

Finding *Renewal* in the Love of God

Unit 1: Discovering Renewal in the Father's Love

Unit Introduction

I recently heard a sermon in which a young preacher related the progression of thought concerning a generations-old controversy among Christians. He had obviously studied the subject thoroughly. I was shocked, then, to hear him date more recent thought on the subject about 15 years later than I would provide if speaking on the same subject. The reason for the disparity was not difficult to discern: he had grown up in a conservative region, a place where ideas dawn on a distant horizon, and change occurs slowly, if at all. As a result, what was new to him as a teenager had been new to *me* as a teenager, though he is 15 years my junior.

I share this story to illustrate the difficulties one encounters when attempting to uncover the context of a biblical writing. Assigning date, origin, place, and situation to particular writings can be tricky. Though this young preacher and I live in the same country—the same city, in fact—at the same time—and share a common heritage, similar traditions and values, our honest and well-informed perspectives differ greatly. Were someone to attempt to unravel the historical underpinnings of this controversy by reading either of our writings, they would find contradictions. While speculation can be helpful in forming the questions we ask of the text and provide us with new and valuable insights, in the end we must remember that what began as speculation can end with no more certainty. Some biblical writers nailed their documents to specific times, rulers, and edicts, and thus make it possible for us to study the documented history of specific instances. This gives us great insight into the writings themselves. The epistle of 1 John is not one of these writings.

Since our knowledge of a “Jahannine” church is at best vague, it is impossible to assign these three very short writings to precise moments in that church’s...history. A complete lack of external controls prohibits reconstructing any history in the full sense. The best one can hope for is to find traces of an internal development within the group. And even this depends entirely on reading between the lines of the writings themselves.... Indeed, it is quite possible that [the letters] were all sent at once. In this case, one could not trace any development in the community, since the letters would describe only a single point in its history (Johnson, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 559).

Thus, when we study in 1 John, we must keep in mind that there are *many* things we cannot know with certainty. For example, we do not even know with certainty *who* wrote the letter. Traditionally, students have assigned the letter to John the apostle, writer of the gospel by the same name. Certainly the language is similar. However, word choice cannot definitively determine authorship. If the three epistles *do share* common authorship, the only other means of identification in the texts themselves is offered in the first words of both 2 and 3 John: “The elder.” *This we know* (at least for the two briefest letters).

Similarly, we continue to uncover ambiguities when we attempt to discover *why* the letters were written, to whom they were delivered, and *what* was their purpose? Concerning the situation of the text, Marianne Thompson (InterVarsity Press, *1-3 John*, 1999) says the reader of the three epistles should “envision a network of smaller congregations or house churches, sharing a theological heritage and historical roots.” The elder with pastoral responsibilities (and who may be a member of the congregation in which the division has occurred), writes to “interpret the split that has torn his church and to warn other congregations about the problem.” Maybe the three letters were part of one package; Johnson thinks so. In his estimation, this accounts for the preservation of 2 and 3 John. Perhaps 2 John represents the cover letter for the main writing, 1 John. It would have been read to the entire congregation as an explanation for the arguments and teachings in the longer letter. The final letter, 3 John, would have served as a letter of recommendation for the carrier of the package. Reading the letters, in this manner—basically backwards—with these thoughts in mind does prove interesting, if not convincing.

But not every part of the writings is vague and without definite meaning. What we can “read between the lines” with certainty is that the intended readers are engaged in conflict. Discerning the basis of this conflict, then, becomes significant. According to Johnson, the conflict in each of the letters is different. He dubs the conflict of 3 John as political—between rival leaders (see verses 9-10). In 2 John, the conflict seems to revolve around proper teaching (see v. 7-11), and in 1 John he says that the issues are both “doctrinal” and “moral.”

A “doctrinal” disagreement is one that affects foundational beliefs, the very roots of faith. The “doctrinal” conflict in 1 John revolves around faith in Jesus. Additionally, this conflict “appears to be one generated from within [the church] rather than from without” (Johnson, 560). Who was Jesus? *Could* he have existed (full of the Spirit, and part of the godhead) as the *flesh and blood* Son of God? Could God be flesh, come in flesh, and *die* in the flesh? Are gods born of mortals; do they bruise and bleed; do gods *die*? Philosophic thought in the day complicated this question. For the Greeks, spiritual matter and physical matter shared no common ground.

Who
was
Jesus?

Johnson notes that 1 John teaches us that the *content* of our belief *about* Jesus—not mere verbal assent of faith *in* Jesus—matters. It becomes the criterion for membership in the community of faith, the church. Thus, the writer declares that we can recognize the Spirit of God living in a man, if that man “acknowledges” (*homologeo*) that “Jesus Christ has come *in the flesh*” (4.2-3). Seemingly, it was this controversy that contributed to a split in this early church.

They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us (1 John 2.19).

The division became so intense that the writer of 1 John no longer refers to these men as part of the family; they have become “false prophets” (4.1), working by the spirit of the “antichrist” (4.3), which is “already in the world.” Thus the *doctrinal* issue

of believing Jesus was born a man, lived as a man, and died as a man—not just as some manifestation or apparition—became grounds for conflict.

*God is light; God is love;
we are His children;
we need to act like it.*

The other major arena for conflict involved “moral” disagreement, that is one regarding judgments about good and evil and a Christian’s involvement in sin. Did being *born of God* so separate a person from her status in the flesh that she was no longer capable of sin—regardless of her actions?

Thompson writes,

[These people] agreed that once they had needed God’s forgiveness through Christ. But having been purified of their sin and born of God, they had been granted a status in which they no longer needed atonement, for they were no longer guilty of or subject to sin. And where there is no sin, there is no need of confession or atonement.¹

The writer of 1 John, intent that his readers recognize their position as *children of God*—“that is what we are” (3.1)—rather calls upon these children to bear in themselves the testimony of their parentage—righteous living. “No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known Him,” he writes (3.6). “He who does what is sinful is of the devil...” (3.8). He also calls them to imitate the Father in another way—by loving one another. “God is love,” he writes (4.16). “We love because he first loved us” (4.19). Thus, the pastor addresses his flock—divided and seemingly confused. The simple truth of his message? God is light; God is love; we are His children; we need to act like it.

Scholars normally date the book at the tail end of the first century (90-100 AD) when the church, for the most part, remained a young, largely disconnected group of autonomous house churches. If tradition got it right and the apostle John wrote these texts, they were written very late in his life—as much as 20 years after he penned the gospel. I like to think John did write this epistle, and the evidence seems to fit another piece of tradition I learned so many years ago that I have forgotten who taught me. Apparently, late in John’s life, after his mind was mostly gone and he could no longer walk to assembly, he was carried there on a stretcher. All along the way and after he arrived, he only spoke one sentence, but he repeated it continually, over and over: “Brothers, love one another.” Maybe that’s just tradition, too—but it’s a wonderful thought—and one I’d like to emulate.

¹Thompson, Marianne Meye: *1-3 John*. Downers Grove, Ill., USA : InterVarsity Press, 1992 (The IVP New Testament Commentary Series), S. 1 Jn 1:1