

I JOHN IN THE LIGHT OF THE DEBATE ON  
ORTHODOXY AND HERESY IN EARLIEST CHRISTIANITY

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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KRISTA GREGORY









I John in the light of the Debate on Orthodoxy and Heresy in  
Earliest Christianity ,

by

Krista Gregory

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## Abstract

This thesis examines I John in the light of the debate on orthodoxy and heresy in early Christianity. I argue that the theory of H.E.W. Turner, with its fixed and flexible elements, is the most accurate explanation of the example of early Christianity that we see in I John. In my attempt to prove the validity of Turner's thesis I look at the classical view and Walter Bauer's theory of the development of early Christianity, examining the inaccuracies contained in both of these views when compared to Turner's theory. A study of the Johannine community of I John and the polemic contained within provides a valuable opportunity to look into an early Christian group. The debate that takes place in I John mirrors the growth of the faith at this early period. An application of Turner's thesis to I John will further demonstrate the value of Turner's theory in helping readers to a greater understanding of the complexity of early Christianity.

### **Acknowledgements**

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Finally I would like to thank Memorial University School of Graduate Studies for their much appreciated financial assistance.

## Abbreviations

|        |                           |
|--------|---------------------------|
| I John | The First Epistle of John |
| ExT    | Expository Times          |
| NovT   | Novum Testamentum         |

## Introduction

This thesis will argue that I John serves as a useful paradigm for the discussion of the orthodoxy/heresy debate. In I John we see that conflict exists in this early Christian community. This shows readers that at its beginning Christianity was not as well defined as we have often been led to believe. However it also demonstrates to readers that the early faith had a basic, yet distinct, understanding of what it meant to be Christian. This letter provides an example of an early Christian group in the earliest stages of development. It therefore provides a useful paradigm by which to test various theories on early Christian development, especially the so-called "classical view" and those of Walter Bauer and H.E.W. Turner. Such a study will in turn demonstrate that Turner's thesis, with its concept of fixed and flexible elements within the early Church, fits the data which we find in I John much better than either the classical view or that of Walter Bauer.

In this study my methodology is both dialectical and historical, for both aspects are important to the understanding of the text. On the one hand, the purpose of using dialectic methodology "is to invite the reader to an encounter, a personal encounter, with the originating and traditional and interpreting and history - writing persons of



the past in their divergencies."<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, historical methodology's aim is "to settle, not what one author was intending, but what was going forward in a group or community."<sup>2</sup>

I am undertaking a detailed examination of the argument of I John with a view to seeing how it illustrates the orthodoxy/heresy debate. But I am also using the illustration of the debate on orthodoxy and heresy in earliest Christianity as the context in which to understand a fruitful discussion of I John. By creating such a "hermeneutical circle" between the text of I John and the broader context of the orthodoxy/heresy debate I hope, as Lonergan puts it, to "spiral" into the deeper meaning of the text. Through this methodology I intend to follow a "process of learning that spirals into the meaning of the whole by using each new part to fill out and qualify and correct the understanding reached in reading the earlier parts."<sup>3</sup> Lonergan's reference to "earlier parts" expresses the changing interpretations that evolve as the reader spends more time studying the text. A fuller meaning is reached as the various parts of the letter are understood individually and

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Method In Theology* (London: University of Toronto Press, 1971), p.168.

<sup>2</sup> Lonergan, *Method*, p. 168.

<sup>3</sup> Lonergan, *Method*, p. 159.

brought together in comprehending the whole.

With regard to the scope of my thesis, it is also important to note that in this study of I John it is necessary to realize the limits to the understanding that may be reached. It is difficult today to look back into history and accurately judge what the author of I John meant to communicate to his readers. Consideration must be made of his audience, opponents and the period in which he wrote. At best one can merely try to understand, for

to judge the correctness of one's understanding of a text raises the problem of context, of the hermeneutical circle, of the relativity of the totality of relevant data, of the possible relevance of more remote inquiries, of the limitations of the scope of one's interpretation.<sup>4</sup>

Though faced with these limitations, I feel that through a study of the evidence we are presented with in the Epistle and through an application of Turner's thesis, we can come to a greater understanding of the growth of early Christianity.

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<sup>4</sup> Lonergan, *Method*, p. 155.

## Chapter One

### The Orthodoxy/Heresy Debate

#### A. The Classical View of Early Christian Development

The "classical view" of early Christian development sees the early Church as being purely orthodox, with no false teaching or beliefs. Heresy was not present within the early Church, but was a later development as Christianity became exposed to false outside beliefs.

This classical theory has a "uniform view of the nature and rise of heresy which evolved in the early centuries."<sup>1</sup> It is characterized by H. E. W. Turner as the belief that the Church "originally kept unsullied and undefiled the teaching of our Lord and the tradition of the Apostles..."<sup>2</sup> St. Irenaeus, one of the chief proponents of the classical view, assumes "that heresy only took its rise when the church was in mid-course, subsequent not only to the Apostles, but also to those whom they had committed the churches."<sup>3</sup> The classical view sees heresy as an offshoot from orthodoxy. The root of

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<sup>1</sup> H. E. W. Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth* (London: A.R. Mowbray and Co., 1954), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 4.

heresy is in the personal choices that individuals make in matters to which such choices should not apply. Irenaeus presents this understanding of the development of early Christianity in his writing. He says,

The Lord of all gave to His Apostles the power to preach the Gospel. It is through them that we have come to know the truth, that is, the doctrine of the Son of God... First of all, they preached the Gospel; then, by the will of God, they transmitted it to us in the Scriptures to be the foundational pillar of our faith... After our Lord had risen from the dead, and after the Holy Spirit had come upon them, investing them with power from on high (cf. LK 24:49), they were filled with all His gifts and possessed perfect knowledge (gnosis). They went to the ends of the earth, proclaiming the good news of the good things which come from God, and announcing heavenly peace to men. All of them together and each of them on his own possessed the Gospel of God... They have all passed on to us this teaching: that there is one God, the creator of heaven and earth, who was announced by the Law and the prophets, and one Christ, the Son of God. Anyone who refuses to assent to these truths shows contempt for the 'partakers of the Lord' (cf. Heb 3:14), indeed for the Lord Himself and for the Father; such a person condemns himself, because he resists and opposes his salvation -- that is what all the heretics do.<sup>4</sup>

Irenaeus, sees himself as defending the mainstream of Christian faith against its enemies. According to Irenaeus there is only one standard of correct interpretation, which is the rule of faith that was preserved in churches in the apostolic succession. "Irenaeus is really the father of

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<sup>4</sup> Irenaeus, *The Scandal of The Incarnation: Irenaeus Against The Heresies*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), p. 78.

authoritative exegesis in the church. In his opinion truth is to be found only within the church."<sup>5</sup> Irenaeus says that:

we do not need to seek the truth elsewhere; it is easy to obtain it from the Church. In the most thorough way, the apostles have amassed in the Church, as in a treasure chest, all that pertains to the truth, so that everyone who so desires may drink the water of life (cf. Apoc 22:17) ... We must, therefore, reflect them, but love with the greatest zeal everything to do with the Church and lay hold of the tradition of truth.<sup>6</sup>

Eusebius, an early Church historian, recorded the development of early Christianity in his **Ecclesiastical History**. In viewing the Christianity of the Apostolic age Eusebius says,

the Church had remained a virgin, pure and uncorrupted, since those who were trying to corrupt the wholesome standard of the saving message, if such there were, lurked somewhere under cover of darkness. But when the sacred band of the apostles had in various ways reached the end of their life, and the generation of those privileged to listen with their own ears to the divine wisdom had passed on, then godless error began to take shape, through the deceit of false teachers, who now that none of the apostles was left threw off the mask and attempted to counter the knowledge falsely so called.<sup>7</sup>

Eusebius, like Irenaeus, upholds the Classical view in his

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<sup>5</sup> Robert M. Grant, **A Short History of the Interpretation of The Bible** (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 50.

<sup>6</sup> Irenaeus, **Scandal of The Incarnation**, p. 81.

<sup>7</sup> Eusebius, **The History of The Church From Christ to Constantine**, trans. G.A. Williamson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1965), p. 143.

account of the development of early Christianity and the later rise of heresy.

According to the Classical view, as the heretics began their work within the Church those who maintained the true Christian faith were left responsible for the pure teachings of the Church. Eusebius reports Bishop Theophilus' account of the heretics' actions in Antioch. Eusebius provides a view of the Church in the process of defending itself from the attacks of non believers, saying:

At that time heretics were as busy as ever spoiling like tares the pure seed of the apostolic teaching; so the pastors of the churches everywhere, as though driving away savage beasts from Christ's sheep, strove to keep them at bay, now by warnings and admonitions to their congregations, now by more militant action, by subjecting the heretics to oral direct questioning and confutation, and finally by written polemics in which they employed the most unanswerable proofs to demolish their erroneous ideas.<sup>8</sup>

Eusebius presents orthodoxy as the dominant belief that existed before heresy, a belief strong enough to oppose the heretics. Eusebius wished to show that the general rejection of false belief could be found in the very earliest Christian literature.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Eusebius, *History of The Church*, pp. 185-186.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), p. 150. Translated from the German *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im Ältesten Christentum* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1934).

Eusebius' writing shows readers the true faith of the Church dominating over all heresies. He says,

Truth asserted herself, and with the march of time shone with increasing light. For by her activity the machinations of her foes were promptly shown up and extinguished, though one after another new heresies were invented, the earlier ones constantly passing away and disappearing, in different ways at different times, into forms of every shape and character. But the splendour of the Catholic and only true Church, always remaining the same and unchanged, grew steadily in greatness and strength, shedding on every race... Thus the passage of time extinguished the calumnies against the whole of our doctrine, and our teaching remained alone, everywhere victorious and acknowledged as supreme in dignity and sobriety, in divine and philosophic doctrines so that no one today could dare to subject our Faith to vile abuse or to any such misrepresentation as in the past those who conspired against us were in the habit of using.<sup>10</sup>

As a true man of the Church, Eusebius holds up the classical view as the correct interpretation of Christian development even when writing a history of early Christianity.

Tertullian, another early Church Father, sees the root of heresy in the personal choices made by individuals where personal choice should not be applied. "The personal systems of the heresiarchs are contrasted with the teaching of the Apostles who had 'no faith of their own' and did not choose what they believed."<sup>11</sup> The Church placed itself in a position

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<sup>10</sup> Eusebius, *History of the Church*, p. 160.

<sup>11</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 6.

of authority; through the "classical view" it placed blame for the existence of false belief with those who disobeyed the Church, and thus disobeyed God. Another account for heresy within early Christianity is that it arose from the mixture of orthodoxy with pagan philosophy. Tertullian says:

I have often wished that the clarification of approved doctrines did not, in a sense, demand the existence of heresies. For we thus would have no need of arguments about the soul with the philosophers, those patriarchs of the heretics. Even in the time of the Apostles, St. Paul foresaw there would be trouble between philosophy and the truth.<sup>12</sup>

The views of the philosophers were seen as a threat to the Church and its authority; therefore their views were linked to those of the heretics or those who held false beliefs. The motives of such heretics were presented by early Church fathers who felt that many heretics were "inspired by a spirit of faction, or a restless quest for novelty."<sup>13</sup> Unlike those who wrote the Scripture they were not inspired by divine revelation.

The Church claimed support for the "classical view" through the Scripture's prophecy of heresy.<sup>14</sup> Early Church

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<sup>12</sup> Tertullian, "Apologetical Works: On the Soul," in **The Fathers of The Church**, trans. Rudolph Arbesmann (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1950), p. 185.

<sup>13</sup> Turner, **Pattern**, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Turner, **Pattern**, p. 5.



Fathers like Tertullian felt that the Scripture from God was paradoxically the cause of the rise of heresy. Tertullian said that heresies cannot exist without Scriptures. The Scriptures "were so disposed by the will of God as to supply matter for heretics."<sup>15</sup> The existence of heresy in turn was support for the truth of Scripture. The major support of the "classical view" was the authority and position of the Catholic Church. Evidence for the dominance of orthodoxy was the belief that "Heresy is restricted to relatively few places, whereas the Catholic Church, as the name implies, is world wide."<sup>16</sup>

In summary the "classical view" held by the early Church concerning the heretics and their doctrine holds four main points, or steps in the process of spreading the faith. To begin, the pure doctrine of Christianity was revealed to the apostles by Jesus, partly before his death and partly during the forty days before his ascension. Secondly, after Jesus' final departure each of the apostles took the pure word of the gospel to a different part of the world. The third step occurred after the death of the apostles; the gospel continued to spread; however, it met with obstacles. The devil began to blind the pure Christians and caused them to leave the faith.

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<sup>15</sup> Tertullian, "Apologetic and Practical Treaties," in *Library of Fathers*, trans. Rev C. Dodgson (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1842), p. 474.

<sup>16</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 6.

"This development takes place in the following sequence: unbelief, right belief, wrong belief... where there is heresy, orthodoxy must have preceded." <sup>17</sup> The fourth and final point, the one that spells out the underlying belief of the Church, is that the truth dominates, and right belief is invincible. Though the devil tries, he cannot stop the pure Christian belief as it continues to spread.

#### B. The Theory of Walter Bauer

In contrast to the classical theory there is the view of Walter Bauer concerning orthodoxy and heresy. In his book *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* Bauer "has called into question in a fundamental way the traditional understanding of the development of Church history and the historical foundation of ecclesiastical -- orthodox self-understanding..."<sup>18</sup> Bauer challenges the assumption inherent in the classical view that orthodoxy preceded heresy in the period of early Church development.

Bauer sees the beginning of formal orthodoxy within groups that were separate, possibly minority groups that slowly reached a dominant influence in Christianity. "The

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<sup>17</sup> Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, p. xxiii.

<sup>18</sup> Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, p. xi.

development from little groups of the faithful to the free pattern of Catholic orthodoxy was not the work of a movement and might proceed at different rates in the life of individual churches."<sup>19</sup> Bauer feels that in earliest Christianity, orthodoxy and heresy do not stand in relation to one another as primary to secondary, but in many regions heresy is the original manifestation of Christianity.<sup>20</sup> Bauer's theory represents the possibility that aspects of early Christian life that the church renounces as heresies:

originally had not been such at all, but at least here and there were the only form of new religion - that is, for those regions they were simply Christianity. The possibility also exists that their adherents constituted the majority, and that they looked down with hatred and scorn on the orthodox who for them were the false believers.<sup>21</sup>

Walter Bauer's thesis may be viewed as a threat to traditional ways of thinking and to the Church. Bauer insisted on a "scientific" approach to history. He contrasted the proponents of the "classical view", such as Irenaeus, who showed an obvious dislike for natural science, for through such methods Irenaeus feels that true answers may not be found. As Grant explains, in natural Science

many things escape our knowledge, and we entrust

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<sup>19</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 40.

<sup>20</sup> Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, p. xi.

<sup>21</sup> Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, p. xxii.

them to God; for he must excel over all. What if we try to set forth the cause of the rising Nile? We say many things, some perhaps persuasive, others perhaps not persuasive: what is true and certain and sure lies with God.<sup>22</sup>

The classical view sought only divine explanation.

Bauer's commitment to keeping a scientific approach leads him, he believes, to being open to both sides of the debate concerning the nature of early Christianity. He feels that we must take all sides into consideration before we make a judgement. Bauer realizes that we cannot blindly follow the words of the early Church fathers who held an anti-heretical view, for they are just one side of the debate, one party. He says:

if we follow such a procedure, and simply agree with the judgement of the anti-heretical fathers for the post-New Testament period, do we not all too quickly become dependent upon the vote of but one party -- that party which perhaps as much through favourable circumstances as by its own merit eventually was thrust into the foreground, and which possibly had at its disposal today the more powerful, and thus the more prevalent voice, only because the chorus of others has been muted? Must not the historian, like the judge, preside over the parties and maintain as a primary principle the *dictum audiatur et altera pars* [let the other side also be heard]?<sup>23</sup>

The object of Bauer's study is the approximately one hundred years following the apostolic age. Bauer sees Eusebius

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<sup>22</sup> Grant, *Interpretation of The Bible*, p. 50.

<sup>23</sup> Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, p. xxi. Bauer makes a good point here that can be transferred to our study of I John.

as an unreliable source for the recounting of early Christianity. He interprets Eusebius' work as that of a fourth century churchman who sees the individual community churches as:

folds in which the shepherd guards and protects the sheep. The heretics roam about outside like wolves, intent on gaining prey. But the carefully planned measures taken by the 'shepherds' have made it very difficult for the heretics. Nevertheless, according to everything we have ascertained, the situation in the second century simply was not that way. It was by no means the rule at that time that heretics were located "outside." It is, however, completely credible that already at that time the leaders of the orthodox were using the tactics mentioned by Eusebius, so as to safeguard their own people against contagion. But we must quickly add that the party opposing the orthodox worked in the same way and with corresponding goals. ...Already in the second century we hear of direct discussions between the representatives of ecclesiastical Christianity and their opponents, and can easily find the bridge to an even earlier period.<sup>24</sup>

He concludes that the classical view, as represented by Eusebius and others, simply does not stand up to the scrutiny of history. Contrary to what Eusebius would have us believe, Bauer points out that orthodoxy prevailed only "very gradually with great difficulty."<sup>25</sup>

In Bauer's view, that which triumphs as "orthodox" is the Christianity of Rome. Roman Christianity dominated for several reasons, the most important being the affluence of the Roman

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<sup>24</sup> Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, p. 131.

<sup>25</sup> Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, p. 43.

Church. He says:

If we ask to what degree donations of money should be of importance in the welfare of the spirits, our imagination would have no difficulty in suggesting all kinds of ways... The encomium of Eusebius teaches us that Rome viewed it as an altogether legitimate practice in religious controversies to tip the scales with golden weights.<sup>26</sup>

The Roman Church along with its financial wealth also held "a shrewdness, energy and communal unity."<sup>27</sup> These characteristics of leadership further allowed the Church to exert its power. By the end of the second century the Roman Church was well organized and strictly governed by the monarchical bishop, it was ready to extend out into the world and further establish itself.

Bauer focuses on Eusebius' concern with establishing a body of ecclesiastical literature that is

as old as possible and as extensive as possible, but also treasured as much as possible in the present, and just as widely dispersed. [Eusebius] wants to show that the general rejection of false belief can also be found from earliest times in Christian literature.<sup>28</sup>

Bauer feels that Eusebius is unsuccessful in his attempts at presenting an abundance of orthodox literature in the first

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<sup>26</sup> Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, pp. 122-123.

<sup>27</sup> Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, p. 123.

<sup>28</sup> Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, p. 150.

centuries.

According to Bauer, the views of the opponents were distorted. When the orthodox party gained control, they suppressed as much of the heretical literature as possible. Therefore the canonical writing must be scrutinized, for they are the end result of the struggle between orthodoxy and heresy, and are chosen by the orthodox. It provided limited value in opposing the heretics because of the possibility of differing interpretations even among the orthodox. For example the Gospel of John began its course as a heretical Gospel. With this in mind I John may have been an attempt by the Church to include John as part of the opposition against the heretics, making John more ecclesiastically viable.

Bauer best sums up his position concerning the establishment of early Christianity:

The form of Christian belief and life which was successful was that supported by the strongest organization -- that form which was the most uniform and best suited for mass consumption -- in spite of the fact that, in my judgement, for a long time after the close of the post-apostolic age the sum total of consciously orthodox and anti-heretical Christians was numerically inferior to that of the 'heretics'.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore:

[It] appears no less self-evident that the Roman

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<sup>29</sup> Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, p. 231.

government finally came to recognize that the Christianity ecclesiastically organized from Rome was flesh of its flesh, came to unity with it, and thereby actually enabled it to achieve ultimate victory over unbelievers and heretics."<sup>30</sup>

Throughout his study of early Christianity Bauer gives the impression of strict, well defined positions that were in opposition to one another. But he is forced to admit that in at least one instance this does not seem to be the case:

The religious discussion which brought about the split in Rome between Marcion and orthodoxy was of a special sort. At least at the outset, it was not thought of as a struggle for the souls of Roman Christians fought from already established positions, but as an effort to ascertain what the true meaning and content of the Christian religion really is, and to that extent it was somewhat comparable to the apostolic council (Acts 15).<sup>31</sup>

Bauer, through his study, has given renewed force to viewing Christian origins from the standpoint of diversity.

### C. The Theory of H.E.W. Turner

H. E. W. Turner in his book **The Pattern of Christian Truth: A Study in the Relations between Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Early Church** responds to the "classical view" and the thesis of Walter Bauer. Turner strongly disagrees with both

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<sup>30</sup> Bauer, **Orthodoxy and Heresy**, p.232.

<sup>31</sup> Bauer, **Orthodoxy and Heresy**, p. 132.



theories of early Christian development. The classical view in Turner's opinion is wrong in its "assumption that orthodoxy represents a fixed and unyielding deposit of faith. A modern investigator finds it difficult to accept the static conception of orthodoxy which the classical view presupposes."<sup>32</sup> Such a view, according to Turner, ignores the existence of factors that are peculiar to heresy and does not present a full picture of orthodoxy in the early centuries of Christianity. It seems more likely that during "the formative periods of the Christian Church orthodoxy resembles a symphony composed of varied elements rather than a single melodic theme."<sup>33</sup>

Turner does not think that Bauer's understanding of the development of Christianity is accurate either. He objects to Bauer's view because he feels that the evidence is not strong enough to support a theory as clear cut as the one he presents. Moreover Bauer's "scepticism on many points of detail appears excessive, and his tendency to postpone the development of recognizably orthodox life far from conclusive."<sup>34</sup>

Turner suggests that Bauer is more concerned with "the

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<sup>32</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 8.

<sup>33</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 45.

historical relations between those who considered themselves to be orthodox and those whom they condemned as heretical." Bauer would have done better to be more concerned with the nature of heresy or orthodoxy. "For the nature of orthodoxy is richer and more varied than Bauer himself allows."<sup>35</sup> Turner's critique of Bauer is captured in the following excerpt:

his fatal weakness appears to be a persistent tendency to over-simplify problems, combined with the ruthless treatment of such evidence as fails to support his case. It is very doubtful whether all sources of trouble in the early Church can be reduced to a set of variations on a single theme. Nor is it likely that orthodoxy itself evolved in a uniform pattern, though at different speeds in the main centres of the universal Church. The formula 'splinter movement, external inspiration or assistance, domination gratitude to those who assisted in its development' represents too neat a generalization to fit the facts. History seldom unfolds itself in so orderly a fashion.<sup>36</sup>

Though Turner does not entirely agree with Bauer's views he does see some value in his theory. Bauer's theory, while extreme, presents a more realistic view of early Christianity than does the classical theory. It provides readers with

many valuable suggestions which deserve further exploration. It is probable that orthodoxy may have been more hard-pressed in certain churches during the early period than it has been customary to admit. Orthodoxy and heresy certainly lay side by

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<sup>35</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 80.

<sup>36</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 79.

side during the period.<sup>37</sup>

Turner views the evolution of orthodoxy taking place at differing rates in different parts of the world. It appeared in different forms at different times, "without loss of continuity of life and unity of theme."<sup>38</sup> Turner goes on to conclude in his study of the development of orthodoxy that "orthodoxy was a richer and more complex phenomenon than either the classical view or its modern rivals was disposed to allow."<sup>39</sup>

While Bauer, a Church historian, devoted his study to the personalities and events involved in the development of Christianity, there are other modern alternatives to the classical theory that concentrate on the history of Christian ideas and the formulation of doctrine and which draw conclusions similar to those of Bauer. Turner's study briefly reviews three such modern views of orthodoxy, those of, A. Harnack, M. Werner, and R. Bultmann. Similarly to Bauer, each of these stresses the diversity and fluidity of early Christian thought, in opposition to the fixed and stable norm of the classical view. These theories seem to suggest that the "orthodoxy" which was eventually victorious was a travesty of

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<sup>37</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 79.

<sup>38</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 80.

<sup>39</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 473.

the original Christian faith.

Adolf Harnack "emphasized the fact that at the outset the Church offered to the world a message of salvation to which the appropriate response was a living act of faith." However as the Catholic Faith unfolded during the early centuries it took on a different appearance from the message of the New Testament.<sup>40</sup> The Pauline saving faith expressed in a new way of life "appears different from assent to a formulated doctrine and the concept of Christianity as the New Law."<sup>41</sup> Harnack says that religion became a doctrine whose content was only in part derived from the Gospel.

Martin Werner's thesis states that with the hope of a near Parousia the Church had no choice but to completely re-establish its life and thought. Werner describes this change "as *Enteschatologisierung* or 'De-eschatologizing.' Later orthodoxy is virtually an *ersatz* production with little or no continuity with the faith of the New Testament."<sup>42</sup>

Rudolf Bultmann finds the beginning of the evolution of the message of Christian faith at an even earlier point than

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<sup>40</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 17. See Adolf Von Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums*. ET: *What is Christianity?*, trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders (New York: Harper, 1957).

<sup>41</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 17. See *Das Wesen*.

<sup>42</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 20. See Martin Werner, *The Formation of Christian Dogma: an Historical Study of its Problems* (New York: Harper, 1957).

we see in the theories of Harnack and Werner. Bultmann sees "fluidity and variety within the thought of the New Testament."<sup>43</sup> Bultmann feels that there are signs of tension within Christianity "between the religion of the Church and the terms in which it was expressed."<sup>44</sup>

These three views of the relation between orthodoxy and heresy share four main points. To begin they contrast the classical view's opinion of a fixed and stable orthodoxy by stressing the diversity and fluidity of early Christian thought. Another common point is their view of "a marked difference between the developed Christianity of the fourth century and the primitive life and thought of the Church." A third point of similarity is their acceptance of "the admixture of the original Hebrew and Christian stock with alien elements" as the root of this "sea-change" experienced by the early Church.<sup>45</sup> The fourth common point is the question of whether this development is "a translation of Christian realities into a Greek setting."<sup>46</sup>

Turner sees such modern views on the orthodoxy/heresy

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<sup>43</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 23. See Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of The New Testament*, vol. 1 (London: SCM Press, 1952), p. 164-183.

<sup>44</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 24. See *Theology*, p. 164.

<sup>45</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 24.

<sup>46</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 25.

debate as too extreme. While the classical notion of a fixed and static doctrinal norm is too simple, the view that sees the resultant victorious faith as a travesty of its former self is too severe. These alternative modern views imply too high a degree of openness or flexibility.

If the classical theory and Bauer's theory are viewed as extremes of one another, then Turner's thought on the development of orthodoxy and heresy appears to be a compromise between these two extremes. Turner interprets Christian development as an "interaction of fixed and flexible elements, both of which are equally necessary for the determination of Christian truth in the setting of a particular age."<sup>47</sup>

Turner used the term *lex orandi* to refer to Christian common sense that gave Christians a "relatively full grasp of what it meant to be Christian." This *lex orandi* "enabled the Church to reject interpretations of her faith and dilutions of her life even before she possessed formal standards of belief."<sup>48</sup> According to Turner, these fixed elements are the religious facts or basic beliefs of Christianity. First and foremost is the belief in God as Father of creation, and Christ as a divine and historical redeemer; second, is the belief in the Creed and Rule of Faith. The Church had a grasp

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<sup>47</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 26.

<sup>48</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 28.

of these religious facts in the early centuries of Christianity long before they created a coherent formula of faith. According to Turner, for example, "Christians lived Trinitarianly long before the evolution of Nicene orthodoxy."<sup>49</sup>

As well as fixed elements, Turner acknowledges that early Christianity contained some flexibility. These flexible elements were differences in "Christian idiom" including varying literary genre, as well as differences in metaphysical and eschatological interpretations of Christianity. Turner, however, maintains that the "Christian deposit of faith is not wedded irrevocably to either idiom but is capable of expression both ontologically and eschatologically."

The selection of a distinctive theological idiom, whether it be eschatology, ontology, or even in more recent times existentialism, illustrates one possible element of flexibility in Christian thinking.<sup>50</sup>

Flexible elements also lie in the individual personalities of the theologians themselves. Such flexible elements did not mean that followers held false beliefs. The flexibility within Christianity allowed for Christians to individualize their beliefs, to make Christianity belong in their lives. It was important, even to the early faith, that Christians be allowed

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<sup>49</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 28.

<sup>50</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 31.

to express themselves through different means without fear of being viewed as non Christian heretics.

Turner's theory also suggests a **penumbra** or a **fringe** between orthodoxy and heresy. This **penumbra** was a sort of grey area, a shadowing, between what is orthodox and what is heretical. Turner feels that this fringe between orthodoxy and heresy helps to explain more adequately many of the varying ideas between Christian groups and in turn the situation that Bauer describes, for the line of division between the two was not nearly as sharp as Bauer attests. In early times there was not always distinct groups claiming to be heretical or orthodox. Groups could not always stand in direct opposition to one another, for it was not always clear which beliefs were correct and which were false.

H.E.W. Turner's view of the development of the early Church and his thoughts concerning other theories of this development, such as those held by the classical view and Walter Bauer, is best summed up through his own words. Turner feels that:

orthodoxy resembles not so much a stream as a sea, not a single melodic theme but a rich and varied harmony, not a single closed system but a rich manifold of thought and life. And that is, after all, what we should expect, for it is essentially the human expression from age to age of the truth of the One God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit Who in co-equal glory and co-eternal majesty liveth and



reigneth unto ages of ages. <sup>51</sup>

Turner recognizes the need to take into consideration the complexity of the development of Christianity and the relationship and growth of both orthodoxy and heresy within the faith. It is upon this point that Turner bases his theory and it is this complexity that becomes evident in the next chapter as we study the early Church through the example provided by I John.

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<sup>51</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 80.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The First Epistle of John

#### A. Conflict Within the Community of I John

The Johannine tradition, as presented in the Gospel of John and the three epistles attributed to John, is for many Christians a window through which to see the life of the Johannine community. In a study of I John we are presented with the existence of a group within the Johannine community in a period approximately five generations away from the presence of Jesus. The author of the Epistle offers to his followers an interpretation of the community's tradition, and for readers today information concerning the conditions within that group. Though the Epistle reveals to us the presence of opposition and secession within the community, our access to this dispute is limited, for in order to get a grasp of the views of these "secessionists" one must see them through the words and arguments of the author. Like the author the opponents claim to love and follow God and his Son, Jesus. However, because of differences in their views concerning the tradition, the Epistle condemns them.

A study of the secessionist's position, against the backdrop of the Johannine tradition, suggests the possibility that many of their opposing claims, condemned in the Epistle,

are logical deductions from a common tradition. A study of the arguments of the author of I John and the opponents brings the understanding that as readers we should be careful not to draw conclusions that are too absolute. Precautions must be taken, for we cannot argue absolutely that the Gospel inevitably led either to the position of the author or to the views of his opponents. Neither can we argue that either of the groups held positions that were total distortions of the tradition. Instead we should realize that the tradition contained in John was received originally by both the opponents and the Epistle writer and was quite unclear on many points that later came into dispute.

Though we must be careful in taking information for granted, without trying to evaluate its worth, there are a number of important assumptions that must be made before starting a study of the conflict contained within the Epistle of I John. Such assumptions will help to clarify our study. It will be assumed that I, II and III John were written by the same author and that they were composed "after the situation envisaged by the evangelist in the Gospel."<sup>1</sup> It also seems necessary to assume that the Epistle's presentation of the views of the Johannine community and the beliefs of the

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of The Beloved Disciple* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1979), p. 97.

opponents is reasonably accurate. Brown recognizes the difficulty of reconstructing the arguments of the secessionists, saying that, "we must view them mirror-wise through the polemic affirmations of the author of the Epistle, as he refutes the claims that 'someone' might make."<sup>2</sup> In such cases when we view individuals through the eyes of those who oppose them problems arise, "for it is exceedingly rare that people think themselves represented fairly or accurately by hostile opponents."<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless we may, as Bogart says:

reasonably trust the author of I John; he is obviously giving us only what he thinks his opponents' claims were asserting, but his impressions, characterizations or paraphrasing are reliable for this reason: There can be no doubt that his opponents' claims were actually upsetting the community, and causing such a disturbance among the faithful that the author felt obliged, as a pastor, to write his congregation(s) and set them straight. We hypothesize that it would be incredible that such a disturbance among the faithful could have come about merely by a misunderstanding of what the opponents were really teaching and asserting. The intensity of the disturbance (measured by the intensity of the author's response!) indicates that the disturbance in the community was caused by no phantom threat, but rather a clear understanding of what the

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<sup>2</sup> Raymond E. Brown, "The relationship to the Fourth Gospel shared by the author of I John and by his opponents," in **Text and Interpretation**, eds. Ernst Best and R. Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 58-59.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond E. Brown, **The Epistles of John** (Garden City: Doubleday Co. Inc., 1982), p. 47.

opponents were actually proclaiming.<sup>4</sup>

In a study of the conflict, evident in I John, we must also assume that the opponents of the author were a united group. As Schnackenburg writes, "even though there may be different groups among the many antichrists (2:18) or false prophets, they are united in their denial of the church's christological confession (2:22; 4:2-3)".<sup>5</sup> As well we must realize that as Brown suggests, "both the adversaries in I John and the author knew the Johannine proclamation of Christianity and professed to accept it."<sup>6</sup>

#### B. The Argument of I John

To begin our study of the Epistle of I John we will take a general look at the letter. The epistle is pervaded by the author's claims that he has the correct interpretation of the Johannine tradition and those he speaks of as "ἀντίχριστοι" or the "ἑκτα τοῦ διαβόλου" have incorrect views on what the tradition is saying.

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<sup>4</sup> John Bogart, *Orthodox and Heretical Perfectionism* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977), pp. 28-29.

<sup>5</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., 1992), p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Brown, "Relationship to The Fourth Gospel," p. 58.

The writer explains why he is writing I John in chapter one verses 1-4. The letter, he informs readers, is meant to tell them of the truth that his select community of believers have seen and heard for themselves. The author establishes his authority by informing his audience of the close relationship that he and the community have had with God the Father and his Son Jesus from the beginning. It is their mission to inform believers of the message they have heard from him, "ὁ θεὸς φῶς ἐστὶν καὶ σκοτία ἐν αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδεμία" (1:5). The author and his followers wish to be in fellowship with readers, this fellowship is communicated through the form of a commandment, a new commandment, the commandment to love the "brethren." If believers love God and follow his commandments, or walk in the light, then they must love the brethren. If they share fellowship with one another then they will benefit from the death of God's son, Jesus. Through the special relationship that the author's community shares with God, if they sin they can be forgiven for their sins through Jesus, for Jesus is their advocate with God and "αὐτὸς ἰλασμός ἐστιν περὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν" (2:2). The author thus sets up the problem within the community from the beginning of the letter. His call for fellowship indicates to readers that the community is having problems in this very area.

The author goes on to argue that believers should not love the world or the things within the world. Those who love

the world do not love God and are not part of the community of believers. In 2:15 "ὁ κόσμος", it appears, is that which is outside the author's group. As we read on it seems that some community members have left and the author feels that their leaving is an indication that they love the world more than they love the community of the author. The former members become referred to as "ἀντίχριστοι". These antichrists, according to the author, "ἐξ ἡμῶν ἐξήλθαν, ἀλλ' οὐκ ἦσαν ἐξ ἡμῶν" (2:19). It appears that they are no longer welcome in the group, for these former members may be returning, perhaps trying to share their interpretation of the Johannine tradition with members of the author's group, for I John says, "ἀντίχριστοι πολλοὶ γεγόνασιν · ὅθεν γινώσκομεν ὅτι ἐσχάτη ὥρα ἐστίν" (2:18). The last hour may refer to the end of their community because of dispute from within. If more members leave the community may break up. The author may fear that these former members are looking for converts, causing more members to leave his community, jeopardizing his authority and the life of the group. The author warns followers not to be swayed or deceived by those who have left, for he says, "Ταῦτα ἔγραψα ὑμῖν περὶ τῶν πλανῶν τῶν ὑμᾶς" (2:26). He feels that this is such a serious matter that it might even be the signal for the beginning of the end of the world, or "ἐσχάτη ὥρα."

In contrast to these "antichrists" the author claims that he and his followers must have the correct interpretation of

the tradition because they have been anointed by the Holy One, and they know the truth, he says, "οὐκ ἔγραψα ὑμῖν ὅτι οὐκ οἶδατε τὴν ἀλήθειαν, ἀλλ' ὅτι οἶδατε αὐτήν, καὶ ὅτι πᾶν ψευδοῦς ἐκ τῆς ἀληθείας οὐκ ἔστιν" (2:21). The antichrists deny "τὸν πατέρα καὶ τὸν υἱόν" (2:22). This shows that are not one with God, and they do not know God and his Son.

The community of I John knows God. They are the children of God, "πᾶς ὁ μὴ ποιῶν δικαιοσύνην οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ ὁ μὴ ἀγαπῶν τὸν ἀδελφόν." Such are "τὰ τέκνα τοῦ διαβόλου." (3:10). In the eyes of the author, the leaving of the secessionists indicates that they do not love the brethren; therefore they choose to move away from God to be children of the devil.

If the community continues to follow God and listen to the author then they will have nothing to fear or to be ashamed of when Jesus comes. As the letter says, "μένετε ἐν αὐτῷ, ἵνα ἐὰν φανερωθῇ σχῶμεν παρρησίαν καὶ μὴ αἰσχυρθῶμεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ αὐτοῦ. ἐὰν εἰδῆτην ὅτι δίκαιός ἐστιν, γινώσκετε ὅτι καὶ πᾶς ὁ ποιῶν τὴν δικαιοσύνην ἐξ αὐτοῦ γεγέννηται" (2:28-29.). Those who have left do not know God, for if they knew God they would have also known the community members and they would have stayed with the author's group. The author writes, "Ἴδετε ποταπὴν ἀγάπην δέδωκεν ἡμῖν ὁ πατήρ ἡνα τέκνα θεοῦ κληθῶμεν, καὶ ἐσμέν. διὰ τοῦτο ὁ κόσμος οὐ γινώσκει ἡμᾶς, ὅτε οὐκ ἔγνω αὐτόν" (3:1). Like Jesus, the



community as children of God is denied and mistreated.

According to the author of I John hating the brethren is like murdering them. He does not want the relationships of community members to be like that of Cain and his brother. However, by leaving the community the secessionists have become evil like Cain, forsaking their righteous brethren of the author's group whom the author sees as representing Cain's murdered brother. According to I John, "ὅτι αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ ἀγγελία ἣν ἠκούσατε ἀπ' ἀρχῆς, ἵνα ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους· οὐ καθὼς Κάιν ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ ἦν καὶ ἔσφαξεν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ." (3:11-12).

In contrast to his reference to Cain, the author feels that, just as Jesus the son of God laid down his life for those who believe, such as those of the community of I John, then the community should in turn lay down their lives for the brethren. This is what God asks of believers, "καὶ αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ ἐντολὴ αὐτοῦ ἵνα πιστεῦσωμεν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους καθὼς ἔδωκεν ἐντολὴν ἡμῖν" (3:23). If we follow God's commandments we will receive all that we ask for from the Father. The love of God for believers as seen in his sacrifice of his only Son, should be rewarded by believers through their love of the brethren.

From the letter of I John the primary conclusion that we can arrive at is that there is strife in the community. The conflict within this community has changed from that reflected

in the pages of the Fourth Gospel. It seems that the dispute in the letter is more difficult for it is now between members of the same group. It is no longer "belief versus unbelief, but correct belief versus incorrect belief."<sup>7</sup> It is hard at this point to decide which of the opposing groups is correct and which is false. Both the followers of the author and the secessionists have come to a point where their disagreements prevent them from being able to exist together in the same community. It seems at this point that the group has split both geographically and ideologically. Such a division within the group indicates that the life of the Johannine community is threatened. The extent of this threat may be seen in the writing of the letter by the author in response to the claims of the opponents. He may feel the need to try to keep the remaining members of his group together, to help the Johannine faith and/or to ensure his authority, which he feels is being threatened by the growing number of secessionists. Whether the author's description of the dispute is entirely correct, or his interpretation of the tradition on which he bases his opinions is accurate, we do not know. At this point all that we can really deduce from the existence of community strife is that there are differing interpretations of the Johannine

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<sup>7</sup> Urban C. von Wahlde, *The Johannine Commandments* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), p. 92. (Emphases added).

tradition.

We have indicated in broad terms what I John is about. It is now necessary to examine the argument of the epistle in more detail. Before we do this, however, it is necessary to say something about the structure, for the organizational design of any text gives us a deeper insight into the meaning. Unfortunately, however, finding a clear structure in I John is very problematic.

### C. The Structure of I John

Usually, powerful and insightful arguments are only effective if they are set out in a clear systematic way. I John, however, seems to be an exception to that rule. In I John there seems to be little or no true structure. In fact "the structure of I John, or lack of it, has been the subject of much discussion. Each passage is clear enough in itself, but there is no clear progression of thought throughout the book."<sup>8</sup> This having been said, there have been no lack of attempts to find a clear structure in I John. Robert Law drew attention to what he called the 'spiral' development of the argument within the letter. Law saw evidence of Hebraic poetic

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<sup>8</sup> John Painter, *John: Witness and Theologian* (London: SPCK, 1975), p. 109.

style, that showed some similarity to Wisdom literature's parallelism. He broke I John down into an introduction that is followed by three cycles. "In the cycles, the claims of the heretics are tested by the standards of (1) righteousness (2) love (3) belief."<sup>9</sup> Law's analysis of the structure of I John may be summarized as follows,

I. Prologue (1.1-4).

II. First Cycle: The Christian life as walking in the light  
(1.5-2.28).

(a) Introduction (1.5-7).

(b) Tested by righteousness (1.8-2.6).

(c) Tested by love (2.7-17).

(d) Tested by belief (2.18-28).

III. Second Cycle: The Christian life as Divine Sonship  
(2.29-4.6).

(a) Tested by righteousness (2.29-3.10a).

(b) Tested by love (3.10b-24a).

(c) Tested by belief (3.24b-4.6).

IV. Third Cycle: Correlation of righteousness, love and  
belief (4.7-5.21).

1. Love (4.7-5.3a).

(a) The genesis of love (4.7-12)

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<sup>9</sup> Painter, John, p. 109. See Robert Law, *The Tests of Life* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1909).

(b) The synthesis of love and belief (4.13-16).

(c) The effect, motives and manifestations of love  
(4.7-5.3a).

2. Belief (5.3b-21).

(a) The power, content, basis and issue of  
Christian belief (5.3b-12).

(b) The certainties of Christian belief (5.13-21).

Painter feels that Law's analysis of the structure of I John "looks reasonable at first sight, but the whole pattern breaks down in the third cycle."<sup>10</sup> The format that Law uses in his analysis does show the spiralling nature of the author's argument, but the structure is too rigid for the pattern of argumentation that we see in I John.

Theodor Häring is another scholar who has proposed a structure of I John. Häring feels that within each cycle there are only two tests, "the ethical test (combining love and righteousness), and the christological test (the test of belief)."<sup>11</sup> Häring's analysis of the study of I John may be summarized as follows,

I. Introduction (1.1-4).

II. First presentation of the two tests (1.5-2.27). The two tests of fellowship with God (ethical and

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<sup>10</sup> Painter, John, p. 109.

<sup>11</sup> Painter, John, p. 110. As quoted by John Painter.

christological heresies).

1. Walking in the light, the true sign of fellowship with God (ethical test). Refutation of the first lie (1.5-2.17).

2. Faith in Jesus Christ as the test of fellowship with God (christological thesis). Refutation of the second lie (2.18-27).

III. Second presentation of the two tests (2.28-4.6). With special emphasis on their connection (3.22-24).

1. Doing righteousness (love of the brethren) the sign by which we may know that we are born of God (2.28-3.24).

2. The christological thesis. The Spirit from God confesses Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (4.1-6).

IV. Third presentation of the two theses in which their inseparable relation to each other is shown (4.7-5.12).

1. Love, based on faith in the revelation of love, is the proof of knowing God and being born of God (4.7-21).

2. Faith is the foundation of love (5.1-12).

V. Conclusion (5.13-21).

The greatest criticism of this analysis of the structure of I John is that "the pattern tends to be imposed rather than

discovered."<sup>12</sup> Even with great effort it is not possible to make Häring's pattern fit I John. While providing some useful points it is not an adequate structure for the letter: it is just too complex and artificial.

Rudolf Bultmann also attempted to derive a structure for I John. Bultmann analyzed the letter from 1:1 to 2:27, however, he found that it was not possible to find a consistent train of thought from 2:28 to 5:12. This section, according to Bultmann, is composed of fragments supplementing 1:5 to 2:27. He felt that the writer in the original composition was commenting on a source, similar to the revelation discourses used in the Gospel. The use of the source varied throughout the letter. Later additions of the work were made by the author and his disciples. Bultmann argues that, "after completion the work was tampered with by an 'ecclesiastical redactor' who added the appendix (5.14-21), traditional emphases concerning the work of Christ and eschatology."<sup>13</sup> Bultmann does not see the possibility of providing a systematic structure for I John.

It seems impossible to impose any such systematic outline upon the Epistle. If such detailed patterns existed, as Law and Häring suggest, then they would be quite obvious after any

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<sup>12</sup> Painter, John, p. 110.

<sup>13</sup> Painter, John, p. 111.

exposure to the letter. However, there seems no way to make them fit the actual structure of I John.

This lack of structure may be explained in several ways. Though the author of the letter has specific areas of argumentation, these do not seem to be thought out in detail. At this point in the history of the community, individuals such as the author do not have a systematic understanding of areas such as Christian theology and ethics. It appears that the author in fact may have written the letter in haste. He was upset with the conduct of members of the community who, due to differences in thought, have gone from the author's group. It may also be that he sees others within the community displaying thoughts similar to those who have already left. The author may feel that it is necessary, as quickly as possible, to get his interpretation of the tradition to the community, explaining what is incorrect in the opponents' interpretation. In giving his own personal interpretation of the tradition in his letter he hopes to clarify problems before more people leave. Further problems arise, however, for readers because the author does not seem to have a clear understanding of tradition himself. In fact he sometimes seems to contradict himself.

The author's style of argumentation is not then, presented in a systematic pattern and its form varies throughout the letter. His argumentation, however, while not



appearing to take a particular systematic form, does have an overall pattern of development. I propose an arrangement, less rigid than the structures of Law and Häring which I have discussed, but a "phase argumentation" that is repeated throughout the letter. This pattern is composed of three major developmental phases:

- (1) **God** - Love of God is the basis of Christian belief.
- (2) **Jesus** - God's Love translates into the sacrifice of his only son Jesus for those who believe.
- (3) **Love of the Community & Brethren** - Belief and love in Jesus translates into Christian love which for the community equals brotherly love.

Contained within these three phases of the argument, but not corresponding exactly to them, are three major issues of concern for the author and his community: ethics, eschatology and Christology.

The first phase of I John's three - phased developmental scheme begins with God. God's love marks the beginning of Christianity. The next phase of I John's argumentation is Jesus. It is the belief that Jesus has come that sets Christianity apart from Judaism. God's love for followers

translates into the sacrifice of his only son, Jesus, for those who believe. According to the author of I John this love of God, as expressed through the sacrifice of Jesus, in turn brings us to the third phase of his argument, and his basis for writing the letter. The author claims his purpose is to promote love of community and brethren, but it appears most likely to be the prevention of further separation of the community. Belief in God and Jesus, the basis for believers, translates into Christian love which, according to the author, equals "ἀγαπῶν τὸν ἀδελφόν" for the community. This threefold argument contains issues most basic to all Christianity, belief in God and Jesus, love for God and Jesus, and love for fellow believers. It is a test of the followers' true love and faithfulness: if followers can love the brethren then they can truly love God. I John 5:1-2 shows that the love of God and of one's brethren are linked by reason of loving both the "begotter and the begotten." The basis of love in such an instance is familial love -- if one loves the parent, one ought to love the child. "The application to the Christian is explained in 5:1. The one who believes that Jesus is the Christ is 'born' of God... the one who loves God should love one's fellow Christian, since that fellow Christian is a child of God also."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> von Wahlde, *Johannine Commandments*, pp. 61-62.

The stress placed on the love command in the letter proceeds naturally from the two premises of the argument. However, not all community members feel that the transition to the third stage is a necessary progression. Love of God and his Son may not translate into love of the community. Why, then, is leaving the group a show of hatred, equated with murdering the brethren? The views of Ernst Käsemann in his work, *The Testament of Jesus*, may help us to understand why the author of I John could come to such a conclusion. Käsemann says:

If the unity of the Son with the Father is the central theme of the Johannine proclamation, then that unity is of necessity also the proper object of faith. Nowhere else in the New Testament is faith described with such force, repetition, and dogmatic rigidity.<sup>15</sup>

In the letter, faith is of great importance and faith in Jesus is taken a step further and translates into the unity of the community through love.

I John 5 presents a problem for the idea that the author uses a three-phase argument. It also shows the confusion of thoughts within the letter and a reason for the difficulty of finding in I John any type of systematic structure. This final chapter of the letter begins with the full pattern of argumentation used throughout the letter by the author: love

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<sup>15</sup> Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1968), pp. 24-25.

of God; love of Jesus; love of brethren. The author ends the letter with warnings arguing for followers to be wary of the world. It seems odd that he does not end the letter with the request for the community to love the brethren, since the love command is so important and also because he uses the three phases of argumentation fairly consistently throughout the letter. We will return to this later.

Major questions arise as to how the author can refute the opponents when they share the same tradition. It is this major issue, a common tradition, that is necessary to take into account when we look at the difficulty that the author has in refuting his opponents' claims, the claims that came from a common source. This problem is seen in the fact that, "in so many respects their view was so close to that of the author of I John and his followers."<sup>16</sup> Perhaps this is why the author of I John used the form of argumentation that he did. Though he felt that he knew what was right belief and what was wrong, he felt confused because on many points it was not completely clear how the views of his opponents differed from his own, though it was obvious that they were not the same. He did not have the proper theological tools to assist him in clarifying points of confusion with regard to understanding and interpreting the tradition. Therefore it appears that the

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<sup>16</sup> von Wahlde, *Johannine Commandments*, p. 138.

author is arguing randomly with no regard to the structure of his argument within the letter. The three phases that the author does resort to in turn creates confusion. Raymond Brown put his finger on the key problem: "the author was handicapped in refuting his opponents. The tradition itself did not give clear rebuttals to the new issues raised by the secessionists."<sup>17</sup>

It is understandable that the author, at this early point in Christian development, would have trouble defining these areas and explaining how and why his opponents have come to wrong conclusions in their interpretation of the same tradition. The three phases appears to be the best way that the author can deal with such complicated issues at this early point and in some sense provide some coherent argument.

At this point in the study of I John it seems necessary to examine the obvious areas of disagreement between the author and the secessionists: christology, ethics, and eschatology, and the support that each group has within the Johannine tradition regarding these major issues.

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<sup>17</sup> Brown, *Community*, p. 130. (Emphases added).

#### D. Christology

Throughout I John we can see the significance of Jesus for this Johannine community. Such value may be seen in the first commandment of the letter 3:24, which is described as "πιστεύσωμεν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ." This is unusual, for elsewhere in the Johannine literature, "keeping the work" or "walking in truth" are the first commandments identified. Such a commandment shows the importance of Jesus within I John. "One of the major problems facing the Johannine community at the time of the epistles was a dispute over the precise role and importance of Jesus within salvation."<sup>18</sup> Jesus is a model for the community in the letter, showing them obedience to the commandments.

The author of the letter places great merit in the proper actions of believers. Such a belief in the value of physical life stems from the author's stress on the physical nature of the Son of God over and above Jesus' divine nature: "οὐτός ἐστιν ὁ ἐλθὼν εἰς τὸ ὕδατος καὶ αἵματος, Ἰησοῦς Χριστός· ὃς ἐν τῷ ὕδατι μόνον, ἀλλ' ἐν τῷ ὕδατι καὶ ἐν τῷ αἵματι." (5:6). It thus makes sense that if the physical life and actions of Jesus are of the greatest importance to I John then the physical actions of the followers of God too are very

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<sup>18</sup> von Wahlde, *Johannine Commandments*, pp. 53-54.

important.

Since the physical nature of Jesus is valued by the author then it follows that great importance would be placed in the physical death of Jesus for the salvation of believers, for this is seen in the author's words, "καὶ τὸ αἷμα Ἰησοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ καθαρίζει ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ πάσης ἁμαρτίας" (1:7). The death of Jesus, God's sacrifice of his only son for the sins of believers, takes on even more value when Jesus is viewed as a physical, living human being who suffered on the cross for the faithful.

The author wishes readers to follow the actions of Jesus on earth, to be faithful to the Father as Jesus was. Christians must see that just as the actions of Jesus on the cross, his pain and suffering, were of the greatest importance, so too were his actions, while he lived on earth, a valuable part of his redemptive power. Followers should place great salvific value in their physical actions, just as they place salvific value in the physical actions of Jesus on earth, for, "ὁ λέγων ἐν αὐτῷ μένειν ὀφείλει καθὼς ἐκεῖνος περιπατήσεν καὶ αὐτὸς οὕτως περιπατεῖν" (2:6).

Just as those who have left, the secessionists, did not recognize the importance of the physical Jesus, neither did they recognize the importance of their actions of leaving the community. The opponents did not see the community as brethren just as they did not recognize the physical Jesus, "ὁ κόσμος

οὐ γινώσκει ἡμᾶς, ὅτι οὐκ ἔγνω αὐτόν" (3:1). The physical actions of the community are as important as the physical actions of Jesus in the salvation of believers. The community members should be willing to do the same for their brethren as Jesus did for all believers, "ἐν τούτῳ ἐγώκαμεν τὴν ἀγάπην ὅτι ἐκεῖνος ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἔθηκεν· καὶ ἡμεῖς ὀφείλομεν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἀδελφῶν τὰς ψυχὰς θείναι;" (3:16). If the physical Jesus and his actions on earth were of no value to the opponents then it is not surprising that they place little or no value in their own physical actions, such as ethical matters like following the commandments. The Christological beliefs of the community and its opponents is important for understanding how and why they interpreted ethical issues within their tradition as they do.

In opposition to the author of I John the opponents hold a high christology, stressing the divine nature of Jesus over the physical. Raymond Brown feels that it is important to consider whether an interpretation of the earthly career of Jesus that would make sense of the views of the secessionists on Christology can be derived from the Johannine tradition. It is also necessary, he feels, to look at why the author found them dangerous. He says that "the secessionists believed that the human existence of Jesus, while real, was not salvifically



significant."<sup>19</sup> To the opponents the death of Jesus on the cross was not truly important to the salvation of believers. Salvation would be the same even if it had come about in a totally different human form, whose life and death was different. What was important for the opponents was that eternal life was brought to them through God's divine Son.<sup>20</sup> What Brown is saying is of great significance, for he is showing that the split in the community is over the interpretation of a common tradition -- the Johannine tradition.

Through a study of Ernst Käsemann's view of the nature of Jesus in the Gospel and letters we can come to a better understanding of the secessionists' interpretation of the nature of Jesus from the Johannine tradition. Although Brown says that Käsemann's interpretation of the "naive, unreflected doceticism" of the Christology of the Fourth Gospel may not be a correct view of John, Brown recognizes that Käsemann

shows how the Gospel can be read, and he may well have approximated in the twentieth century the way in which the opponents of I John interpreted the Johannine tradition in the first century, namely, in terms of an earthly career that did not really involve an appropriation by Jesus of the limitations of the human condition.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Brown, *Community*, p. 113. (Emphases added).

<sup>20</sup> Brown, *Community*, p. 113.

<sup>21</sup> Brown, *Community*, p. 116.

Käsemann's study of the Gospel of John, particularly chapter seventeen, becomes important for the issues that arise in I John over the nature of Jesus. John 1:14 says, "Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο." This verse has traditionally been viewed as a summary of the Gospel. But claims Käsemann, it is difficult to see how this earthly view of Jesus balances with the Jesus that we see in the Gospel. For within John Jesus is portrayed as God walking about on earth. Käsemann says that we must ask:

In what sense is he flesh, who walks on the water and through closed doors, who cannot be captured by his enemies, who at the well of Samaria is tired and desires a drink, yet has no need of drink and has for different from that which his disciples seek?<sup>22</sup>

How could such a presentation of Jesus result in the view that Jesus was of flesh? According to Käsemann the words that follow in John 1:14 clarify this issue. The passage "ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ" shows readers that perhaps the line "and the Word became flesh" means nothing more "than that he descended into the world of man and there came into contact with the earthly existence, so that an encounter with him became possible."<sup>23</sup>

Käsemann's thesis may illuminate the background to I John

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<sup>22</sup> Käsemann, *Testament of Jesus*, p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> Käsemann, *Testament of Jesus*, p. 9.

with regard to the nature of Jesus. If Käsemann sees the importance of the divine nature of Jesus stressed within the Gospel -- to the detriment of the earthly Jesus -- then it is not surprising that the opponents of I John also stress this divine nature. Käsemann shows the possible existence of differing interpretations that may have existed within the early community, such as the interpretations of John from both the author of I John and his opponents that we see in the letter.

Käsemann sees the danger in the christology of glory as doceticism:

It is presented in a still naive, unreflected form and it had not yet been recognized by the Evangelist or his community. The following Christian generations were thoroughly enchanted with John's christology of glory. Consequently the question "Who is Jesus?" remained alive among them. But those generations also experienced the difficulties of this Christology of glory and had to unfold and deepen its problems and, in so doing, had to decide for or against doceticism.<sup>24</sup>

We can apply Käsemann's insight to the epistle, where the author sees the opponents as "enchanted" with a christology of glory, and has decided against doceticism, for the author stresses the physical Jesus and condemns those who see only the divinity of Jesus. The question "Who is Jesus?" had become central to the community at the time I John was written.

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<sup>24</sup> Käsemann, *Testament of Jesus*, p. 26.

### E. Ethics

The issue of ethics appears to be the author's primary concern within I John. The author of the Epistle seeks to establish the importance of keeping God's commandments. From the words of I John we can assume that the opponents are not following the commandments of God as the author feels that they should. The three main ethical offenses that the letter accuses the opponents of are, claims of intimacy with God that lead to perfection; lack of emphasis, or need to follow the commandments; and lack of brotherly love.

In discussing the first offense that the secessionists are charged with, that is, claims of intimacy with God that lead to perfection, it is important to note that the concept of knowing God is tied to the presence of Christ in the community. How can we define what it means to know God? Whitacre says that:

Behind the author's polemic is his understanding of God's character, and his belief that the very life of God is revealed in Jesus and is present in the Christian community. The opponents claim to know God, but the author makes use of the community's tradition to show that, far from knowing the Father, they are in reality idolaters.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> R.A. Whitacre, *Johannine Polemic: The Role of Tradition and Theology* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1982), p.151.

The author knows God through the presence of Jesus on earth. Moreover, the author does not see the possibility that the secessionists could know God to the point that they could claim to be free from the guilt of sin.

It seems necessary at this point to define perfectionism. Perfectionism is a term that is most often applied to "the view that man is capable of achieving sinlessness in his present existence. This definition primarily concerns the ethical aspect of perfection, i.e., the achievement of ethical or moral purity."<sup>26</sup> The first claim of perfectionism may be seen in the opponents' feelings of intimacy with God, "Ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι κοινωνίαν ἔχομεν μετ' αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐν τῷ σκότει πειοπατῶμεν, ψευδόμεθα καὶ οὐ ποιοῦμεν τὴν ἀλήθειαν." (1:6). As well, the opponents make claims of sinlessness, "Ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι ἀμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν, ἑαυτοὺς πλανῶμεν καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν" (1:8) and "Ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι οὐχ ἡμαρτήκαμεν, ψεύστην ποιοῦμεν αὐτὸν καὶ ὁ λόγος αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν" (1:10).

But however wrong the author sees the secessionists' claims of perfection and sinlessness, they can be justified by the Johannine tradition. I John 1:8-10 contains a twofold claim of sinlessness on the part of the secessionists that might at first not appear to be part of the tradition. However

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<sup>26</sup> Bogart, *Perfectionism*, p. 7.

the claim to be free from sin, or to "ἀμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν", is actually just rephrasing the Johannine belief that, "by contrast with the non-believer, the believer is free from sin."<sup>27</sup> As well, the claim to have not committed any sins in their lives, or to "οὐχ ἡμαρτήκαμεν", may mean that they have not sinned since they became believers. According to Brown the secessionists may have made the claim that when they became "children of God, they became sinless, even as the Son of God was sinless (8:46). Were not all Johannine Christians taught that they have received the spirit which gives a power over sin (20:22-23)?"<sup>28</sup>

The author of I John in fact also appears to come close to making the same claims of sinlessness and freedom from the guilt of sin for which he condemns the secessionists! I John says, "πᾶς ὁ ἐν αὐτῷ μένων οὐχ ἁμαρτάνει· πᾶς ὁ ἁμαρτάνων οὐχ ἔώρακεν αὐτόν οὐδὲ ἔγνωκεν αὐτόν" (3:6). It seems that the author is claiming that Christians cannot be sinners in the sense that they cannot consistently be sinners. The author does not make himself clear on the reasons why he arrives at this conclusion. This lack of clarity is confusing. But it does show that the author and the secessionists were not as far apart on issues as might first appear.

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<sup>27</sup> Brown, *Community*, p. 125.

<sup>28</sup> Brown, *Community*, p. 126.

The second claim of the opponents, that is, the lack of emphasis, on the need to follow the commandments, may be seen in the epistle in such verses as the following, "ὁ λέγων ὅτι ἔγνωκα αὐτόν, καὶ τὰς ἐντολὰς αὐτοῦ μὴ τηρῶν, ψεύστης ἐστίν, καὶ ἐν τούτῳ ἡ ἀλήθεια οὐκ ἐστίν." (2:4), and, "ὁ λέγων ἐν αὐτῷ μένειν ὀφείλει καθὼς ἐκεῖνος περιεπάτησεν καὶ αὐτὸς οὕτως περιπατεῖν" (2:6). It seems odd that the author does not mention any of the vices involved in the opponents' actions that would indicate that they have no regard for the commandments. Brown feels that the opponents "gave no salvific importance to ethical behaviour and that this stance flowed from their Christology. If they did not attribute salvific importance to the earthly career of Jesus, to the way he lived and died, why should the earthly life of the Christian be pertinent to salvation?"<sup>29</sup> As we discussed in the previous section, the secessionists' high christology that led to a lack of regard for their own physical actions, while not necessarily the correct interpretation of the Johannine tradition, is none the less a possible interpretation.

The third offense of the secessionists is the issue that takes on the greatest importance, not just with regard to ethical behaviour, but also with regard to the entire letter. As von Wahlde says, within the New Testament love of God and

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<sup>29</sup> Brown, *Community*, pp. 128-129.

love of one's neighbour are the greatest of the commandments.<sup>30</sup> For the author the love command subsumes all others. Failure to love the brethren is the only specific wrong doing that the author mentions regarding the opponents disregard for keeping the commandments. The author continues to return to the love of the brethren. I John regards this love as the basis of the Christian community. Love of fellow community members stands alongside of belief and love of God and his Son. The letters says, "ὁ ἀγαπῶν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ φωτὶ μένει, καὶ σκάνδαλον ἐν αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔστιν." (2:10).

The love command holds great importance for the author in his attempts to keep his group together. As we see in Christian tradition the love that the disciples have for one another has a witness value. Their love shows the world that they are disciples of Jesus. Jesus' death for believers "is given as the supreme example of the love that the believer should show to the other members of the community... the theme of the death of Jesus for his own is given the greatest emphasis in the Johannine tradition."<sup>31</sup> The author of II John also sees a witness value in the love of the community members. The stress placed on love of the brethren establishes the special status that the followers have with God alongside

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<sup>30</sup> von Wahlde, *Johannine Commandments*, p. 9.

<sup>31</sup> von Wahlde, *Johannine Commandments*, p. 18.



of the disciples and Jesus. As well, the condemnation of those who leave the community sets an example for those who are considering taking similar actions like leaving the Johannine community to go out into the world, actions that would weaken the strength of the community in the eyes of the author of I John. The love command becomes an important tool for the author of I John.

The underlying point that the author is trying to make can be seen in I John 4:20-21: "ἐάν τις εἶπῃ ὅτι ἀγαπῶ τὸν θεόν, καὶ τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ μισῶ, ψεύστης ἐστίν· ὁ γὰρ μὴ ἀγαπῶν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ ὃν ἑώρακεν, τὸν θεὸν ὃν οὐχ ἑώρακεν οὐ δύναται ἀγαπᾶν... ὁ ἀγαπῶν τὸν θεὸν ἀγαπᾷ καὶ τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ." This is one of the strong points within the author's argument, for it appeals to the experience of community members. In these verses the author is presenting an appeal to brotherly love in a way that readers, who may not understand the theological concept of love of God, can relate to. It is a request in the most basic human sense. At such an early period in the development of Christianity the family and community were very important to survival. People had to depend on and trust those close to them. If they could not trust those from their own community to be faithful, then whom could they trust?

It appears that while the author condemns the secessionists for their lack of obedience, they in fact claim

to love God and follow his word, for the author addresses their claims saying, "ὁ λέγων ἐν τῷ φωτὶ εἶναι καὶ τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ μισῶν ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ ἐστὶν ἕως ἄρτι" (2:9) and "ἐάν τις εἶπῃ ὅτι ἀγαπᾷ τὸν θεόν, καὶ τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ μισῇ, ψεύστης ἐστίν·" (4:20). The opponents are making claims of loving God and of walking in the light, however, their actions indicate that they hate the brethren. The author feels that they could not possibly love the brethren of his group because they have left the community. This going out into the "κόσμῳ" may mean that those who leave have a different understanding of what the tradition means when it refers to "κόσμος" and "ἀδελφός". Such differences in the interpretation of the author and the secessionists and the love command of the Johannine tradition will be dealt with more thoroughly in Chapter Three when we apply the orthodoxy/heresy debate to the letter.

We must now look at another major issue within the letter to help explain why the community of the author feels as it does with regard to these ethical issues and why the opponents act as they do. A study of the way the opponents interpret eschatology within the tradition may help us to understand their claims of perfectionism. It appears that perhaps eschatology, like christology, is at the root of the sins of the opponents.

### F. Eschatology

The author of I John holds what seems to be a combined realized and future eschatology. It seems as if the community shares a conditional eschatology, salvation is realized. However members must continue to act faithfully toward God or they will not be rewarded in the future, final coming. The author feels that as followers of God and his Son, the community is chosen, they have everlasting life. However, they must continue with the author to "ἐν τῷ φωτὶ περιπατῶμεν" (1:7).

The author begins the letter saying, "Παιδιά, ἐσχάτη ὥρα ἐστίν, καὶ καθὼς ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἀντίχριστος ἐρχεται, καὶ νῦν ἀντίχριστοι πολλοὶ γεγόνασιν · ὅθεν γινώσκομεν ὅτι ἐσχάτη ὥρα ἐστίν" (2:18). This indicates to readers that the author sees the end as coming very soon, maybe even at the present time they are seeing its beginning, that is if the opponents' actions are any indication. The author sees dispute from within, caused by the opponents, as an indication of the end. The community cannot hold up against internal strife and the continued quarrels of the secessionists will cause its collapse. The author believes that he and his community have been promised eternal life. The actions of community members should be faithful to God's word, for he warns readers, "μένετε ἐν αὐτῷ, ἵνα ἐὰν φανερωθῆ σχώμεν παρρησίαν καὶ μὴ

αἰσχυρθῶμεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ αὐτοῦ" (2:28). Members of the author's community, as the chosen ones, will recognize the Lord when he comes for "οἶδαμεν ὅτι ἐὰν φανερωθῇ ὁμοιοὶ αὐτῷ ἐσόμεθα, ὅτι ὁψόμεθα αὐτὸν καθὼς ἐστίν" (3:2). Towards the end of the letter the author continues to hold a sense of future eschatology believing that their faithfulness gives them a special advantage over the opponents, "Ἐν τούτῳ τετελείεται ἡ ἀγάπη μεθ' ἡμῶν, ἵνα παρρησίαν ἔχωμεν ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῆς κρίσεως, ὅτι καθὼς ἐκεῖνός ἐστιν καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐσμεν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ τούτῳ" (4:17).

Though a belief in future eschatology exists within I John from beginning to end the author also indicates a sense of realized eschatology throughout, a sense that followers in his community have already been chosen. He says, "ἡμεῖς οἶδαμεν ὅτι μεταβεβήκαμεν ἐκ τοῦ θανάτου εἰς τὴν ζωὴν, ὅτι ἀγαπῶμεν τοὺς ἀδελφούς· ὁ μὴ ἀγαπῶν μένει ἐν τῷ θανάτῳ" (3:14). The author goes on to say in the next verse, "πᾶς ὁ μισῶν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ ἀνθρωποκτόνος ἐστίν, καὶ οἶδατε ὅτι πᾶς ὁ ἀθροποκτονος οὐκ ἔχει ζωὴν αἰώνιον ἐν αὐτῷ μένουσαν" (3:15). Such references may simply indicate hopes of future eschatology, or perhaps they indicate the author's confidence that he and his community are ensured a place with God forever. What is important is that followers continue to love God and his Son and follow God's commandments. It may be a tactic used by the author to ensure that no more people leave

the community.

It is hard to get an indication from the letter of the opponents' ideas toward eschatology, for the author of I John does not condemn any clear eschatological statements. If their lack of adherence to the commandments is any indication then it would seem safe to assume that the secessionists hold a realized eschatology, for they do not worry about their actions in their present life. As well, we could get some indication of their eschatological beliefs from their claims of perfectionism, which seem to have resulted in their lack of regard for the commandments. Perfectionism may be "expanded to include spiritual perfection also, i.e., the union with God or the beatific vision."<sup>32</sup> Such realized salvation, as seen in the Gospel of John, stresses what God has done for believers in Jesus. This "realized salvation was accomplished by the descent of the word into the world, and Christians who have received such privileges need not worry about what they do in the world."<sup>33</sup> The opponents of I John feel that they can do as they wish in this life because as believers they have been chosen by God and have already been rewarded with eternal life.

It is possible that the opponents' spiritual

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<sup>32</sup> Bogart, *Perfectionism*, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> Brown, *Community*, pp. 135-136.

understanding of the nature of Jesus led them to argue that "the true purpose of his ministry was the announcement of and the preparation for the eschatological outpouring of the spirit." Therefore they saw "no distinctive identity for Jesus nor would they have any permanent need of Jesus within salvation or within the community tradition since ultimately it was the spirit that mattered." <sup>34</sup> Unlike the author, the secessionists did not place value in the physical nature of Jesus. The belief that they possessed the spirit caused further problems, for they felt that "they would have no future, final judgment to fear since they had been made sinless by their possession of the Spirit." There would be no second coming of Jesus because the spirit had already come in a definitive way already.<sup>35</sup>

#### G. Conclusions

A study of I John helps to show readers two important aspects of early Christianity. The first is the conflict that existed in the faith, at one of its earliest periods, over the interpretation of the tradition. The second is the aspect of further confusion that resulted when followers, like the

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<sup>34</sup> von Wahlde, *Johannine Commandments*, p. 115.

<sup>35</sup> von Wahlde, *Johannine Commandments*, p. 115.

author of I John, attempted to define the faith of the early Church.

Käsemann asks the question, "Does the New Testament canon establish the unity of the Church?" He answers that it rather establishes the "plurality of confessions." This point is useful for a study of the Johannine tradition, especially when looking at the controversy that exists within the letters of John. As well, within his concluding chapter of **The Testament of Jesus** Käsemann says that "certainly faith and interpretation never exist otherwise than in human entanglement and disorder."<sup>36</sup> Both of Käsemann's statements help us to see that the situation of dispute and confusion, discernable in I John, was not uncommon to early Christianity.

Though not agreeing with many of the points of Käsemann's thesis, Bornkamm sees their value in a study of the Johannine tradition as conducted by Käsemann. Bornkamm concludes that:

Nevertheless the first task is still to arrive at a critical understanding of the manifold varieties of early Christianity with an eye to their original intention, to take on board the questions that arise from their extremely diverse historical settings, and then to present freshly, in one's own way of thinking, the gospel of Christ. Käsemann's important book is of considerable help in promoting a sharp awareness of the peculiarities and puzzles

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<sup>36</sup> Käsemann, **Testament of Jesus**, p. 77.

in Johannine theology.<sup>37</sup>

Bornkamm sees the value in Käsemann's work in helping readers to grasp a greater understanding of the controversy that exists within I John and the importance of such struggles in the development of the faith of the early Church. Through Käsemann's study we can see that the views of the opponents of I John may have been possible interpretations of the Johannine tradition.

Throughout I John the author seems to go continually through the three major phases mentioned earlier: Love of God is the basis of Christian belief; God's love translates into the sacrifice of his only son Jesus for those who believe; and belief and love in Jesus translates into Christian love which for the community equals brotherly love. The lack of uniformity within the argument is due to the author's lack of the full grasp, or full understanding, of what each issue contains. The author of I John is marking the beginning of a new age in Christian development. I John is the start of a definition of the faith, the author had no footsteps to follow in regarding such theological issues as are contained in the letter. Even today in the twentieth century, with much experience in defining the major elements of Christianity, we

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<sup>37</sup> Gunther Bornkamm, "Towards the Interpretation of John's Gospel," in *The Interpretation of John*, ed. John Ashton (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 94.



continue to have trouble with the deep issues which the author  
of I John found himself having to face.

## Chapter Three

### I John and the Orthodoxy/Heresy Debate

#### A. Bauer's non-developmental Thesis

In this chapter I would like to apply the orthodoxy/heresy debate to I John to show that this letter serves as a useful paradigm for both a discussion of the debate and as an example of the growth of Christianity as a whole. Although the letter appears to be an attempt to clarify certain issues within the community, it in fact leaves readers with many questions. This Johannine community contains groups who have come to different conclusions concerning what it means to be Christian. The author of I John seems to be struggling with the problem of how to define some positions regarding Christian beliefs within the community as "correct" and others as "false". Such a controversy within the First Epistle shows us that early Christianity had not yet developed the clear cut definitions of orthodoxy and heresy that the classical theory and Bauer's view would indicate. Turner's thesis, with its concept of fixed and flexible elements within the early faith, provides a better understanding of the situation that we see in I John. In the light of Turner's thesis I John presents an example and explanation of the development of early Christianity and shows that the growth of

the faith was much more complex than has often been acknowledged.

In the previous chapter we started with the assumption that the author and his opponents were arguing from a common tradition. In this chapter I would like to take this assumption a step further and assume from the start that the groups in opposition in I John were arguing from a common tradition because they were all originally members of the same united group, a group that held to a common religious tradition. This view, as supported by Turner's thesis, contrasts with that of the views of the development of early Christianity held by Walter Bauer and the Classical View.

To begin we will look at the thoughts of Walter Bauer on the development of the early Church. Bauer felt that perhaps

certain manifestations of Christian life that the author of the Church renounces as 'heresies' originally had not been such at all, but, at least here and there, were the only form of the new religion -- that is, for those regions they were simply 'Christianity.' The possibility also exists that their adherents constituted the majority, and that they looked down with hatred and scorn on the orthodox, who for them were the false believers.<sup>1</sup>

By such a statement Bauer suggests that there was no unity to early Christian belief. He assumes that Das Wesen des Christentums is not a meaningful phrase and that there is no way to distinguish which beliefs were correct and which were

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<sup>1</sup> Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, p. xxii.

"false." As Turner says:

[Bauer says that] there was no clear-cut or fundamental distinction between orthodoxy and heresy. Both arose simultaneously within the Church herself, and the classical view is in error in regarding heresy as later in date than orthodoxy... Formal orthodoxy began as a splinter or minority movement under episcopal leadership, and only slowly reached a dominant influence in the life of the Church. <sup>2</sup>

Bauer does not allow for the existence of any united group in the early faith. He paints the picture of total disarray, with little or no agreement on what it meant to be a Christian at the earliest point in the development of the Christian faith. In fact Bauer's work "has given renewed impetus to viewing Christian origins from the standpoint of diversity."<sup>3</sup>

Bauer, in an attempt to avoid confusion caused by the use of terminology in his study, in turn creates confusion. He says "in this book, 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy' will refer to what one customarily and usually understands them to mean."<sup>4</sup> Bauer's assumption that there is a customary definition for these terms is incorrect and misleading. We can see the trouble that this lack of definition causes for readers when

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<sup>2</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 39.

<sup>3</sup> David Hawkin, "A Reflective Look at the Recent Debate on Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity," *Eglise et Théologie* 7 (1976): 369.

<sup>4</sup> Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, pp. xxii - xxiii.

we look at the work of A.A.T. Ehrhardt who is led astray by Bauer's lack of definition and presupposes

that somewhere in Christianity a *regula fidei* was invented as a touchstone of orthodoxy, at the very outset of the history of the Church, an assumption which seems to leave out of consideration whether or not the problem of heresy was at all visualized in the early days of Christianity.<sup>5</sup>

David Hawkin notes that "this, of course, completely misconstrues Bauer's intention."<sup>6</sup>

George Strecker, the author of the Appendix of Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, recognizes the trouble that is created by Bauer's lack of definition, for it leads to the open use of a variety of understandings. Strecker says:

The sort of confusion that results from this aspect of the semantic problem is well illustrated by the attempts of some of Bauer's critics and heirs to define what they would like to understand by the word "orthodoxy"... Indeed, is there today any commonly accepted meaning of "orthodoxy" such as Bauer wished to presuppose?<sup>7</sup>

Bauer failed to find a definition that accurately represented the thoughts and feelings of the early Christians:

Bauer settled on the material components of orthodoxy in the third and fourth centuries. He saw

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<sup>5</sup> Arnold Ehrhardt, "Christianity Before the Apostle's Creed," *HTR*, 55 (1962): 93.

<sup>6</sup> See D.J. Hawkin, "A Reflective Look," Footnote 12, p. 370.

<sup>7</sup> Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, Appendix 2, p. 314, n. 30 from D.J.Hawkin, "A Reflective Look".

the claim that these material components of orthodoxy were present in first century Christianity was wrong. But what he himself failed to do was to settle on a heuristic definition of orthodoxy; that is, he did not offer a formal definition which, as an invariant structure, could take account of development.<sup>3</sup>

Through his lack of explanation of what he means when he uses the terms orthodoxy and heresy Bauer creates further confusion by an image of further disarray within the early Christian community.

From the letter of I John Bauer's presentation of Christianity as existing in total confusion does not seem to be an accurate depiction of what was occurring in early Christianity. The secessionists shared the same tradition as the author. As we will see, Turner presents a different view from Bauer, a more accurate explanation of what was occurring in the early Church such as we see in the community of I John. Turner's view of early Christianity takes account of development, whereas Bauer's does not.

#### B. A Common Tradition

The Johannine community, prior to the letter and its questioning of the tradition, existed as one united group. We have, unfortunately, only the information given us by the

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<sup>3</sup> Hawkin, "A Reflective Look," p. 370.

author of I John to reconstruct the early community. According to Klauck:

The fact that this schism was preceded by a longer phase of the different groups co-existing within one and the same community is implicitly presupposed in I John 2:19 by the fourfold use of ἐξ ἡμῶν, "from us", "from among us". In I John the preposition ἐκ, "out of", "from", expresses origin and belonging. It points to a preceding shared history.<sup>9</sup>

It is perhaps the original unity of the community which may have intensified the dispute. It is the disunity of a once united community that we see in the passionate words of the author in his letter. The dispute, if between people who had once been in communion, is over loss of fellowship and loss of the author's power over a once much larger group. Klauck feels that "a not inessential contribution to the intensification of the conflict was made by the social dynamics contained within it."<sup>10</sup>

In the Johannine tradition of the community we see the same sense of estrangement that is present in the letter, a sense of "us" against "them". This dualistic outlook has shifted over into I John. The division within the community has changed to simply "us". Troubles arise in the community

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<sup>9</sup> Hans- Joseph Klauck, "Internal Opponents: The Treatment of the Secessionists in the First Epistle of John," *Concilium*, 200 (1988): 56.

<sup>10</sup> Klauck, "Internal Opponents," p. 56.

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the cannons that once pointed outwards to protect the fortress of truth against the world will be spun around to point inwards against those betraying the truth from within (for whom there is always a more special hatred).<sup>11</sup>

Troubles in this Christian community intensified as disputes over the faith began to tear it apart internally.

A simple reading of the letter gives indication to the reader of the strong feelings of the author. His harsh words show his emotion, he is extremely upset at the actions of the opponents. It is their leaving and forsaking the fellowship that appears to be at the root of his problem. The author feels that it was the secessionists breaking away from the community that caused them to sway in their faith and to become sinful. We can sense his anxiety at the loss of members of the faith and his extreme fear that more will follow. It is through an understanding of the close relationship that the author's community must have once shared with the secessionists that we can relate to the feelings of fear and hatred that the author is left with after the community's initial conflict and the breaking away of those who have become known as opponents.

In such a close knit community there develops a certain social dynamic, as Klauck explains:

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<sup>11</sup> Brown, *Community*, p. 134.



At work are laws of social psychology which even Christian groups can only with difficulty evade: the discovery and safeguarding of identity by a group whose existence is threatened almost necessarily goes hand in hand with highly developed internal community and cutting oneself off from the outside world. It is above all those who are blamed for the crisis, who are particularly experienced as a threat, who are regarded with hatred...<sup>12</sup>

We can perhaps summarize that the author of the epistle fears that those who were internal members of this close knit community could leave and become threatening enemies to the future welfare of the group. The secessionists have knowledge of how the community functions, its strengths and weaknesses, which could be used to destroy the author's community. They could also use their former relationships with remaining members of the author's group to persuade them into leaving, which would devastate the author's stronghold.

The letter's warning in I John 2:15-17 against becoming part of the outside world is to be viewed against the background of the relationships and conflicts between community members.<sup>13</sup> The ability of the secessionists to communicate with those outside the community may in fact show us some development that was taking place at this early point in Christianity. However, this development through the secessionists' communication with the outside world, contrary

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<sup>12</sup> Klauck, "Internal Opponents," P. 63.

<sup>13</sup> Klauck, "Internal Opponents" p. 56.

to Bauer's belief that the community was in total disarray, may not be a sign of the beginning of order among the confusion. Rather, communication with the world outside the community may mark a further development and organization of this already orderly Christian group. Even at this early stage the faith was beginning to spread to others outside the close knit group, as the faith was beginning to take greater shape.

The author and his opponents have gone their different ways. The author's group seems to be continuing on its own, keeping to itself, while the opponents have started to communicate and deal more with others outside. In I John 4:5 we see that:

the secessionists were more successful in coming to terms with the non-Christian world in which they lived. In distinction from the remnant around the author of the epistle (cf. his emotional complaint in I John 4:6) they were able to attract attention, to gain a hearing for their message and possibly even to acquire new members.<sup>14</sup>

The author, as leader of the community, may be writing the letter because of his need for the support of the members who remain within his group. If more people leave, the community may fold. It may well be that:

the influential and well-off are probably to be sought particularly among the opponents of the epistle's author. Before the split they were from a

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<sup>14</sup> Klauck, "Internal Opponents," p. 56.

material point of view very important for the community... The author of the epistle and his supporters suddenly find themselves confronted with financial problems they had not dreamed of. They feel themselves to be 'betrayed and sold.'<sup>15</sup>

As more people leave the author finds the community becoming weaker and his power as leader gradually failing.

While the author, through the writing of his letter, establishes that the secessionists were former community members, he tries to deny at the same time, any relationship between the present community and those whom he brands as enemies. In 2:19 he says, "οὐκ εἰσὶν πάντες ἐξ ἡμῶν." Such a statement by the author denies a common history. Yet, as Klauck rightly maintains, the secessionists and the author of the Epistle do have a common history as demonstrated by the phrase "ἐξ ἡμῶν ἐξῆδθαν." The close knit relationship never existed in reality, it was only a sham maintained the author of the epistle. In their hearts the author's group knew that the dissenters were never genuine members of the community. But this is the author's way of trying to come to terms with the traumatic experience of separation.<sup>16</sup> The author does not want to accept the division of a group that was once so close. Such a division may undermine the confidence of the community in the author's ability to make the correct choices for the

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<sup>15</sup> Klauck, "Internal Opponents," p. 57.

<sup>16</sup> Klauck, "Internal Opponents," p. 61.

benefit of his group. The division may make followers see him as an inadequate leader.

### C. The Development of the Tradition

Turner's thesis, as applied to I John, shows us that groups in opposition both held some sense of what it meant to be Christian. They had once been a united group and, as we see in the epistle, there was a basic unity in their beliefs. It was upon more difficult areas requiring deeper explanation than the tradition provided that the community found problems which eventually caused them to separate. At the point of development that we see in I John the opposing groups were trying to get a better grasp of their faith, it was a time of greater refinement in belief. It was a time of development. People felt the need to be more specific about their faith. They had a basic sense of what it meant to be Christian but there were many controversial issues that they needed to iron out. It was a time of questioning, a time of reflection on the basic realities of their beliefs.

The author of the First Epistle believes, of course, that his opponents have misguidedly gone beyond the tradition in their interpretation of the faith. Thus he makes much use of

traditional material and stands on what was there from the beginning (1.1, 2.7,24; 3.11).<sup>17</sup> The opponents are moving beyond the tradition to find explanations, moving out into the "κόσμος" feared by the author.

R.E. Brown makes a salient point when he says, "the gospel and the epistle almost certainly share the same community and tradition. But they reflect different stages of that community's growth."<sup>18</sup> The different interpretations of the epistle show the natural development of a community. The Johannine community seen in I John has moved beyond the stage of followers at the time of the Gospel. As Bornkamm writes, "The dispute thus centres on the joint Johannine heritage and how it should be maintained, continued and developed."<sup>19</sup>

I John plainly shows that clear cut definitions of "right" and "wrong" have not yet been formulated. The community of I John was still struggling to define which beliefs were correct and which were false. Therefore, if no one has definite definitions for the terms orthodoxy and heresy, then they cannot be applied to the situation that we see in the letter. Thus one of the greatest criticism of

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<sup>17</sup> William Loader, *The Johannine Epistles* (London: Epworth Press, 1989), p. xxiv.

<sup>18</sup> Loader, *Johannine Epistles*, p. xxii.

<sup>19</sup> Klauck, "Internal Opponents," p. 58.

Bauer's thesis is his method of "doing history backwards." Brown best explains this in saying that Bauer "was knocking down a straw man when he refuted the simplistic idea that what was regarded as orthodoxy in the late second century had been held from the beginning."<sup>20</sup>

This criticism of Bauer also presents us with one of the major faults of the classical view. The Church cannot assume that terminology developed in later centuries can be applied back to New Testament texts such as I John. Bogart says:

One man's orthodoxy is another man's heresy, as later Church history has shown. Further, these terms gain a specialized meaning from the late second century on, especially after the writings of Irenaeus and Hippolytus. It would be inappropriate and inaccurate to apply them to first century or early second century New Testament texts with the same meanings that they acquired in the late second century.<sup>21</sup>

Brown also criticizes the Classical theory's inappropriate use of the terms orthodoxy and heresy when he says, "'heretical' (or heterodox) as judged by writers like Irenaeus whose position prevailed in the Church -- we need not think that these movements understood themselves as departing from orthodoxy."<sup>22</sup>

Koester feels that we should not underestimate the impact

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<sup>20</sup> Brown, *Community*, p. 105, Footnote 203.

<sup>21</sup> Bogart, *Perfectionism*, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> Brown, *Community*, p. 104, Footnote 203.

of the use of the terms orthodoxy and heresy, for he says, "convenient and time-honoured labels for the distinction of heretical and orthodox prove to be very dangerous tools since they threaten to distort the historian's vision and the theologian's judgment."<sup>23</sup> The use of these terms could seriously skew the true picture of what was actually occurring at this early point in the faith.

While orthodoxy and heresy were not applicable to the early Church that we see in such writings as I John, the faith had developed to the stage where there clearly was differentiation and a seeking to define the boundaries of belief. The community that we see in I John illustrates a primary stage in the growth of early Christianity. It shows us the changes that were taking place at this early point in the establishment of the faith. This small community and its struggles are an example of what was happening in the development of Christianity as a whole, it is a paradigm for Christian growth. At the time of I John, "the era of simple and unquestioning faith in the apostolic testimony was past, and men were beginning to enquire and reason... What seemed to the Apostle the pangs of dissolution were in reality 'growing

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<sup>23</sup> H. Koester, "Gnomai Diaphorai: The Origin and Nature of Diversification in Early Christianity," *HTR*, 58 (1965): 279.

pains."<sup>24</sup>

The community is exhibiting the normal characteristics of development. Just because the community members do not know and understand everything about their faith does not mean that the faith was in total confusion. In fact Christianity was quite established at the point that we see it in I John. (Even today there is much confusion in Christianity over interpretation of the tradition and over what it means to be Christian!) Such questioning of faith is a natural reaction for those who wish to grasp a better understanding of their beliefs.

Turner's thesis can be used to help us gain a fuller view of what is occurring in the community of I John. It can also help us to use I John to gain an even greater understanding of how this community is a paradigm for the growth and development of early Christian faith. Turner argues that definitions of what it meant to be Christian were not clearly formulated even in the minds of those who professed to be leaders of the faith. And we see that the author of I John is struggling to find arguments against those opponents who have left the community. Though he feels strongly that they have deviated from the traditional faith he has difficulty in clearly and adequately defining the boundaries of the

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<sup>24</sup> The Expositors Greek Testament, p. 179.



tradition. As well, it is not possible for us to determine exactly what beliefs the opponents held. Instead the author appears to go around the issue. Even at the end of the letter he has not clearly differentiated his position from that of those he claims to be his opponents. For the relationship between the author and the community in I John, according to Lieu:

is not that of spiritual founder and infant Church, or of disciplining teacher responsible for an erring congregation, but of a community at once confident in their assurance and yet engaged in the process of deliberation about the consequences of that assurance in a situation where there is no external yardstick by which to measure themselves. The author, perhaps in reality outside the situation and by the very act of writing claiming to interpret it, can only share in it and recognize their own independence of him (2:12-14).<sup>25</sup>

It appears that the author of the letter is trying his best to come up with reasons for the beliefs he holds, but at this point no adequate definitions of orthodoxy have been established for him to utilize in his arguments. The author is left to his own devices and attempts to explain his beliefs through common experience, such as brotherly love. However his lack of clear definition further complicates the issue.

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<sup>25</sup> Judith M. Lieu, *The Theology of The Johannine Epistles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 27.

#### D. The Fixed and the Flexible Elements

Turner suggests that the attempts of the classical theory and its modern alternatives to explain the nature and rise of heresy have failed because

the phenomenon for which they seek to account is richer and more complex than their theories are disposed to admit. The development of Christian theology as a whole ... may perhaps better be interpreted as the interaction of fixed and flexible elements, both of which are equally necessary for the determination of Christian truth in the setting of a particular age.<sup>26</sup>

At this early point in Christianity we can indeed see the existence of fixed and flexible elements as defined by Turner. The dispute between the author and his opponents illustrates Turner's thesis nicely. The fixed elements are love of God and belief in Jesus. God's gift of love to the faithful is seen in the Gospel of John 3:16: "οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλ' ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον." Belief in, and love of, God and His Son are necessary elements of what it means to be Christian.

Christians had a basic sense of what it meant to be Christian long before their beliefs were set out by the Church. Turner says:

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<sup>26</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 26.

the Church's grasp on the religious facts was prior to any attempt made to work them into a coherent whole. The definition of the doctrine of the Incarnation was the task of the fourth and fifth centuries, but the religious fact of the divinity of Christ is an accepted datum from the earliest times to which testimony is borne alike by friend and foe.<sup>27</sup>

Even at this early date in the development of the faith, Christians agreed upon what was necessary to constitute the faith. In I John even "friend" and "foe" agree with the necessity to believe in and love God and His Son Jesus. This is not in question at all, for such religious facts were accepted as truth by community members from the start of the group, prior to the polemic. What the author of I John polemizes about are issues which fall into what Turner calls the penumbra a "grey area", for the tradition allows for different interpretations on many issues and thus causes the disputes we see in I John.

Both the author and those he refers to as his opponents demonstrate that, while the community began with the same essential beliefs, those beliefs which brought them together as a community prior to the polemic, with development contentious issues have arisen which have now divided them. The dispute over these issues shows the flexibility in the tradition. Such flexibility may have come about due to lack of

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<sup>27</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 27.

precise definition in certain areas. How could it have been otherwise? Jesus did not hand to his disciples a book containing defined theological positions! The early Christian began with the lex orandi. Theological clarification came later. And with such clarification came debate, polemic, argument and counter -- argument.

The characteristics and personality of the author of I John illustrate how Turner's thesis is an excellent example of the situation that we see in the Epistle. Turner feels that a basic element of flexibility present in the evolution of Christian theology is "the individual characteristics" of the theologian.<sup>28</sup> This aspect of flexibility may be seen in the community of I John. The author of the letter displays many characteristics that are unique, or different from those to whom he is in opposition.

The author's personality might be seen as more conservative in comparison to that of the secessionists who seem to be liberal in their attitude to religion and their relationship to those outside the community. He prefers to establish the tradition of the community as fixed rather than going beyond it for answers. Loader feels that "the author is conscientiously not an innovator; he is battling with

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<sup>28</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 34.

innovators."<sup>29</sup> The author is adamant about establishing the faith in the community; his is not a flexible personality. The author would rather establish the beliefs of the group. As well, the author's writing of the letter and his authoritative manner indicates that he wishes to take a position of respect and leadership. The author wishes to protect his position in the community and this indicates to readers an important aspect of his personality and an important reason why the letter was written.

It seems that in the letter the author is trying to take the flexible and make it fixed; the author does not seem to see the possibility of flexibility. He is not ready at this stage for such growth in the community; he does not see a place for flexibility in a united group. He has difficulty in making his interpretations fixed because of the support that both he and his opponents take from the same tradition. It is through the letter that it appears the author is trying to establish authority for his beliefs; however, he does not have any more authority than the secessionists. Since the topics of controversy are flexible and the author cannot find definite support for his views from the tradition, once again he is left to his interpretation of the tradition to provide validity for his thoughts.

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<sup>29</sup> Loader, *Johannine Epistles*, p. xxiv.

The author has chosen a task that as we see is too advanced for the period in which he writes. He wishes to get to the bottom of the flexible issues in the community. The author's attempt to create a greater set of fixed beliefs for the community seems to have further divided the group -- all those who do not accept his definitions of true faith are outsiders. Therefore the community is broken down into the author's group, composed of Christians, and the outsiders, or opponents to the truth, who are no longer Christian members. It seems that the author and his community have come to a point where they are not as comfortable with the elements of flexibility in their tradition. The problem with establishing more fixed parameters is that the author himself is not clear enough on certain issues to support his own views adequately. He makes definite statements but does not adequately support them. The author's personality comes into further issue when we look at the next factor of flexibility, the author's choice of idiom.

The author in his choice of the letter as a form or idiom to present his views demonstrates another example of flexibility that existed in early Christianity. He has made use of the language common to his community, language that may be understood only by those from within. The author takes for granted that readers will know what he is talking about without making reference to the split and other such details

that would help us today to have a better understanding of what is going on in the community. De Boer says that

The language of I John is written to people who know what the secessionist crisis is about first hand. These readers of I John thus frequently need only a brief, allusive phrase to know what the author is referring to in connection with this crisis. The language of I John, as of the other works in the Johannine corpus, is that of an in-group, the Johannine community.<sup>30</sup>

J.L. Martyn also writes about the unique form used by the author. He feels that the letter was written for a community with a shared history, a group that have developed a language that is very symbolic with many expressions which members "would easily understand as referring to their shared history. In short, to a large extent the Gospel is written in the language of a community of initiates."<sup>31</sup>

However, Turner notes that differences in idiom "inevitably resulted in a change in the background of thought."<sup>32</sup> While much of the letter is written in a personal form that includes all group members, the letter does show readers that I John is a step away from the original, once united group, and the idiom itself is showing signs of this

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<sup>30</sup> Martinus C. De Boer, "The Death of Jesus Christ And His Coming In The Flesh," *NovT*, xxxiii (1991): 331.

<sup>31</sup> J. Louis Martyn, *The Gospel of John in Christian History* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), p. 91.

<sup>32</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 32.

new status. The author of I John makes this change apparent through his introduction of various new uses and understandings of terms in the letter which may have a different meaning for his new in-group of followers. This marks another area of flexibility related to the quest for a satisfactory philosophical background. Flexibility in the selection of technical terms for the use of Christian theology

might at first sight appear a relatively minor matter, but variations and ambiguity in terminology were to prove a fruitful source of confusion. This can be illustrated both from the doctrines of the Trinity and of the Person of Christ...<sup>33</sup>

Such differences in terminology may be seen in the uses of words like brethren, community, fellowship and love by the author. We see that the author makes different uses of these terms than does his opponents, and it in turn creates problems because he does not make clear to readers exactly what he feels that they mean:

In general it may be said that while in some cases differences of terminology might offer a permissible and even a valuable variety in the phrasing of particular doctrines, on balance it tended rather to confuse the issue and to retard rather than to advance the proper rhythm of development.<sup>34</sup>

The differences in personality between the author and his

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<sup>33</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p.32.

<sup>34</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 34,



opponents, the form or idiom chosen by the author, and the resulting differences in terminology, are areas that account for the differences between people in the community. These differences contribute to the dispute for they lead to areas of flexibility on deeper levels. Turner makes reference to this when he says,

We may first notice what might be called differences in Christian idiom. This must not be restricted to the various types of literary genre used by early Christian writers,..., but to differences at a deeper level such as between an eschatological and metaphysical interpretation of Christianity."<sup>35</sup>

Such deeper differences may be observed in I John through the disputes over eschatology, christology and ethics. Interpretation of these theological areas, as demonstrated in the choice of terminology used by the opposing groups, cause the major community divisions we read about in the letter.

There appear to be three major divisions, or flexible areas, in the thought processes of the author and his opponents. If we look at the divisions in the community that we discussed in the previous chapter, ethics, christology, and eschatology, we can see the major areas of flexibility and the support that each group derives from the tradition. To begin we can look at what seem to be the most essential differences

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<sup>35</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, p. 31.

in the letter, the point that the author spends the most time stressing, ethics. This heading includes many areas such as claims of perfection; emphasis on the commandments; and love of the brethren. The second major division is the community's thoughts concerning christology, a view of Christ as human/divine versus a purely divine christology. The third area of division regards eschatology, a combined present/future eschatology versus a realized eschatology.

#### E. The Penumbra

As we have said the aspect of flexibility referred to by Turner as differences in Christian idiom may account for some of the different thoughts contained in the opposing groups and how individuals arrive at different interpretations of particular issues in the tradition. These differences as they are reflected in such areas as the use and understanding of terminology and concepts in the tradition by the author and his opponents, and may reflect the major cause of the flexibility evident in the letter. They may be referred to as a grey area or the penumbra of the tradition. They are aspects of the faith which have not yet been fully formulated and thus remain open to discussion and debate.

The penumbra does not actually consist of areas of flexibility, but becomes part of the difficulty associated

with flexibility. The penumbra of the tradition that we see in the words of the author of I John falls between that which is established as fact, or fixed, and that which flexibility makes possible. It is perhaps the penumbra that arises in issues of ethics, christology and eschatology that result in such disagreements, and eventual separation in the community. It is perhaps unfortunate that Turner in the development of his thesis does not establish a full definition of the term penumbra.

It is the penumbra that is the cause of flexibility in the tradition, for the grey area allows for the flexibility that results in the community conflict. Like the author's interpretation of the tradition, the penumbra is likely due to the fact that the faith has not developed to a stage where a full understanding can be grasped. To use a Lonerganian term, the consciousness of the Johannine community was relatively undifferentiated. The tradition had not established clear understandings of that which we refer to as the penumbra; these issues had fallen through the cracks of that which is fixed, or made definite in the tradition, and that which is flexible, or left up to personal interpretation. To explain this concept further we must look at the grey area as it exists in the thoughts of the author of I John and the Johannine tradition.

It is important to note, prior to discussing the grey

area evident in the issues of conflict in the letter, that many of the concepts are related to one another. According to Lieu:

[I John] has often been likened to a spiral; again and again it returns to a point where it has been before, and yet by bringing in a new element moves a step further. This spiral is not merely a technique of literary style and structure, but is equally an expression of thought-structure. Inevitably then, its theology cannot be separated out topic by topic: themes and ideas are interwoven, and it is impossible to explore one without having to say something about the others as well.<sup>36</sup>

We will see as we discuss the three major issues over which the community split that they relate to each other.

#### (I) Ethics

In the area of ethics the author criticizes the opponents for forsaking the brethren and going out into the world and loving the world instead of the brethren. The author commands readers in 2:15 "Μη ἀγαπάτε τὸν κόσμον μηδὲ τὰ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ θάνεις ἀγαπᾷ τὸν κόσμον οὐκ ἔστιν ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ πατρὸς ἐν αὐτῷ." The author is attempting to fix the community's beliefs with regard to ethics and the concept of love. The problem with establishing the command to love according to Ferguson is that "love is not law... it would lose its nature if it became law.

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<sup>36</sup> Lieu, *Theology of The Johannine Epistles*, p. 22.

There is a proper sense in which every person and every situation is unique."<sup>37</sup> We may be able to understand better the reason for dispute over love of the world verses love of the brethren if we look at the different understandings of the author and the opponents over these issues.

It becomes apparent from the letter that going out into the "κόσμον" has a different interpretation for the author of I John and then to the secessionists. The secessionists have different interpretations of the Johannine tradition with regard to the definitions of the words "brethren" and "world." Such differences in interpretation of these major aspects of the community may have been the primary cause for the split in the community. It is not that the secessionists did not love the brethren or did not claim to love the brethren. According to Raymond Brown, the basis of the problem is the definition of "οἱ ἀδελφῶς." He writes "For the author of the Epistles 'the brethren' were those members of the Johannine community who were in communion (*koinoia*) with him and who accepted his interpretation of the Johannine Gospel."<sup>38</sup>

The author feels that the opponents' leaving the community showed that they were no longer brethren and showed

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<sup>37</sup> John Ferguson, *The Politics of Love: The New Testament and Non-Violent Revolution* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1974), p. 100.

<sup>38</sup> Brown, *Community*, p. 132.

their lack of love. The separating of the opponents from the community broke the love command. If the author's definition of brethren is limited to those members who live within his group then we can understand why he would feel that the opponents' leaving the group indicates that they no longer love his followers. However, if the secessionists still consider the author's community part of their own group of brethren, even though they have gone out from them, then we can also see why the opponents would still claim to love the brethren. Though the opponents have left the author's community it does not necessarily mean that they do not love God and the brethren.

In contrast to the love of the brethren there is the love of the world. If anyone loves the world then they cannot claim to love God as well and, therefore, according to the author's pattern of argument, they do not love the brethren. Love of the world is an ethical issue because "κόσμος", for the author, comes to mean all that is traditionally viewed as unethical. "ὅτι πᾶν τὸ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ, ἡ ἐπιθυμία τῆς σαρκὸς καὶ ἡ ἐπιθυμία τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν καὶ ἡ ἀλαζονεία τοῦ βίου, οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς, ἀλλὰ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου ἐστίν" (2:16).

The author feels that if the community members are leaving the group then it must be because they are attracted to that which is unethical, for good only exists within the Johannine community. Those who have left are not of God for

"Πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἁμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ ... πᾶς ὁ μὴ ποιῶν δικαιοσύνην οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ ὁ μὴ ἀγαπῶν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ" (3: 9-10). While the author feels that the world contains all that is unethical, the secessionists must not hold this same interpretation of the definition of "κόσμος" because they do not feel that they sin by leaving the community and going outside into what the author refers to as the "world." There is, moreover, a problem in how the words love and hatred are related to each other.

The author of I John even goes as far as to differentiate between 'correct' love from 'incorrect' love. In his understanding, the love of God and the love of Jesus for men, play a major part. Thus 'correct' love implies an acceptance of God's love toward man in the person of his son and of the latter's redemptive death as well as a willingness to abide by the latter's commands, which are ultimately those of his father. Likewise, 'incorrect' love implies a love of God which bypasses that particular mode of love which God manifested toward men and which claims freedom from those commands brought by the Son. This latter love is, in the eyes of the author, nothing but 'hatred' of one's brother."<sup>39</sup>

Thus it is obvious that considerable ambiguity in the understanding of love has led to misunderstanding and polemic.

According to Lieu:

Love is by definition, especially against the Old Testament background, dynamic rather than static. While God's act of love is complete this love which

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<sup>39</sup> F. Segovia, *Love Relationships in The Johannine Tradition: Agape/Agapan in I John and The Fourth Gospel* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1982), p. 76.

flows from God and finds expression in believers' love for God as well as for one another also invites further completion. The language of perfection or completion, a common New Testament theme (Matt 5: 48; 1Cor. 2:6; 13:10; Phil 3:12), is used only of love in I John (2:5; 4:12, 17, 18). Yet such perfection can be realised here and now, in obedience to God and in mutual love, and in anticipation of full confidence before God. Again it is ambiguous whether the love that is thus completed is God's love for us or our love for God, and the ambiguity is perhaps best left unresolved.<sup>40</sup>

There is much ambiguity and dynamics attached to the concept of love, especially the concept of a shared relationship of love between God and his followers.

The author says that "ὁ μὴ ἀγαπῶν οὐκ οὐκ ἔγνω τὸν θεόν, ὅτι ὁ θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν" (4:8). As well, he says, "ἐάν τις εἶπῃ ὅτι ἀγαπῶ τὸν θεόν, καὶ τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ μισῶ, ψεύστης ἐστίν." (4:20). The author feels that the opponents' action of leaving the community indicates that they hate those left behind, the members of the author's group. If the author considers his own group children of God then if the secessionists hate these "τέκνα τοῦ θεοῦ" they in turn indicate their hatred for God. For the author there is no in between: members either love or hate one another; those who have left must feel hatred because if they loved their brethren they would have stayed. According to the **Expositor's Greek Testament** "St. John recognises no neutral attitude

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<sup>40</sup> Lieu, *Theology of The Johannine Epistles*, pp. 67-68.



between 'love' and 'hatred'. Love is active benevolence, and less than this is hatred, just as indifference to the Gospel-call amounts to rejection of it."<sup>41</sup> The author does not take into consideration that the secessionists might feel something between these two emotions, perhaps they feel a sense of regard for their former community members.

The secessionists may show some indifference toward the author and his group and this is interpreted in the epistle as hatred. As well some of the author's group may still hold pleasant feelings for those who have left. As we have established the opposing groups were formerly members of a united community, it is likely that family ties still exist between those who left and those who stayed. It would be doubtful if all members of the Johannine community felt hatred toward the secessionists as the author appears to. This may also be said regarding the feelings of the secessionists toward the author and his community. Family ties bind people together and in such a close knit community as was the Johannine group prior to the split it is likely that members found it difficult to cut themselves off from those they loved even if they were separated physically and spiritually.

Along with the lack of continuity in defining such terms as "κόσμος" and "ἀδελφός" another contribution to the conflict

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<sup>41</sup> *Expositor's Greek Testament*, p. 176.

between the two opposing groups is the author's choice to interpret and emphasize the conditional nature of Johannine love. The author's call to love fellow human beings is, as we have discussed, based on the condition that these individuals must belong to the same community as the author and share his beliefs. The opponents of I John do not seem to understand the conditional love command in the letter because they have not interpreted the love of the tradition to be conditional. It seems that the secessionists see the call to love as a call to love everyone regardless if they claim to follow the views of the author. Therefore it is hard for them to understand how love of God and his son translates into love of community, but doesn't translate into love of the world.

It is the conditional nature of the letter that has resulted in what is called the great anomaly of I John. While the author calls for love of the brethren, at the same time he condemns his opponents, who were once members of his community. As Brown writes, "In his attitude toward the secessionists... he supplied fuel for those Christians of all times who feel justified in hating other Christians for the love of God."<sup>42</sup> The author has not made his interpretation of the love command clear and creates confusion for readers who do not understand the importance that he has placed in the

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<sup>42</sup> Brown, *Community*, p. 135.

conditional nature of love in his interpretation of the Johannine tradition.

While it may not seem entirely clear and evident, there is evidence for the conditional nature of love in the Johannine tradition and it is this which seems to be emphasized in I John. The Gospel of John 10:17, says "διὰ τοῦτό με ὁ πατήρ ἀγαπᾷ ὅτι ἐγὼ τίθημι τὴν ψυχὴν μου, ἵνα πάλιν λάβω αὐτήν." Such an example shows that the conditional love we see in the letter is probably not as unusual as it originally appears, since the letter's tradition holds a conditional form of love command. If there is a conditional love between the Father and Jesus, then it is not entirely inappropriate that conditional love exist between fellow Christians.<sup>43</sup> Von Wahlde notes that throughout the Johannine writings "it is said that if one loves, one will keep the commandments; thus love must always be manifest in correct action. Keeping the commandments is a way of discerning true love of God/Jesus."<sup>44</sup> If love was meant to be an innate feeling for all, why would followers have to be constantly reminded to follow the command to love? It is obvious from all that we have said that love is not a concept that has been settled on in the community and belongs to what Turner calls

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<sup>43</sup> von Wahlde, *Johannine Commandments*, p. 12.

<sup>44</sup> von Wahlde, *Johannine Commandments*, p. 14.

the penumbra. Therefore the interpretation of conditional love for only the brethren is not so odd after all.

The commandment of brotherly love in I John is much different from the call to love, even one's enemies, that we see in the Gospel of Matthew. Von Wahlde asks the question, "Are we correct in maintaining that what is traditionally termed one of the most beautiful and intense injunctions to Christian love really is such?"<sup>45</sup> When we examine the conditional element of brotherly love in I John it seems that its view of love is much different from what Christians traditionally believe it to be.

The fact that ethics is such an unsettled issue in the community may be better understood if we look at the complicated nature of love. Ferguson establishes three corollaries of the assertion that God is love:

First, love cannot be defined, for to define is to place limits upon, and it is impossible to place limits upon God. Love can be apprehended but not comprehended. It can be exemplified but not exhausted. Secondly, because love is primarily the very being of God and only secondarily seen in his relations with men it is impossible for love to degenerate into any kind of legalism without ceasing to be love... Thirdly, because love is God, because it is God's nature to love, love is not called out by any merit in the recipient. 'Christ died for us while we were yet sinners, and that is God's own proof of his love toward us' (Rom. 5:8). It was not merit in the sheep which sent the

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<sup>45</sup> von Wahlde, *Johannine Commandments*, p. 70.

shepherd out to find it.<sup>46</sup>

There is much more to understanding the concept of love than may first appear. Therefore it becomes easier to understand how and why the author and his opponents would have such different understandings of the term. As well it becomes questionable whether or not the author and his followers actually hold the same interpretation when the author does not define his position on the issue of love. Ferguson shows the difficulty in grasping an understanding of the concept of love. Such difficulties show how easily discussion of the issue could fall into what Turner calls "the penumbra."

Love of God is also a confusing issue. In I John the author says, "ἡμεῖς ἀγαπῶμεν, ὅτι αὐτὸς πρῶτος ἠγάπησεν ἡμᾶς" (4:19). It is the first human response in which love is expected to operate. In the letter love of God is expected to be a natural response. Ferguson feels that:

the reason why there is not more stress upon this is partly that it is taken for granted, and partly that you cannot really command a person to love God; it is a natural response or it is nothing... It might seem nonsensical to speak of loving God, or seeking his well being. Not so. In some paradoxical way God needs us, has chosen to need us.<sup>47</sup>

But again, this relationship is not clearly explained or

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<sup>46</sup> Segovia, *Love Relationships*, p. 94.

<sup>47</sup> Segovia, *Love Relationships*, p. 94.

understood in the letter. This lack of clearly defined parameters means that it can be easily perceived as the penumbra of which Turner speaks.

The concept that God needs our love may not be understood by all community members. I John communicates this concept to readers when he says, "καὶ ταύτην τὴν ἐντολὴν ἔχομεν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ, ἵνα ὁ ἀγαπῶν τὸν θεὸν ἀγαπᾷ καὶ τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ" (4:21). Love of God is shown in love of the brethren. According to Ferguson:

So we pass from the love of God to the love of men, and we find that the New Testament identifies three relationships in which love is shown. The first is within the Church... This seems at first sight surprising, turning the Church into a mutual admiration society. We feel this because we are tainted with the heresy of individualism. But very much of life is about corporate action, about community, about fellowship... They know that a Christian fellowship which merely looks inwards is not a fellowship at all, and ceases to be attractive even to those within it.<sup>48</sup>

However, not all Christians understand how the love of God translates into love of brethren.

In I John the author demonstrates the relationship of followers to God and their relationship to each other. The letter shows:

the uncompromising hostility shown to the schismatics and the probable inward restriction of love for one another have led many to balk at the

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<sup>48</sup> Ferguson, *Politics of Love*, pp. 96-97.

epithet. Perhaps of chief importance is that through this one theme I John can speak of God's relationship with believers, believers' relationship with God and their relationship with one another. It illustrates best the flowing spiral of thought and argument so characteristic of I John, and on a wider canvass poses more sharply and fruitfully than any other biblical writing the question of the relation between love of God and love of neighbour.<sup>49</sup>

The translation of love of God into love of brethren or love of neighbour is of major importance in the epistle, yet the author leaves this as a grey area in his writing. Perhaps the author himself has not come up with a full understanding of this issue. As Lieu says, this issue also represents the sense in which the thought and argument of the letter forms a spiral, for within the issue of love of God and love of neighbour is contained the issue of how this love of God is expressed through his sacrifice of Jesus. This is further connected with the issue of the importance of the physical and divine Christ.

One can see the uncertainty of what the call to love means. In the letter the priority of all love:

remains with God and with God's love for 'us' shown specifically in the sending of his son (4:10). This is not only the source of Christian love and its obligation (4, 11, 19) but actually defines love for us. It is only a step further to say 'God is love' (4:9, 16). Although much quoted and hailed as the goal and sum of Johannine theology, this is no speculative reflection on or definition of God. It

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<sup>49</sup> Lieu, *Theology of The Johannine Epistles*, p. 66.

is true that it says more than 'God loves' and something very different from 'Love is God': yet it is rooted in God as experienced, and is directed towards the inescapable conditions for those who claim to continue to experience God.<sup>50</sup>

What exactly does it mean to experience God, how do we judge if a person has actually had this experience and in turn how do we know what the call to love means?

The love which is called for in response to God's nature can be simply to love, a love that does not have an actual object, for example 4:16, "ὁ μένων ἐν τῷ ἀγάπῃ." However this love is usually defined as love for one another as brethren, or as love for God. The letter calls followers to love God, unlike the Gospel which called disciples to love only Jesus.

The preoccupation in I John with Christians loving and not loving one another has resulted in the letter being viewed as a sectarian document. As Loader writes:

It represents on this reading a retreat from universal love, a narrowing of focus, the self-indulgence of a small group intent on its own survival. It means attributing a very limited understanding to statements about God's sending his son, so that they apply now only to the chosen ones.<sup>51</sup>

The universal love that one usually associates with Christianity is missing from the letter. The tradition says,

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<sup>50</sup> Lieu, *Theology of The Johannine Epistles*, p. 66-67.

<sup>51</sup> Loader, *Johannine Epistles*, p. xix.



"Ἦτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον." But the author of I John shows a different understanding of world and in so doing shows how much lack of formulation there is in the community with regard to understanding what the tradition says about the relationships of Christian love. It is not hard to see that the issues contained in the area of ethics would fall between the fixed and flexible and into the area that Turner refers to as the penumbra.

### (II) Christology

The relationship of love of God toward his people as expressed through the sacrifice of Jesus implies that

the Son of God in carrying out his mission and specifically in dying for men also manifested love toward men. It is he who forms the necessary link between God and man and, as such, partakes of that relationship of love as well.<sup>52</sup>

Jesus forms the link between God and his followers, he joins God to human beings and human beings to each other. This link between the nature of Christ, his coming, the love of God, and the relationship between fellow human beings demonstrates the spiral of argument characteristic of I John. In a study of ethics and love it is important to gain an understanding of the struggle in the community over the nature of Christ.

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<sup>52</sup> Segovia, *Love Relationships*, p. 74.

Within the issue of Christology the differences in the interpretation of key concepts plays an important role in understanding how divisions may have occurred in the community. What does the death of Jesus mean for Christians, how does it reflect on their own physical actions in the world? As with love, the community of I John has not formulated a common interpretation of its Christology and the understanding of the nature of Jesus falls into the penumbra. The confusion over this issue is important because it divides the community.

The author of the letter stresses the human nature of Jesus and also sees the importance of the divine, while the opponents seem only to stress Jesus' divinity. The low Christology of the author contrasts with the high christology of the secessionists. The letter says, (4:2) "πάν πνεῦμα ὃ ὁμολογεῖ Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν ἐν σαρκὶ ἐληλυθότα ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐστίν." According to De Boer, this verse "seems to provide a basic clue to the issue that divides the author from his adversaries."<sup>53</sup> The importance of recognizing that Jesus came in the flesh relates to the actions of followers. If members do not recognize that the physical life of Jesus is important then they will not see their own physical actions as having

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<sup>53</sup> Martinus C. De Boer, "The Death of Jesus Christ and His Coming In The Flesh," *NovT*, 33 (1991): 326.

any great value. Therefore, the commandments for the actions of Christians will not hold any strength, for if one's physical life is not important then it does not matter how he or she behaves.

Another issue encompassed in the debate over the nature of Jesus is what the death of Jesus means for Christians, the relationships they partake in, and their actions toward others. The sacrifice that God made by giving his only son, and the suffering that Jesus felt on the cross, would have less importance if the physical nature of Christ was denied. If Jesus came in the flesh then we as human beings could appreciate the great loss of God when he gave his only son over to be persecuted and tortured. Therefore we should see the significance that this sacrifice should have for Christianity and how Jesus' death translates into love in the community. In I John "the confession of 4:2 concerns the death of Jesus Christ as an exemplary or paradigmatic, and very concrete, act of love."<sup>54</sup> Just as God sacrificed his son for his followers, so too should they make sacrifices for their fellow Christians. God set a precedent, an example, anything less will not do.

It is, true however, that in the letter we can see the importance that the author places in the death of Jesus for

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<sup>54</sup> De Boer, "Death of Jesus Christ," p. 332.

the welfare of the community. He says, "οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ ἐλλῶν δι ὕδατος καὶ αἵματος, Ἰησοῦς Χριστός· οὐκ ἐν τῷ ὕδατι μόνον, ἀλλ' ἐν τῷ ὕδατι καὶ ἐν τῷ αἵματι." (5:6). De Boer feels that this verse clearly indicates that the author and the secessionists have divided over the theological relevance of the death of Jesus Christ.<sup>55</sup> He goes on to say that the secessionists completely deny the ethical relevance of Jesus Christ's death. They believe they can do this by recognizing the presence of "eternal life" with the experience of baptism. Baptism is a Christian rite that is very important for its association to Jesus Christ's work as saviour and with the spiritual communion with God that this baptismal rite effected (1:3,6; 4:1-3,6; 5:6). The author's use of the term "ἐν σαρκί" in 4:2 is an attempt to claim that self-giving is in fact a manifestation of eternal life. It is

the new order of being made manifest in the world by the loving action of Jesus Christ. (cf. :1-2; 4:14)... The use of the term "flesh" as a synecdoche for "self" furthermore, underlies the concreteness of this act of divine love on the part of Jesus Christ himself and thus on the part of believers who make the confession of 4:2 and live by it (cf. 3:16-17). Where there is this concrete love, the author claims, there is also eternal life (3:14-15; cf. 1:1-2; 2:25; 5:11-13, 16, 20). This love -- this life -- gives the community its cohesion and identity in distinction from the world and is the perceptible mark of "true" spiritual fellowship with God, with his Son Jesus Christ, and with each other. (cf. 1:2-3; 4:4-6). For the

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<sup>55</sup> De Boer, "Death of Jesus Christ," p. 340.

author, then, the confession "Jesus Christ having come in the flesh" signifies that self-giving love is the visible, sensible, tangible manifestation of eternal life (cf. 1:1) - as visible, sensible and tangible as the baptismal water and spiritual experience to which the secessionists appeal as legitimation for their own understanding of the saving work and example of God's Son, Jesus Christ.<sup>56</sup>

I John says, "ἐν τούτῳ ἐγώκαμεν τὴν ἀγάπην ὅτι ἐκεῖνος ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἔθηκεν· καὶ ἡμεῖς ὀφείλομεν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἀδελφῶν τὰς ψυχὰς θείναι" (3:16). The importance of the sacrifice of Jesus for believers may also be understood with regard to the great sacrifice that Jesus himself made and the love and courage that he expressed in giving his own life for even those who sinned:

Throughout the New Testament it is constantly asserted that love suffers. The suffering of Jesus is the supreme example of the love which refuses to meet evil with evil, violence with violence, hate with hate. 'There is no greater love than this that a man should lay down his life for his friends' (Jn. 15:14)... it is continually assumed that the Christian who accepts for his own life Christ's way of love will expect to suffer.<sup>57</sup>

In order to appreciate the great sacrifice of Christ Christians must grasp the physical sense of Jesus. If Jesus was purely divine then his suffering would not have the same understanding for Christians. Many Christians would not appreciate the importance of Jesus' own sacrifice outside of

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<sup>56</sup> De Boer, "Death of Jesus Christ," p. 345.

<sup>57</sup> Ferguson, *Politics of Love*, pp. 98-99.

understanding the loss suffered from his Father.

The love that is expressed in the life and death of Jesus can form the basis for human respect in the community. There is a spiral connection contained within the letter, where love of God and Jesus and their love for humankind is further expressed in love among society. Those who do not understand the importance of the physical nature of Jesus would not see the importance of the physical nature of human beings. Loader says that

not taking our own flesh and blood seriously means not loving ourselves and not loving one another. It reflects a spirituality unconcerned with the concrete issues of human living and human relationships. Beneath the surface seems to lie religion which denies value to much of life.<sup>58</sup>

The deep connection between issues of ethics and christology becomes more pronounced once the tradition is explicated and articulated more fully.

The christology of I John is quite complicated. Its relationship to the issue of ethics further complicates any attempt at trying to come up with a definitive view of the nature of Jesus. The conflicting interpretations of the author and the secessionists over christology demonstrate the complexity of the growth of the early faith and show how much was a "grey area", both for the followers in that community as

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<sup>58</sup> Loader, *Johannine Epistles*, p. xvii.

well as for readers of I John today.

### (III) Eschatology

The Johannine tradition offers "a suitable point of departure for the here and now eschatology but also for the evaluation of baptism as birth 'from above' (cf John 3:5,8)." <sup>59</sup> The community creates confusion as the two groups arrive at different interpretations of the same tradition and the author in turn, through his use of language, presents more confusion for readers with regard to eschatology. Though he disagrees with the secessionists' realized eschatology, the author of the letter does not define either the secessionists' eschatological views or his own. According to Klauck:

The language with which the polemic of I John is clothed is very fundamental, very dualistic and very mythological. Must it in fact be called predestination, in the sense that a certain group of people precisely because of their origin cannot be other than of the devil and all helplessly condemned to sin? The author of the epistle here moves dangerously close to a boundary but without making the step to a doctrine of pure predestination. An indication of this should be that the term "born of the devil" (analogous to "born of God" in 3:9 and elsewhere) is deliberately avoided...<sup>60</sup>

The author comes very close to the claim of predestination.

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<sup>59</sup> "Internal Opponents," p. 58.

<sup>60</sup> Klauck, "Internal Opponents," p. 62.

While not actually making this statement he does imply in the letter that his group are the chosen ones while the opponents are of the devil. Therefore the opponents do not have a chance to be united with God. Eschatology is a grey area for readers because the author does not make definite statements on how he stands on this issue. Klauck's quote demonstrates how the author's lack of clarity can cause the interpretation of predestination.

Although usually careful in making definite statements in I John 3: 10 the author does say, "ἐν τούτῳ φανερά ἐστιν τὰ τέκνα τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὰ τέκνα τοῦ διαβόλου· πᾶς ὁ μὴ ποιῶν δικαιοσύνην οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ ὁ μὴ ἀγαπῶν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ." This verse illustrates that the commandment to love is the supreme command (3.23; 4.20-21). "It is also a major criterion of discernment, for love indicates that one has passed from death to life (3.14-15), and it indicates that one is in the truth (3.18-19)."<sup>61</sup> As we discussed earlier, the letter contains confusion regarding the interpretation of love. By combining the issues of ethics and eschatology, love of brethren and realized eschatology -- passing from death to life, the author further confuses the issue.

The three major areas of dispute in the Johannine

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<sup>61</sup> R.A. Whitacre, *Johannine Polemic: The Role of Tradition and Theology* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1982), p. 143.



community of I John illustrate very well how right Turner is when he insists that to understand early Christianity properly we must think of a penumbra separating various theological positions. The debate in the letter provides evidence that while the community may not be at a stage where they have defined every aspect of their beliefs, clarity is being sought over many complicated issues. This is a community struggling with its own self-definition. It is a community in which war is not being waged from clearly defined positions, as Bauer would have us believe; rather it is a community in the process of development. And it is quite valid to see this development as the product of fixed and flexible elements.

## Conclusion

Our study of I John shows that Turner's understanding of the nature of Christianity is a more convincing description of the situation that existed within the early Church. Bauer and the Classical theory provide explanations for the development of Christianity that, upon examination, do not fit the historical data that we are provided with in I John. The evolution of Christian faith is not simple. It progresses at varying paces within different groups and develops into different forms.<sup>1</sup> It is not yet defined, at this early date, which beliefs were "correct" and which were "false".

As well, to grasp a better understanding of I John we must place this letter in the broader context of the development of early Christianity. I John shows the controversy that existed in the development of the early Church as a whole, not just within this individual community. Division from within, as we see in the letter, shows the

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<sup>1</sup> It would be quite misleading to think of development as having fixed and narrow limits. As Turner points out: "The customary limitations imposed by human sin, human error, and human blindness can be observed even here. Christian theology is not exempted from the law of oscillation which applies to all branches of human thought. Premature syntheses required subsequent modification and the dangers of distortion and accretion were not slow in making their presence felt." Turner, *Pattern*, p. 498. But if early Christianity did not proceed along the "straight and narrow" in quite the way the classical view proposed, neither did it lose its way altogether!

conflict over the interpretation that existed within the entire faith. The early Christians were not exactly sure what later came to be implied by certain beliefs. Through a study of I John we can grasp a better understanding of how Christianity progressed as a whole at one of its earliest points of existence.

I John serves as a paradigm for the orthodoxy/heresy debate while at the same time it is an example of the growth that took place in early Christianity. The community in I John developed in a way that is best explained through the work of H.E.W. Turner, who sees the evidence of growth in the interaction of the fixed and flexible elements of the faith. In the major issues of the letter we can see what Turner refers to as the penumbra. This grey area contains important aspects of early Christianity that were not clearly articulated from the beginning. In I John the existence of the penumbra becomes evident as we see the community struggle towards differentiation and clarity. Lack of complete understanding of some of these major issues, which we have focused upon in the discussion of ethics, eschatology, and christology, should not to be viewed as a lack of ability on the part of the community's leader or members, rather it demonstrates the complex and difficult growth of a group who at the beginning of the faith were left to the task of articulating Christian belief.

My conclusions, if generally correct, have implications for the wider study of early Christianity. For what is at stake in the orthodoxy/heresy debate is not merely a semantic quibble over how to define orthodoxy and heresy. The issue is much deeper and goes to the heart of the question about the very nature of Christianity itself. Those who accept Bauer's thesis either implicitly or explicitly accept that Christianity has no distinctive substantial identity. Rather, for them it is a syncretism or -- perhaps more accurately -- an "ongoing multiplicity of interpretations with family resemblances."<sup>2</sup> Turner, however, does not believe that Christianity is intrinsically a syncretism. He often argues that this grasp of the realities of the Christian faith was hampered by inadequate categories of expression, so that these realities were sometimes "evacuated"<sup>3</sup>, "distorted"<sup>4</sup> or "truncated"<sup>5</sup>. But this, he claims, is precisely what the theological debates in early Christianity were about: how best to find ways of expression which grasped these realities.

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<sup>2</sup> Hawkin, "A Reflective Look", p. 376.

<sup>3</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, pp. 142-148.

<sup>4</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, pp. 124-132.

<sup>5</sup> Turner, *Pattern*, pp. 142-148.

For Turner, then, there is a "Christian deposit of faith". This can be seen when the self-understanding of the early Christians is taken into account and made part of the historian's data. Bauer does not do this. He does not take account of development nor does he acknowledge that the horizon of the early Christian is more undifferentiated than our own. Bauer thinks like the inept Athenian in Plato's **Republic**. He settles on the material components of orthodoxy and heresy in the third and fourth centuries and retrojects these back onto the first and second centuries. This is a similar procedure to the Athenian who, when confronted with the question, "What is justice?" responds by giving a list of the acts of a just man. This does not, of course, tell us what justice is. Neither does Bauer's examination of early Christianity tell us what orthodoxy and heresy are and consequently what early Christianity was like.

I have endeavoured to show, in my study of I John, that Turner is a better historian than Bauer. Further discussion of the theological implications of the orthodoxy/heresy debate is beyond the scope of this thesis. But I hope I have shown through my limited historical enquiry that Bauer's thesis should be reassessed, and that consequently there should be a rethinking of some of the theological positions based upon it.

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