

CONTRASTS

The first epistle of John could well be called “The epistle of the either/or”. John seems to have viewed spiritual realities in a binary mode of thinking. He clearly saw the polarities, the opposites, the dichotomies and antitheses of the spiritual world. This does not mean that John viewed spiritual realities in the conceptualization of classic dualism though, for such conceptualization (evident in Eastern philosophies, such as the yin/yang dualism) posits equal and balanced powers of good and evil, positive and negative, neither of which can ever gain the ascendancy. John quite clearly understood the ultimate and absolute sovereignty of God in Christ, and that the Evil One was created by, derived from, and subordinate to God. John recognized that there was a cosmic conflict between God and Satan, good and evil; and that the character of either of these spiritual sources could be employed in human behavior. In addition, John realized that the victory in this cosmic conflict had been won by the work of Jesus Christ. John wanted his Christian readers to understand that the character of their behavioral expressions was derived from either God or Satan, either representing or misrepresenting the One who lived in them, Jesus Christ.

Some might attempt to interpret John’s contrasts and dichotomies by likening them to the dialectic theology of Kierkegaard, Barth, Brunner, Ellul, *et al*, but the polarities posed by John cannot be brought together in Hegelian synthesis or in the dialectic resolution of a Christic incarnational expression. They exist as polar opposites which form a spiritual “either/or”.

What follows is a listing of some of the contrasting opposites that can be found in this first epistle of John.

Chapter One

1:5	God is light		no darkness
1:6	walk in darkness	1:7	walk in light
1:8,10	say we have no sin	1:9	confess our sins

Chapter Two

2:1	not sin		sins
2:3	keep His commandments	2:4	does not keep His commandments
2:7,8	old commandment		new commandment
2:8	darkness passing away		true light shining
2:9,10	in the light	2:9,11	in darkness
2:10	loves his brother	2:11	hates his brother
2:15	love the world		love of the Father
2:16	from Father		from the world
2:17	passing away		abides forever
2:19	not of us		of us
2:21	truth		lie
2:27	true		lie

Chapter Three

3:2	it has not appeared		when He appears
3:4	commits sin	3:6	does not sin
3:10	children of God		children of the devil
3:11	love brother	3:12	murder brother
3:12	works evil		works righteous
3:14	death		life
3:14	loves brother	3:15	hate brother
3:14	abides in death	3:15	eternal life abiding in him
3:18	love in word, tongue		love in deed and truth
3:19	assure our hearts	3:20	heart condemns us
3:20	heart condemns us	3:21	we have confidence

Chapter Four

4:1	spirit...of God	4:3	spirit...not of God
4:2	spirit that confesses Christ	4:3	spirit that does not confess Christ
4:2,3	Christ	4:3	antichrist
4:6	of God		not of God
4:6	spirit of truth		spirit of error
4:7	love...know God	4:8	does not love...know God
4:18	love		fear
4:20	love brother		hate brother

Chapter Five

5:10	he who believes		he who does not believe
5:12	has Son		does not have Son
5:12	life		does not have life
5:19	we are of God		whole world in Evil One

REFERENCES TO EVIL

John's perspective of the "either/or" of spiritual realities allows him to address more clearly the origin and operation of evil as derived from the Evil One. This first epistle of John has perhaps the most defined theodicy of all the New Testament literature. Theodicy (derived from *theos*, meaning "God", and *dike*, meaning "justice") is the attempted explanation of the just attitude of God toward evil and all that is not consistent with His character of good. Theodicy pertains to the so-called "problem of evil", and the questions often posed concerning: "Where does evil originate? or "Why does a just God, a good God, allow evil in the world He created?"

John seems to clearly indicate the diabolic etiology of all character that is not consistent with the character of God. "He who sins derives what he does from the devil" (3:8). Much of evangelical thinking has been steeped in the humanistic fallacy of human self-generation of character in behavior; i.e. that man generates his own sin, evil and unrighteousness (even though they often deny that man can generate his own righteousness). The ill-defined theodicy of evangelicalism has been unwilling to accept the premise stated by John, that Satan, the devil, the Evil One, the deceiver, the destroyer is the personal spiritual source and origin of sin, unrighteousness, evil, death, etc.

For this reason it is extremely important that we study the references to evil in this first epistle of John. Here is a list of some of those references:

Chapter One

- 1:5 in God...no darkness
- 1:6 walk in darkness ... lie ...do not practice truth
- 1:7 cleanses from sin
- 1:8 say have no sin ... deceiving ourselves ... truth no in us
- 1:9 confess our sins ...forgives our sins ...cleanse from unrighteousness
- 1:10 say have not sinned ... make Him a liar ... truth not in us

Chapter Two

- 2:1 not sin ... if anyone sins
- 2:2 our sins ... sins of whole world
- 2:4 liar ... truth not in him
- 2:8 darkness is passing away
- 2:9 hates brother ... in the darkness
- 2:11 hates brother ... in the darkness ... walks in darkness ... darkness has blinded his eyes
- 2:12 sins are forgiven
- 2:13 overcome the Evil One
- 2:14 overcome the Evil One
- 2:15 love the world ... things in the world
- 2:16 all that is in world ... lust of flesh ... lust of eyes ... pride of life ... not of God ... of world
- 2:17 world is passing away ... and its lusts
- 2:18 antichrist is coming ... now many antichrists have arisen

- 2:19 they went out from us ... not of us ... shown that they are not of us
2:21 no lie is of the truth
2:22 liar denies Jesus is Christ ... antichrist ... denies Father and Son
2:26 those trying to deceive you
2:27 not a lie

Chapter Three

- 3:4 practices sin ... practices lawlessness ... sin is lawlessness
3:5 take away sins ... in Him there is no sin
3:6 abide in Him, no sins ... sins, haven't seen Him or known Him
3:7 let no one deceive you
3:8 one who practices sin is of the devil ... devil sinned from beginning ... Son of God came to destroy the works of the devil
3:9 born of God, do not practice sin ... cannot sin
3:10 children of the devil ... does not practice righteousness ... does not love brother
3:12 Cain, of Evil One ... slew his brother ... deeds were evil
3:13 world hates you
3:14 out of death into life ... no love, abides in death
3:15 hates his brother, a murderer ... murderer, no eternal life
3:17 brother in need, close heart

Chapter Four

- 4:1 false prophets gone out into world
4:3 spirit does not confess Jesus from God, antichrist ... already in world
4:4 he who is in the world
4:5 from the world ... speak as from world ... world listens
4:6 spirit of error
4:8 no love, does not know God
4:10 propitiation for our sins
4:18 fear ... loves casts out fear ... fear involves punishment ... fear, not perfected in love
4:20 hate brother ... liar ... don't love brother, can't love God

Chapter Five

- 5:4 overcomes the world ... overcome the world
5:5 overcomes the world
5:10 don't believe God, make Him a liar
5:12 don't have Son, don't have life
5:16 committing a sin not unto death ... sin not unto death ... sin unto death
5:17 unrighteousness is sin ... sin not unto death
5:18 no one born of God sins ... evil one does not touch him
5:19 whole world lies in the evil one
5:20 guard yourself from idols

REFERENCES TO GRACE

Unlike Paul's writings which always begin and end with references to the "grace" of God in Jesus Christ, the first epistle of John has no direct or explicit references to "grace" within the letter. The reader must be careful not to draw a false conclusion that John did not clearly understand the gospel of grace as Paul did.

Grace is God in action in accord with His character as expressed in His Son, Jesus Christ. As John explained in his gospel record, "grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). Grace is God doing what He does because He is who He is, and that through the expressive agency of His Son. The grace activity of God is evident throughout the first epistle of John, both in historical references as well as continuing expressions, and in both objective and subjective expressions.

The importance of understanding how this epistle is thoroughly permeated with an understanding of God's grace will become particularly evident when we proceed to the next category of "human responsibility." Many have read the first epistle of John as if it were a legalistic document advocating the performance of "works," because they failed to see John's underlying and implicit understanding of grace. We want to avoid such a misreading, so we note some of the references to God activity of grace, as follows:

Chapter One

- 1:1 from beginning, Word of life
- 1:2 life was manifested ... eternal life ... manifested to us
- 1:3 fellowship with us ... fellowship with Father, and with Jesus Christ
- 1:4 joy may be made complete
- 1:5 God is light
- 1:7 walk in the light ... fellowship with one another ... blood of Christ cleanses from sin
- 1:9 He is faithful and just to forgives our sins ... cleanse us from all unrighteousness

Chapter Two

- 2:1 we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ
- 2:2 He is the propitiation for our sins ... for those of whole world
- 2:3 come to know Him
- 2:5 love of God has been perfected
- 2:8 true light is shining
- 2:10 abides in the light
- 2:12 sins are forgiven
- 2:13 know Him ... overcome the evil one ... know the Father
- 2:14 know Him who has been from beginning ... you are strong ... Word of God abides in you ... overcome the evil one
- 2:17 does the will of God
- 2:20 you have an anointing from the Holy One ... you know
- 2:21 know the truth ... you know it
- 2:23 confesses Son ... has Father
- 2:25 promise of eternal life

2:27 anointing abides in you ... teaches you ... you abide in Him
2:29 born of God

Chapter Three

3:1 love of Father bestowed on us ... called children of God
3:2 we are children of God ... we shall be like Him ... see Him as He is
3:5 He appeared to take away sins
3:7 practice righteous is righteous
3:8 Son appeared to destroy works of devil
3:9 born of God ... His seed abides in him ... born of God
3:10 children of God
3:14 we have passed out of death into life
3:16 He laid down His life for us
3:19 we are of the truth ... hearts assured
3:20 God greater than our hearts ... knows all things
3:24 He abides in us ... Spirit given to us

Chapter Four

4:4 You are from God ... greater is He who is in you
4:6 we are from God
4:7 born of God ... knows God
4:9 love of God was manifested in us ... God sent His only Son into the world ... we might live through Him
4:10 He loved us ... sent His Son to be propitiation for our sins
4:11 God so loved us
4:12 God abides in us ... His love is perfected in us
4:13 we abide in Him ... He in us ... He has given us of His Spirit
4:14 Father sent the Son to be Savior of the world
4:15 God abides in him ... we in Him
4:16 know the love God has for us ... abide in God ... God in us
4:17 love is perfected with us ... as He is, so are we in this world
4:18 perfect love casts out fear
4:19 He first loved us

Chapter Five

5:1 born of God
5:4 whatever is born of God overcomes the world ... victory that has overcome the world
5:7 Spirit bears witness
5:9 witness of God
5:10 the witness in himself
5:11 God has given us eternal life ... this life is in His Son
5:12 He who has the Son has life
5:13 you have eternal life
5:14 He hears us
5:16 God will give him life
5:18 born of God ... evil one does not touch him
5:19 we are of God
5:20 Son of God has come ... given us understanding ... we are in Him who is true ... in Jesus Christ

HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

There are numerous imperatives within the first epistle of John inculcating human responsibility and action. In addition there are other statements implying human action and Christian consistency in expressing and representing the character of Christ. Several of these contain the condition or contingency of an “if...then” phrase, which may or may not be interpreted as a linear cause and effect.

Apart from the underlying understanding of the grace of God (as noted in the previous section), these statements of human responsibility can easily be misunderstood in a legalistic, moralistic or fundamentalistic framework (as has often been evident in the commentaries on this epistle). Only when we recognize John’s polarity of good and evil as derived from God or Satan respectively, alongside of his presuppositional understanding of God’s grace, can we conclude that John is not advocating epistemological knowledge or ethical conformity, but bases his calls to human action on the fact that God is the dynamic of His own demands. God does not ask us to do anything as Christians, but that He provides the full empowering to do so by the indwelling presence of the Spirit of Christ. The human responsibility within Christian behavior is the dependent receptivity of faith allowing for the derivative expression of Christ’s character and activity through our behavior. When we understand this premise of grace expressed through faith, the first epistle of John becomes an exciting venture for understanding Christian behavior.

Note some of the references to human responsibility, bearing in mind that they can only be implemented in the dynamic of God’s grace:

Chapter One

- 1:2 seen, bear witness and proclaim eternal life
- 1:3 seen, heard, proclaim
- 1:7 walk in the light
- 1:9 confess our sins

Chapter Two

- 2:1 do not sin
- 2:3,4 keep His commandments
- 2:5 keep His word
- 2:6 abide in Him ... walk as He walked
- 2:10 love the brethren
- 2:13 know Him ... overcome Evil One ... know the Father
- 2:14 know Him ... are strong ... overcome the Evil One
- 2:15 do not love world or things in world
- 2:17 do the will of God
- 2:24 let God abide in you
- 2:27 abide in Him
- 2:28 abide in Him
- 2:29 practice righteousness

Chapter Three

- 3:3 purify oneself
- 3:6 does not sin
- 3:7 let no one deceive you ... practice righteousness
- 3:9 does not practice sin
- 3:11 love one another
- 3:14 love the brethren
- 3:16 lay down lives for brethren
- 3:17 open hearts to those in need
- 3:18 love in deed and truth
- 3:22 ask
- 3:23 believe in name of Jesus Christ ... love one another

Chapter Four

- 4:1 test the spirits
- 4:7 love one another
- 4:11 love one another
- 4:12 love one another
- 4:18 no fear
- 4:20 love brother
- 4:21 love brother

Chapter Five

- 5:1 believe that Jesus is Christ ... love the Father, love One born of Him
- 5:2 love children of God ... keep His commandments
- 5:3 keep His commandments
- 5:4 faith
- 5:4,5 overcome the world
- 5:10 believe in the Son of God
- 5:13,14,15 believe in the name of the Son of God
- 5:14 ask according to His will
- 5:18 do not sin ... keeps himself and evil one does not touch him
- 5:20 know the Son of God has come
- 5:21 guard yourselves from idols

(These lists were compiled as a collective effort by the participants of the Neighborhood Church of Fallbrook, California.)