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The road from the theater to the harbor at Ephesus.

INTRODUCING 1 JOHN

By C. Mack Roark

Among the last of the letters of the New Testament, 1 John was written by John the apostle in his old age. Strong tradition has it that after Jesus' crucifixion, John stayed in Jerusalem until Mary the mother of Jesus died, then went to Ephesus where he ministered until he was banished to Patmos. At Ephesus, some time between 80 and 100, he wrote his Gospel, the last of the four to be written. A decade or more later he wrote

the letter we call 1 John. That the Letter follows the Gospel, and not the other way around, is obvious to most scholars. Apparently enough time had passed since the writing of the Gospel for it to be circulated, studied, interpreted—and misinterpreted—and on the basis of that misinterpretation, for a schism to have occurred in the churches reading that Gospel. John wrote his Epistle to address this schism. (See especially 2:19,21,24,26; 5:13).

Thus we should call 1 John a Pastoral Letter, written to a circuit of house churches in and around Ephesus, to counter this split. John had no intention of getting the two groups back together. Rather, he wanted to expose the error and make clear that those who had separated really did not belong (2:19); and he wanted to strengthen the faithful in the face of these who were perverting the truth (2:26).

Who were these false teachers, and how were they perverting John's Gospel? From John's characterization of them we can know that they were in error both doctrinally and ethically. Examining these two errors will give a window into the life situation of the churches as well as into the basic teachings of the letter.

In terms of doctrine, the background for 1 John is the high Christology of the Fourth Gospel. The Letter obviously presupposes the gospel, which makes clear that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah sent from God. Indeed the whole purpose of his Gospel was to bring people to faith in Jesus as Messiah (John 20:30-31). When John said that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" he was summing up a Christology that began in the prologue with "the

Word became flesh and dwelt among us." (John 1:14, RSV). Jesus was God in the flesh, incarnate. This high Christology is reflected in the way John spoke of Jesus. Jesus was the pre-incarnate Word of God (John 1:1); He and the Father were one (14:9); no one had power to take His life, whatever happened was because He willed it (10:18). Even His death was a glorification. Upon reading this gospel, some were so enamored with its high view of the divine Christ that they doubted or denied that He was really human. The theology of 1 John is best understood as a response to this overemphasis on a high Christology. In the Letter, John said that those who deny that Jesus is the Christ (2:22) are not so much denying that there is a Messiah, but that Jesus of Nazareth, who came in the flesh, could also be the Messiah of God (4:2-3). Such belief, for John, was really "antichrist" (2:18-23; 4:1-3).

Can we further identify these heretics? They were apparently gnostic, probably docetic, and perhaps followers of Cerinthus. But what do these terms mean? Gnostics, among other things, had a dualistic worldview. Spirit (thus God) is good but the physical (thus humanity) is evil. From this gnostic

dualism there developed a docetic (from the Greek word *dokein*, "to seem"). The Gnostics claimed that Jesus only seemed to experience humanness, for the Messiah of God would certainly never inhabit flesh, which is by definition evil. Ignatius of Antioch was the first to use the word "seem" in describing their theology. Writing to the Trallians he said, "Be deaf, therefore, whenever anyone speaks to you apart from Jesus Christ ... who really was born, who both ate and drank; who really was persecuted under Pontius Pilate, who really was crucified and died ... who really was raised from the dead."

Cerinthus was a gnostic who assumed this distinction between spirit and flesh and thus made a distinction between the divine Christ and the human Jesus. (..erinthus asserted that the Christ (spirit) came on Jesus (flesh) at His baptism (thus the formula 'This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased') and left Him just before the crucifixion (thus the formula, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"). While it may be too much to say with certainty that John was addressing docetic gnostic followers of Cerinthus, theirs is the kind of heresy he attacked.

The second error 1 John confronted was ethical. When the heretics rejected Jesus' humanity, they likewise depreciated the life that He lived. Their lowered Christology issued in a lowered morality. And since the evil body was for them only an envelope for the spirit within, nothing the body might do could affect the spirit, so the matter of right and wrong was a non-issue. John was "refuting a system of thought that lacked moral earnestness." Their new theology produced a new morality that was, in fact, immorality.

This docetic Christology produced a group of gnosticizing Christians who were all too ready to say "I know him" (2:4) and with that knowledge to claim to be above sin (1:8,10). All the while their lives demonstrated that they did not "know him." Their spiritual elitism coupled with their attitude toward sin resulted in a loss of love for the brethren (2:7-11; 3:10-18; 4:7-5:3). Clearly they did not know Him, for they did not keep His commandments: "He who says 'I know him' but disobeys his commandments is a liar" (2:4, RSV). John then sums up the commandments: "And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his

Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he commanded us" (3:23). Ethics for John was primarily a matter of love, growing out of God's saving love for us (4:10-11). The gospel commandment "love one another" (John 13:34) is repeated five times in 1 John: 3:11,23; 4:7,11,12.

In his attempt to correct these heresies, John set forth a series of tests for authentic Christianity. These tests can be grouped in at least 25 ways. They are imbedded throughout 105 verses. Their intent was to test and bring assurance to the true Christians. Two literary formulas were used to introduce the tests: (1) conditional sentences—for example, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1:8; see 1:5-10, 2:3; 4:12; 5:2); and (2) relative clauses—for example, "He who says 'I know him' but disobeys his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (see 2:4-11,23; 3:8,10,17; 4:6-8,15,16,20; 5:1,4,10,12). A close look of these passages shows the two primary tests of authenticity are believing that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God and loving one another. At least 11 have to do with believing in Jesus and at least 15 with loving/hating a brother.

One should also consider the vocabulary of 1 John. Three words have special prominence: love, *know*, and *abide*. *Love*, as noun, verb, and adjective, occurs 52 times. *Know* occurs a total of 40 times. Since the word *gnostic* comes from the Greek word for *knowledge*, John may well have emphasized this word with a pointed irony. While discounting those who claim to know but do not, he gave full assurance that one can "know him." Such was in fact the purpose of the letter: "I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life" (5:13, RSV).

Abide appears 25 times in the 105 verses and perhaps serves as the dominant metaphor for the letter. It was used with both major themes of the letter: doctrine (4:15) and ethics (3:6,9,24). Perhaps echoing chapter 15 of John's Gospel, the "abide" metaphor in this letter was his favorite term for the believer's life in Christ.

First John 3:23-24 summarizes the letter well, with its stress on believing and loving and its metaphor of the mutual abiding of the believer and Christ.

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