



CAPITOL COMMISSION

TO: LEGISLATORS
FROM: BOB LEWIS
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Pennsylvania Radical Antagonisms

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**“The theme of the Epistle is “the Christ is Jesus”;
the theme of the Gospel is “Jesus is the Christ”.ⁱ**

We begin a series of studies in the Apostle John’s little missiveⁱⁱ, 1 John. I use the word missive in that by technical definition the writing is not that of the letter or epistolary style of the time in which it was penned.

I titled this first study Radical Antagonisms because that is precisely the focus of John’s address. In one sense, this is not significantly different from the tensions we all face as we journey through life; issues such as right vs wrong, fair vs unfair, just vs unjust, true vs false.

In John’s case, the concern is for the life of this particular community of believers experiencing a difficult testing. This testing would bear heavily on the testimony or reputation of The Faith within the larger community among whom the recipients lived.

Therefore, John’s missive has bearing for us in our particular generation in that Truth is timeless, though its applications may vary. What had the potential for undoing the life and vitality of that body of believers has a similar potential for us. We know there is no new thing under the sunⁱⁱⁱ

Radical Antagonisms abound in our own day.

The word “radical”^{iv} is apt in that fundamentally, anything of lasting value must be built on Truth and the most effective way to undermine something is to assault the root/foundation.

INTRODUCTION

In order to better understand the writing, we need to imagine ourselves back in that day (this is the hermeneutical principle of “audience relevance”). Whenever it was written, it is apparent the “novelty” of the faith had worn off. At the beginning of The Faith there was the excitement of the miraculous and the rapid growth of the movement. Following the conversion of Saul, the intense and murderous persecution from Jerusalem appears to have almost disappeared.

Instead, and in fulfillment of the words of Jesus and Paul, the problems are of an **internal** nature. (**Matt. 24:11** *and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people* and **Acts 20:29, 30** *know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the*

flock. ³⁰Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them).

They are beset by **seductive** influences catering to what Paul calls in **Eph. 2:3** *our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts.*

In this mileu and with the passing of time, the ethical demands of this kingdom seem to be wearing thin. Jesus warned of this in Matt. 24:12 *Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold*, the word for wickedness here –*anomia*- is the same word John uses in this missive. From this word we derive the word “antinomianism”...against law.

DATE OF MISSIVE.

Scholars are divided as to the dating of the writing. Nothing explicit in the body of the writing provides us with any clues. There are no geographical clues, no current event clues, nor significant personage clues. Some suggest a dating as late as mid second century on one extreme because there is no mention of Domitian’s persecution. Others suggest 68 AD as a likely earliest dating. Some argue from John’s expressions “little children” and “my little children” that John is in an advanced age. Others argue that the absence of any reference to the destruction of Jerusalem suggest a dating prior to 70 AD. The only possible time notation in the writing itself is in 2:18 *Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour.*

My bias lies in the earliest dating in that I am persuaded the entire New Testament corpus had been written prior to the destruction of the Temple.

AUTHOR.

This is one of the few anonymous writings in the New Testament. Early church history and tradition attest to authorship by John the Apostle. Many of the church Fathers along with the early church historian, Eusebius,^v attest to John the apostle’s authorship. Internal evidence in comparison with themes and words in John’s gospel strongly suggest John also penned this missive. For those interested, Adam Clarke^{vi} in his commentary on the New Testament and Albert Barnes’ Notes on the New Testament^{vii} each list over a dozen comparisons between the Gospel and the missive. A more practical method may be to ask yourself if, while reading, you are drawn to think of Matthew, Mark, or any of the other inspired writers in the New Testament. In any event, the author professes to

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be an eye witness and speaks as one who has apostolic authority on the order of Paul's comment in his first letter to Corinth:

If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command.^{viii}

PLACE OF WRITING/RECIPIENTS.

There is no internal evidence as to either the place of writing or the intended recipients. It appears the recipients are well known to the author and tradition has suggested the location of the recipients is Ephesus where tradition also suggests John served as pastor at one time and where he subsequently died.

PURPOSE.

Significant theological error has manifested itself in the life of the believing community resulting in a secession and/or schism. The error is of a magnitude sufficient enough to evoke a strong polemic on the part of the author. The tone of this author is not one of "can't we all just get along?" While on the one hand, the author is brutally polemic in his approach, he is also pastorally gentle. **(Might this not suggest the possibility of a similar approach on our part as believers?).** He knows the recipients and understands the impact of the error within the context of the life of the community. He recognizes that life together^x is under serious threat and he exercises the admonition of Ecclesiastes 8:11^x.

Theological concerns:

Messianic Status (see intro. Citation)

Incarnation (see intro. Citation)

The seeds of a developing heresy are beginning to sprout among the recipients of John's writing, will blossom over the ensuing centuries, and are among us even today, though their outward cosmetic is current versus anachronistic.

As with every theological/philosophical concept or teaching there is always an outward manifestation in life, i.e. an ethical manifestation.

Ethical concerns:

Lovelessness

Lawlessness

THEME.

Fellowship with God the Father, God the Son, and one another.

CANONICITY.

Listed among the writings in the Muratorian fragment dated approximately 170 AD.

BROAD FOCUS.

Summed up in three words: Light; Life; Love

THE RADICAL ANTAGONISMS

Truth/Error

Light/Darkness

Christ/anti-christ

Love/hate

Holy Spirit/spirit of error

CERTAINTIES

Objective: the Christian message is true.

Subjective: Those who believe this message possess eternal life

ⁱ B.F. Westcott, The Epistles of St. John (Eerdmans, 1966), xlv

ⁱⁱ -noun

1. a written message; letter.

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/missive>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ecclesiastes 1:9c

^{iv} going to the root or origin: fundamental

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/radical>

^v Eusebius', Ecclesiastical History (Baker, 1971) book 3, chapter 25, p 110

^{vi} Adam Clarke, Commentary (Abingdon,) p899/900

^{vii} Albert Barnes, Barnes' Note on the New Testament, (Kregel 1962) p1463

^{viii} 1 Corinthians 14:37

^{ix} Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together, (HarperOne, 1978)

^x ESV Ecclesiastes 8:11 Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil..