Mt 12:30). This is a very different perspective from that espoused by Jesus in happier times: “Whoever is not against us is for us” (Mk 9:40).

Love one another/ ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους

We might wonder how things could get so bad in a community organised around a Gospel that emphasises friendship (John 15:13-15), humble service (John 13:14-15), and mutual love (John 13:34; 15:12). Still, it is remarkable that 1 John is so free of polemic. Despite what has happened, the author of 1-Jn does not offer any personal attack on the secessionists or even seek to refute their positions. Instead, the focus is on those who remain with the church, affirming them in ways that will re-establish their spiritual self-esteem and calls them to remember what makes them who they are.

For yourself, check out the following affirmations in 1-Jn

They have had the word of life revealed to them (1:1-2).

They have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ (2:1).3-14).

They have assimilated the truth of the new commandment (2:8).

They have received forgiveness of sins (2:12).

They know the Father, the one who is from the beginning (2:13-14).

They have overcome the evil one (2:13-14).

They are strong, and the word of God abides in them (2:14).

They have been anointed by the Holy One and know the truth (2:20-21).
 They do not need anyone to teach them (2:27).
 They are children of God already, and they will be like Christ (3:1-2; 5:19).
 They have Christ abiding in them, and he has given them the Spirit (3:24; 4:13).
 They are from God and have conquered spirits of the antichrist (4:3-4,6).
 They are indwelt by one who is greater than the one who is in the world (4:4).
 They have experienced love being perfected among them (4:17).
 They have faith that conquers the world (5:4).
 They believe in the name of the Son of God (5:13).
 They have eternal life (5:13).
 They have boldness before God in prayer (5:14-15).
 They have been given understanding to know God (5:20).

They are in the God who is true, through his Son, Jesus Christ (5:20).

One could reasonably argue that the love command [ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους] is the foundation of the Elder's rhetoric. Some version of the love command is cited directly at least ten times in the Epistles (1 John 3:11,14,23; 4:7;11:2; 2 John 5) and entire sections of 1-2-3 John are built on its implications (1 John 2:1-11; 3:4-24; 4:7-21; 5:1-5; 2 John 4-11; 3 John 5-10).

Corresponding to this emphasis, failure to love one's brother, as manifested particularly in a failure to share resources and extend hospitality (1 John 3:17; 3 John 10) is viewed by the elder not only as a violation of Christ's/God's commands but also as tantamount to murder (1 John 3:11-18) and essentially impossible for any true child of God – which is not to say that Christians cannot fail to love, but rather to say that those who fail to love other believers cannot be “Christians.”

The author of 1-Jn summarizes the expectation and demands of God with a single two-part commandment: “And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another [ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους], just as he has commanded us” (1 John 2:3; Check out Matt 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-28).

The letters do not provide a detailed description of what love entails (as Paul does in 1 Cor 13:4-8), but three points stand out:

- (a) People love one another when they keep God's commandments ... “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments.³ For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:2-3).

The commandments specify what it means to love, so people who obey God's commandments are practicing love. This is one reason why the “new commandment” to love one another is really an old commandment (1 John 2:7; 2 John 5).

- (b) People love one another when they imitate God (1-Jn 4:9-11) and when they imitate Jesus (1 Jn 3:16). “God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another” (1 Jn 4:9-11).

Ἐν τούτῳ ἐστὶν ἡ ἀγάπη, οὐχ ὅτι ἡμεῖς ἠγαπήσαμεν τὸν θεόν, ἀλλ' ὅτι αὐτὸς ἠγάπησεν ἡμᾶς, καὶ ἀπέστειλεν τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἱλασμόν περὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν.

Here, 1 John 10 refers to Jesus' death as a ἱλασμός –*hilasmos* (translated “atoning sacrifice” in the NRSV). The meaning of this word is greatly disputed: it might mean either

“propitiation” – that Christ’s death is an act that placates the wrath of a God offended by human sin; or “expiation” – that Christ’s death cleanses or removes defilement caused by human sin. For centuries, exegetes have disagreed as to which meaning is intended, and theologians have worked out different conceptions of atonement theory accordingly.

“We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us-- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another” (1 John 3:16).

People love like God (1 John 4:11-12) when they live like Jesus, walking “as he walked” (1 John 2:6) and laying down their lives for others as he laid down his life for them (1 John 3:16).

(c) People love one another when they use their material resources to provide for brothers and sisters who are in need ... “How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” (1 John 3:17). This is the only concrete example that the letters offer for what it means to show love to another member of the community; this it stand out as a matter of special importance.

Also, we should note that the community’s love ethic is solidly grounded in its theology; the letters teach that both the possibility and the necessity of loving one another have their origin in God, who is love (1 John 4: 8.16) and who takes the initiative in love (1 John 4:10.19). All love is from God (1 John 4:7), and so “knowing God” and “loving one another” go together. No one can love without knowing God (1 John 4:7) and no one can know God without loving (1 John 4:8).

In a slightly different vein, readers cannot fail to notice that the emphasis in these letters is on faith. Nothing is ever said about loving one’s neighbour, much less about loving one’s enemies (cf. Matt 5:44; Luke 6:27).

In fact, 2 John 10 issues a strong prohibition against welcoming (or even greeting!) anyone whose teaching contradicts that of the elder – that doesn’t seem very loving! And community members are instructed not to love the world (1 John 2:15).

The usual explanation for this narrow focus on loving “one another” is that these letters reflect only one aspect of a church in the middle of a crisis: the immediate need is for strengthening internal bonds. For this church, right now, containing the current crisis and preventing the spread of a schismatic heresy is deemed a higher priority than maintaining dialogue or even civil relations with the heretics.

So, we see the author of 1 John calling on those who remain with the church to remember what makes them who they are. There is unusually strong emphasis on the intimacy of their relationship with God and this is worked out in a reciprocal way; the readers abide in God or Christ (1 John 2:6.24.27-28; 3:6.24; 4:13.15-16; cf. 2:10: 4:16) and God abides in them (1 John 3:24; 4:12-13. 15-16; cf 2:14.24.27; 3:9).

Then, they just need to let God’s love be perfected in them (1 John 2:5; 4:12.17-18) and love one another, not just in word or speech, but in truth and action (1 John 3:18). When this happens the author’s joy will be complete (1 John 1:4).

For Further Reading

- Bauckham, Richard. *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids 2007)
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- Jobes, Karen H., *1, 2 & 3 John* (Grand Rapids 2010).
- Klauck, Hans-Josef, *Ancient Letters and the New Testament* (Waco 2006).
- Lieu, Judith M., *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles* (Cambridge 1991).
- Rensberger, David, *1 John, 2 John, 3 John* (Nashville 1997).
- Thatcher, Tom, *Why John wrote a Gospel: Jesus - Memory – History* (Louisville, KY 2006).
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Study Questions

1. Rehearse the likely series of events that transpired in the churches with which the Johannine letters are associated. What sort of conflict has occurred, and how has that played out within the community?
2. What accusations are made against those who left the community?
3. Describe the Johannine ethic of “loving one another.” Cite three ways in which people fulfill this ethic according to the letters.
4. What do the three Johannine letters reveal about church conflict? Why is the conflict behind these letters often thought to go beyond “doctrinal disputes” to involve power struggles and clashes of ego?

Key Quotations from John

²³And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.
(Check out: Mt 22:36-40; Mk 12:28-31; Lk 10:25-28)

People love one another when...

1 John 5:2-3

²By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.

1 John 4:9-11

⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

1 John 3:16

³We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

1 John 3:17

How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

Loving and Knowing God go together

1 John 4:7-8

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

Abide

1 John 2:6

⁶Whoever says, 'I abide in him,' ought to walk just as he walked.
(1 John 2:6, 24, 27-28; 3:6, 24; 4:13, 15-16; cf. 2:10; 4:16)

1 John 3:24

²⁴All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.
(1 John 4:12-13, 15-16; cf. 2:14, 24, 27; 3:9)

Let God's love be perfected

1 John 2:5; 4:12, 17-18

But whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection.