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Religious Belief, Conflict, and Violence: the Theological Basis in 1 John for Being Passionate about What We Believe & Loving Those who Disagree with Us

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Introduction

The theological basis in 1 John for being passionate about what we believe and being passionate about loving those who disagree with us lies in the mission heart of God. Using the Cain and Abel motif from Genesis 4:1–16, the author of 1 John weaves a Midrash Pesher to give a prophetic explanation of the eschatological fulfilment of the ancient Jewish "protohistory" in the life of the beleaguered Johannine fellowship. The fellowship is to emulate the righteous Abel, who worshipped God with a pure heart. They are to hold firm to the gospel teaching regarding God and his incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, because it is the essence of eternal life. They are to eschew those who oppose them violently and walk in the ways of Cain. However, because they live in *koinōnia* with the triune God, they must also reflect his character of self-giving love. Their reaction to religious conflict and violence perpetrated against them is not to return like for like, but to love their neighbors (both inside and outside the fellowship) and to reach out to them in missional zeal through proclamation and prayer.

1 John is often seen to present a moral dilemma for Christians, who are commanded to "love one another" (2:10; 3:11; 4:7, 21) and yet, at the same time, to hold a "consistently hateful attitude towards their opponents … the Antichrists" (2:22; 4:3).[2] The author is seen to limit love to the fellowship circle of the Christian community, thereby implying a rejection of those, now outside, who hold different beliefs.[3] It would seem, therefore, that hatred and religious conflict are the inevitable consequence of the stark polarization in the epistle

[2] 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, Contexts and Norms of N.T. Ethics*, vol. III, ed. Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmerman (Heidelberg: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 350.

[3] As this article has no space to engage with the substantial debate regarding the authorship of 1 John, it uses "the author" to indicate authorship.

between those who are in the light and those who walk in the darkness (1:5–7). Yet, the often-overlooked missional nature of 1 John belies this interpretation.[4] The purpose of the proclamation of the gospel (1:3) is not to exclude those who disagree with the apostolic teaching, but to bring them into life and fellowship through repentance and belief (1:9; 2:2; 5:16). Indeed, the purpose of writing (5:13) is both that they "may believe in the name of the Son of God" (an initial drawing into fellowship) and that they may know that they "have eternal life" (an assurance of continuance in the fellowship).[5] There may be conflict and even violence over opposing religious beliefs, but this is not an ethical ideal to which the Johannine fellowship should aspire. They are to hold firmly to the truth, while seeking through faithful proclamation (1:3) and fervent prayer (5:16) to bring those who oppose them into the fellowship of eternal life.

A. Theological Center of 1 John

The author uses the Jewish history of Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1–16) to situate the current conflict in the O.T. historical-theological tradition. The role of O.T. scripture in 1 John has been widely debated. Carson holds that the only allusion is the Cain and Abel narrative in 1 John 3:12.[6] Lieu, on the other hand, argues that the O.T. underlies the entire Jewish worldview of the epistle.[7] Both positions are, in fact, correct, but with reservations. The only specific scriptural allusion is to Genesis 4, and there is scriptural underpinning in the broad sense throughout the epistle, but this is secondary to the narrative of Cain and Abel that forms the structural and theological center. To read 1 John this way, is to propose an alternative to traditional interpretations of the epistle.[8] Instead, 1 John is

[4] Caroline G. Seed, "The Missional Nature of Divine-human Communion: T. F. Torrance and the Chinese Church" (PhD thesis, Potchefstroom, ZA: North-West University, 2016), 106–114.

[5] All Bible references in this article are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV), 2011.

[6] D. A. Carson, "1–3 John," in *Commentary on the N.T. use of the O.T.*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 1063–1067.

[7] Judith M. Lieu, "What Was from the Beginning: Scripture and Tradition in the Johannine Epistles," *N.T. Studies* 39, no. 3 (July 1993): 461.

[8] See, for example, Judith M. Lieu, *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991): 31–71.

understood in the context in which it was composed during the period of Second Temple Jewish hermeneutics.[9]

1. A Midrash Pesher on Genesis 1–4

Anthony Royle proposes that the author uses Genesis 1–4 as Midrash Pesher applied eschatologically to the contemporary situation found in the Johannine fellowship.[10] Midrash Pesher in eschatological fulfillment was a common exegetical technique in use during the Second Temple period. Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner describes this type of prophetic Midrash as the process by which "the exegete will read Scripture as an account of things that are happening or are going to happen," so that the Scripture portion exegeted serves as a prophetic reading of contemporary events.[11] The historical life of Israel would therefore be seen to prefigure contemporary events and to act as a guide for to the unfolding of events in the near future.[12] Royle maintains that I John has Genesis 1–4 in view, and this is no doubt true because Genesis 4 presupposes Genesis 1–3. However, when 1 John is read as Midrash Pesher specifically on the Genesis 4 account of Cain and Abel, applied in eschatological fulfillment to the situation facing the Johannine fellowship, then its intention to address the issue of current religious conflict through the Genesis account of Cain and Abel becomes apparent.

To make sense of the current conflict over religious belief that has split the visible Johannine fellowship (Gen 2:19), the author appeals to the Jewish collective memory of the first instance of religious conflict in Genesis 4 (3:11–15). Tom Thatcher proposes that the narrative serves to categorize individuals into those who are of Cain (of the devil) and those who are of Abel (of God, of Christ).[13] The Cain and Abel motif (3:12) is placed in the center of the structural chiasm so that it dominates the interpretation. Those who

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[9] Anthony Royle, "1 John as Midrash Pesher on Genesis 1–4: Eschatology, Typology, Structure and Early Christian Polemics," conference paper presented at the *British N.T. Society Conference* at the University of Manchester, 6 September 2014.

[10] Royle, "1 John as Midrash Pesher." In this article, the word "fellowship" translates the Johannine usage of *koinónia* (1 John 1: 3, 7), rather than *ekklesia* (church), to designate the community of believers. The popular use of the "Johannine community" has been avoided because of its association with Raymond Brown's theories regarding the authorship, dating and purpose of the epistle.

[11] Jacob Neusner, *What is Midrash?* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1987), 1, 7.

[12] Neusner, *What is Midrash?*, 53.

[13] Thatcher, *Cain the Jew*, 354.

are like Abel hold passionately to the truth and live in love and obedience. Those who are like Cain demonstrate opposite behavior. Yet, the Abelites are called to reflect the love that is the essence of the character of God their Father (4:16). They are not to hate their brothers (4:19–21). Instead, like the apostles, they are to proclaim the truth passionately, with the missional purpose of bringing those who are outside, into the fellowship of the truth (1:3, 7).

Proving that 3:12 is the center of the epistle is not, however, a simple task. The structure of 1 John has long been a matter of debate. Köstenberger notes that opinion varies widely from the complete lack of coherence to intricately balanced composition.[14] Van Staden, for example, applies Hebrew parallelism and concludes that the epistle consists of three sections organized in chiasm with introductions and transitions linking them.[15] The problem with Van Staden's schema is that it is based on a reading of 1 John as an apologetic document to refute opponents' claims about the Gospel of John.[16] It does not, therefore, allow the text to speak for itself. A more intrinsic approach is needed.

In his work on the rhetoric of 1 Corinthians, Middle East scholar Kenneth Bailey demonstrates that typical Jewish prophetic rhetorical structure uses parallelism in the micro as well as the macro structures.[17] He shows that the rhetorical structures of Isaiah's prophetic oracles are often reflected in Paul's writings. If it were possible to postulate that the same Hebrew prophetic rhetorical traditions have been used in the composition of 1 John, then we may expect to find evidence of Hebrew parallelism in the macro and micro structures of this epistle too. If the text of 1 John is read intrinsically as a chiasm of theological concepts, then there is no need for the introductions and transitions suggested by Van Staden. 1 John forms a macro chiasm with the Cain and Abel motif at the center. This is reflected in the proposed schema below.[18]

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[14] Andreas Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters: The Word, the Christ, the Son of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 171.

[15] P. J. Van Staden, "The Debate on the Structure of 1 John," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 47 (April, 1991): 487–502.

[16] Van Staden, "Debate … 1 John," 498.

[17] Kenneth Bailey, *Paul through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011), 34–52.

[18] This schema does not reflect the micro chiasms within the macro chiasm.

Table 1: Proposed Macro Chiastic Structure of 1 John

A. 1: 1 –2:6 Fellowship
B. 2: 7– 11 New Commandment
C. 2: 12–14 Testimony
D. 2: 15–17 Overcoming the World
E. 2: 18– 27 The Last Hour
F. 2: 28–3:10 Practicing Righteousness
G. 3:11–15 Cain and Abel (Gen 4).
F^{1}. 3: 16–24 Practicing Righteousness
E^{1}. 4: 1–21 The Last Hour
D^{1}. 5: 1–5 Overcoming the World
C^{1}. 5: 6–15 Testimony
B^{1}. 5: 16–17 New Commandment
A^{1}. 5: 18–21 Fellowship

The careful balance between the first and second sections of the chiasm relates the theological themes of the epistle to the central narrative. The core conflict between Cain and Abel is over the way they "practice righteousness" (F–F1). This conflict should be interpreted eschatologically as the inevitable conflict of the "last hour" (E–E1). The issue is the victory over the world by the Lord Jesus Christ (D–D1), to which both the experience of the disciples and the blood, water, and Spirit bear testimony (C–C1). The essence is the new commandment to love one another (B–B1), which arises from the nature of faith as entry into and maintenance of fellowship with the triune God, as opposed to Cain's alternative, which is, in reality, fellowship with idols (A–A1).

2. The Cain and Abel Motif

The Cain and Abel allusion at the center of 1 John, therefore, provides an O.T. framework through which to interpret the pain of rejection experienced by the Johannine fellowship. This came because of the opposition of those who had split the group and left the church (2:19). Wenham maintains that the events of Genesis 2:4–4:26 are "protohistorical," in that they narrate events concerning real historical figures, whose actions have an influence on all humanity, but that they are also "paradigmatic" as they stand as a warning against types of behavior that humans might fall into if they disobey

God.[19] The author of 1 John intends that the fledgling church should understand the contemporary conflict within its fellowship in terms of the "protohistorical" Cain and Abel narrative that forms an interpretative motif through the epistle.

The Cain and Abel pericope (Gen 4:1–16) is part of the first cycle of "generations," introduced in Genesis 2:4. This genealogy of creation encompasses the disobedience of God's first creatures, the entry of sin into the world, and the curse leading to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. This is followed by examples of the multiplication of the sin of Adam and Eve in their progeny, Cain and Lamech, and the corresponding multiplication of grace in the righteous progeny, Abel and Seth. When Eve gives birth to Cain outside the Garden of God's presence, she believes that the son she has given birth to is the "seed of the woman" who will "bruise the head of the serpent" and reverse the effects of the curse (Gen 3:15; 4:1).[20] However, subsequent events will prove her wrong. The births of Cain and his younger brother Abel will not reverse the effects of sin and curse, but rather enhance them through the conflict over religious worship that plays out in their lives (Gen 4:8–12). At the same time, the history of the gracious intervention of the Lord in the lives of the righteous is seen in the life of the Lord's appointed (Strong's H7896, *shith*) righteous brother, Seth (Gen 4:25–26). Thus, the primordial family history begins a pattern of sin, conflict, and the gracious intervention of the Lord that will be repeated down the generations of the nations of the earth.

The foundational Genesis 1–4 pattern serves as a motif for understanding religious conflict through the ages.[21] God creates the world "very good" (Gen 1:31), but Satan tempts those made "in [God's] own image" (Gen 1:27) to rebel and so to fall into sin and judgment. The full effects of sin are seen in the lives of their sons, Cain and Abel. Cain continues to rebel against the Lord, leading to the murder of his righteous brother (Heb 11:4). The "blood of Abel,"

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[19] Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15. Word Biblical Commentary*, 1 (Waco: Word, 1987), 117.

[20] Walter C. Kaiser Jnr, *Mission in the O.T.: Israel as a Light to the Nations*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 16. The Hebrew words are ambiguous. Kaiser interprets Eve's statement in the light of the "promise plan" of God to deliver humanity from the effects of sin and death.

[21] Ida Glaser with Hannah Kay, *Thinking Biblically About Islam* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, Kindle edition, 2016), location 832.

the righteous one, continues to cry out to the Lord for justice (Gen 4:10). A pattern is set. Righteousness and evil dwell side by side in the post-Fall world. Within the first family, there are those who "walk in the ways of the Lord" and those who choose the path that leads to destruction. Those who walk the path of sin persecute those, who by grace, walk the life of faith as Abel did (see Gen 21:8–12).

The paradigmatic nature of the Cain and Abel narrative in establishing a pattern of contrast between the righteous and the wicked can be illustrated by the use of the motif in the Jewish writings. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan,* a fifth century B.C. Aramaic translation*,* locates the problem of Cain's evil nature in his conception by an angel.[22] The *Genesis Rabbah*, a fifth century B.C. Midrash on the Torah, on the other hand, places the blame for Cain's conception in Eve's connivance with Satan in tempting Adam to sexual arousal.[23] In the early Christian period, Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 B.C. to 5 A.D.) interprets the conflict between the two brothers in terms of their contrasting loves: the sin of self-love as opposed to the love of God. Cain's self-love is indicative of the sin of idolatry, while Abel's love of the Lord is indicative of humility and good.[24] In the same period, Josephus contrasts the righteousness of Abel with the evil of Cain and the *Apocalypse of Abraham* 24:5 comments that Cain acted lawlessly under the influence of Satan.

Given the paradigmatic nature of the Cain and Abel motif in Jewish thought at the time of the composition of the epistle, it may not be unreasonable to suggest that is the foundation text for a prophetic Midrash on the interpretation of unfolding apocalyptic events in the early church. Yarbrough notes that the allusion to the Cain and Abel narrative in 1 John is more restrained than the extra-biblical material but suggests that it is in harmony with what is implied.[25] The final exhortation, "Little children, keep yourself from idols*"* (5:21), may express something of Philo's opinion that the self-love of Cain was tantamount to idolatry. However, in 1 John, it is not

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[22] *The Targum of Palestine, commonly entitled the Targum of Jonathan ben Uzziel on the Book of Genesis*, available from http://targum.info/pj/pjgen1-6.htm; accessed 9 May, 2017.

[23] Robert C. Gregg, *Shared Stories, Rival Tellings; Early Encounters of Jews, Christians and Muslims* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Kindle edition, 2015), 602.

[24] Gregg, *Shared Stories*, 827.

[25] John Yarbrough, *1–3 John* (Grand Rapids: Baker), 198.

the conception of Cain that is at the heart of the exegesis, but the contrasting religious practices of the brothers. As Waltke observes, the root of the conflict paradigm initiated by Cain and Abel is religious.[26]

B. Religious Belief, Conflict, and Violence

1. Origins in Genesis 4

In the post-Fall world of Genesis 4, evil has become a reality. The Lord tells Cain, "Sin is crouching at your door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it" (Gen 4:7). The sin of Adam and Eve has marred the relationship with the Creator. No longer does the first family live in secure knowledge of an uninterrupted relationship with God. Sin is personified as a demon waiting at the door to pounce on its victims.[27] Glaser points out that this does not mean that people have no knowledge of God.[28] Genesis 4 records a religious act of reaching out to the Lord by bringing offerings to him in sacrifice. The core issue is the Lord's reaction to the sacrifice (Gen 4:4). The Lord has "regard for Abel and his offering", but for Cain and his offering, the Lord has "no regard". The Hebrew root *shaah* (Strong's H8519) means to "gaze with interest". Thus, the Lord looks with favor on Abel (implying the blessing of restored relationship) and does not consider Cain's religious act (implying that Cain continues in broken relationship and sin).

The surprise in this section is not that Cain's offering does not please the Lord, but that Abel's offering does.[29] Somehow, the broken relationship has been restored through Abel's actions. Commentators have speculated on the difference in the Lord's reaction to the religious acts of the brothers.[30] The Genesis 4 passage does not give an answer. Instead, the narrative moves to set the scene for the entry of the crouching sin into Cain's heart. Cain is "very angry", the Hebrew root *charah* meaning to "burn with anger" (Strong's H2734). His "face falls", meaning he is displeased with the

[26] Bruce Waltke, *An O.T. Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 270.

[27] Wenham, *Genesis*, 104.

[28] Glaser, *Thinking Biblically*, 857.

[29] Glaser, 857.

[30] Wenham, *Genesis*, 104.

Lord and turns his face away. Rebellion, the chief characteristic of sin, has entered his heart. The Lord upbraids Cain, telling him that if he "does well", he will be accepted. The term *yatab* used in Gen 4:7 implies doing that which is ethically correct (Strong's H3190). The reason for the failure of Cain's grain offering to find favor with the Lord lies in the attitude of Cain's heart.

However, Cain shows no propensity to listen to the Lord or to repent of the sin that has entered his heart. He plots against his brother and murders him. The word used for "killed" in v.8 is *harag*, implying ruthless, personally motivated violence (Strong's H2026). When the Lord calls Cain to account, Cain multiplies sin by lying about his knowledge of his brother's whereabouts (Gen 4:9), so that it is the innocent blood that "cries to the Lord from the ground" (Gen 4:10). Cain has failed to do what is right. His original unethical worship has now been compounded by lying and murder. He has no concern for the glory of God.[31] When rebuked, instead of repenting and turning to the Lord, he turns away. His heart is not right with God.

Thus, when the author of 1 John speaks of Cain, he says that he was "of the evil one" and that his "deeds were evil" (3:12). The implication is that Cain follows his parents into the sin of listening to Satan. The root of Satan's rebellion against the Lord is to tempt people to relate to God on their own terms, rather than to come to him on his terms. Cain's actions of rebellion, murder and lying were of Satan and thus, of essence, evil. It is here that the root of religious conflict and violence is found. Cain's deeds were evil and so his offering to the Lord was not accepted. All the Lord required of Cain, was a change of heart. Instead, Cain pursued religious hatred to the point of violent premeditated murder. When the author of 1 John looks at the contemporary situation in the fellowship, he sees two groups of people who resemble Cain and Abel and interprets the current situation through the paradigmatic primordial narrative.

2. Conflict in the Johannine fellowship

A question that has vexed commentators has been the nature of the opponents to the Johannine fellowship. In 2:19, we learn that they

[31] S. McKnight, "Cain," in *Dictionary of the O.T., Pentateuch*, ed. Desmond Alexander and David Baker (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003): 108.

are a group of people who were once part of the fellowship, but have now left, causing distress in the process. Theories relating to the expulsion of the Johannine community from the synagogue for their faith in Jesus the Messiah and the subsequent writing of John's Gospel as an apologetic document have been widely disputed in recent times.[32] This study, therefore, considers the internal evidence of the epistle that there has been a schism: the dissenters have withdrawn, the fellowship has been shaken by the experience and the dissenters still pose a danger to the believers.

The question under consideration is the nature of the conflict in the fellowship because the core unity of the fellowship is at stake. The nature of this unity, stated clearly in the prologue (1:3), is both human and divine. It has horizontal and vertical dimensions that involve both *koinōnia* with the leaders (the eye-witness apostles) and *koinōnia* with the Father and the Son. The entire fellowship should operate in perfect unity with God in Christ, as a body of like-minded believers who live in truth, love, and righteousness (3:7b). The challenges posed to the fellowship by the dissenters threaten to destroy the *koinōnia* through conflict and division. Using Stott's three basic "tests" as a guide, the problems facing the fellowship can be examined in three categories, using the internal evidence of the text.[33]

Firstly, the dissenters show evidence of stirring up doctrinal conflict with the fellowship. They claim to be made perfect, perhaps by a special anointing of the Spirit (2:27), and so deny the reality of sin (1:8, 10). Therefore, they deny the necessity of the atoning sacrifice of the Son (2:2). In denying the work of the Son, they "deny that Jesus is the Christ" (2:22). In 4:2–3, they show themselves to be the "antichrist" because they do not confess that Jesus is the Christ, the one sent from God. Their belief system is diametrically opposed to the open confession of the fellowship that, "our *koinōnia* is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1:3). Thus, it appears that the primary conflict is on the level of theological assent. They do not believe the truth.

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[32] Köstenberger, *Theology*, 51–53.

[33] J. R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John,* Tyndale Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 55.

Secondly, the lives of the dissenters display moral/ethical problems. They claim to have *koinōnia* with the Father, as the rest of the fellowship does, but they do not show evidence of this in their lives. Claiming to "walk in the light," their behavior shows that they are walking in the "darkness" (1:6). This can be seen by their inability to keep God's commandments (2:3). Their ethical behavior displays the antithesis of their theological claims. Instead of being sinless, they "keep on sinning" and "make a practice of sinning" (3:4–7). The author of 1 John, therefore, interprets their behavior as being "of the devil" because "the devil has been sinning from the beginning" (3:8). As those who are evil, they "love the things of the world" (2:15) and show that they are "from the world" and not "from God" (4:5). Their religious practice denies their claims. They cannot be born of God because they are under the influence of the evil one (5:18).

Thirdly, the dissenters bring social problems into the fellowship. They do not love the believers ("brothers") and therefore, by inference, hate them (2:9; 4:20). Painter states that the use of the Cain and Abel motif in 3:12 to illustrate the polarity between the believers and dissenters could imply that they had taken violent action against the believers in the same way that Cain acted violently against Abel.[34] Although this cannot be proved from the text, the Epistle of James accuses the Jewish churches to which it is addressed of fights, quarrels, and murder (Jas 4:1–2). It is possible that religious conflict and violence had also occurred in the Johannine fellowship.

The result of the violent conflict is schism (2:19). The dissenters have "gone out from us" because they are "not of us." The dissenters are not part of the true *koinōnia* that holds the fellowship in perfect unity with one another and with God in Christ. False theology leads the dissenters to inappropriate ethics, resulting in violent antisocial behavior. That antisocial behavior, understood eschatologically, is the behavior of the antichrist (2:22). There are only two ways to live: in Christ or in Satan. This is the witness of the ancient Hebrew Scriptures concerning the lot of the righteous Abel and the way of the evil Cain (Heb 11:4). It corresponds with the way of faith (5:10) or the way of idolatry (5:21), being "from God" or "in the power of the

[34] John Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John* (Sacra Pagina. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 238.

evil one" (5:18). The polarity is stark. Either people are in fellowship with the Father and the Son and are righteous like Abel, or they are in fellowship with idols and Satan and are unrighteous like Cain. The distressing situation in the Johannine fellowship can therefore be explained as eschatological fulfillment of the motifs of Genesis 4.

C. Being Passionate about What We Believe

The key to remaining in the fellowship and not being derailed by the deception of dissenters is holding onto the message that the Johannine fellowship had heard "from the beginning." In 1:1–4, the author roots this belief firmly in the historicity of the incarnation, so that there is concrete content to the message. The message is grounded in historical fact and they are to hold on to it passionately in its absoluteness. There is no negotiation on the truth. Whatever is not truth, is a lie and lies are the work of the evil one (3:8). Thus, conflict cannot be avoided by means of negotiating a middle position between truth and falsehood. The Johannine fellowship is to hold passionately to what it has received and is not to accept compromise in any form.

1. The Concreteness of Belief

In 1 John, the "children of God" (5:2) are those who hear the witness to the incarnation proclaimed by the apostles and are brought into fellowship with the Father and the Son (1:3). The basis for their entry into the fellowship is their reception of the proclaimed word regarding the person of the Son (1:1–4). The epistle begins in an enigmatic way, introducing the eternal Deity objectively using the neuter pronoun *Ó* (that). "*That* which was from the beginning" (1:1) suggests the divine Being in his eternal existence, an allusion that would be readily understood by an audience familiar with John 1:1 and Genesis 1:1.[35] At this point, there is no explicit reference to the *logos* or to the Christ. The reader is expected to understand that the gospel message is located in the person of the Creator God, who reveals the identity of the pre-existent Son to the believers.

There is a multi-sensory approach to the Johannine witness in 1:1–3. The remote Being, who was present at the beginning, became a tangible human being who could be perceived with the senses, that is, someone who was "heard," "seen," "looked on," and "touched"

[35] I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 100.

(1:1). This speaks of the reality of the entry of the eternal creator God into the human space-time continuum by means of the incarnation. The One who was intrinsically "life" was revealed through the incarnation, and those who knew him bear witness to what they have "seen and heard" (1:2–3). The purpose of their witness is to bring those who hear and accept their testimony concerning the revelation of the eternal *logos*, the "word of life" (1:1), into fellowship with God the Father and the Son, Jesus Christ (1:3). The revelation of the identity of the eternal *logos* in the person of Jesus Christ therefore has a missional purpose. It proclaims the truth about the reality of the coming of the Christ (the Messiah), so that those who hear it believe and enter the fellowship of the triune God. The outcome of this fellowship, in Johannine terms, is "complete joy" of unity with the Father and with one another (1:4).

The truth about Jesus the Christ is, therefore, not some myth or religious tale. Throughout 1 John there are witnesses to the reality of the incarnation. The prologue speaks of the eye-witness record of the apostles (1:1–3). In 2:12–14, the children, fathers and young men bear witness to the reality of the incarnation through their experiential knowledge of God. In 2:27, the anointing that the believers have received from the Spirit teaches them the truth about the Son.[36] In 5:6–9, the water of Christ's baptism, the blood of the cross and the Spirit who knows the mind of God all bear witness to the truth.[37] The believer therefore has the confidence to approach the throne of grace at the hour of need (5:14–15). That confidence is based in faith in a real, historical person.

2. The Correctness of Belief

The historicity of the incarnation means that there is an objectivity to belief. The reality is found in the death of Christ on the cross on our behalf, alluded to throughout the epistle. The blood of Jesus "cleanses us from all unrighteousness" (1:7); Christ is the atoning sacrifice (*hilasmos,* Strong's G2434) for our sins and the "sins of the whole world" (2:2); Christ "laid down his life for us" (3:16); "God sent his only Son into the world … to be the propitiation for our

[36] Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 162.

[37] David Jackman, *The Message of John's Letters*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester: IVP, 1992), 148–149.

sins" (4:9–10); "the Father has sent his Son to be the savior of the world" (4:14). All these references are to the work of Jesus Christ in his sacrificial death upon the cross on behalf of sinners. This was accomplished both in his humanity, on our behalf and in his divinity as the sinless One who was with God "at the beginning." Therefore, there is no room for negotiation on the substance of belief. It is necessary to confess that "Jesus has come in the flesh" (4:2). This is not just an intellectual assent. To confess that "Jesus is the Christ" is to "have the Father" (2:22–23) or to be in fellowship with the Father. To have the Father is to be "born of God" (5:1).

The importance of the substance of faith is apparent in the discussion on the dissenters in 2:18–25. The problem is that they have rejected the absoluteness of the historicity of faith. They deny that Jesus is the Christ, and therefore they deny the triune God (the "Father and the Son" 2:22). In denying the triune God, they have placed themselves outside the *koinōnia* of the Father and the Son (1:3) and have moved themselves outside the fellowship of Christ's followers by willful apostasy.[38] Their rejection of Jesus as the Christ, therefore, numbers them in the ranks of the antichrist (2:18). The believers are not to follow them. They have been "anointed by the Holy One," a reference to the Spirit of Jesus, whom they know intellectually and relationally to be the Christ (2:20).[39]

There is no room for doubt about the substance of faith. The historical concreteness of the events of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ make this impossible. The Johannine fellowship is to stand passionately on what they know to be true and not to compromise their belief to accommodate those who preach otherwise. In terms of the Cain and Abel motif that dominates the epistle, it is the substance of belief that differentiates those who walk in the path of the righteous Abel from those whose deeds are evil like Cain. As the contrast between them is starkly polarized, what should the attitude of the righteous be towards those who are of different religious opinion to themselves?

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[38] John Yarbrough, *1–3 John, Baker Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 146.

[39] Painter, *1–3 John*, 198–199.

D. Being Passionate about Loving Those Who Disagree with Us

The use of the Cain and Abel motif suggests a strongly polarity between those who hold an orthodox position regarding the person and work of Jesus Christ and those who dissent. While they are to hold tenaciously to the truth, their attitude towards the dissenters is not to replicate the violence perpetrated on them. They are not to hate or to murder like Cain (3:12). Rather, they are to reflect the character of God, who loves the sinner (4:19), and who sent his Son to lay down his life for them (3:16).

1. The Root of Disagreement

The root of the conflict lies in the doctrinal position of the two groups regarding the person and work of Jesus Christ. In the N.T., the writer of the book of Hebrews interprets the Cain and Abel narrative in terms of the faith of Abel and comments that Abel, though he died, still speaks through his example of faith (Heb 11:4). Jackman, commenting on 1 John 5:6–12, adds faith as a fourth dimension to the three witnesses of water, blood, and Spirit.[40] He observes that the external assent of knowledge must be accompanied by the inner witness of the transformed life that Johannine literature speaks of as being "in Christ" or "abiding in him" (2:24–26).

It is abiding in the fellowship of the Son and the Father by faith, through dependence on the cleansing blood of Christ for forgiveness of sin, that enables the believer to live a life of righteousness and love. On the other hand, those who do not "abide in Christ" dwell in the world and are conformed to it with all its passions and desires (2:15–17; 4:5). The essential difference between the two lies in the object of faith. Those who believe in the Son of God live by faith and produce fruit that is acceptable to God. Those who reject Christ are guilty of idolatry (5:21). For Yarbrough, the root of the conflict in the Johannine fellowship lies in the refusal of those who are on the outside of the family of God, to recognize those who are within.[41] The question is, how are those who are rejected to respond to their tormentors?

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[40] Jackman, *Letters*, 152–156.

[41] Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 176.

2. The Nature of God

The essence of *koinōnia* is the participation of the believer in the divine life (*theosis*).[42] The character of the believer must therefore reflect the nature of the Creator, which the epistle presents essentially as self-giving love (4:9). The ground and the source for love is found in God and not in the will of the believer, because God is the ultimate source of love.[43] Through the epistle, the concept of love is always on the horizon. The new commandment (2:7–10) demands love of the brother as proof of a life lived in the light. The love of the Father is given to his children and is reflected in their lives through provision of material needs (3:17). Love is the essential characteristic of God and therefore is essentially evident in the life of the believer. However, the love of God is qualified. It is related to his holiness (1:5). God loves the world so much that he gives his only Son to restore it to holiness. It is the cross of Jesus that is the supreme demonstration of the nature of the love of God (4:9).[44] This sets a precedent for the type of love self-sacrificing love demanded of his followers (3:19).

3. The Morality of Belief

Bennema further lists the moral attributes of God as life, light, and truth.[45] These qualities are intrinsic to his Being. To come into relationship with him is to have eternal life (1:7), which necessitates walking in the "light" and living in the truth. Being in relationship with God through Christ therefore has moral implications, chief of which is love.

It can be argued that throughout the epistle believers are only told to love their brothers, therefore there is no obligation on them to love their enemies. Thompson speaks of the inevitable dualisms created in the epistle by the use of the Cain and Abel motif with its stark "love" and "hate" polarities.[46] She asks why there is no suggestion of mending the split and answers her own question negatively: we do

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[42] Cornelis Bennema, "Moral Transformation in the Johannine Writings," *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 51, no. 3 (January 2017): accessed May 8, 2017. See www.Academia.edu/30826704/.

[43] Painter, *1–3 John*, 268.

[44] Marshall, *Epistles*, 214.

[45] C. Bennema, "Moral Transformation…," 3.

[46] Marianne Meye Thompson, *1–3 John,* IVP N.T. Commentary (Leicester: IVP, 1992), 105.

not know what measures the fellowship has already taken to bring the dissenters back; and by the time the letter is written, the split is a *fait accompli*, the "absolute, dualistic terms" are set. However, arguments from silence are not convincing. There is evidence in the epistle that the teaching of the Gospels, in which the disciples are commanded to "love their enemies" and to "do good to those who oppose them" (Matt 5:43–38), is assumed, despite the apparent love/hate polarities. I John is intensely theological. The fellowship is to emulate the character of God with whom they are in *koinōnia*. God sent his only Son into the world to provide forgiveness for sin and restoration to fellowship. They are likewise to be mission-minded.

In 5:16–17, the believers are told to pray for those who commit sin not leading to death so that they are restored to life.[47] The word used for the sinner is "brother," but Stott comments that the word used here cannot speak only of those within the fellowship, because they already "have life."[48] The fellowship is instructed to pray so that God will grant the sinner eternal life with the assumption that the sinner is in a position of eternal spiritual death.[49] Therefore, "brother" in 5:16 must mean those in the wider sense who are "neighbors" to the fellowship.[50] They are not members of the fellowship but those outside, for whom the fellowship is to act in the priestly capacity of intercessors with God for the forgiveness of their sins.

Thompson argues that sin that does not lead to death is sin committed by members of the fellowship, as in 2:1–2, whereas sin that leads to death is the sin of the dissenters, thereby reinforcing her concept of duality in the text.[51] However, the character of God requires a corresponding morality in his children. He is the God who

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[47] Stott, *Epistle*s, 186. Stott lists "sins leading to death" as: 1) specific sins of the Mosaic law, 2) apostasy, 3) blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

[48] Judith M. Lieu, *I, II and III John: A Commentary* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 225. Lieu maintains that it is only the believers who are in view here because the general outlook of the Epistle makes it unlikely that it concerns outsiders. This, despite acknowledging the evangelistic tenor of the rest of the Scriptures.

[49] Georg Strecker, *The Johannine Epistles*, *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsberg Fortress, English translation, 1995), 202.

[50] Stott, *Epistles,* 190. This is not a widely-held position. Smalley, for example, argues that the word *adelphos* used throughout the epistle describes the "orthodox Johannine community in its distinction from the heretics": in Stephen Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary 51 (Waco: Word Books, 1984), 189.

[51] Thompson, *1–3 John,* 142–143.

is love, who demonstrated that love by sending his own Son to make atonement for sin, so that sinners may be forgiven and restored to *koinōnia* with him (1:3, 6). The purpose of the proclamation of Jesus Christ incarnate in 1:1–3 is to bring sinners back into relationship with the eternal, holy, and pure God. There are no stark polarities with God because that would indicate that his mission to restore all things to him in Christ has somehow ended with the Johannine fellowship. On the contrary, the mission-heart of God continues to reach out to sinners in Christ and through his followers who reflect his love by interceding for their neighbors.

The distinction in the instruction in 5:16–17 is between interceding for those whose sin can be forgiven (it does not lead to death) and those whose sin cannot be forgiven (it leads to death). In the context of the Johannine fellowship, this category of sinner refers to those who have resolutely rejected God's forgiveness. It seems that the dissenters have fallen into this category. Forgiveness is impossible for them because they do not acknowledge that they are sinners (1:8). Consequently, they reject God's means of forgiveness through the propitiation provided by his Son (2:2) and display the characteristics of those who are given over to the evil one (3:8–9).

Therein, the Cain and Abel motif comes into play. Cain had an opportunity to repent and turn from his sin so that the Lord would have regard for him. But Cain refused to heed God's warning and rejected the word of life. He resolutely chose the way of the devil who has been sinning from the beginning (3:8). In the same way, the dissenters have followed the way of Cain and have rejected the word of life (forgiveness in Christ) held out to them. There is nothing more that can be offered to them. However, those who walk in the way of Abel, heeding the word of life, repenting of their sins, and living in love and holiness are those who reflect the character of their Father by loving those outside their fellowship for whom Christ died, including loving those who walk in the way of Cain and oppose them. Since Christ died for the sins of the world (2:2), the fellowship is to extend the love of Christ to all their neighbors by means of proclamation and intercessory prayer.

Conclusion

Therefore, the theological basis in 1 John for our being passionate about what we believe and passionate about loving those

who disagree with us in an environment of religious conflict and violence is located in the character of God. The seemingly moral dilemma between love of the "brothers" and hatred of the "antichrists" suggested by a cursory reading of the epistle can be resolved by considering the epistle as prophetic Midrash Pesher on the Cain and Abel narrative of Genesis 4. God would have accepted the worship of Cain and would have restored him into relationship with himself, if he had approached God with a heart that was free from sinful motives. Cain was not prepared to do this and so bound himself to Satan's rebellious ways, leading to the first instance of religious violence.

The author of 1 John uses the Hebrew "protohistory" from Genesis 4 to explain the eschatological events in the Johannine fellowship. Those who are righteous like Abel are being persecuted by those who have chosen the way of rebellion like Cain. Yet, the righteous are not to respond to conflict and violence in equal proportion. Instead, they are to reflect the holy character of their Creator with whom they walk in *koinōnia*. They are to be passionate about the truth because God is truth, and Jesus Christ is the revelation of God's truth. At the same time, the self-sacrificing nature of the love of God calls them to love all people and to eagerly desire that they come to the knowledge of the truth. They are to proclaim the truth (1:3) and to pray earnestly for forgiveness for those who have not committed the ultimate sin of denying God's offer of restoration (5:16). The reason they do this is because they reflect God's love that is the mission-heart of God. Christians who experience religious conflict and violence for the sake of righteousness should, therefore, hold passionately to the truth about Jesus Christ, continue to love those who oppose them, and pray that the opposition will accept God's gracious offer of eternal life. In other words, the theological basis for loving in the face of religious conflict and violence is the mission-heart of God.

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