



Us and Them: Lessons from 1 John's Antichrist Polemic

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None of us would say this past year has been “normal.” COVID-19, a presidential election, and renewed attention to long-standing systemic racism in the United States have jolted us from the daily routines that either overwhelmed us or lulled us into a slumber, too busy, beaten down, or contented to look seriously at the fragility and injustice of our societal structures. Perhaps we had already noticed the increased polarization in our society, popularly referred to with the problematic term *tribalism*,¹ but debates and violence over mask-wearing, sending children back to school in person, and the presence of federal officers in cities have exposed our divisions in even starker ways. This moment in history is showing us how easy it is to demonize those with whom we disagree, especially when that disagreement is in the midst of life-and-death struggles for survival. Such

¹ This term degrades people who are members of actual tribes and is based on racist assumptions about the primitiveness of indigenous cultures and the need for their “civilizing” and domestication. Christine Mungai, “Pundits who decry ‘tribalism’ know nothing about real tribes,” *The Washington Post*, January 30, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/pundits-who-decry-tribalism-know-nothing-about-real-tribes/2019/01/29/8d14eb44-232f-11e9-90cd-dedeb0c92dc17_story.html

First John can be read in a very dualistic form, the “us” of the Johannine community versus the “them” who have denied Christ and gone out from the community. But a closer reading of 1 John, in tandem with the Gospel of John, suggests that the situation is not so clear-cut; “antichrists” can remain in the community, and deniers can be brought back in.

demonization quickly devolves into a classic battle of “us” vs. “them”: *we* are right, and *they* are wrong.

When we slip into this language, it's easy to lose sight of what it also teaches us about ourselves; we are too focused on demonizing others *over there*. As a result, we overlook the chance at self-examination it offers. In this short article, I want to flip the script and focus on the underside of polemical language by exploring its use in 1 John. The descriptions of “antichrists” and “children of the devil” in 1 John have led many scholars to interpret it as a letter condemning those who abandoned this community over christological disagreements.² Yet, this letter was ultimately not read by its opponents, but rather by the community of believers who remained connected to its author. Thus, this language tells us a lot more about the “we” of the Johannine community than about the “they” who went out from its midst. In fact, when read in light of the larger Johannine traditions, especially John 6, we see that the polemic of 1 John is not simply directed outward, toward “antichrists” who have already left, but also inward toward those who remain. The antichrist polemic encourages its audience to reflect on their own antichrist behaviors, prompting confession, cleansing by Christ, and renewed actions of love toward one another (1:5–2:2; 3:16–18; 4:7–11). Despite what popular fiction and movies might tell us, in 1 John antichrist need not be a permanent status, nor is it just for “them.”

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THE AMBIGUITY OF 1 JOHN'S ANTICHRISTS

The author of 1 John did not invent the term *antichrist*. Instead, 2:18 and 4:3 indicate it was known by the letter's audience: “Little children,” 2:18 begins, “it is the last hour, and just as you heard (ἠκούσατε) that antichrist is coming (ἀντίχριστος ἔρχεται), even now many have become antichrists (ἀντίχριστοι πολλοὶ γεγόνασιν), wherefore we are knowing that it is the last hour!” Most interpreters suggest that 1 John is using the tradition of God's eschatological opponent and shaping it to fit

² The most famous approach is that of Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist, 1979); Brown, *The Epistles of John*, Anchor Bible 30 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982). For more recent conversations, see *Communities in Dispute: Current Scholarship on the Johannine Epistles*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and Paul N. Anderson (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014).

this context.³ My translation is a bit clunky on purpose.⁴ It not only shows the ring-composition of the verse, which begins and ends with the same words; it also emphasizes the change in verbs from “coming” to “have become” in the middle of the verse. These verbs can be synonymous, but the shift here seems deliberate, pivoting at the center of the verse. It is not only that many antichrists have somehow shown up, but that many people “have become” antichrists, changing from who they were perceived to be and revealing their true identity now with present actions. This translation also makes sense of the larger context of 2:18–27, which emphasizes that these antichrists used to be a part of the community of believers.

The author of 1 John builds on the known image of antichrist by linking it to other repeated terms in the letter, including the following: deceivers and liars (1:10; 2:4, 22; 4:20; 5:1), deniers of Christ (2:22, 23), and children of the devil (3:10). The “they” of 2:18–19 are also aligned with Cain, while the “we” are aligned with Abel by means of an interpretation applying Genesis 4 to the Johannine community.⁵ According to Tom Thatcher, Genesis 4 was a particularly important text to the Johannine believers. John 8 alludes to Genesis 4 when Jesus accuses the Jewish crowd surrounding him of being children of the devil because of their desire to kill him (John 8:44; cf. 1 John 3:8–12). First John describes Cain’s murder of his brother as the fulfillment of his father the devil’s will.⁶ The point of the allusion is in the application: anyone who repeats Cain’s selfishness without repentance reenacts this archetypal story, continuing to murder siblings by hoarding resources rather than sharing and laying down their own life for another (3:13–18).

The result of 1 John’s rhetoric, therefore, is twofold. On the one hand, it demonizes the opposition as antichrists who share diabolical lineage with Cain. On the other, it leaves the children of the devil unnamed. While it might be easy to identify some of “them”—those who have already “gone out” from among us (2:19)—others remain undiscovered. At the end of the day, the “they” of 1 John are anonymous. This mixture of specificity and anonymity makes antichrists a particularly fitting tool for 1 John’s epideictic goals: an antichrist is *anyone* who is ardently, even if ignorantly, opposed to Christ, including those counted among Jesus’s disciples. As Craig Koester notes, “The Johannine Epistles do not allow readers the luxury of equating the antichrist with one particular tyrant, who becomes the focus of all evil.”⁷ Instead, *antichrist* remains at once a concrete and a dynamic term: no one is above reproach. The proof of discipleship is in continuous action:

³ Lietaert Peerbolte, *The Antecedent of Antichrist: A Traditio-Historical Study of the Earliest Christian Views on Eschatological Opponents* (London: T & T Clark, 1996); Craig R. Koester, “The Antichrist Theme in the Johannine Epistles and Its Role in Christian Tradition,” in *Communities in Dispute*, 187–96.

⁴ All New Testament translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

⁵ Tom Thatcher, “Cain the Jew the AntiChrist: Collective Memory and the Johannine Ethic of Loving and Hating,” in *Rethinking the Ethics of John: “Implicit Ethics” in the Johannine Writings*, ed. Jan van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 357–71.

⁶ The Gospel and 1 John incorporate the Jewish and Christian traditions that Cain was the child of Eve and Satan, rather than Eve and Adam. Judith Lieu, “What Was from the Beginning: Scripture and Tradition in the Johannine Epistles,” *New Testament Studies* 39, no. 3 (1993), 458–77.

⁷ Koester, “Antichrist Theme,” 191.

confessing sins, confessing Jesus, and living out the truth of those confessions with loving actions toward others. Identity cannot simply be claimed; rather, it must be continuously lived.

A HISTORY OF ANTICHRISTS: 1 JOHN, JOHN 6, AND THE STORY OF TWO WAYWARD DISCIPLES

Rather than filling in the gaps for 1 John's audience with names and explicit identifiers, I suggest that the author uses larger Johannine traditions to help his audience reflect on who is, or could be, an antichrist. This argument as a whole is not new; many scholars notice how 1 John uses material also present in Jesus's Farewell Discourse from John 13–17, especially Jesus's command for the disciples to "love one another" (John 13:34–35; 15:12–17; 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11, 12).⁸ With these and other allusions, the author of 1 John extends Jesus's story to include his own audience. Instead of arguing for literary dependence or composition order for these writings, I am here noting the pervasive overlaps that demonstrate an awareness of similar traditions. One overlap that has not been fully explored is especially relevant to our topic here: how John 6, especially the stories of Peter and Judas, helps us understand 1 John's antichrist language better.

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Deserters and Antichrists: 1 John and John 6

Aside from parenthetical notes, few interpreters pause to consider the extensive similarities between 1 John and John 6. One of these few is Hansjörg Schmid, who suggests that the audience of 1 John would have understood antichrists based on traditions also represented in John 6.⁹ Schmid focuses on the connection between the "many" (πολλοί) disciples who abandon Jesus in John 6:66 and the "many" (πολλοί) antichrists who abandoned him by leaving the community (1 John 2:18–19). Schmid's initial observations help us see additional connections between John 6 and 1 John 2 outlined in the table below.

⁸ R. Alan Culpepper, "The Relationship between the Gospel of John and 1 John," in *Communities in Dispute*, 93–119.

⁹ Hansjörg Schmid, *Gegner im Johannesbrief? Zu Konstruktion und Selbstreferenz im johanneischen Sinnsystem* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), 107–25, 155–57; Schmid, "How to Read the First Epistle of John Non-Polemically," *Biblica* 85 (2004): 24–41.

Theme/Word	1 John 2	John 6
Remaining in Jesus's word (λόγος)	2:5, 7, 14	6:60
Walking/living (περιπατέω)	2:6, 11	6:66
"From the beginning"	2:7, 13–14, 24	6:64
Truth, true, or truly	2:4–5, 8, 21, 27	6:55
Scandal	2:10	6:60, 61 (cf. 16:1)
Knowing	2:3–5, 11, 20–21, 13–14, 18, 29	6:6, 15, 42, 61, 64, 69
Many (πολλοί)	2:18	6:2, 5, 10, 60, 66
"The Holy One"	2:20 (τοῦ ἁγίου)	6:69 (ὁ ἅγιος τοῦ θεοῦ)
Teaching (διδάσκω)	2:27 (3x)	6:59 (6:45, διδασκοί)
Eternal life	2:25–27	6:27, 40, 47–48, 54, 63, 68
Last	2:18 (2x)	6:39–40, 44, 54

While a number of these words and ideas appear repeatedly in 1 John and the Gospel, several only appear in 1 John 2 and John 6, suggesting a closer association than just a passing similarity. The antichrists of 1 John, therefore, are not just informed by known traditions of an eschatological opponent, but also by other Johannine traditions such as John 6. Reflecting on their own experience of abandonment, the community of 1 John need not be discouraged, but can find strength in connecting their experience to that of their Lord. As Jesus explains, "If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you" (John 15:18). The author of 1 John repeats this tradition in 3:13, "Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, if the world hates you." The world, however, is not just those on the outside; it is also us.

Lingering Antichrists: Judas and Peter

The table above illustrates that the connection between 1 John and John 6 is deeper than just the deserting disciples and antichrists who abandoned the Johannine community. When we read closely, we remember that John 6 also describes two disciples who remained as part of the Twelve, but who later deserted and denied their Lord. Judas is the most obvious of the two, and John 6 is at pains to show that Jesus knew of Judas's upcoming betrayal long before it happened. As is common in the Gospel, Jesus's knowledge contrasts with the ignorance of all those who surround him, and the disciples' ignorance seems to be part of the point. Jan Heilmann argues that all of John 6 should be read as a *test* for the disciples, just as Jesus describes in verses 5–6:

Then, having lifted his eyes, Jesus saw the great crowd coming toward him and he said to Philip: "Where shall we buy bread so that these ones can eat?" Now he was saying this *in order to continue testing him* (πειράζων αὐτόν), for he himself already knew what he was about to do.

Heilmann focuses on Jesus's selection of the Twelve that follows, but the larger test is whether the disciples will continue walking with Jesus, or will stumble over the difficulty of his word and walk away.¹⁰ On the surface, it seems Judas passes: he remains and is identified as one of the Twelve. Jesus, however, knows more—perhaps even more than Judas himself.

In John 6, Jesus emphasizes God's election of those who come to him (6:44–45). As we continue reading the Gospel, we see that "coming" to Jesus is not a one-time affair, however, but a continual action throughout life. Although Judas remained in John 6, his presence is not permanent. Neither Jesus nor the Gospel narrator let Judas's upcoming betrayal go unnoticed. In 6:70–71, Jesus responds, "Have I myself not chosen you, the Twelve? But among you one is a devil! Now he was speaking about Judas son of Simon Iscariot. For this one, one of the Twelve, was about to betray him." When "the devil" inspires Judas to betray Jesus in 13:2–30, the Gospel audience is not surprised. This "son of destruction" (17:12) may not have known he would eventually betray his Lord, but Jesus always knew.

Schmid readily connects Judas to the antichrist language of 1 John, arguing that the Johannine community knew how Judas's betrayal of Jesus led to his death. As a "child of the devil," Judas enacts his father's will participating in Jesus's murder just as Cain did in Genesis 4.¹¹ For Schmid, the connection of Judas and the antichrists shows how this language "others" opponents, cutting *them* off from God, life, and community while affirming *our* secure place as God's elect.¹² Yet, the fact that Judas was "one of the Twelve" should make us a bit leery of casting the title "antichrist" onto others with ease. The possibility that Judas himself was unaware of his coming fate should also caution us against quick demonization. The most damning reason that we should pause, however, is because Judas wasn't the only eventual deserter to remain part of the Twelve long after John 6; Peter, too, stayed.

In fact, Peter emphatically describes the reason for remaining in 6:68–69 *after* the disciples in 6:66 left. Responding to Jesus's question of whether the remaining disciples will also depart, Peter answers: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life and we have believed and have known that you are the Holy One of God!" (6:68–69). While we often focus on Judas as the proverbial snake in the grass, knowledgeable audience members also see Peter lingering among the weeds. Indeed, 1 John seems to play on this reality. First John repeats Peter's

¹⁰ Jan Heilmann, "A Meal in the Background of John 6:51–58?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137, no. 2 (2018): 481–500.

¹¹ Schmid, *Gegner*, 178, 206–10.

¹² Schmid, *Gegner*, 209; see also Schmid, "How to Read," 31.

confession in two places: using the title “Holy One” in 2:20 and claiming, “We have known and we have believed the love which God has among us,” in 4:16.

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Another, less flattering, connection to Peter comes in 1 John 2:22 when the author asks, “Who is the liar if not the one *denying* [by saying] Jesus is not the Christ? This one is the antichrist, the one who is *denying* the Father and the Son.” In Johannine tradition, the only one who “denies” (ἀρνέομαι) Jesus explicitly is *Peter*. As with Judas, Jesus knows Peter’s upcoming failure; Jesus predicts his denial in John 13:38, and Peter acts it out in 18:17, 25–27. From the perspective of 1 John, then, by denying Jesus in John 18, Peter “has become antichrist,” at least for a time. Even at the end of the Gospel, when Peter is restored to the fold, he remains ambiguous when he earns one final rebuke from Jesus after he questions the Beloved Disciple’s fate: “*You follow me!*” (John 21:20–22). Peter reminds 1 John’s audience that *anyone* has the potential to become antichrist—even those who sometimes say and do the right things.

Acknowledging Peter’s antichrist status helps us see the potential of 1 John’s polemic to inspire self-examination. If Peter, the spokesperson for the Twelve, can be antichrist, then self-reflection is in order. First John, thus, is not ultimately about alienating the community from the “they” who have already left, but about strengthening the “we” who remain. This strength comes from confessing sins and relying on Jesus (1 John 1:5–2:2), while simultaneously imitating Jesus’s love through caring for others (3:16–18). The believers aren’t perfect, but they are reminded of God’s love and encouraged to keep trying regardless of their failures. As long as they keep coming to Jesus, he is faithful to help. While it is tempting to push 1 John’s polemic off onto others—those who have already left or who are suspected of disloyalty—when read carefully, 1 John does not let us off so easily.

In fact, recognizing Peter as antichrist at John 18 helps us learn another new thing about antichrists of 1 John as well: antichrists *can return to the fold*. Although Peter left and denied, he also returns and is reenlisted, even while remaining imperfect (John 21:15–23). First John, too, repeatedly encourages its audience to remember they are children of God (1 John 3:1–3). The sermon offers its audience means of comfort, first for their sins through reminding them of Jesus’s continual intercession on their behalf in 1:5–2:2, and then by describing God’s comforting of the hearts of those who fear (3:20–24; 4:7–21). Even the oft-debated “sin unto death” of 5:16–17 is enveloped by an admonition to pray for those who are “not sinning unto death” because of God’s faithfulness in restoring them to life. Even the harsh language of antichrists, Cain, and murderers participates in this

encouragement. The author preaches a prophetic word, full of rebuke and promise, to strengthen the community.

From this perspective, the idea that the Johannine community provides no room for reconciliation is short-sighted.¹³ Instead, Johannine tradition is based on God's initial reach to the world in love (John 1:1–18; 3:14–18; 1 John 4:7–11). First John certainly includes harsh language, but these sections are mixed with hopeful language even in the midst of its most severe polemic. For the Johannine community, the lines between “us” and “them” are blurred; even Peter can be antichrist, and even antichrists like Peter can be restored.

CONCLUSION

So, what does this all mean for us today? As a biblical scholar, I might say this intra-traditional reading shows how 1 John's antichrist polemic participates in its epideictic rhetoric. In everyday terms, though, it means that the demonizing language of 1 John is not just about creating division between *us* and *them*. Instead, this language, and its weaving in of stories from the Gospel of John, encourages self-examination with the hopes of strengthening the community. For 1 John, no one is above reproach because faith is not simply a doctrinal issue to be confessed and then ignored; rather, faith is expressed in continual action. Even though some of our actions, like those of Peter before us, are mistakes—sins that amount to denying our Lord—1 John calls us to act again with confession, thus living out our trust in Jesus's intercession (2:1–2).

Perhaps instead of weaponizing 1 John's antichrist language against others, then, we could take the time to flip it on its head, particularly those of us in positions of authority and privilege. Rather than creating a sharp divide, harsh words spoken truthfully invite us to pause and reflect on our own actions.

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¹³ See Thatcher, “Cain the Jew the AntiChrist,” 372–73.

by the Spirit, reminds us we are children in God's large family, tested in life by trials and failing to love one another in the ways we should, but also known by a God who loves us completely. Even though there might be "many" who go out, we are called to remain. But our remaining is not a static activity. We need also to acknowledge that we too have been antichrists, wandering from time to time from the fold. It is only because of God's limitless love and superabundant provision through the Son that even deniers and liars, like Peter and like us, can be restored. For a chaotic world still reeling from 2020, this is the hope for us all. ☩

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