

### 3 1 John. God Is Pure Love: “Koinonia” - Solidarity With the Poor

#### Outline

Introduction / Prologue: The Word Creates Community Life, 1:1-4

#### I God is Light, Walk in the Light, 1:5--3:10

- 1 Break with injustice, oppression, violence, 1:5--2:2
- 2 Keep Jesus' commandment/s (love your sister and brother), 2:3-11
- 3 Guard against the oppressive world system, 2:12-17
- 4 Guard against antichrists who shatter solidarity, 2:18-27
- 5 The purifying hope: Jesus' triumph over injustice, 2:28--3:10

#### II God is Love, Walk in Love, 3:11--5:12

- 1 Avoid violence (Cain), practice solidarity with the poor, 3:11-24
- 2 Guard against antichrists and the oppressive world system, 4:1-6
- 3 Love as God, who “is love,” sacrificially loved us, 4:7-21
- 4 The power of faith to overcome the oppressive world system, 5:1-13
- 5 The efficacy of prayer in the face of oppression, 5:14-17

Conclusion / Epilogue, three final certainties, 5:18-21

In all the Bible, the great affirmation that “God is love,” we find only in 1 John, where it occurs twice in the fourth chapter (1 John 4:8, 16). However, the first chapter of the same book also affirms

that “God is light” (1:5). The Gospel of John gives us a third affirmation of fundamental importance:

“God is spirit” (John 4:24). The perception that God is love represents the culmination of all truth in the Bible and as such provides us the pinnacle from which we can contemplate, understand and properly interpret all that the Bible says.

1. Love as solidarity with the weak and poor. What does John mean when he affirms that God is love? John wrote his letters around 95 AD to combat the teachings of certain persons who had left the Christian community (2:18-27, 4:1-3). Because of their denial of the incarnation they were similar to 1) the Docetists, who claimed that Jesus was a spirit and only appeared to be a human of flesh and blood, and 2) the Gnostics of the Second Century, who asserted that salvation came through proper knowledge (gnosis).

Faced with these Docetic and Gnostic tendencies, John emphatically insisted on the physical reality of the incarnate Jesus (1:1-2), stating that: “We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have koinonia (fellowship) with us; and truly our koinonia is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1:3). The Greek word koinonia is rendered several ways in our translations of the Scriptures (fellowship, communion). The basic meaning is “to have in common”, as in our word, “commun-ism”, but often the best translation today would be “solidarity.” Certain persons had shattered the solidarity and abandoned the Christian community. They denied the reality of the incarnation and proclaimed salvation by means of their elitist and spiritual philosophy, which had nothing to do with the injustices and sufferings in the material world. Early Christian communities included many poor people, and John made it quite clear what was involved for all those who wanted to live in solidarity with these communities: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us -- and we

ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?" (3:16-17).

Jesus (early source "Q," Matthew 5:44 and Luke 6:27), as well as Paul (Romans 12:14-21), commands us to love our enemies, but in John, Jesus limits himself to the commandment of mutual love between disciples (John 13:34; 15:12, 17; 17:9). Nonetheless, experience and church history remind us that to love those with whom we live can be more difficult.

2. Sin as Injustice, Oppression, Violence. "Sin", according to John, is all that oppresses and does damage to our weak and poor brother or sister: "If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all 'adikía (injustice, oppression)" (1:9; 5:17).<sup>1</sup> The sins of injustice, oppression, and lack of solidarity and love represent "darkness" (1:6; 2:9-11). These sins characterize "the world", and disciples of Jesus should stop conforming themselves to this corrupt, cruel, and violent system (2:15-17; 3:15).

At the same time "darkness" represents ignorance (2:11). Thus, when John states that "God is light" (1:5), he declares that God is the source of all justice and truth. The elitist Greek philosophies placed much emphasis on knowing the truth. But John, as is common in the Bible, speaks of a praxis, a practice, of "walking" in the truth. The Bible never speaks of "ethics" or "morals" (dominant concepts of the Greek philosophies) but of human life, both individual and communal, as a "walk." This "walk" always implies a concrete historical context necessary for proper understanding of the divine instructions (see 1:6-7; 2 John 4, 6; 3 John 4).

3. The "epistemological privilege of the poor": Why John wrote this letter. At the beginning John indicated that his purpose in proclaiming (1:3) and writing (1:4) his message was to promote

koinonia (solidarity) among the Christians, both poor and rich, so that the joy of all would be fulfilled.

However, at the end of the letter we find another purpose that receives even greater emphasis:

“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life” (5:13).

We can trace the importance of this purpose (of knowing, of being certain of our relationship with God) throughout the entire letter:

“By this we may know that we know him, if we keep his commandments” (2:3).

“You have an anointing from the Holy One, so all of you know the truth” (2:20).

“If you know that he is just, you may know that everyone who practices liberating justice has been born of him” (2:29).

“We know that we have already passed from death into the sphere of life, because we love the brothers and sisters; the one not loving remains in the sphere of death” (3:14).

“The one keeping [Christ’s] commandments remains in him and he in him; and by this we know that he remains in us, by the Spirit he gave us” (3:24).

“By this we know that we remain in him and he in us, because of the Spirit he has given us” (4:13).

In this way John answers the Gnostic types, who were so proud of possessing knowledge (gnosis) superior to “common”, ignorant people. Faced with the arrogance of the elitists that had broken the community’s solidarity, leaving to establish their ghettos of privilege, John seeks to remind the humble community of believers that they are the ones who really have authentic knowledge of God. In the same way today many think that true knowledge comes through studies and university degrees or becoming wealthy in order to know “important” people and to have all the modern technology that gives

access to the great libraries of the world. But John continues the teaching of the carpenter of Nazareth, who insisted that God hides himself from the wise and learned of the world and reveals herself to the humble and poor (Matthew 11:25-30; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31).

For this reason many theologians in Latin America have spoken of the privilege that the poor and humble have in the matter of knowledge of God and God's will (Matthew 5:3-6; Luke 6:20-26). Since this privilege refers to the matters of knowledge (which philosophers call "epistemology"), many theologians now insist on the "epistemological privilege" of the poor. With their perspective, from below, the oppressed, marginalized, and victims of violence cry out to the God of the Exodus to liberate and save them. They may suffer every type of evil, but can know that oppression and injustice are not God's will.

John also thus wants to insist on the "epistemological privilege" of his humble community. Through the testimony of the apostles, their obedience and practice of justice and love, and the divine Spirit which dwells within them, the believers reach full knowledge and assurance of their relationship with God and of the character of God as a God of truth, liberating justice, and love. The elitists had left the community in order to protect their privileges, but they lost this epistemological privilege of knowing God and God's liberating purposes.

John speaks of readers who already possess and participate in "eternal life," not in the philosophical sense of a celestial life without material dimension but in a community life in solidarity that begins in this life and continues after death: "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3; cf. Jeremiah. 22:16, "to know Yahweh" is to practice liberating justice; Mateo 25:31-46).

4. Textual problem (1 John 5:7). See NRSV, HCSB and JB notes. The very late trinitarian addition of the Greek Textus Receptus, followed by the Authorized (King James) Version, is unanimously rejected by modern scholars. It occurs in none of the earlier and reliable Greek manuscripts and versions and was not cited by the Greek Fathers in their efforts to establish the trinitarian doctrine. What was apparently a gloss (marginal commentary) mistakenly was copied into later manuscripts as part of the text.

Bibliography - 1, 2, 3 John (see 3 John)