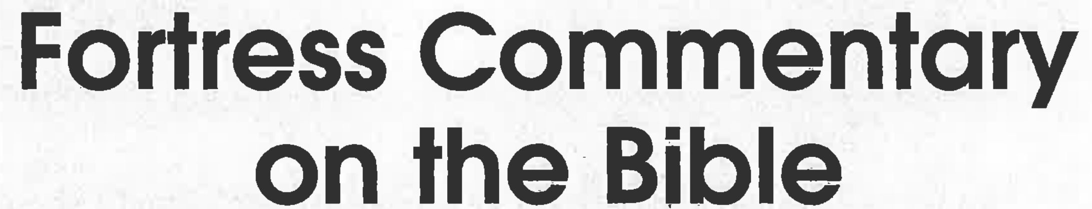

Fortress Commentary on the Bible

THE NEW TESTAMENT

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1, 2, 3 JOHN

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Introduction

The Johannine Epistles, along with the Gospel of John, occupy a substantial position in the canon, constituting "The Johannine literature" and perhaps indicating a "Johannine school of thought" from which they all emerged, akin to the notion of a "Pauline school of thought." Certainly 1 John has provided the church ample liturgical material with its insistence on confession of sin and assurance of pardon (1:8-9); the call to prayer (4:14-15), especially intercessory prayer (4:16); and its proclamation that "God is love." The epistles raise and inform the following issues:

- *Ecclesiology*: How is the group to form and maintain a cohesive communal identity? How should it handle church discipline when conflict arises? Who has the authority to instruct the church in matters of theology and praxis? Does the "elder"? On what is this authority based?
- *Hospitality:* Who deserves hospitality from Christians and who does not? On what basis is this decision made?
- *Ethics*: What is the shape of a Christian praxis based on the preeminent commandment from Jesus to "love one another"? How does this cohere with denying hospitality to certain individuals? How should the Christian interact with "the world"?
- *Theology*: What is the nature of sin? Who is Jesus and how has his blood cleansed the Johannine Christian?

Unlike 2 and 3 John, the author of 1 John remains entirely unnamed, but claims to be an eyewitness to the earthly Jesus (1:1-4). Due to apparent knowledge of and dependence on the traditions evinced by the Fourth Gospel, some assume that the same author penned both texts. Based on differences in theology and style, however, others attribute 1 John to a different author, perhaps the "elder" referred to in 2 John 1 and 3 John 1 (though the epistles may well come from different

hands). The composition history of the Fourth Gospel itself is quite complex and probably reflects various stages of the community in which it arose (see the entry on the Gospel), and more than one authorial or editorial hand. As a result, theories concerning the authorship and dating of the Gospel and each epistle abound. If, as seems likely, the epistles were composed after the Gospel, they should be dated to around 100 CE. (For a thorough treatment of the composition history of the Johannine material, see von Wahlde.)

Also unlike 2 and 3 John, 1 John is more a hortatory address or essay than an epistle. It lacks the conventional features of a letter, including the names of the sender and recipient, opening and closing greetings, or a thanksgiving. Second John is written to "the elect lady and her children" and 3 John, to Gaius. First John does not designate its audience, but its rhetoric, allusions, and assumptions indicate that the audience is part of the same community from which the Fourth Gospel arose. In each case, the author is concerned with both the theology and the ethics of the community. Whereas the Gospel of John devotes much attention to the relationship between the Johannine community and other entities outside of it (the parent Jewish tradition, Rome, other Christian groups: Clark-Soles), the Johannine Epistles focus internally. The letters share a common language, outlook, and social setting. They instruct their readers regarding how to deal with those who have abandoned the community (and thereby apostatized) as well as those who espouse false teachings. The tensions felt in the community with respect to those members who have become a problem raise questions about the nature of Christian hospitality and inclusivity. In addition to building up the faithful who remain by demonizing those who departed, the epistles also reiterate the importance of binding the community together through active, sacrificial love.

"God is love [*agapē*]." This central, climactic assertion provides shape to the Johannine Epistles. Inseparable from this main theme are two others: proper Christology and the avoidance of sin, especially the sin that leads to death (5:16). As an act of love, God sent Jesus (1) to reveal the nature of love, which is always concrete and other-oriented (if sectarian), and (2) to free people from the power of sin by his sacrificial act through his blood (1:6—2:2; 4:10).

First John appears concerned to combat what historians call docetic Christology. The term *docetism* derives from the Greek verb *dokeō*, "to seem." Broadly speaking, it refers to a form of Christianity, known to us chiefly from the writings of other Christians who condemned it, that maintained Jesus was not really human but only appeared to be. He was not truly subject to the vicissitudes of embodied fleshly existence and therefore only "appeared" to suffer physically. Docetism is usually described as related to Gnosticism, another modern name for a number of early Christian movements that until the mid-twentieth century were also known only through the writings of polemicists like Irenaeus. Bishop of Lyons in the late second century, Irenaeus mocked certain other Christian teachers as "falsely so-called 'knowers' [*gnōstikoi*]." As conventionally understood, both docetism and Gnosticism malign the material order and denigrate the usefulness of the flesh; both were declared heresies in the early centuries of the church.

Curiously, "gnostic" thinkers such as Valentinus drew heavily on the Gospel of John. Indeed, the renowned theologian Ernst Käsemann detected what he called a "naïve docetism" in the Fourth Gospel, generated by the author's heavy emphasis on Jesus' divinity, not to mention the aplomb with which Jesus manages his passion as compared to the Synoptic Gospels. But the author of 1

John castigates docetic Christologies, and was followed by numerous subsequent theologians (see Ignatius's *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 1–7; *Letter to the Trallians* 9.1–2; Irenaeus's *Against Heresies*).

Although the authors of the epistles remain anonymous, all three became associated with "John" in the early church, whether that John was identified as the son of Zebedee or "John the Elder." Eventually, Revelation, the one text that actually names its author as John (but does not give any more identifying details), becomes associated with the Gospel and the three epistles. From the outset there were doubts about the authenticity of the material, especially of 2 and 3 John (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.9–10). The letters are cited unevenly among the church fathers, and the reception of each varies geographically (Lieu 2008, 25–28). While 1 John appealed widely early, 2 and 3 John experienced rockier paths to canonization. Their survival and final inclusion in the canon signifies that, regardless of their authorship or original audience, the contents of the letters were and are useful to the wider Christian church.

1 John

1 John 1:1-4: The Prologue

No two commentaries agree on the structure of 1 John. The epistle does not present a clear thesis that drives forward to a compelling conclusion. Rather, it is marked by repetition, a spiral-like collection of themes, and self-referential habits (e.g., 1 John 3:24 and 4:13 make the same statement; 4:1-6 picks up on 2:18-28). Like the Fourth Gospel, 1 John begins with a prologue that introduces key themes and terms: word, life, revealed, testify, declare, fellowship, and the relationship between God and Jesus as Father and Son. Authority is justified by a claim to eyewitness status. The prologue also anticipates a major theme of the epistle, namely, the incarnation, the embodiedness of the Messiah, such that he could be perceived by the senses: he was seen, heard, and touched. In addition, the transmission of the Gospel involves attending to the embodiedness of one's brothers and sisters (3:16-18) and abiding with another in love; as the text demonstrates, this ideal can be elusive.

1 John 1:5—2:17: Walk in the Light

The Text in Its Ancient Context

After declaring that "God is light" (v. 5), the author continues to solidify bonds with the listeners by drawing them into "we" rhetoric and indicating what behavior and beliefs they should espouse and what they should eschew. The audience is to walk in the light. The language of walking (Greek *peripatein*) as a metaphor for ethical behavior is common in the Hebrew Bible and stems from the Hebrew verb *halak*, to walk. Hence, even today the collection of rabbinical ethical teachings is called the halakah.

First John 1:6-10 enjoins the audience to walk in the light, for those who do so testify to truth; enjoy fellowship with one another; confess that they have sin; and have been forgiven their sin and cleansed from all unrighteousness by the blood of Jesus, God's Son. Those who walk in the darkness can enjoy none of these benefits. As parents assume the role of moral formation in their children,

so the author addresses them as "my little children" (note that the "we" language has receded here). With respect to sin, one must confess that one has sin in order to receive forgiveness (1:9). Although the author wants the audience to behave ethically and avoid sin (indeed, this is a main point of the sermon as indicated in 2:1), he makes allowance for it by noting that if anyone does sin, Jesus Christ provides the solution. How?

First John 2:2 deserves further explication. The sentence reads: "And he himself is a *hilasmos* on behalf of our sins, but not only on behalf of our [sins] but also on behalf of the whole cosmos." It is difficult to translate *hilasmos* because apart from here and 1 John 4:10, it appears nowhere else in the New Testament. The NRSV translates it as "atoning sacrifice"; Judith Lieu (2008, 64) as "forgiveness"; and John Painter (146) and D. Moody Smith (52) as "expiation." Unfortunately, the word appears only six times in the Septuagint (Lev. 25:9; Num. 5:8; 2 Macc. 3:33; Ps. 129:4; Amos 8:14; Ezek. 44:27; Dan. 9:9) and does not always have the same meaning. It can refer to the effects of cultic (or sacrificial) action, such as expiation (which emphasizes the subjective agency of God in removing sin) or propitiation (which emphasizes the human action in appeasing God's wrath); or it can refer to the action itself, specifically a sin offering; or it can simply refer to forgiveness. Those who argue for a cultic meaning in 1 John point to Lev. 25:9 and the context of the Day of Atonement. They also note the phrase "on behalf of our sins" in 2:2 and link this verse with 1:7-9, which refers to Jesus' blood and cleansing. Lieu 64 disagrees with this approach and argues that the scant evidence does not bear out such specificity as a translation such as "atoning sacrifice" would imply. Those Christian scholars who do see a cultic meaning are careful to translate *hilasmos* as "expiation," not "propitiation," because God and Jesus the just (*dikaios*) are the actors and agents in dealing with sin.

A connection is sometimes made between 2:2 and the martyr traditions found in 4 Maccabees and the Suffering Servant of Isa. 52:13—53:11. The servant is just (*dikaios*; Isa. 53:11); his death is "on behalf of sin" (Isa. 53:10); and he "bore the sins of many and was handed over on account of their sins" (Isa. 53:12 LXX; Lieu 2008, 63–64). The Maccabees, as just martyrs, may present a parallel: "the tyrant was punished, and the homeland purified—they having become, as it were, a ransom [*antipsychon*] for the sin of our nation. And through the blood of those devout ones and their death as an atoning sacrifice [*hilasterion*], divine Providence preserved Israel that previously had been mistreated" (4 Macc. 17:21-22). If martyrdom is the notion the author has in mind, it raises doubts about 1 John's containing a developed doctrine of atonement at all.

Whatever one decides, it is important to be clear that (1) God and Jesus provide the solution for sin; (2) Jesus continues to solve sin in the present as a living, active agent; and (3) Jesus' action was and is part of God's original plan, not, so to speak, an improvisation. That is, we should not imagine that in the author's view, God had devised a plan A for the Jews, through the Torah and covenants, which failed so that God was forced to scramble to initiate a plan B in the form of Jesus. Jesus' work implements God's initial plan. There are at least three problems with imagining that atonement in Jesus is in any way an innovation or improvisation. First, it divorces Jesus from his own Jewish identity and tradition. Second, it postulates Christianity as a solution to the failure of atonement in Judaism and is therefore supersessionist and, potentially, antisemitic. Third, it appears gnostic; that

is, it seems to see the Old Testament as evidence of a lesser God of a lesser religion and the New Testament as evidence of Jesus who frees the believer from the gnostic demiurge.

The proclamation that Jesus' justifying work is on behalf of "the whole cosmos" is noteworthy and, when combined with 4:14, where Jesus is denoted "the savior of the world," sounds quite hopeful and expansive. As it turns out, however, this is probably the exception to the general rule of 1 John (and the Gospel of John); the world represents opposition to God and God's children. In this way, 1 John may be described as sectarian and dualistic.

It is not surprising in a hortatory address to find the author moving from a discussion of sin to that of obeying Jesus' commandments and imitating Jesus' behavior. Though the author speaks of commandments in the plural at 2:3-4, he really has only one commandment in mind: "Love your brother [*adelphos*]." This commandment may well allude to John 13:34: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." In both cases, the author calls the audience to love fellow believers (this use of sibling language for church relationships is typical for early Christians). Those familiar with the Synoptic Gospels will miss the charge to "love your enemies" (Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27, 35) or "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27), neither of which appears in the Gospel of John. Instead, Johannine Christians are to love the other members of the group, but they are to do so specifically by imitating Jesus' own way of loving. The author is trying to create a household of love where the family ties are strong enough to maintain group cohesion: note the familial language in 2:12-14—fathers, children (*teknia*), young people (*paidia*), and that the family ties that bind also liberate (1 John 3:17-18).

At 2:15, the author warns the listeners that one can either love the world or love God; the two are mutually exclusive. Scholars debate extensively the meaning of the triad presented in 2:16, which the NRSV translates: "the desire [*epithymia*] of the flesh [*sarx*], the desire [*epithymia*] of the eyes [*ophthalmōn*], the pride [*alazoneia*] of riches [*tou biou*]." Some consider the first two to refer specifically to sexual issues; others consider all three to relate to greed, a lust for wealth. Desire in and of itself may not be problematic, but deformed desire always is. William Loader suggests that the author signifies "the depraved excesses of the rich at their often pretentious banquets" where money, drunkenness, and sexual immorality inevitably coalesce (forthcoming, 6). This passage relates to a fundamental ethical concern that runs throughout the epistle: the care of the poor. The Roman Empire in the first century had nothing like "the middle class" of today; the vast majority of people lived in poverty at a bare subsistence level and depended on handouts from the state or wealthy persons. The passage immediately preceding demands that the Christians love one another, referring not to a mere feeling but to concrete action as defined in 3:16-18. Faithful Christians will resist greed and exploitation of others, both of which are tantamount to "hate" and even "murder." In 2:14, the author declares that true Christians have "overcome the evil one."

The Text in the Interpretive Tradition

First John 2:1-2 has given rise to christological debates about the work accomplished by Jesus in solving the problem of sin. This includes attention to various hotly debated theories of atonement.

Many Christians unjustifiably assume penal substitutionary atonement theories when reading any New Testament texts. In this view, God's justice demands a legal payment as the penalty for human sin. Rather than each sinful person having to pay that price, Jesus is substituted. First John should challenge that assumption. In fact, the issue already arises in the Gospel of John itself, when Jesus is referred to as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), and where Jesus dies a day earlier in the Gospel of John than in the Synoptics, at the time when the sacrifice of the Passover lambs occurred in the temple. Technically speaking, the Passover lamb was not a sacrifice *for sin* (so no particular theory of atonement is in view), but symbolized deliverance from death. Most likely, the Gospel's language of the "Lamb of God" represents a merger of Passover-lamb symbolism with imagery of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53. Rather than presenting a notion of penal substitutionary atonement, John depicts Jesus as dying to reconcile an alienated world to its God by overcoming the world's hostility through belief. "*When the love of God, conveyed through the death of Jesus, overcomes the sin of unbelief by evoking faith, it delivers people from the judgment of God by bringing them into true relationship with God.* This is atonement in the Johannine sense. . . . There is no suggestion that dying 'for' the people equals paying the legal penalty for sin. The Fourth Gospel has a different understanding of sacrifice" (Koester 2008, 115–16). This understanding is probably what the author of 1 John also has in mind.

Others debate whether *hilasmos* means expiation or propitiation (see above). Still others argue that 1 John may have both expiation and propitiation in mind (Painter, 146–47).

The Text in Contemporary Discussion

From purely academic contexts to popular Christianity today (e.g., Rob Bell, Brian McClaren, Emergent Christianity), atonement theology has recently come under scrutiny. Feminists and others raise deep concerns about the marriage of religion and violence in sacrificial language. Did God will the death of God's own child? Is child sacrifice ever warranted? Does God ever perpetrate violence and demand it as an act of faith from God's followers? If so, by what standards does one judge a violent act done in the name of God as faithful or evil? How does voluntary or involuntary martyrdom relate to these themes, if at all? If Jesus' act was performed on behalf of the whole world, does this imply that, finally, the whole world will be saved?

Though nuances inhere, there are currently five primary views of atonement in play in modern Christianity.

1. The first is *Christus Victor* or "Ransom." Human beings used their free will to rupture their relationship with God, and Satan used this opportunity to imprison us in sin and death. Sinless Jesus was sent as a "ransom" and won the victory over sin, death, and Satan.
2. The "satisfaction theory of atonement" was championed most famously in the eleventh century by Anselm the archbishop of Canterbury in his book *Cur Deus Homo* ("Why did God become human?"), and furthered by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. God created the universe in an orderly manner in which human beings are meant to honor and obey God. In the Garden of Eden episode, God's honor was offended and the universe was thrown off balance. Someone must satisfy the debt due God's offended honor. That someone has to be

infinite since God is infinite. Enter Jesus, the one who is both human and infinite. "By dying on the cross, Jesus, as a man, satisfied God's honor. As God, he provided the infinite payment necessary to satisfy an infinite debt" (Baker, 57).

3. The third model of atonement, Jesus as moral example, is associated with Peter Abelard (1079–1142) and employs the metaphor of courtly love. "Abelard wanted his listeners to think about God as loving, compassionate, and merciful. Consequently, Jesus lived, died, and rose again in order to reveal God's love to us. Everything Jesus said or did served as an example not only of how God behaves, but how we should behave too" (Baker, 60).
4. The model popularized by John Calvin (1509–1564), and the one probably most familiar to contemporary Christians, is penal substitution. Those familiar with or committed to the so-called Romans Road to Salvation will consider it the singular version of atonement theology: (a) "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23); (b) the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23); (c) though all deserve eternal punishment, Jesus "acts as our substitute, taking on our sin and suffering our punishment so we don't have to" (Baker, 63).
5. Finally, the model of atonement made popular by authors such as Sharon Baker and Raquel St. Clair may be called an "antiviolent atonement theory." It lays the blame of Jesus' violent, unjust death at the feet of all of us human beings (rather than God or Satan) who are addicted to violence in the name not only of barbarous entertainment but also of political expediency. The salient features of this view of atonement (as enumerated by Baker) are as follows:
    a. "Jesus emptied himself of the right to live selfishly and gave his life in service to all creation" (Baker, 158).
    b. Jesus died as a consequence of human sin.
    c. Jesus asked God to forgive that sin, and God complied with Jesus' prayer.
    d. Jesus' salvific work undoes the sin of Adam and brings salvation on a cosmic level (Baker, 159).
    e. "Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus reveals to us the incomprehensible love of God . . . toward all creation. . . . God forgave all people universally, without condition and without exception" (Baker, 159). When human beings embrace this forgiveness, reconciliation and justice abound.

The evidence in 1 John (and the Gospel itself) probably cannot bear the weight imposed on it by those who would argue for a "theory of atonement," and certainly not a singular one. Lieu is wise to warn against overinterpreting the *hilasmos* language. Of the five models mentioned above, the Johannine Epistles (and Gospel) may have most in common with the fifth. "In 1 John, however, there is nothing to demand a sacrificial understanding . . . particularly as not only did God *send* (aorist) Jesus as a *hilasmos* (4:10), but he *is* (present) one (2:2)—past act and present reality. In all the emphasis is probably on the reconciliation thus made possible and not on any precise model of its method" (Lieu 1991, 64).

First John 2:15-17 may be less about asceticism than it is about care for the poor. Though readers are often tempted to focus on sexual lust in the passage, the better question is, how do sex and greed and lust combine to promote injustice? As Philo already noted: "For strong drink and gross eating

accompanied by wine-bibbing, while they awaken the insatiable lusts of the belly, inflame also the lusts seated below it" (*Spec. Laws* 1.192). In our world as well, insatiable sexual lust and economic injustice are intertwined. Loader's depiction of the gluttonous banquets of the rich relates directly to the staggering enormity of human slavery and sex trafficking worldwide at present. The text lends urgency to our consideration of such issues by setting it in an eschatological context, noting that one's choices have ultimate consequences before God.

1 John 2:18—3:24: Love in Action

The Text in Its Ancient Context

Those who have left the community are antichrists and liars and do not love God. While they are not directly equated with "the world," by denying God they show that they love the world. What makes these apostates antichrists? Their Christology. Not only do they deny the Father and the Son and that Jesus is the Messiah (2:22), but they also deny the flesh of Jesus. For the author, it appears to be a short step from denying the importance of Christ's fleshly embodiedness to denying the importance of a fellow Christian's bodily needs. When one does this, one walks in the footsteps of Cain, who is associated with the evil one and traffics in fratricide (3:12-15). Wealthy Christians are to care for poorer Christians.

The ethical exhortation is set in an eschatological context. It is "the last hour" (2:18). The faithful community is able to do right because they are "christs" (2:20; 27), having been anointed by the Holy One. They know everything they need to know to abide and love; even more will be revealed to them when Jesus comes again (2:28; 3:2; cf. 1 Corinthians 13). They are on an ethical journey that has not yet been brought to fruition; in the end, they will be like Jesus. Jesus is pure, holy, and just (2:20; 3:3, 7).

It is clear, however, that the author of 1 John holds an apocalyptic worldview (like most New Testament authors). Like Paul, he understands that Christians live in a "middle period," the time between Christ's effective work on the cross and the full unveiling of the eschaton. There is a cosmic battle being waged between the forces of good and evil. Human beings can enlist with one or the other, but they cannot remain neutral. While the devil's days are numbered, he still wanders to and fro about the earth causing trouble for the faithful (cf. the figure of "the adversary," *ha-Satan*, in Job, and the devil in 1 Pet. 5:8). Even Christians must be on guard lest they inadvertently lend their energies to the work of the devil. When they slip up, they confess and are righted; this distinguishes them from those who have departed and abandoned Jesus entirely.

The leitmotif of 1 John is love. God loves us, as shown through the way Jesus has loved us (by laying down his life) and continues to love us (including advocating for us in our weakness). This love commandment dominates as it has "from the beginning." The latter is a favorite phrase of the author and is multivalent. Surely it means, at least, from the beginning of everything, since it defines God's character (1 John 4:16); from the beginning of creation; from the beginning of humanity's story (Cain and Abel are representative of the fruits of love and hate); from the beginning of the Son's particular work in the incarnation (cf. the Gospel of John); and quite possibly, from the beginning of the Johannine community, likely in Palestine, and continuing in the author's day: in Ephesus, according to some traditions. Love is foundational. It is also generative: note both the mention

of God's seed (*sperma*) in 1 John 3:9 as well as the language of birth, children, and life throughout. Love is eternal and abiding. As noted earlier, the practical expression of love involves trusting in the name of Jesus and loving one another (3:23).

The Text in the Interpretive Tradition

First John 3:2 has been beloved by the mystics who longed to attain illumination and the beatific vision (Murphy, 59–60), while 1 John 3:3 (sometimes in concert with 2:16) has inspired asceticism among many church fathers, such as Tertullian and Augustine (Greer, 21–26).

First John 3:4-10 is one of the most difficult passages in 1 John. Verses 4-6 have appeared in debates both about the doctrine of the sinlessness of Jesus and about the doctrine of original sin. Furthermore, in it the author declares that Christians do not do sin (*ou poiei hamartian*) and cannot sin (*ou dynatai harmatanein*). Those who sin are children of the devil, do not do justice, and do not love. This proclamation is puzzling, given the author's insistence that one must not deny having sin (1:5-10) and his assurance that if they sin, Jesus will advocate for them (2:1-2). How is this apparent contradiction to be explained? Some suggest that the earlier discussion refers to a person's pre-Christian life as if that were in the past tense, whereas 3:4-10 refers to a person who has become a Christian. This fails to convince, however, because both the having sin in 1:8 and the doing sin in 3:4 are in the present tense. Another proposed solution depends on the language of abiding (*menō*). As long as one abides, one does not sin; when one does not abide, one sins. This notion of moving in and out of the state of abiding, however, does not make sense in Johannine terms. The word "abide" denotes stability and something God and Jesus are said to do as well. A third suggestion is to consider that, while the abiding might be stable, it is incomplete until the eschaton. Others find this explanation wanting, arguing that it applies to the cosmic level but not the individual (Lieu 2008, 132).

The Text in Contemporary Discussion

The emphasis on care for those in poverty draws the contemporary reader's attention to gender, race, and disability concerns. Who is poor and why? Faith and love belong together and coalesce in a concern for economic justice. While the author may have only the Christian poor in mind, doesn't morality compel modern readers to both acknowledge the sectarian impulse in the text and move to universalizing the principle of concern for the poor? Johannes Beutler declares: "Christians living in affluence must share their material goods with their brothers and sisters beyond the boundaries of their Christian communities on a worldwide scale and challenge unjust social structures. . . . For the nations of the northern hemisphere, this responsibility means sharing their wealth with the nations of the south. But this commandment also applies to the developing nations that are characterized by vast inequality in material wealth. A rich ruling class often exploits the masses of the poor" (556–58).

1 John 4:1-6: Incarnation and Antichrists

The Text in Its Ancient Context

First John 4:1-6 returns to the theme of 2:18-28. There the subjects were the last hour and the antichrists associated with it, who deny that Jesus is the Messiah and deny the Father and Son;

those who went out (from the Greek verb *exerchomai*) from the community (19); and a warning to abide and not fall under the spell of deceivers. Likewise, 1 John 4 depicts an urgent eschatological scenario (4:3) characterized by the activity of false prophets (4:1) who have "gone out [from *exerchomai* again] into the world." (Recall that in 1 John, "the world" represents a sphere where God's values are not regnant.) There are antichrists who apparently deny that Jesus has come in the flesh and do not confess Jesus (4:2-3). For this author, having the right Christology is not merely an academic exercise but is essential for acting justly, which is to say, loving in the way that God loves (*agapē* language occurs forty-eight times in 1 John). The denial of Jesus' fleshly existence along with the overwhelming use of "knowing" language (*ginōskō*, twenty-five times; *oida*, fifteen times) immediately raises the specter of docetic or gnostic Christology among opponents. It is no accident that the noun "knowledge" never appears in 1 John; the emphasis is on action. Knowing is doing, and knowing rightly is tied to acting rightly. Those who disembody Jesus easily disembody their neighbor. Certain ways of "knowing" cause arrogance and disdain of others in the community.

The Text in the Interpretive Tradition

The insistence on proclaiming that Jesus came in the "flesh" (*sarx*; 1 John 4:2; 2 John 7) indicates that the opponents deny Jesus' flesh or separate the human Jesus from his role as the Christ.

Not surprisingly, docetic Christology also has implications for eucharistic theology, with its emphasis, in some traditions, on consuming Jesus' flesh and blood. First John 4:2 (and 2 John 7) also appear in debates about the virgin birth, the doctrine that Jesus was miraculously conceived by the Holy Spirit and that Mary remained a virgin until after he was born. In 1 John, the emphasis is on the fact of Jesus' physical birth, not on Mary's virginity (which is never mentioned). That is to say, docetic Christologies, with their disparagement of the flesh, would not tolerate a literal incarnation; clearly the author of 1 John insists on it and, therefore, lends support to those who argue for an actual human birth (if by miraculous conception: Sweeney).

The Text in Contemporary Discussion

First John's focus on the incarnation implies that Christians ought to be concerned with ecological matters (Lee). The prologue to John proclaims: "The Word became flesh [*sarx*] and tabernacled among us." Though Jesus is the unique Son of God, he is related to us insofar as we have become children of God through his blood. As the Son, he has authority over all flesh (*pas sarx*; 17:2). Since the prologue narrates the Word's participation in the creation of everything (John 1:3), "all flesh" presumably includes the whole created order, not just human beings (cf. Romans 8). First John eschews docetist theologies that denigrate the material order. Do we? Should human beings relate to the earth in a hierarchical, dominating fashion by which the earth exists merely as an object to be used in the gratification of human greed and gluttony as described in 1 John 2:16?

Ecofeminists argue that denigration of creation is usually connected to denigration of female bodies. The power dynamic of patriarchy involves a system of hierarchy where the male rules as lord (Latin *dominus*, tied to the word "dominate") and the female (and children) are subjects (objects,

really) to be used as the male sees fit. Rape, of the earth or of people, is inherent in such a system. Postcolonialism extends the conversation to other bodies, colonized bodies.

The Gospel of John draws heavily from creation language in Genesis. There God created the first earth creature (*'adam*) from the ground (*'adamah*). The fall points to the tragic disruption of the synergistic relationship between humans with each other and humans with the earth (Trible). Jesus redeems this problematic situation from the prologue to the Garden, where Jesus and Mary become a new Adam and Eve. Given 1 John's apparent frustration with "the world," some might argue that ecological concerns are not in its purview. On the contrary, since the "world" signifies those ignorant of or in opposition to God's values, then

> this attitude of the world, to find its own answers and to create its own security outside the realm of light and truth, is the real cause for the exploitation of the earth in a manner that shows no concern for the commandment of neighbourly love. The endless ravaging of the earth for economic progress, and the consequential pollution of the earth, the atmosphere and the oceans, are all symptoms of the world's blindness, its mindless quest to establish a security of its own, to erect its own modern Tower of Babel. . . . Neighbourly love must take on a concrete form, and there is no way that people can continue to ravage their neighbour's environment and pollute the air that they must breathe and still say that they are walking in the light, that they are keeping the commandment of neighbourly love. (Pretorius, 273, 277)

1 John 4:7—5:12: The Church Defined by Love

The Text in Its Ancient Context

This section of 1 John repeats numerous themes and images from earlier:

- The mark of being a child of God is to love one another.
- To love God is to obey God; to obey God is to love one another.
- God's love was "revealed" (1:2; 2:28; 3:2, 5, 8, 10) by sending his son Jesus to provide life (*zōē*) for God's children.
- Jesus is an "atoning sacrifice" (4:10; cf. 2:2).
- The ability to love depends on the abiding relationship that involves the believer, the Holy Spirit, God, and Jesus (4:13-15).
- God's love precedes and is the basis for the love that Christians manifest for one another (4:19).
- God is not visible to the human eye at this point in history except through acts of love (4:20); until the eschaton (and the full unveiling of God's face), the only way to surely connect to God is to practice loving with the expectation that practice will make perfect, eventually.
- Love and God go together; hate and God do not (20); fear and God do not (18).
- Proper christological confession is important and entails these beliefs about Jesus:
- He is the Messiah (5:1).
- He is the Son of God (5:5).
- He came in the flesh (5:6-7).
- Proper belief empowers one to overcome "the world" (5:4).

Thus no new topics are introduced except perhaps the water and blood (5:6-7). This may refer to John 19:34, where Jesus was stabbed in his side with the spear and water and blood came out. Even apart from that possible allusion, the language fits well in 1 John, where all the "begetting" language implies birth language, which involves both blood and water (cf. the woman in labor in John 16:21 and the womb [*koilia*] and water language in John 3:4; 7:38). Furthermore, the blood of Jesus has already been mentioned in chapter 1 in relation to his salvific death. By insisting on this earthy, earthly, wet, and bloody reality that Jesus experienced, the author may be emphasizing his actual death, thus countering once again a docetic Christology that insists that Jesus only "seemed" human. As often happens with the passage in John 19, some find baptismal and eucharistic allusions in the language. While this is possible, 1 John does not mention either ritual explicitly.

The Text in the Interpretive Tradition

As noted earlier, many over the centuries have interpreted the Gospel of John docetically. It may be that some in the community of 1 John already made this docetic move, thereby provoking the vitriol of the elder who considers these docetic Christians to be opponents and even antichrists.

Study Bibles note that some early Latin manuscripts insert the following just before the phrase "and these three are one": "There are three that testify in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit." This is referred to as "The Johannine Comma" and reflects a later stage in textual transmission in which a scribe, familiar with trinitarian debates, makes a marginal note that subsequently enters the body of the text in some later Greek manuscripts and thus into the Authorized Version of the English Bible of 1611. It does not appear in most ancient texts and should not be considered original. Martin Luther dismissed it as an addition by "an ignoramus," by which he meant to refer to an early Catholic Christian who opposed Arianism (Posset, 247).

The capacious proclamation at 4:16 complexifies the epistle because, on the one hand, it has been interpreted as highly sectarian and dualistic, but now it appears to be the most expansive and universal of all New Testament literature. The latter accounts for its appeal over the centuries to Indians and its repeated translation into Sanskrit. Commenting on a new "presentation of the first letter of St. John in Sanskrit poetry and Indian symbolic idiom," G. Gispert-Sauch declares: "The text has a clear mystical resonance that cannot but appeal to all religious people specifically those nurtured in Indian religions, and the nature of its teaching has a certain universality that can be applied to different doctrinal contexts" (422).

The Text in Contemporary Discussion

First John 4:16 may be the most famous verse in the epistles, if not the New Testament: "God is Love." As such, it touches on everything, from the individual-psychological to the radically communal. Writing from the perspective of a therapist, William Clough draws on 1 John 4. He concludes:

> 1 John 4:19 is the ultimate summation of the process of sanctification, and, one might suggest, the best possible outcome of counseling, therapy, or spiritual direction. We love because he first loved us. . . . The Logos shows itself therapeutically as love: the deep energy that motivates us to

> seek spiritual direction, therapy, counseling, mentoring, education, advice, sermons, worship, and community. It lives in our affection for our children; our debt to our parents; our concern for one another; and our responsibility to the earth, to other species, and to God. Love challenges and convicts us. It is the living reality that drives and can ground "discourse" and "meaning-making" in existential psychotherapy and post-modernist psychology: It is the basic motivation which must be addressed in counseling. (Clough, 30)

Throughout this study, I have noted the author's tendencies toward dualistic, binary categories. This philosophical habit typically quickly degenerates into systems of hierarchies where one element is valued and empowered at the expense of the other: male versus female; white versus black; rich versus poor; this culture versus that culture; this religion versus that religion. Many contemporary thinkers (e.g., Fr. Richard Rohr of The Rohr Institute) are calling for unitive ways of thinking, replacing either/or modalities with both/and. Such approaches have great potential for addressing oppressive divisions of all kinds and invite readers to contemplate the challenging tension that Miroslav Volf has identified between "Johannine Dualism and Contemporary Pluralism."

1 John 5:13-21: Final Verses

The Text in Its Ancient Context

First John 5:13 echoes the thesis statement of John 20:31 and connects back to 1:4. The author writes to engender belief, knowledge, and eternal life. He reminds the readers to be confident, even bold in prayer (cf. 3:21-22) and to pray for any fellow Christian who is sinning, but not "sinning to death." What is the difference? The author indicates that all injustice (*adikia*) is sin. When a Christian does not "do justice," does not love a brother or sister, she is not acting in accordance with God's will or loving the way God loves. That person needs to recognize that she is out of step with God and the community and is thereby affecting the whole group negatively. She needs to recognize her sin, rely on Christ's advocacy (2:2), and move back into harmonious relationship with God and neighbor. The result will be, as usual, life.

But there is a different kind of sin that leads to death: apostasy. Those who leave the Johannine community abandon their church and enlist with the world, which lies under the power of the evil one (5:19). They have not simply faltered momentarily but have severed their connection to life; their end is destruction. Those who abide with the community by definition do not sin in this way. As long as one abides, life is inevitable; as soon as one apostatizes, death is inevitable. The same distinction is made in 3:9. Again, there is a cosmic battle going on between God and Satan; as long as the readers remain in the Johannine community, they are protected by Jesus.

First John 5:21 may seem like a strange way to close the epistle, but it aptly concludes not only what immediately precedes it but also the whole letter. The readers have a choice: serve the true God or serve idols. This is reminiscent of the Old Testament, when Israelites were tempted to worship the gods of other nations or apostatize. The language is a trope and is often described in the metaphorical imagery of sexual immorality ("play the harlot," "commit adultery"). It is clear throughout 1 John that those who remain in the Johannine community do serve the true God (5:20), which

leads to life and to "conquering the world"—a typically Johannine phrase that is never defined but that points to the Johannine understanding of the world as oppositional. In contrast, those who go out from the community serve Satan. Since he has power over the whole world (5:19), those who leave oppose Christ (i.e., they are antichrists) and instead adopt the values of Satan and his world: desire of the flesh, desire of the eyes, the pride in riches (2:16). The author closes by asking the readers: "Whom will you serve?"

The Text in the Interpretive Tradition

The textual transmission of 5:18 reveals that it has caused some consternation: Who is protecting whom? It makes the most sense to argue that Jesus, the Son of God, does the protecting. He is like those he is protecting because he is born of God as they are (both are described using a participle of the verb *gennaō ek tou theou*), but he is unique in that he is the only Son of God, whereas they are children. The concept that Jesus was "born of God" offended some thinkers as the christological debates of the later centuries developed, so one finds glosses in some manuscripts that make the text say that the believer protects himself (*heauton*); but that obviates the essential role played by Jesus in 1 John. A third option suggests that God is the protector: "This connection with John 17:15 seems close enough to lead to the conclusion that somehow 1 John 5:18 means that God keeps the believer" (Painter, 324).

Due to later trinitarian debates, some have tried to distinguish between Jesus' birth from God and the believer's birth from God by noting that the perfect participle of the verb is used for believers (*gegennēmenos*) and the aorist tense (*gennētheis*) for Jesus. That is, the perfect tense, on the one hand, is used for an action that occurred in the past but has continuing effect in the present (those who have been begotten, the effects of which are continuing). The aorist tense, on the other hand, refers to a single completed action in the past, without reference to an ongoing process. Centuries later, post-Nicene Christianity would resolve the debate by using the phrases "eternally begotten" and "begotten not made" to refer to the Son.

The reference to mortal sins calls Christians to serious reflection about sin, confession, and repentance, both individually and corporately. The later church distinguished between "mortal" sins (pride, covetousness, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, and sloth) and "venial" sins. Tertullian claims that John refers to murder, idolatry, injustice, apostasy, adultery, and fornication (Smith, 134).

The Text in Contemporary Discussion

A number of important questions for contemporary Christians arise from this passage. Does the contemporary church adhere to a notion of mortal sin? If so, what should be added or deleted from the lists above, if anything?

How vital is intercessory prayer? "How seriously does the Church take its responsibility to intercede on behalf of a sinning brother or sister? What formal means of reconciliation and forgiveness are available and utilized with the Church?" (Thomas, 281–82).

Finally, what constitute idols in our contemporary context? Do wealth, status, power, ego, vanity, and nationalism qualify? Are there other false teachings or gods that tempt people away from God?

2 John

Introduction

This short book follows some of the themes addressed in 1 John (see the introduction to 1 John). For example, the call to love one another is an ancient command present from the beginning. It also warns of practicing this love with some caution; receiving or welcoming those who deceive can compromise the faith of both individuals and the community. The whole of this epistle is treated as a single sense unit.

The Text in Its Ancient Context

Written in letter form, 2 John opens with the identification of the sender and receiver followed by a greeting that, in this case, appears as a benediction. But the atypical immediately captivates: Who is the "elder"? The author never names himself but assumes authority of some kind on the basis of advanced age or, perhaps, by virtue of an office. Verse 12 indicates that he plans to educate them more deeply in person (cf. Paul).

And what of the recipients, the *eklektē kyria* and her "children"? *Eklektē* (whence we derive the word "eclectic") means "chosen" or "elect." *Kyria* is the feminine form of *kyrios*, which means "sir" or "lord" or "master." Usually *eklektē kyria* is translated "elect lady" and assumed to refer metaphorically to the gathered church receiving the letter (as opposed to being addressed to a woman named Eclecta or Kyria), particularly because the letter closes with reference to "your elect sister," likely a reference to the author's own church community. The "children" of the elect lady probably refers to church members. The intimate, relational, familial language, quite typical of the Johannine literature, strikes the reader immediately. Furthermore, the personal tone, signified especially by the abundance of first-person constructions, is remarkable and lends a sense of immediacy to the letter.

The immediate preoccupation with truth looms large, as the word *alētheia* ("truth") appears five times in the first four verses. This author links truth and love together from the start (1, 3, 5-6) and assumes that these attributes tie Christians together into a cord that cannot be easily broken. To love one another is to walk in the commandment(s) (cf. John 15:12; 1 John 1:7). This does not imply a generalized love but rather a choosy love that embraces only those who agree with the author's vision of truth. Based on the author's language, one can delineate the characteristics of the two opposing groups: those who abide (who believe correctly) and those who are antichrists (those who oppose truth and promote falsehood).

Led by figures such as Irenaeus and Hippolytus, subsequent readers of the Johannine Epistles have expressed consistent fascination with the antichrist language, identifying characters from the historical to the fantastic and mythical as "*the* Antichrist." For the elder, however, "the antichrist" was not an individual character; rather, it described anyone who expressed a Christology incommensurate with the elder's own. Specifically, it denoted "those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (v. 7; cf. 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3). These antichrists are deceivers; they are "many" (v. 7); and they are former members of this very community, known personally by the readers and

elder (cf. 2:18, 22). Antichrists are probably Christian, since non-Christians are unlikely to deal in the details of various Christologies. Any Christian, then, can remain a christ (2:20, 27) or become an antichrist at any time (Koester forthcoming).

To summarize this dualistic picture: the elder and his sympathizers abide with the community and the inherited tradition, are marked by truth and love and obedience, have the Father and the Son, and deny hospitality to those deemed unorthodox in their Christology. The opponents are deceivers and antichrists who depart and who "go beyond" the christological tradition (v. 9) and try to tempt others to do the same; they do not have God.

The elder forbids the readers to extend hospitality to anyone espousing an alternative Christology. To receive that person is to become an antichrist; it has eschatological ramifications, namely, the loss of all heretofore accumulated rewards.

The Text in the Interpretive Tradition

Although Polycarp (*Phil.* 1 34) followed the elder's lead in construing the antichrist as pluriform (using the term to refer to docetists, for example), the habit of envisioning a single political or religious figure as *the* Antichrist began early in Christian history and continues today. By combining traditions such as "the lawless one" of 2 Thessalonians and the beast described in Revelation 13, Christians have imagined a single person who represents pure evil, serving in the army of Satan in an apocalyptic eschatological battle between God and Satan. Sometimes the figure is Jewish (Hippolytus), sometimes Muslim, sometimes this or that Roman emperor. The pope as antichrist has enjoyed a long tenure beginning in the fourth century. Indeed, in the Middle Ages, Emperor Frederick II Hohenstaufen's publicists "gained an advantage by showing how the numerical value of the name *Innocencius papa* was 666, concluding that there can be no doubt that Innocent IV is the 'true Antichrist!'" (McGinn, 154). Luther, Calvin, Increase and Cotton Mather, and Jonathan Edwards all capitalized on this tradition. Those named as the Antichrist throughout history are too many to list, but include Hitler, Reagan, Elvis, and Saddam Hussein (Nichols, 81–83). The impetus of the original text, whose purpose was to insist on the humanity of Jesus and to emphasize the incarnation, has largely been eclipsed by the construction of the later Antichrist myth and rapture theology.

The insistence on embodiedness described in verse 7 has also fueled enduring and sometimes vociferous debates in Christian tradition about the virgin birth, the incarnation, and the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist (Painter, 350).

The Text in Contemporary Discussion

The phrase identifying the addressee, *eklektē kyria*, may refer to a church leader named either Kyria ("lady") or Eclecta ("the elect"). If either word is a proper name, this would show the importance of female leadership in the early church. More likely, however, the phrase is a metaphor imaging the church as a lady (*kyria*) in relationship with her lord Jesus (*kyrios*). This image may offer a liberating trajectory regarding women, their value, and their experience. However, such language might simply entrench patriarchy where the male elder becomes "lord" over "lady church" (O'Day, 467).

The insistence on incarnation is important. Womanists and feminists know that theologies that view the body and soul as binary categories (as in docetism and Gnosticism) are always detrimental to women. The soul is valued and the body is denigrated as a hindrance to the soul (summarized in the pithy saying, *sōma sēma*—"the body is a tomb"). Women are associated with the bodily, which is to be controlled and subdued.

Second John's injunction against hospitality and his promotion of exclusionary practices toward opponents raise deep concern regarding current ethno-religious conflicts, whether it is the Catholic-Protestant conflict in Northern Ireland or Catholic-Muslim-Orthodox fighting in Yugoslavia (Slater, 511). However, our reading of 2 John today may evoke important questions about how to maintain group cohesion and draw healthy boundaries when destructive persons are allowed to wreak havoc on a community with impunity.

3 John

Introduction

See the introduction to 1 John for additional commentary regarding the connection of the three Johannine Epistles. Here again, the theme of discerning truth and being coworkers with the truth is emphasized. Gaias and Demetrius are commended for walking in the truth, while Diotrephes is accused of spreading false rumors. Again, the whole of this brief letter is treated as one sense unit.

The Text in Its Ancient Context

If one were to title this letter, it might be "Good Gaius, Dastardly Diotrephes, and Devoted Demetrius." Like 2 John, 3 John is a letter written by "the elder," but in this case to an individual, Gaius, "whom I love in truth" (cf. 2 John 1, where the same language is used of "the elect lady and her children"). The elder uses *agapē* language twice in the opening sentence. It is almost as if "Beloved" were the author's nickname for Gaius (1, 2, 5, 11) since he begins the next sentence with it as well.

As is customary in an epistle, the author follows the introduction with a prayer on behalf of Gaius and words of praise about his "walking in truth" (3, 4). The language of "walking" as a metaphor for ethical behavior is typical for the Johannine Epistles (cf. 1 John 1:6, 7; 2:6, 11; 2 John 4, 6). As in all of the epistles bearing the name of John and in the Gospel of John, concern for *truth* predominates (1, 3, 4, 8, and 12).

The body of the letter comprises verses 5-12. Immediately we learn that just as Gaius is beloved, he also loves fellow believers (v. 6), in accordance with the commandment of Christ so fundamental to the Johannine community (John 13:34; 1 John 3:11). Thus walking in truth is synonymous with loving. Gaius expresses his love in practical terms by showing hospitality to Christian missionaries: feeding, housing, and financially supporting them. This model was common in the early church.

Third John testifies to a power struggle in the church between the elder and Diotrephes. The elder has written to the church requesting that the church receive the missionaries and show them hospitality as Gaius has previously done. Diotrephes, however, does not recognize the elder's authority;

instead, he commands the community to reject hospitality to the missionaries or be expelled. Many details remain obscure, including whether or not Gaius is subject to Diotrephes' power. Since he implies that Gaius is his child (v. 4), one wonders if the elder converted him. No specific church offices are mentioned in the letter, but it attests to the struggle regarding the best way to structure Christian communities both locally and at a broader level.

Unlike 1 and 2 John, 3 John does not refer to false teachings or particular christological claims. In fact, neither the word *Jesus* nor *Christ* appears in the letter (NRSV fills it in at v. 7, but the Greek word *Christos* is not there). The author exhorts Gaius not to imitate evil (associated with Diotrephes), but good (modeled by Demetrius, who may be the bearer of the letter).

The letter concludes with almost identical words as 2 John 12 about not writing more but meeting in person. This is followed by a word of peace, greetings from the elder's church, and a request that Gaius share the elder's greetings with those whom he knows personally.

The Text in the Interpretive Tradition

Citations of 3 John are rare, though verse 2 has appeared occasionally. Some imagine in verse 2 a distinction between the prosperity of the body and the prosperity of the soul and quickly move to asceticism (Tertullian and Augustine). The Benedictine Bede saw prosperity as a communal category so that prosperity was a way to gift others in need. Debates arise about the relationship between spiritual health and physical health, in some cases leading to the founding of medical institutions or healing movements, as in the case of Carrie Judd Montgomery. Montgomery (1858–1946), was a leader in the Divine Healing movement and an influence in Pentecostalism. She began opening healing homes in the 1880s. The translation of the phrase *peri pantōn* leads to different stances. Those who translate it as "above all things" see God as supporting an emphasis on financial prosperity (Oral Roberts); those who translate it as "with respect to all things" do not (Landrus).

The Text in Contemporary Discussion

Third John addresses questions about hospitality as an ethical imperative for Christians. Christians are called to love not only those whom they know but also those who are "strangers" to them. It also raises questions about how Christians are to support financially those who are called to teach and preach the gospel near and far.

Third John also demands that individual Christians and communities guard against those who have a "passion for preeminence" (Jones, 272), who "love being first" (*philoproteuō*) in church leadership. Conflict is inevitable, but is there a better way to address it than the elder's strategy of vituperation (v. 10, "talking nonsense about us with evil words," author translation).

Finally, the interpretation of verse 2 raises questions about the relationship between faith and physical well-being as well as faith and financial well-being. Those committed to the "prosperity gospel" (also known as "the health and wealth gospel") suggest that faithful believers should expect physical and financial deliverance. Others link holiness with poverty. Are Christians free or even obligated to succeed financially? Does wealth necessarily cause spiritual injury? Is poverty a sign of a lack of faith or a sign of blessedness?

The field of disability studies has taught us to ask these questions about physical health as well. Should those who have physical or mental disabilities seek physical healing to conform to "normal" bodies, or does physical suffering bring holiness (cf. 2 Corinthians 12)?

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