



The Holy Spirit and Schism

GARY M. BURGE

Most of us read the letters of the New Testament as if they are static documents without an author, history, or context. During this odd season of the COVID-19 pandemic, I ambitiously decided to reread Tolkien's trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*. Of course, I had read it before when I was younger and didn't miss the films. But now I was reading it differently. I began to wonder who Tolkien was and what inspired this epic production. The trilogy was intended as a sequel to *The Hobbit* (1937), but soon it became a massive story of its own. The books were written between 1937 and 1949, and I wondered to what extent the events of those years contributed to Tolkien's themes and symbols? A world of Tolkien scholarship has tried to answer that question. Most of my students have only seen the films, and to them the story is about friendship, modeled between Frodo and Sam in particular. But now I am confident that the films misrepresent the books. Enormous parts are expanded in the films (such as battle scenes ginned up by special effects) while other scenes are left out (Tom Bombadil, his wife Goldberry, and the Old Forest)—and friendship doesn't seem to be central. However, other things were on Tolkien's mind before 1949.¹

¹ An earlier draft of this essay appeared as "Spirit-Inspired Theology and Ecclesial Correction: Charting One Shift in the Development of Johannine Ecclesiology and Pneumatology" in *Communities in Dispute: Current Scholarship on the Johannine Epistles*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and Paul Anderson (Atlanta: SBL, 2014), 179–186.

In 1 John a classic religious dilemma is played out, the tension between spirit-filled inspiration and the fixed theological traditions of the community. Unwilling to try to match spirit-filled credentials with his opponents, the writer of 1 John instead reminds his community of what they have seen and heard, and the theological traditions about Christ handed down to them.

We do something similar when we read the letters of John. We are drawn particularly to 1 John and conclude that the repeated theme of love is a restatement of Jesus's command in John 13:34, "A new command I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another."² This, then, is John's central message. However, what we fail to do is read the Johannine letters from within their own context, much like we fail to read Tolkien through the events of World War II and Norse mythology. Today we interpret Paul's letters through the context of his travels and the concerns of Roman culture in his era. We think about Philippians and we review what it meant to have Roman citizenship in a distant colony. We think about Colossians and realize that we need to understand Roman religion.

If this is true of Paul, it must be true of John. However, the difficulty is that we cannot with certainty reconstruct the geographical or contextual setting of the Johannine letters. Even so, we can do more than we think. We know there is a connection between the letters and the Fourth Gospel. And this is our first clue to discover what is really going on. John is writing about love but for reasons that might surprise us.

THEORIES ABOUT JOHANNINE HISTORY

The idea that the literature attributed to John³ belonged to a community of ancient Christians who shared a history has been commonplace since the 1980s. The great scholar of Johannine studies, Raymond Brown, first offered this theory in 1979⁴ and then expanded it in his famous *Community of the Beloved Disciple*.⁵ He also gave it thorough exegetical support in his Anchor commentary on the Johannine letters three years later.⁶ Today it is overlooked by some interpreters, but in my mind, it is one of the vital clues to understanding 1 John. Newer commentaries by scholars such as Urban von Wahlde⁷ have revived Brown's thesis.

Brown believed that a number of theological themes found in the Gospel of John became the source of considerable theological division in later stages of the community's life, and 1 John provides significant evidence of this problem. Brown felt, for instance, that the high Christology of the Gospel may have contributed to what seemed to be a debate centered on early Docetism and a denial of a full incarnation. He also felt that the dualistic language of the Gospel and its perceived tensions with the "world" laid the groundwork for the ethical dualism that may

² Each citation is taken from the RSV.

³ Here I will refer to John as the author of these four documents: the Gospel and the three letters. For a full explanation of authorship issues, see my *Interpreting the Gospel of John: A Practical Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

⁴ Raymond Brown, "The Relationship of the Fourth Gospel Shared by the Author of 1 John and by His Opponents," in R. Wilson, and Ernest Best, eds, *Text and Interpretation: Studies in the New Testament Presented to Matthew Black* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 57–68.

⁵ Raymond Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979).

⁶ Raymond Brown, *The Epistles of John*, Anchor Bible 30 (New York: Doubleday, 1982).

⁷ Urban von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John*. 3 vols (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

have divided the community later. He famously said that the weapons of conflict that the Gospel aimed at the unbelieving world later were turned back on the community members in the Johannine letters.

In 1 John 4, we are warned about deceitful teachers. “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world” (4:1). In the immediately following verses, we learn that the test of a spirit that has come from God is that it embraces a correct Christology: “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God.” (4:2–3a)

Two ideas seem clear: First, we can fairly assume that these false teachers were prophets who were claiming some spiritual authority to lead the church in new theological directions. And second, we can assume that they were successful. In 1 John 4:5 the letter says with a hint of despair that “the world listens to them.” The congregation was listening to these novel teachers, they were doubting what they had heard “from the beginning,” and now they were ready to claim that the Spirit of God had given them these new insights into life and belief. And this is one of the concerns that prompts the writing of 1 John. The recipients are torn between what has been taught in the tradition and what is being revealed by these new teachers. It would be similar to what I heard a student once say: “Why follow the Nicene Creed? We need to follow Jesus instead.”

Two ideas seem clear: First, we can fairly assume that these false teachers were prophets who were claiming some spiritual authority to lead the church in new theological directions. And second, we can assume that they were successful.

The question is simply this: What ecclesial and theological environment would lend itself to this sort of pastoral crisis? And this is where Brown’s thesis (echoed by many others) becomes a useful tool. Brown’s thesis is simple: the pneumatology of the Gospel of John gave rise to the ecclesial crisis we later see in the letters. Or we might put it another way: a community deeply invested in Spirit-experience found itself in jeopardy because of the very intense spirituality it had so eagerly promoted. Moreover, this Spirit-experience inspired a willingness to upend all that had been “taught from the beginning.”⁸

⁸ See Andrew Byers, *Ecclesiology and Theosis in the Gospel of John*, Cambridge Monograph Series 166 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

THE HOLY SPIRIT IN JOHN

The prominence of the Spirit in the narrative of the Fourth Gospel is well-known.⁹ Jesus's own identity is presented with reference to the Spirit (1:33–34; 3:34; 6:27; 7:37–39, etc.), and in this Gospel we hear Jesus not only promising and describing the coming Spirit-Paraclete for his followers (14:17, 26; 15:26; 16:13) but also delivering it on Easter (20:22). Perhaps the most interesting metaphor for the Spirit is given in the living water imagery of the gospel. The Samaritan woman is offered this water (4:10), the worshippers at Tabernacles hear about it (7:37–39), and water mysteriously flows from Jesus's side on the cross (19:34). John tells us that this is the Holy Spirit (7:39) and it is a signal marker of the gift that Jesus is bringing to the church. For some interpreters the dialogue with Nicodemus in chapter 3 is a template for what it must have meant to belong to the community formed by John.

No other Gospel quite compares to all this. Moreover, in the Farewell Discourse we learn that the promised Spirit will sustain the presence of Jesus within his disciples. In John 14:17 this Spirit is with them (presumably in the presence of Jesus) and will be in them (presumably in the coming of the Spirit-Paraclete). This teaching even resolves the eschatological crisis: Jesus will return to them but in a manner that they need to appreciate: the resurrection-return will provide the gift of Jesus's own Spirit-return, which will be breathed into them. This is why they are not orphans (14:18). Jesus never leaves them. As many have pointed out, the tasks of the Paraclete parallel the tasks of Jesus, signaling that the indwelling of the Spirit will sustain Jesus's own life in the world. This fits well with the way in which discipleship is described in 1 John 4:13. We know we abide in him and he in us because he has given us "his own Spirit."

What will this Spirit-Paraclete do? It will indwell them (John 14:17), teach them everything (14:26), and lead them into truths that *they have not yet heard* (16:13). Simply put, the Spirit-Paraclete will be the resumption of Jesus's life in the church and thus will continue the revelatory work that Jesus brought to the world. As Jesus came to reveal the Father (17:6), so now Jesus-in-Spirit will continue to reveal the deeper truths about God that the community needs to hear.

Therefore, this is what we have: The followers of John were formed by the theology of the Fourth Gospel and possessed a heightened awareness of the indwelling Spirit. And while this contributed to a community of vibrancy and immediacy (John 3:3; 4:23–24), it spun off prophet-teachers who used this same inspiration to justify their novel teachings. Because they could claim that the indwelling Spirit of Jesus was with them, they could reveal to the church things about a docetic Christ no one had considered before. These controversial teachings were among the things Jesus could not say earlier but now was ready to reveal (John 16:12–15). And as prophets they were ready to supply him with a voice. If challenged, they could

⁹ Gary Burge, *The Anointed Community: The Holy Spirit in the Johannine Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

even up the ante: dwelling in them were the *Father and the Son*, who together were confirming this revelation of the Spirit (John 14:23).

Brown never saw these prophets as mystics for whom religious ecstasy inspired their following. He saw them as teaching prophets and demonstrated this role from the *Didache*, where the difference between prophets and teachers is vague (*Didache* 11–13; cf. Eph 4:11).

THE SPIRIT AND 1 JOHN

This explains something that my Charismatic-Pentecostal friends do not think I understand—or at least that good Presbyterians and Lutherans may not understand: In this pastoral environment with spirit-anointed false teachers, there are some things you simply cannot do. In a word, you cannot take the posture of Paul. That is, you cannot appeal to your own ecclesial authority and believe that the *gravitas* of your position or the force of your experience will win the day. Your ordination barely counts. Ecclesial correction in a spirit-filled setting requires unique strategies. Just ask anyone at the Society of Pentecostal Studies.

You cannot appeal to your own ecclesial authority and believe that the gravitas of your position or the force of your experience will win the day. Your ordination barely counts. Ecclesial correction in a spirit-filled setting requires unique strategies.

First, notice that in 1 John the author never appeals to any apostolic authority or to his authority as a bearer of teaching that cannot be contradicted. He never uses an authoritative “I” statement. Compare this with the approach of Paul in Galatians. His words resound from the first: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you” (Gal 1:6), or “As we have said before, so now I say again, If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed” (Gal 1:9). There is an unmistakable authority there that Paul leverages to his advantage. Paul is deferring to tradition (the gospel “which you received”) but considers himself the arbiter of its meaning.

John cannot do this. In his letters he does not leverage pastoral authority or power anchored to a position. He cannot point to the apostles in Jerusalem as if they validated him (as Paul tries to do in Galatians 2). John lives in a world where the institutionalization of authority has barely surfaced, and so the correction of misguided teachers cannot be achieved easily.

Second, note what John does do. He must appeal to the discernment of spirits as a chief strategy. He cannot discredit their anointing directly—they would just return the favor. But he can remind his church that the same Spirit-Paraclete indwells them just as it indwells the teachers. He does not want them to be intimidated by any who might claim a fuller inspiration. “But you have been anointed by

the Holy One, and you all know” (1 John 2:20). He continues, “But the anointing which you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that any one should teach you; as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie, just as it has taught you, abide in him” (1 John 2:27). In other words, they each have the same equipment as the secessionists, and their knowledge and inspiration are comparable to these new teachers. They have no need to be intimidated.

Thus, John must propose that they learn to test the spirits. There are spirits of truth and spirits of error (1 John 4:6); even the spirit of the antichrist is now in the world (1 John 4:3). So this is his chief strategy. John cannot deny the Spirit; but he can teach discernment of spirits and urge followers to weigh the claims made by the prophet-teachers.

But the immediate question in such a unique ecclesial setting is this: What are the criteria we use to discern such revelatory spirits? And John has his answer, which is tenuous but necessary: the validity of the true Spirit of God is found in ethics and right belief (1 John 4:13–21). Simply put, he appeals to tradition.

John’s doctrinal test of true spirits needs to be anchored, and here he makes a final argument that was as risky as it may have been ineffective. John appeals to what had been taught traditionally in the apostolic record. Ten times he refers to “the beginning” or “what you heard in the beginning” and points his followers to the apostolic tradition no doubt presented in his Gospel.

The only problem for John, however, is this: the Gospel of John enshrined the same orthodox tradition that gave birth to the spirituality he needs to restrain. Therefore, rather than beginning 1 John with a recital of his credentials (as Paul does in Galatians 1:1), he reaches back to how this Christian faith is anchored: in the incarnation that was heard, touched, and seen—and proclaimed from the very beginning. In other words, what the Spirit of Christ is saying now must cohere with what we understood Christ to have said during his incarnate life. And this is in the apostolic tradition (or the gospel record read in the Gospel of John). Moreover, since John himself was a witness of this apostolic tradition—a custodian of these events—indirectly he is referring to his own role in preserving this tradition (though he avoids saying it explicitly).

First John may represent the early stages of a process evident in the New Testament. Prophets were clearly held with esteem in the early chapters of the church (1 Cor 12:28; Eph 3:5; 4:11; 1 Tim 4:14), but their efforts inspired departures from the apostolic tradition and these had to be restrained (Mark 13:32; Matt 24:11; 1 Cor 14:29, 32; 2 Pet 2:1; 16; Rev 2:20). John reflects the same reserve or caution with regard to prophecy as we see in, say, 2 Peter.

1 JOHN, THE SPIRIT, AND TODAY

I was once speaking at the Society of Pentecostal Studies and mentioned this theological dilemma of 1 John to a friend in the Assemblies of God. “I get it exactly,” he said. “And this is why we now require our pastors to go to seminary.” However, he added, this is also why today’s pastors need to be equipped in spiritual warfare. In

a spirit-infused environment, you push people to re-anchor themselves to Scripture and tradition, but the climate of the church may drift toward personal spiritual validation.

This theological and pastoral tension between inspiration and tradition is timeless. And Brown successfully demonstrated that if we link the Gospel and the Letters thoughtfully, suddenly new light is shed on what was happening behind the scenes in 1 John. He also demonstrated that this tension continued well into the second century. The opponents of Ignatius, the second-century gnostics reflected in Nag Hammadi (esp. *The Hypostasis of the Archons*), and what little we know of Cerinthus all point to the irresistible temptation to an inspiration that in some manner upends tradition. And it is very difficult to defeat.

One might think that this is an ancient issue or something restricted to Pentecostal, Holiness, or Charismatic settings that might be foreign to some of us, so let me reach as far from these places as I can. However, to tell you this example runs the risk of inspiring the very unhappiness found in 1 John, so please recall that letter's love exhortations in as you read this.

In a major fundamentalist church in the United States, a pastor recently spoke to his congregation of fifteen thousand about what God had revealed to him concerning the end of the world. He appealed to Spirit-texts of the Gospel of John (such as 16:12) and claimed that the Spirit-Paraclete was revealing to the church things Jesus could never say in his lifetime. His revelation: that war would break out soon in the Middle East, that political support for Israel was God's test of faithfulness in our day, and that all Christians need to become politically active and urge that the United States arm its ally (Israel) and be ready for a preemptive attack on Iran. It was quite a sermon!

What is interesting here is not the subject itself (Christian Zionism, to be precise). At this point I have little interest in the mingling of politics and faith in this story. But what is interesting is how this was explained. Theology was not a matter of wrestling with tradition or text; it was grounded in the self-validating experience of what someone believed to be the Holy Spirit. The speaker did not even try to do theology: he temporarily joined Montanus, appealed to the Spirit, and made a pronouncement.

Now traditionalists in this church have an interesting dilemma on their hands, not unlike that of the author of 1 John—which is why this is an interesting case study and one that appears in many forms in churches today. When text and tradition are not the basis of theological discourse, when unprecedented revelations are offered with confidence, how does one challenge a new theological teaching?

When text and tradition are not the basis of theological discourse, when unprecedented revelations are offered with confidence, how does one challenge a new theological teaching?

Perhaps a sound recommendation would be that they hand this dilemma to the Society of Pentecostal Studies. They seem to know how to address those who claim to speak in the name of the Spirit, thanks to their long tenure living in the world of John. John 16:12 is familiar territory to them, and they (like John) know how to correct teachers who promote things Jesus never said. ⊕

GARY M. BURGE is professor of New Testament and Dean of the Faculty at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and is ordained in the Presbyterian Church USA. He is the author of many books, including The New Testament in Antiquity, Interpreting the Gospel of John, and commentaries on the Gospel of John and the Letters of John.