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The First Epistle of John: Notes for Theology Students

There is no such thing as “pure Christian faith”; no clear, transparent window through which we can stare in awed worship through two thousand years at Jesus Christ of Nazareth, Saviour and Lord. What Jesus taught and achieved has been transmitted to us by others, who have each coloured in the picture in accord with their culture, their times and their concerns. We are heirs to a stained glass window which is in constant change. There is not, equally, a “pure” Early church to which we can try to return. Even in the fairly narrow constraints of Luke/Acts we clearly see a Hellenistic-Jewish axis emerge, each leaving their own legacy. As Evangelicals it can be very hard to let go of the myth that if we only get back to the Early Church then everything will be alright. As a matter of fact, not everything was alright in the Early Church, as the pain inflicted on John and his Christian community by the recent departure of a sizable faction from their fellowship demonstrates. This sermon series, as well as these notes, is based on the observation that I John represents only a part of the Early Church, and a troubled one at that. The Scriptures themselves are “coloured” by their authors and their context. My sermons are preached within the context of only a part of the modern church, which is, itself, split into a myriad denominations and theological groups. As long as we acknowledge that, we can be challenged and stimulated by this Scripture. It may not be comfortable.

1) Authorship

The first question to tackle is “Who was John?” While a number of possible authors with that name have been suggested there are three main candidates: the apostle John, son of Zebedee; the un-named *The-Disciple-Whom-Jesus-Loved*; John the Elder. As the book bears no inscription it could be argued that no one of the name John actually wrote it; perhaps it was a compilation made by a group from the Johannine community. However, tradition links it with someone of the name “John” and the book itself is clearly linked in style and content to the Gospel of John and the second and third epistles. The latter bear the inscription “the elder”. There is also the more tenuous link to the Book of Revelation, with its inscription of “John, the servant” and “brother and companion”. The permutations of who wrote what are large, but fortunately they are narrowed by a wide acceptance that the three epistles are probably by the same author. Howard Marshall concludes “The common authorship of all three Epistles remains the overwhelmingly probable hypothesis.”ⁱ There is less agreement on the authorship of the Gospel, while Revelation is so off-beat by comparison that one can hardly expect any kind of consensus. My opinion, as I am sure you are wanting to know by this point, is that the apostle John is *The Disciple-Whom-Jesus-Loved*. author of the Gospel and three Epistles, while a different John, the Elder, wrote Revelation.

It is not known how early John the Apostle was identified as *The-Disciple-Whom-Jesus-Loved*, the author of both Gospel and Epistles, but Irenaeus was the first to record the belief (c.a. 180AD). He quotes 1 and 2 John and explains that the author was “John, the disciple of the Lord, and that he wrote the Gospel in Ephesus, during the reign of Trajan (97-117).”ⁱⁱ Although Irenaeus could be accused of bias because he liked to argue that the true church was established by the Apostles in opposition to the shaky foundations of the heretics, there is no suggestion that he had invented the idea. His own spiritual pedigree is long and it is worth recording what he says about a previous well-known bishop:

“And then Polycarp, besides being instructed by the Apostles and acquainted with many who had seen the Lord, was also appointed for Asia by the Apostles as bishop in the church of Smyrna. Even I saw him in my early manhood; for his was a long life . . . There are some also who heard him relate that John, the Lord’s disciple, went to the baths at Ephesus, and rushed out without taking a bath when he saw Cerinthus inside, exclaiming, “Let us get away before the baths fall in; for Cerinthus is in there, the enemy of the truth.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Irenaeus also tells us that John wrote his prologue of the Gospel to combat the heretics.^{iv} He is familiar with and cites not only the Gospel but also 1 and 2 John. Importantly, Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna, also quotes from this Epistle although, he does not mention the author by name. But he certainly knew the Apostle John because Irenaeus could remember him talking about it:

“I can describe the place where Polycarp sat and talked, his goings out and comings in, the character of his life, his personal appearance, his addresses to crowded congregations. I remember how he spoke of his conversations with John and with the others who had seen the Lord; how he repeated their words from memory; and how the things that he heard them say about the Lord, His miracles and His teaching, things that he had heard direct from the eye-witnesses of the Word of Life, were proclaimed by Polycarp in complete harmony with Scripture.”^v

Can we trust Irenaeus? His testimony is reinforced by later Church Fathers. Clement of Alexandria stated that it was written by the Apostle John.^{vi} Tertullian has more than 50 quotations from it.^{vii} Origen frequently cited it as by John. Dionysius believed it to have been written by the author of the Gospel, but not Revelation which was by another hand. The Muratorian Fragment lists 1 John but is more confused about 2 and 3 John. Earlier church fathers quote from it or echo it. Clement of Rome described Christians as being “perfected in love” and a similar expression is found in the *Didache* also. The Epistle to Diognetus uses the phrases “from the beginning”, “God loved men”, “sent his only begotten Son”, “him who first loved us”. However, although the Epistle was well circulated, there are two problems. Firstly, Irenaeus stated that the apostle John lived in Ephesus until Trajan’s (97-117AD) time when he wrote the Gospel.^{viii} This seems rather old for such a task, although there is no reason to suppose that some of it had not been written earlier. If he did not write the Gospel we may well question whether he wrote the Epistle also. Sixty-five years after the death of Christ would have put John in his eighties, and church traditions state that he died an elderly man, so it not impossible. Eusebius quotes Polycrates, Bishop of Ephesus (190 AD): “Again there is John, who leant back on the Lord’s breast, and who became a priest wearing the mitre, a martyr and a teacher, he, too, sleeps in Ephesus.”^{ix}

The second snag with Irenaeus’ testimony is that we have what some see to be a contradictory statement from an earlier Church Father. Papias wrote five books around 150AD, all of them, sadly, lost. But Eusebius had read at least some of them, and quotes him as stating:

“And whenever anyone came, who had been a follower of the presbyters, I inquired into the words of the presbyters, what Andrew or Peter had said, or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew, or any other disciple of the Lord, and what Aristion and the presbyter John, disciples of the Lord, were still saying.”^x

Eusebius goes on to point out that there were two tombs in Ephesus claiming to be John’s, so perhaps both leaders were buried there, and he postulates that the second could have been the author of the Book of Revelation. Certainly this latter presbyter(elder) John lived longer than the Apostle because Papias had met him. I think it is worth pointing out here that Papias does not contradict Irenaeus’ account and does not cast doubt on the Apostle John’s authorship of the Gospel and Epistles. Indeed, it could be that his reference to “presbyter John” means “the Apostle John who was still alive when I heard him.” Eusebius might have misunderstood him to suggest two Johns. To summarise, Eusebius’ study of the early church documents, many of which are lost to us, led him to conclude that the Gospel and the first Epistle were written by the Apostle John, *The-Disciple-Whom-Jesus-loved*, who died in Ephesus where he wrote the Gospel. At least part of it was written against the heretics.

In conclusion to this part, Donald Guthrie is right in saying that “In one sense the authorship is not the most important issue, for the exegesis of the letter is not greatly affected by our conclusion regarding authorship.”^{xi}

2) The Johannine Community

What recent studies have done is to move away from the figure of John, author of Gospel and Epistles, to the community he was addressing. Johnson states “2 and 3 John are incontrovertible evidence for the existence of the Johannine community.”^{xii} Some of the concerns of the community are: Johannine Christology, eschatology, dualism, signs, parakletos, witness, the concept of “faith in”. It is not insignificant that the word “ekklesia” appears neither in the Gospel nor the First Epistle of John. This group of Christians using John’s writings and following his leadership are referred to by theologians variously as a community, or communities, or group, or school or sect.^{xiii} Without direct knowledge of them we cannot be more precise.

The Epistles were addressed to a number of house churches, spread over a large geographical area, although the larger urban centres may have harboured a number of such churches. They were so spread out that they did not all know the key figures personally. They were serviced by an unknown number of itinerants. If the Gospel and Epistles are indicative of their theology and way of life, they were quite different from the churches linked to Paul, Barnabas, Peter and Luke. The theology of the Johannine writings has very different emphases and reflects different problems. It is also written out of a major crisis. The churches were splitting, and many were leaving the authority of the Elder and his circle to form their own churches with markedly differing teachings about Jesus, his divinity and his humanity. There was a terrible amount of bitterness in the circle. Perhaps as a result of this the community had become quite inward looking. Sandelin suggests: “The Christian community behind the Gospel of John is one which has distanced itself not only from the world proper, but also from other early Christian groups.”^{xiv}

To go back to my opening paragraph, the three main “tones” of Christianity found in the New Testament are the Peter/Paul group of churches centred in Antioch and established in Rome; the Jewish Christian group centred in Jerusalem and led by James; and the Johannine community scattered around Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). No church would have possessed all the New Testament scriptures, and it would be 250 years before that could become

universally possible, so each would have its collection of sacred books which shaped its faith. They would build on that collection as best they could, copying and sending for copies of other writings held by churches in other regions. John's books were written primarily for his community and reflect its particular context and crises.

There does not seem to be the same hierarchy as found in the other streams of Christian faith, and it could be argued that this was one of the causes of its downfall. Let me digress slightly here and look at the encounter between two Bishops at a slightly later date (around 110 AD). Bishop Ignatius was in dire straits. Firstly his church in Antioch had suffered a major problem (possibly a division), and secondly he had been arrested and was being transported to Rome for almost certain execution. On the way he met Polycarp and had meetings with churches and leaders in the area of Smyrna. He also wrote a number of letters around that time. He, too, like John, warned against "those who say that He (Christ) suffered only in semblance"^{xv} Clearly the heresy which troubled the Johannine community was not stamped out. However, his counter was to stress the model of church leadership we know as "monarchical episcopate", where one overall leader for each church was chosen out of the presbyters (elders). The Philadelphians had been astounded by his crying out ("the very voice of God" in his own opinion) "Be loyal to your Bishop and clergy and deacons."^{xvi} A section of the church objected, finding him to be authoritarian and accusing him of poking his nose into business that was not his. Polycarp, on the other hand exercised his ministry over a huge area, even visiting and preaching very effectively in Rome. Churches in Antioch and Smyrna worked along very different lines in the early second century. It is hardly surprising, therefore, to find a *Johannine Community* in the pages of the New Testament.

Can we trace lines of development of this community? The classic book setting out this approach is by Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*^{xvii} which, although dated now, is worth studying. His conclusion is that the Community went through four phases;

1. Pre-Gospel era when a community of Jewish Christians, who had been embedded in the synagogues, held together around John, were expelled after their theology began to enunciate clearly that Jesus was the divine Son of God.
2. The Gospel (written by John, but altered by a redactor around AD90) was written reflecting the community's new position outside of the Jewish religious milieu.
3. The Johannine communities were assailed with splits, resulting in a significant number leaving and setting up on their own. The Epistles represent this phase.
4. The two groups ceased to have independent existence. One group merged into the mainline Christian orthodoxy, while the schismatics melted into the second century Gnostic groups, taking with them the Gospel of John which became a mainstay Gnostic text in the second century.^{xviii}

There are many other reconstructions and discussing them is the theologian's task based on study of the Johannine corpus. We have no evidence to suggest that the community rejected the churches led by Paul or James, but they did strongly centre themselves around John as leader. Note how in the Fourth Gospel *The-Disciple-Whom-Jesus-Loved* is always favoured over Peter: he is closer to Jesus at the Last Supper (13:23); the others abandon Jesus, but he doesn't (16:32); Peter denies Jesus, but he remains even at the foot of the cross (19:26f); he understands first the significance of the scene in the tomb on Easter Sunday (20:8-10); he recognises the risen Jesus before Peter; penitent Peter has to be restored, then gets rebuked for wanting to know what is to become of *The-Disciple-Whom-Jesus-Loved* (21:20ff).

The community is not being polemical towards other Christians, nor are they rejecting the (other) Apostle-led churches, but rather they are reminding their readers that the essential is not the hierarchy, but the living relationship with Jesus, the Vine, and the ongoing presence of the Paraclete with us. In other words, a different colour stained glass.

3) Some Final Points

Which came first, the Gospel or the Epistle? Traditionally, the Gospel is considered to have had priority: "The impression, widely held, that the Epistle must be fitted in after the Gospel probably arises from three considerations: that a Gospel is a fundamental document, and an Epistle must be a successor document; that the Christological views opposed in the Epistle are of such advanced Gnostic kind that they could have developed only after the Gospel's Christology had been worked out; and that the Epistle showed an interest in ecclesiastical matters that were not evident in the Gospel."^{xix}

However, a lot can be said for a more complicated scenario in which the Gospel was circulated in an earlier format reflecting expulsion from the synagogues, then the Epistle was written reflecting the Christological schism taking place: "Just as in the Gospel the Jews appear as a paradigm of the human world, so in 1 John we have the secessionists are of the world."^{xx} The main enemy had changed, so a new prologue to the Gospel was written and letters were sent out.

Although I have sympathy for an approach which suggests that the Gospel and Epistles were written by an author or authors other than Apostle John, son of Zebedee,^{xxi} I find that I can still blend the traditional attribution of authorship to John and his identification as *The-Disciple-Whom-Jesus-Loved* with a scenario such as presented by Gary M. Burge^{xxii}:

1. An early draft of the Fourth Gospel circulated widely and is subject to misinterpretation
2. John penned his letters and wrote a prologue for the Gospel
3. John died and his followers published the final form of the Gospel (including the prologue and chapter 21), organised and preserved his letters.
4. The community of churches split, and part of it drifted deeper into Gnostic heresy while the remainder gradually blended into the wider Christian community, taking on a different, more "Catholic" style.

The Epistle of John reflects the horror of a community seeing its most precious doctrine seized upon by a group who refused to listen to reason, divided the local churches, and campaigned to persuade the faithful members to leave with them. It is not comfortable reading, but represents the experience of many within our contemporary Christian culture. It is not difficult to recognise the swirls, colours and patterns in the stained glass. We do well to read it with the same pastoral spirit in which it was written.

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ⁱ I. H Marshall, *The Epistle of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p.31.

ⁱⁱ *Adv. Haereses* 3.3.

ⁱⁱⁱ *idem*

^{iv} *Adv. Haereses* 3.11

^v In *To Florinus quoted by Eusebius in Eccl. Hist* 5.20

^{vi} *Strom.* ii. ii.5.66, iii .4.32, iii.5.42,44, iv.16.100

^{vii} *Adv.Mar.* v.16; *Adv. Prax.* Xxviii; *Adv. Gnost.* xii

^{viii} *Adv Haereses* 2.33.2

^{ix} *Eccl. Hist.* 3.31

^x *Eccl. Hist.* 3.39

^{xi} Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction, 3rd Ed., revised* (London: IVP, 1974), p.864.

^{xii} Thomas F. Johnson, *1,2 & 3 John*, New International Biblical Commentaries (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993) p2.

^{xiii} See Birger Olsson, "The history of the Johannine movement" in Lans Hartman & Birger Olsson (eds.), *Aspects on the Johannine Literature*; papers presented at a conference of Scandinavian New Testament exegetes at Uppsala, June 16-19,1986. *Coniectanea Biblica, NT Series* 18 (Upsalla: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1987), pp.27-43.

^{xiv} Karl-Gustav Sandelin, "The Johannine Writings within the setting of their cultural history" in Lans Hartman & Birger Olsson (eds.), *Aspects on the Johannine Literature; papers presented at a conference of Scandinavian New Testament exegetes at Uppsala, June 16-19,1986.* *Coniectanea Biblica, NT Series* 18 (Upsalla: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1987), p.14.

^{xv} *Trall* 9.1.10

^{xvi} *Philad* 7

^{xvii} Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1979)

^{xviii} *idem* p23

^{xix} . Kenneth Grayston, *The Johannine Epistles*, NCBC (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1984), p.11.

^{xx} Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, trad. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1989), p.119.

^{xxi} Hengel, for example paints a very winsome picture of a young man called John teenage follower of Jesus, present at his death, who lived to 100 , saw it all, wrote it down in the reign of Trajan and only later became identified wrongly with the son of Zebedee. op.cit. p.133f. Hengel may be right, and I do not think that it would alter our views about the authority and inspiration of the text. I just find it hard to imagine someone getting as close to the inner circle around Jesus without being one of the Apostles.

^{xxii} Gary M. Burge, *The Letters of John*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), pp.24ff.