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# 1 JOHN: A PASTORAL TRACT FOR THE TIMES<sup>1</sup>

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The threat of false teachers has loomed over the Church ever since its birth. For example the Apostle Paul, in addition to dealing with false teaching in many of his own letters warned the Ephesian elders about their role in protecting the flock. He characterized these men as “fierce wolves” coming into the flock, and called them speakers of “twisted things” (Acts 20:29-30). Their errors are insidious, destroying and deceiving the flock so that even the elect wander away from truth into myths and speculations (2 Tim 3:1ff, 4:3-4).

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## 1 JOHN: NATURE OF THE DANGER

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Writing most probably to churches in the area of Ephesus around AD 80-85, The Apostle John in his epistle like Paul, addresses error. While much has been written concerning the historical background of 1 John, we can identify much about both the *fact* and the *nature* of the errors first by John’s own words. In his epistle he uses three vivid expressions to describe these men as originating from the devil, influencing the flock towards evil, and false in their proclamation of Christ.

### 1. False Prophets (4:1-6)

- a. A prophet represents God. From earliest descriptions (for example, Deut 18:18), the prophet is the mouthpiece of God. John then presents the false teachers in this way:
  - i. The true prophet is a mouthpiece of God the Spirit, who is the Spirit of truth (John 16:13).
  - ii. On the other hand, a false prophet is the mouthpiece of the spirit of error.
- b. This is why John presents the issue of false teaching in this way, “test the spirits” (John 4:1-6). When God’s Spirit is at work, there are very clear definable truths by which you can know Him and His representatives. So it is with the spirit of error.

### 2. Deceivers (2 John 7)

- a. False teaching is not something a pastor can be careless about. I’ve heard leaders speak, even recently, in this way about false teachers, as a justification for tolerating their teaching - “Anyone can teach us good things”. The idea is that if there is some truth, then we should allow it.
- b. By using the word “deceiver”, John reminds us that while false teaching can contain a morsel of truth, the end goal is deception, so that by the tasty bait “even if possible the elect” might be led astray. Error rarely comes without the garb of truth. It seems we’re less tolerant of false advertising by corporates than we are of the destructive false teaching of deceivers.

### 3. Antichrists (2:18)

- a. While this is a name that is familiar to our ears, the title itself describes something about the type of individuals represented:
  - i. John is calling them “anti” Christs. In other words, the fundamental danger that they carry is not just that they say false things. It is not only about their deceiving motives.
  - ii. The ultimate threat is that they are not in allegiance to Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Helpful resources: *The Epistles of John*, John R. W. Stott; *An Introduction to the New Testament*, D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo

- b. In context, John's opponents were specifically denying the incarnation of the eternal Son, Jesus Christ (2:22, 4:3, 2 John 7).

Clearly, much is at stake in Ephesus. Teaching of diabolical origin has infested the church through men whose goal is to deceive the flock away from the truth, and whose ultimate direction is anti-Christ. And while the error being taught is different at different times, these descriptions remind us that doctrinal error is not in the same league as intramural disagreement. We must be able to distinguish between biblical disagreement and doctrinal error, for one is a poison that can destroy a church.

## 1 JOHN: CONTENT OF THE ERROR

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Without yet getting into broader historical background, we are able to uncover elements of John's concern by examining the letter itself:

### 1. Theological Error (2:26, 2 John 7)

- a. A direct attack is being made on the person of Christ. The "antichrists" deny Jesus was the "Christ" (2:22), and are trying to deceive the flock into this kind of anti-Christ understanding (2:26).
- b. This is not a denial of the historical Jesus being the prophesied anointed Messiah.
- c. Rather, they deny that Jesus is the eternal Son (2:23, 4:15, 2 John 9 also 5:1, 9, 13, John 20:31)
  - i. John uses the title "Christ" as shorthand for this fundamental truth about the person of Christ
  - ii. in other words, in this epistle, to deny Jesus is the Christ is to deny that Jesus is the Son of God
  - iii. Key verses that indicate this: 4:2, 2 John 7 – the "coming in the flesh" of the Son is being denied.
- d. John's emphasis of eyewitness testimony and the term "from the beginning" put into focus the first hand reality of the incarnation of the son of God (1:1-3; 2:7, 24; 4:14)

### 2. Ethical Issues (3:7)

John also addresses a downplaying of sin's seriousness (and denial of sin's existence). In John's mind, one's theological content and one's ethical direction are tightly connected. This denial or downplay for John is related to a denial of the incarnation of the Son.

- a. He addresses denials about **sin** apparently from the deceivers or their followers:
  - i. 1:6, 8, 10 indicated by the repeated line "if we say", containing two main ideas regarding sin.
    - 1. Sin doesn't matter to me
    - 2. Sin doesn't exist in me
  - ii. But for John, the incarnation of the eternal Son was purposed to remove sin, so you cannot say it doesn't matter or doesn't exist subjectively or objectively (see 3:4-10)
    - 1. Sin is the reason for Christ's mission (3:5a)
    - 2. Sin is opposed to Christ's nature (3:5b)
    - 3. Any denial or downplay of sin is to deny God's word (1:10), His nature (1:5), and his mission (3:5)
- b. Further, John says that the incarnation of the Son is the *reason* for Christian ethics:
  - i. Regarding obedience: Since God is light (1:5), then those who claim allegiance with Him "walk" as the *incarnate* Son did because of his divine nature (2:6)
  - ii. Regarding affections: The *incarnation* demonstrates God's love (4:9), which is the pattern by which Christians are then expected to walk (4:8)
- c. Obedience and Affection are interconnected with Truth about the Son. These are the three primary themes in 1 John.

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## 1 JOHN: HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS

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Looking through history and the themes of this epistle, many have made the connection between 1 John with the historical teachings of Gnosticism. However, much of what we know about Gnosticism stems from writings in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and John wrote at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup>. What we infer is that while the Gnostic heresy resolved into clear teaching later, during this time there existed Gnostic-leaning ideas (though not yet called this) which John addresses in his epistle.

Simply put, Gnostic thinking abominated anything material. They considered matter impure and knowledge/spirit supreme. Thus they struggled (and created their own heretical solutions) about how “creation” could be created by a good God. They struggled with the material nature of the Christian faith:

1. How can God become matter? Thus, they would struggle with incarnation
2. How can the Christian’s physical existence be important?
  - a. In this framework,
    - i. the body is a prison for the spiritual/rational part of man
    - ii. Salvation is by knowledge (“gnosis”). Some have this knowledge inherently, some are able to receive this knowledge, and some are doomed to never know this knowledge
    - iii. They had classes: spiritual (pneumatikoi) and fleshly (psuchoi)
  - b. As far as behaviour,
    - i. Some opted to distance themselves from all material things (asceticism), where the denial of sin may have come from in 1 John 1
    - ii. Some, darker in intent, decided that evil cannot destroy the indestructible spiritual/rational self, and morality is not important. A pneumatikoi is “righteous” irrespective of what the material does.

There is good reason to suspect a proto-gnostic slant in John’s epistle, because it was written in Asia (Ephesus) where the Gnostics eventually infiltrated. In Ephesus, there is some evidence that a man called Cerinthus opposed the Apostle John and had proto-gnostic leanings<sup>2</sup>.

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## 1 JOHN: LESSONS FOR OUR TIMES

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It must be emphasized that while false teaching is a key issue, it is not John’s *only* concern in his epistle. However, this study is a survey of this book with a narrow view towards false teaching. While the error in John’s day was a specific denial of the incarnation, yet we can draw some general principles for our own churches from John’s example as he addressed the errors of his time. This list is not comprehensive.

### 1. True faith’s object is a true Christ (1:1-6, 4:1-6)

- a. Like the rest of the apostles, John’s first move against deception is to proclaim the person of Christ and His cross work. To misrepresent the first is to defeat the other. Christ is the inviolable centre of Christian doctrine. And in this epistle, John demonstrates that a correct understanding of Christ is connected to a true appropriation of his cross work and this in turn is connected to truly transformed actions and affections (5:1-2)
- b. Like the apostles, the constant emphasis is the Gospel of the person and work of Christ. In any fight against error, we must be clear on the implications of the error on the Gospel we proclaim. It is this understanding which will affect the urgency of our defense.

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<sup>2</sup> Stott, 46-47 – quoting Irenaus, Cerinthus ‘represented Jesus as having not been born of a virgin, but as being the son of Joseph and Mary according to the ordinary course of human generation...moreover, after his baptism, Christ descended upon him in the form of a dove from the Supreme Ruler...But at last Christ departed from Jesus...then Jesus suffered and rose again, while Christ remained impassible (invulnerable), inasmuch as he was a spiritual being’.

## 2. Old is new (1:1, 2:7, 2:13-14, 24, 3:11, 2 John 5)

- a. John reminds his readers that his teaching on both belief and behaviour is not new, but what is “from the beginning”. Specifically, he is demonstrating that what he teaches is anchored to the apostolic chain which finds its anchor in Christ and His teaching.
- b. In other words, the test for doctrine and ethics is up to no human agent, but really ends with the teaching, works and person of the incarnate Christ. Even Paul made the Gospel of Christ preeminent over his own apostolic authority (Gal 1:8-9).
- c. Since this is true, then our primary job as pastors and teachers is not to be innovative or trendy. While we desire to engage people with God’s word our role is to:
  - i. Study Apostolic Gospel truth – the old, old story of Jesus. Let innovation not be the hallmark of your ministry, but the ageless Gospel. It is healthy to recognize that what we present is nothing new - “Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews, foolishness to Gentiles”.
  - ii. Know the times and recognize the Spirit of the age (4:6 – known by “what is from us (the Apostles)”. One gauge for recognizing potential error is what takes the garb of newness.

## 3. Ethics are as essential as truth (2:3-6, 3:4-4:6)

- a. While the fight against false doctrine is a fight for the mind and understanding, we must always remember that rich theology cannot be separated from obedience. Theology which is not transformative is useless.
- b. While John spends some time emphasising the truth about the incarnate Son, he spends much of his epistle addressing Christian behaviour.
- c. Genuine Christianity is testable:
  - i. Do you claim to know Jesus Christ? (2:4, for example)
  - ii. If so, do you love? Obey? (2:4-6)
- d. So, a mark of genuine doctrine (though not the only mark) is radically transformed love and obedience for Christ. Genuine doctrine, like genuine faith, is testable by both its confession and its effects.

## 4. Love does not demand uncritical tolerance of error (2:18-19, 3:1ff)

- a. Our definitions of love are skewed by the flesh and by culture. On one hand, there are those among us who show no genuine affection, and demand that their love be recognized by the sterile truth that they proclaim. But the fruit of the Spirit is love (Galatians 5:22)
- b. On the other hand, there is a part of our culture that demands love to be uncritical meekness, tolerating all, discerning nothing. But this too is not biblical love.
- c. Love is a major theme in 1 John (2:5, 15, 3:1, 3:10-11, 14-18, 23, 4:7-21, 5:2-3). To John, love is an important demonstration of genuine life in Christ. Yet, we see such words from him:
  - i. Irenaus the church father writes,  
*“John, the Lord’s disciple, went to take a bath at Ephesus, but, seeing Cerinthus inside, he rushed out of the bathhouse without bathing, crying, “Let’s get out of here lest the place fall in: Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is inside!”<sup>3</sup>*
  - ii. In his letter, John speaks of these men as false teachers, deceivers and “antichrists” and writes this, *“they went out from us...that it might become plain that they are all not of us”*. In other words, he disowns people who attending his fellowship!
  - iii. We may have a deep-rooted reluctance to offend people. This is more often than not a good thing. But even in speaking of God’s love, John demonstrates that truth alienates (3:1ff)
    1. God has given “us” love and made us his family (v1)
    2. This alienates us from the other family, the world (v2)
  - iv. Even Paul famously spoke of those who teach a different Gospel in the harshest terms – literally, they are God-damned (Galatians 1).

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<sup>3</sup> Eusebius, *the Church History*, Paul L. Meier, 129

- d. Why is this not a contradiction of the love of Christ to undeserving sinners? Because the errors are *precisely* what are doing damage to the Gospel which reveals Christ's love for and deliverance of sinners!
- e. The bait of error comes wrapped in the morsel of truth, but we as leaders must be vigilant and not err in tolerance – Christ's authority is upon us to, often, "make war for the sake of the faith" (Jude 3).

**5. A test for orthodoxy is a love for Christ's church over personality (v18-19, 20-21, 26-27)**

- a. So often, the mark of false teaching is a leader-centric ministry. The cult of personality rules. Everything is focussed, sometimes in the garb of false humility, on the glorification of the leader.
- b. The Gnostics had devised a class system of knowledge – there were some who had the "gnosis" (knowledge) intrinsically, and could pass it on to some who were able to receive it (the 'elect'), while others were forever doomed. This creates a monopoly on truth among the "enlightened", and echoes are seen in 1 John.
  - i. For the antichrists, they are ultimately revealed because their long-term allegiance is not to the church of Christ. Notice 1 John 2:20-21 – to them, their personality, their following is more important than fighting for Christ's agenda ("I will build my church"), and thus it is tragically said of them "they went out from us". Just like perseverance is a mark of belief, faithfulness to Christ's church is a mark of orthodoxy.
  - ii. To assure his readers, John speaks to them regarding the deceivers (v26), reminding them of the indwelling Holy Spirit which all believers possess (v27). This is the de-cultifying of truth. "you have no need of teachers" (v20-21).
    - 1. John is not denying the need for teachers – in that case his writing this epistle would be a contradiction. What he is denying is the need for mediating teachers.
    - 2. In the gnostic system, and with many false teachers, access to knowledge of God is mediated by a man, the human leader – he has special access to knowledge or understanding. But there are no more priests in the new covenant. "they will all know the me" Jer 31:34. A church leader who claims a secret knowledge is to be avoided.
  - iii. This is a healthy reminder to teachers. As someone put it, preachers are hungry men offering bread to hungry people. We need not overestimate our place. There is no mediating access to knowing God (v20) or abiding in Him (v27).

**6. Even under threat of false teaching, the main concern is pastoral and exaltational (5:13, 21)**

- a. Finally, In the battle for what is right, we can be wrongly transformed into people who always want to be right. The fallout of this kind of battle is the destruction of sheep.
- b. Let us not forget, that God has placed shepherds not just as independent "heroes for the truth" gaining laurels for themselves as "apologists" and Christian "watchdogs". Pauls' words in Acts 20:28 are apropos, because he frames the pastor's responsibility against false doctrine as "caring for the church of God". "Pay careful attention to yourself and to the flock". And as we read 1 John, we see this is John's desire:
  - i. 5:21 – the command against idolatry is not incidental. It is the singular summarizing conclusion to this epistle. Always, the most important motive is the exaltation and glorification of God. Nothing else matters.
  - ii. This is *His* church, *His* people, *His* Gospel.
- c. John is an example of this concern, he exalts Christ by proclaiming truth and shepherding the flock towards assurance in Christ. He shows us the fight against error can be edifying, not destructive.