



# Confession and Community in the Letters of John

ARLAND J. HULTGREN

Interpreters of the Letters of John consider them to have been composed within or adjacent to what is called “the Johannine community” (or “circle” of such communities<sup>1</sup>) located anywhere from Alexandria to Syria to Ephesus—with Ephesus having majority support. Behind both the Gospel of John and the Letters of John stands a span of several decades in which traditions of and about Jesus were given their distinctive Johannine character in a series of stages of development. Theories about such stages have been proposed that are plausible, and for the most part widely accepted in principle, even though details among them vary.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Although, as in this essay, the term *Johannine community* is conventionally used to designate the place of composition of the Johannine writings, it is clear to many scholars that the community consisted of a network of smaller communities sharing the Johannine tradition and interacting among one another, as the Letters illustrate; consequently, the term *Johannine circle* is often used, as in the work of Francis J. Moloney, *Letters to the Johannine Circle: John 1–3* (New York: Paulist, 2020), xv, 8–9, 22, and elsewhere. Moloney cites others who have employed the concept of a “Johannine circle” (8) but also cites those who reject it (118, note 4).

<sup>2</sup> A well-known, but dated, proposal is that of Raymond E. Brown, *Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979), including a chart (166–67). He sums up the views of five other scholars as well: J. Louis Martyn, Georg Richter, Oscar Cullmann, Marie-Émile Boismard, and Wolfgang Langbrandtner, (171–82). Subsequently, Brown revised his own proposal in his *Introduction to the New Testament*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 373–76 and in his *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*, Anchor

*Healthy religious communities creatively combine a worldview (theology) with a lived ethos (practice), but the breakdown of this fusion means trouble and discord. In the community of 1 John the internal dispute over the nature and purpose of the Christ is a sign of deep trouble, something the author seeks to repair with this letter.*

The Gospel of John, in its final form, is generally considered a late-first-century document. The Letters, especially 1 John, contain themes and concepts that recall the Gospel of John (illustrated below), and seem to presuppose it, and so the Letters are thought to have been composed either after the Gospel of John had been completed or about the time of its final editing.<sup>3</sup> Typically the Letters are regarded as having come from the end of the first century or at the beginning of the second, written by someone of the Johannine community other than the Fourth Evangelist. Whether all three Letters were by the same author is not settled, although that is possible. In any case, for our purposes there is sufficient similarity among the Letters on the issues discussed, so the matter need not be decided. The term *author* (singular) will routinely be used.

### IN THE WAKE OF A SCHISM

On reading the Letters, it becomes apparent that there had been a disruption of the Johannine community. Those who disrupted the community, who can be called “the secessionists,” had already left by the time the Letters were written (1 John 2:19). The secessionists can be characterized by all those things that are opposed in the Letters. They deny the incarnation and humanity of Jesus (2 John 7: they “do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh”; cf. 1 John 4:2–3); they claim to be enlightened (2:9); they maintain that they are without sin (1:8, 10); they disregard the ethical teachings (“commandments”) of Jesus (2:3–4; 3:22, 24; 5:2–3); and they fail to practice love (2:9–11; 3:11–18; 4:20). Although they claim to “abide” in Jesus, they do not “walk just as he walked” (2:6). Instead, they walk in darkness (1:6). The author of the Letters calls them “antichrists” and persons who impersonate the “spirit of the antichrist” (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7).

Taken together, these elements of theology and conduct indicate that the separatists had gnosticizing tendencies. By denying the incarnation and humanity of Jesus, the secessionists would also, by implication, have to deny the death of Jesus as the Christ upon the cross, even though that was the most publicly known datum of the story of Jesus. The problem had to be dealt with one way or another. One person who took up the challenge was the gnostic teacher Cerinthus, who lived and taught in the late first and early second centuries. As such, he was a contemporary of the author of the Letters and, like the latter, lived in Asia Minor. He resolved the problem of the death of Jesus by claiming that a spiritual power, Christ, descended upon Jesus at his baptism, but “at the end Christ separated again

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Bible Reference Library (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 2003), 40–85, 189–98. Surveys and proposals are offered in commentaries and other works, such as by R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 54–61, and Moloney, *Letters to the Johannine Circle*, 1–26.

<sup>3</sup> A thorough discussion of five different proposals is provided by R. Alan Culpepper, “The Relationship between the Gospel and 1 John,” in *Communities in Dispute: Current Scholarship on the Johannine Epistles*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and Paul N. Anderson (Atlanta: SBL, 2014), 95–119.

from Jesus, and Jesus suffered and was raised again, but Christ remained impassible, since he was pneumatic.”<sup>4</sup>

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One need not claim that the secessionists were followers of Cerinthus, although the time and place of both make the influence of his teachings—or those of other like-minded persons—a possibility. Suffice it to say that Cerinthus is illustrative of currents of thought contemporary with the Letters. Thinking along similar lines appears to have been characteristic of the secessionists. Salvation for them consisted of a spiritual communion with the glorified Christ, abiding in him individually, allowing the believer to claim to be like him already (1 John 3:2). Present eschatology, prominent in the Gospel of John (3:16, 36; 5:24; 6:40, 47, 53–54, 68; 10:28; 17:2–3), was taken up to the exclusion of future eschatology, which the Fourth Gospel retained in tension with present eschatology (4:14; 5:25; 6:27, 39–40, 44, 54; 11:24; 12:25; 21:22). Moreover, gnostic movements tended to be antinomian. Having been freed from the confines of the flesh into the freedom of spiritual salvation, libertinism was commonplace.<sup>5</sup> The profile of the secessionists was similar.

## CORRECTIVES AND AFFIRMATIONS

It is against such a backdrop that the theology and ethical teaching of the Letters is developed and expressed. The Letters share with the Fourth Gospel a host of confessional convictions: the God of Israel is known as the Father of Jesus (John 17:1; 1 John 1:3; 2 John 3) and the Father of Jesus’s disciples (John 14:8; 15:16; 1 John 1:2); apart from this God there is no other worthy of worship (John 17:3; 1 John 5:20–21); the Father has sent the Son into the world (John 6:57; 1 John 4:9–10) to save it (John 12:47; 1 John 4:14); and faith in Jesus as the one sent from God is the means to eternal life (John 3:16; 1 John 5:13).

Christological views are alike in several respects too, but they deserve special attention. The Letters include the use of major traditional titles: “Christ,” “the Son of God,” or simply “the Son,”<sup>6</sup> but the titles “Lord” and “Son of man,” present in

<sup>4</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.26.

<sup>5</sup> Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 35; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.25.1–6; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.28.

<sup>6</sup> But there are no christological titles or explicit references to Jesus in 3 John at all. The phrase “for the sake of the name” (based on the Greek text) in verse 7 is rendered “for the sake of Christ” in the NRSV, but not in the KJV, ASV, RSV, NIV, NET, ESV, and other versions.

John's Gospel, do not appear in the Letters. As in the Gospel, so also once in the Letters, Jesus is called "the Savior of the world" (John 4:42; 1 John 4:14), and once he is hailed as "the Holy One" (John 6:69; 1 John 2:20). Unique to the Letters is the title "Son of the Father" (NRSV: "the Father's Son," 2 John 3). As mentioned previously, Jesus is the one sent from the Father. That expression, found forty-one times in the Gospel of John, has been called "the most characteristic christological formula in the Fourth Gospel,"<sup>7</sup> and it appears three times in the Letters (1 John 4:9, 10, 14). Distinctive to the Letters is that Jesus is explicitly called the believer's "advocate (παράκλητος [*paraklētos*]) with the Father" (2:1), a concept that is applied to Jesus only tangentially in the Gospel. There, at one point, Jesus says that he will ask the Father to send "another advocate" (meaning in addition to himself), referring to the Spirit (14:16). Otherwise the term "advocate" refers characteristically to the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John (14:26; 15:26; 16:7).

Basic to any Christology is that Jesus is the Revealer of God and the Redeemer of humanity. In the Gospel of John, Jesus claims that whoever sees him sees the Father (14:9). He and the Father are one (10:30; 17:11, 22), but he also says that the Father is greater than he (14:28). Jesus's earthly ministry of revealing the Father—his passion, death, resurrection, and glorification—form a soteriological continuum. His crucifixion was the means of his being "lifted up" (3:14; 8:28; 12:32–34), his return to the Father (7:33; 13:1–3; 16:28), and his glorification (12:23; 13:31). All who believe in him are empowered by the risen Christ to be children of God (1:12) and have eternal life (3:16, 36; 5:24; 6:47). That is so because the Father has given him such authority (17:2).

The author of the Letters portrays Jesus as having been sent into the world (1 John 4:9–10, 14), and revelation therefore comes by him, but there is an implied subordination of the Son to the Father. To be sure, there is a unity between the Father and the Son (1 John 2:23; 2 John 9), but nowhere is it claimed that the Father and the Son are one. The author of the Letters goes a step further than the Fourth Evangelist particularly in regard to redemption. Twice Jesus is spoken of as the "atoning sacrifice for our sins" (αὐτὸς ἱλασμός ἐστιν περὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν, 1 John 2:2; 4:10; cf. 1:7; 3:5, 16). One can find an implicit affirmation of the same in the Gospel of John where John the Baptist calls Jesus "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29), but the concept of the crucified Jesus as an atoning sacrifice does not appear as a significant theme in the Gospel of John. The author of the Letters brought it from the periphery of Johannine theology to place it prominently in his own Christology.

The fact that the phrase is used twice in the Letters—with the exact same wording—indicates that it had become a fixed confessional statement. It was obviously of major importance for the community. The secessionists were able to avoid such thinking in favor of a spiritualized, non-crucified Savior. But for the author of the Letters, as with the other authors of New Testament books, especially Paul,

<sup>7</sup> Ernst Haenchen, *John: A Commentary on the Gospel of John*, vol. 1, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 96.



humanity does not simply need information or enlightenment to resolve its need for salvation; it needs divine action to rescue it from sin and death.

The author says, quite astonishingly, that the crucified Jesus is the atoning sacrifice “not for [our sins] only, but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). This could mean that the author affirms that God’s redemptive work in Christ is complete and effective for all, even apart from faith, or it could mean that it is potentially effective for all who come to faith. The latter is finally more likely, for the writer will say later that it is in consequence of faith in Jesus that believers have eternal life (5:13). Moreover, the person who does not love abides in death (3:14), and “murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them” (3:15). There is a “day of judgment” to come (4:17). Nevertheless, having said all that, it remains that the scope of the redemptive love of God for humanity knows no boundaries. All is complete on the divine side for reconciliation (i.e., there is prevenient grace prior to human faith). The secessionists would not have agreed to that; for them, as proto-gnostics, there is no universal scope of divine love.

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Finally, but certainly not less important than theology, a major concern has to do with ethics.<sup>8</sup> The ethos of abiding in Christ, prominent in the Gospel of John (15:4–5, 7–10), continues as essential to Christian identity in the Letters (1 John 2:6, 27–28; 3:6, 24; 2 John 9). Furthermore, the theme of loving others in the community, also prominent in the Fourth Gospel (13:34–35; 15:12, 17), continues as a mark of Christian identity in the Letters (1 John 2:6, 27–28; 3:6, 24; 4:21). Abiding in Christ means “to walk in the same way in which he walked” (1 John 2:6)—the way of love and obedience to the Father. The true disciple observes the commandments of Jesus (1 John 3:24; 2 John 6) and practices love (1 John 4:12–13, 16, 21). The love of the disciple is to reflect the love of God: “Since God loved us so much [by sending his Son], we also ought to love one another” (4:11). And that love should extend beyond the community to those who are needy (3:17–18). One should do what is right, loving “in deed and truth” (3:18). Here it can be said that “civic righteousness” has become a virtue, for “everyone who does what is right is righteous” (3:7). That does not mean that believers are sinless. Sin is an ever-present possibility, and even believers are sinful; to say that they are without sin is delusional (1:8, 10), but Jesus has borne the consequences of judgment upon sin (2:2; 3:5; 4:10). The disciple is charged to engage in battle against sin (3:6, 9; 5:18). Even the passage

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<sup>8</sup> An extensive study is by Jan G. van der Watt, “On Ethics in 1 John,” in *Communities in Dispute*, 197–222.

that speaks as though Christians do not sin (3:6–9) is best regarded as hortatory and descriptive of one who does not persist in sinful behavior.

## CONFESSION AND COMMUNITY

Whatever else one might say about religious communities around the world and throughout history, it is typical of them to have two primary expressions—belief and practice (or worldview and ethos). *Belief* is given outward expression in primary language, such as in prayer (private or corporate), emotional utterances, and testimonies. It may also be given expression in the formal language of a more reflective, theoretical kind, such as in doctrinal statements and in statements of values. *Practice* is given expression in ways that people of a given community worship, how they interact, how they form community life, and how they put into effect the values held in a common life—that is, ethical behavior.<sup>9</sup>

The correspondence between beliefs and practices has long been of interest to cultural anthropologists, sociologists, and historians of religion.<sup>10</sup> Clifford Geertz has used the term *congruence* in his discussion of the relationship between the specific metaphysic of a religious community and its particular style of life.<sup>11</sup> He maintains that a major role of religion is the “fusing of ethos and world view.”<sup>12</sup> Received beliefs and established norms confirm and support one another. He illustrates how the fusion of worldview and ethos can be seen in religious traditions around the world.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Jacob Neusner has written that the description of Judaism in any of its forms requires attention by the investigator to the correspondence between worldview and ethos. Indeed, he says, every religious system is made up of the worldview and the way of life characteristic of a particular social group.<sup>14</sup>

Problems arise when the “congruence” between worldview and ethos—belief and practice—deteriorates. A community can become unsettled and even be torn apart when beliefs are disputed by some or when the behavior of some causes scandal. Often the beliefs and the bad behavior go hand in hand. The beliefs are labeled false, and the behavior is called abusive. To be sure, attempts at reform have often involved disputes and controversial actions that go against the received tradition. But religious communities that are lively and healthy can accommodate

<sup>9</sup> Joachim Wach, “Religious Experience and Its Expression,” in his *Sociology of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944), 17–27.

<sup>10</sup> Gerhardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 459–60, 650; A. R. Radcliff-Brown, “Religion and Society,” in his *Structure and Function in Primitive Society: Essays and Addresses* (London: Cohen & West, 1952), 160–63, 177; and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 1, 100, 111–12, 119.

<sup>11</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in his *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90.

<sup>12</sup> Geertz, “Ethos, World View and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols,” in *Interpretation of Cultures*, 131.

<sup>13</sup> Geertz, “Ethos, World View and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols,” 126–27.

<sup>14</sup> Jacob Neusner, “A Religious System as a Theory of Society,” in his *Understanding Seeking Faith: Essays on the Case of Judaism*, vol. 3, Brown Judaic Studies 116 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986–1988), 10–11.

challenges and go on to integrate the concerns being expressed by reformers. Nevertheless, there are cases where the congruence fails to be sustained, and that is what had happened to the Johannine community on the eve of the writing of the Letters of John.

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In the wake of a crisis that included schism, the author of the Letters addressed a community that was still intact, albeit troubled. The task at hand was to fuse together a worldview (theological convictions) and an ethos (ways of living together) so that the community remaining could have an abiding and viable future. It is likely that the addressees were ready to receive what the author had to say, since he says that they “know the truth” already (1 John 2:21) and “do not need anyone to teach [them]” (2:27); they did not need persuasion as much as encouragement to remain faithful to “what was from the beginning” (1 John 1:1; cf. 2:24; 3:11; 2 John 5–6). Envisioned was a community in which Jesus was remembered as one who taught the love commandment (1 John 3:23) and sought unity among his own (1:3–7). Selflessness and care for those in need would be paramount (3:17–18). Teaching and ethics must cohere. That coherence is expressed above all in the exhortation “Since God loved us so much [in sending his Son], we also ought to love one another” (4:11).

Community care and leadership were urgent for the author of the Letters. According to the Letters, an ongoing and recognized leadership—with personal office-holding—was under development at the time and was considered necessary. Although the precise meaning of the term “presbyter” (πρεσβύτερος [*presbyteros*], 2 John 1; 3 John 1—translated as “elder” in NRSV) in the Johannine Letters is not spelled out, it has become a title borne by a person with presumptive authority (3 John 9). The term is more than an honorific for a senior, esteemed person. It is the term that a particular, familiar person uses to introduce himself in 2 and 3 John, and so it designates an office recognized by those to whom he writes. The status and role of presbyters is more clearly seen in contemporary sources, such as in Acts (20:17, 28), the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim 5:17), and 1 Peter (5:1–5). It is more nebulous in the Letters of John, but it does indicate the value placed on authoritative leadership in and for the community.

## THE LEGACY OF THE LETTERS

It has been suggested that, in the aftermath of the schism of the Johannine community, the fate of the secessionists was to end up in early Christian Gnosticism,



taking the Gospel of John with them.<sup>15</sup> Gnostic teachers were among the first to make use of it in the second century. The gnostic teachers Ptolemaeus and Heraclon both wrote expositions or commentaries on the Gospel of John (ca. 170 AD).<sup>16</sup> The remnant of the divided community, on the other hand, most likely identified with the emerging proto-orthodox tradition, or normative Christianity,<sup>17</sup> which was the precursor of orthodoxy. They also preserved and valued the Gospel of John. Ignatius, writing in the first decade of the second century, uses words and theological concepts similar to those in the Fourth Gospel,<sup>18</sup> but he does not actually quote from it. Papias made use of 1 John early in the second century, but apparently did not know the Gospel of John; he learned Johannine traditions about Jesus orally from others.<sup>19</sup> But by the end of the second century the Gospel of John had firm acceptance, as attested by Irenaeus (ca. 180 CE), who included it among the “four pillars” of the church’s gospel (along with the other three canonical gospels).<sup>20</sup>

It is likely that the Johannine Letters played a role in preserving the Fourth Gospel for the emerging catholic tradition. Early Christian writers and documents often link the Gospel of John and 1 John (less often 2 and 3 John) together as authoritative documents in the long process of what eventually became canonization.<sup>21</sup> Origen claimed that “there is complete harmony between the gospel and the epistle.”<sup>22</sup> For various writers of the first four centuries, 1 John was a noteworthy companion to the Gospel. That being the case, just as 1 John refuted the secessionists at the time of its writing, it served in later decades to help maintain the viability of the Johannine tradition for emergent orthodoxy over against gnostic interpretations. It promoted a synthesis of confession and community ethos that could be sustained over against the gnostics, who continued to divide up into various groups well into the fourth century before they dissipated. The Johannine tradition was preserved for the larger, main stream of Christianity. Most likely that

<sup>15</sup> Brown, *Community of the Beloved Disciple*, 151–55, 167; Culpepper, *Gospel and Letters of John*, 61.

<sup>16</sup> Works discussing gnostic expositors of John include J. N. Sanders, *The Fourth Gospel in the Early Church: Its Origin & Influence on Christian Theology up to Irenaeus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943), 47–66; Maurice F. Wiles, *The Spiritual Gospel: The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel in the Early Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 96–111; and Elaine H. Pagels, *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis: Heracleon's Commentary on John*, SBL (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973).

<sup>17</sup> Brown, *Community of the Beloved Disciple*, 151–55; 167; Culpepper, *Gospel and Letters of John*, 61. A study of the emerging normative (or proto-orthodox) tradition across major parts of the world of early Christianity appears in Arland J. Hultgren, *The Rise of Normative Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

<sup>18</sup> Parallels are demonstrated by Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origins, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 46–48.

<sup>19</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.1–17.

<sup>20</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.11.7–8.

<sup>21</sup> Examples include writers from the second through the fourth centuries. Second century: Clement of Alexandria, *Hypotyposes* 3.1.1, and Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 4.2; 5.16; *Against Praxeas* 15 (the apostle John as author of his Gospel and 1 John). Third century: Origen and Dionysius of Alexandria (quoted, respectively, by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.25.10–13 and 7.25.6–26). Fourth century: Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.25, and Athanasius of Alexandria, *Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter* §5. In addition, the *Muratorian Fragment* (lines 27–33) can be included, whether dated from the second or fourth century (the date is disputed).

<sup>22</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7.25.21.



was due in part to the correctives and affirmations provided by the Letters over against the secessionists and the gnostics. ⊕

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