

Too Smart for Our Own Good
By Reverend Litton Logan
April 15, 2018

Scriptures:

1John 3:1-7

¹See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ²Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. ³And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

⁴Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. ⁵You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. ⁷Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. ⁸Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. ⁹Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God's seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God. ¹⁰The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters. ¹¹For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.

Sermon:

The little book of 1 John can best be described as a teaching sermon written by an Elder in a community of believers that held much in common with the community of John's Gospel. 1 John was believed to have been written toward the end of the first century of the Common Era or just after in Ephesus. Ephesus was a place where Oriental and Middle Eastern philosophies and religions met, mingled, and mixed, giving rise to various perspectives on the nature of reality, the cosmos, and human nature.

If we do not understand the background of the Elder's letter a little bit, it can be confusing and difficult to understand. For example, his exaggerated claims about Christians being sinless children of God today is confusing given his opening remarks 1 John 1:8-2:2:

⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; ²and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

We gather in 1 John, like the Gospel of John, that there were conflicting views about who and what Jesus was as the Christ, as the Son of God, and concomitantly the nature of God. People also held a variety of metaphysical understandings about their own human natures and the world.

It appears that these conflicts stemmed from Gnostic world views possibly held by some non-Jewish converts as opposed to the beliefs of more traditional Jewish Jesus-believers who were the dominate membership. There could also have been some Hellenistic Jews who may have held some Jewish-Gnostic or mystical views.

Gnosticism was not and is not a pagan religion or even a heretical Christian sect. Gnosticism is best understood as a complex of religious-philosophical ideas predating Christianity by centuries that continues into our day. These religious-philosophical perspectives influenced people's interpretation of everything, not only who and what Jesus was, who and what God was and is, but who and what human beings are as well as the state of nature.

For our purposes, in very broad, general strokes, people with Gnostic leanings would have denied the sovereignty of the God of the Jews and the uniqueness of Jesus as the Son of God. The god of the Jews was thought to be an inferior god, who created this world and didn't get it right as evidenced by the pervasive pain, suffering, disease, and death. The real, good god, the god who sent Jesus, was the true and good god of light, love, and truth. The good god of Gnostic beliefs, out of concern for souls trapped in human flesh created by the god of the Jews sends spirit-revealers to reawaken those trapped souls to their true nature and destiny as well as impart the knowledge, gnosis in Greek, on how to get back to their original state once released from the body in death. But, this awakening and revealed guidance is only for a select few.

Given that the soul is an eternal, spiritual being; that is, not of this created, material world, what the human host does in and with its body does not affect the spirit held prisoner within it any more than a prisoner is affected by what his jailer does off duty. Thus, the soul-self does not sin per se, i.e., those who say, "we have no sin."

Thus, for those of the Gnostic viewpoint, Jesus was the latest divine revealer, with more to come. And, Jesus' incarnate spirit-being did not suffer or die on the cross along with his body. However, in appreciation for the physical Jesus being such a perfect spirit-host, the good and supreme god resurrected him, allowing him to slip off and live out his life until he died again. At that point his soul would go the way of all souls, meaning either his soul would be reabsorbed back into the world-soul or continue to exist as a discrete but eternal spiritual monad.

These beliefs, although sharing some common metaphysical terms such as souls, bodies, good, evil, revelation, truth, light, and god, etc., stood in stark contrast to the more traditional Jewish understandings of such terms and their realities. Judaism understood there to be only one God, the Supreme and Sovereign Lord of All Light and Life and humans were created in God's image. God had breathed into them the breath of life or souls and they were thereby indivisible, physical-spiritual entities. Souls thereafter are passed on through biological conception (traducianism) or God had created all souls that were to ever be in the beginning and allocates them to human bodies at conception. Later, some of the rabbis understood that humans are born with the metaphysical capacity to make or develop a soul, not born with a soul per se. But, either way, the body-soul is an eternal unity.

To this we may add that God, out of a continuing desire to relate to and bless humankind despite Adam's and Eve's failure, which introduced the possibilities of corruption and death into the world, revealed the knowledge of righteousness, wisdom, and the joyous life through the Laws of Moses, the Prophets, and finally in and through an incarnation of God's very self as a truly human, truly divine man. This incarnation of the divine self, not just a transit, revealer-messenger, was Jesus, the man from Nazareth - a physical manifestation of the divine reason for creation itself. That reason being, divine love, the energy of all life; a love that is available to all, not just a privileged few.

In this perspective, humankind lives in a world that may seem like a glass half empty world, dominated by death, corruption, evil, and suffering. But, in truth, we are living in a glass

half full world ,albeit flawed; wherein humanity as inspired co-creators with God can affect and remedy the corruption, evil, pain, and suffering of the world caused by the forces of Darkness, the Satan, the devil, who entered this dimension through the portal of Adam's and Eve's disobedience. Regardless of Adam and Eve having eaten the apple, God's purposes for humankind did not and has not changed. We are still here to develop and care for this world and its creatures.

Thus, in the Jewish Jesus-believers' mind, Jesus didn't just appear to be human, he was truly human and truly divine; he truly suffered, he truly died; he was truly resurrected as a physical-spiritual person not some hybrid, and he is truly alive in the divine reality of this world and beyond. Faith in God's redemptive and restorative work in this truly human and truly divine Christ is the way to achieve the fullest relationship to God, others, creation, and creature as well as resolve the anxieties surrounding death and the human condition. However, faith in Christ does not release the believer from obeying the physical and moral laws of God or the physical and spiritual consequences of sin.

Let me expand on the idea of sin in the author's context. Traditionally, when we individualistic, guilt oriented westerners hear the word sin, we either want to hold up a biblical mirror and reflect its definition and realities out onto the world, or we peer into the biblical mirror and see our worst acts of immorality and/or our penchants toward immorality. This is only a very small part, if at all, of the author's viewpoint embedded in a much bigger understanding. Individuals may commit moral infractions but as members of a group or family such things bring dishonor and guilt upon the whole group along with other possible ramifications. In the biblical world, an individual's sin is in effect a "we" sin and "we" sin is "my" sin. Example: Sam, as a Christian with Gnostic leanings, thinking his eternal soul will not be tainted by frequenting the local brothel, actually stigmatizes and dishonors the "we" of his family in Christ. It is as if every member of his Christ family went to the brothel. Therefore, sin is far more than just an individual's breaching the Ten Commandments, giving rise to social or moral lawlessness. But most importantly, sin violates the supreme God-Jesus commandment, the essence of all commandments, to love one another - be loyal to, be caring of, and concerned with others, as God, our heavenly parent, was for us in Christ.

Confusion and misunderstandings with resulting conflicts over such things in the Elder's community of faith has caused people to act dishonorably and abusive toward one another. In short, 1 John is a sermon about people in their sense of "right-ness" disregarding Jesus' commandment to love their brothers and sisters in Christ as they do themselves.

Lawlessness understood in this way, given what we know about the contemptuous arrogance of many religious people, who believe they are right and others wrong, that rises to the point of abusiveness, we can then see the dynamics of the Elder's community and in part why he writes what he writes.

The Elder understands that God through The Holy Spirit, not a holy spirit, but The Holy Spirit, plants an awareness of hope and eternal joy in the hearts and minds of those lost and mired down in the anxieties and struggles of life, pulled hither thither and yonder by competing life philosophies, passions, and fears. Those who long for true knowledge and an ultimate grounding in their Creator-Sustainer find it in Christ.

As true children of God, born of the Spirit, people can no longer deny God in Christ any more than they can deny that they have biological parents. In addition, people cannot embrace a way of life steeped in worldly pleasures and pursuits contrary to the will of God while simultaneously claiming Jesus as the Christ, deny his humanity, his death for the sins of the world, his resurrection, and his living presence in the world. They may still commit immoral acts and dishonor their brothers and sisters in Christ, but the Spirit within them will not allow them to

be comfortable or at ease in their ways of sin. That is to say, a person may sin, but they cannot live a life of sin because the Spirit within them will constantly try to pull them back to the way of the light and life in God.

People of the world, the outsiders, also created by God are unaware of the true nature of Jesus, unaware of their true origins in God or the nature of their Creator-Sustainer because they trust only in their own intellectual and religious abilities and insights. Therefore, those of the world miss out on the eternal dynamics of God's grace and love so readily available to all because they choose not to accept it or participate in it out of pride.

The Elder is not hinting that Christians should reject their material existence as evil or corrupt and go off and live in a cave, eschewing all that is good and pleasurable in life, as many of those of Gnostic ilk advocated. The Elder is saying that Christians should reject those ideas and values of the world that attempt to unseat God in Christ as the sovereign center of their existence and enthrone the self and its intellectual and physical capacities as the measure of all things valuable. The Elder wants Christians "doing what is right," "keeping God's commandments," or "walking as Jesus walked" as mortal beings seeded with God's righteous spirit.

The Elder says that by faith in God's restorative love in Jesus, the Christians purify themselves; that is, they set themselves apart from the world and must strive to avoid those things that dishonor God, and the holy ways of love in the family of God.

The Elder is certain that he and his church are living in the last hours of this world, a time that traditionally was understood to be characterized by lawlessness, corruption, and unbridled immorality. A time when there would be many false "revealers" and so-called "holy guides" that would lead people down prideful, human pathways that diverge from God's revealed will and ways. Today we have false revealers, who come to us under the rubrics of science or cloak themselves in New Age spirituality, or un-reflected upon, arrogant, self-righteous, feel-good, exclusive Christianity.

We have political and social revealers who tell us we must be more sophisticated in our understandings of the intricacies of human psychological and social behaviors. Therefore, we must not give credence to simple minded scriptural injunctions and condemnations of personal immorality, corporate greed and corrupt political processes that victimize the human family. We have revealer-experts who tell us that psychological, genetic, social, and cultural sources of immorality, crime, and poverty mitigate the demands for moral accountability, moral restraint, moral education, and character building enterprises for the offenders or their communities. They tell us that human enlightenment preempts God's condemnations of sin at the individual or that collective levels and divine punishment as the consequences of sin is passé.

Okay, I'll give you that I am old fashioned. I am from another generation; but let me ask some questions. Why is it that in all our modern, humanistic sophistication we have not been able to cancel out the consequences of what the bible has defined as sin - individually or collectively - and make the world a better place for all life by our own efforts? Why are sexual promiscuity and licentiousness still hurting, maiming, destroying families and killing people today just as it did in the Elder's day? Why is it that worshipping multiple gods or value paradigms of our own making has produced a schizoid society without any semblance of a moral or spiritual compass? Why is it that envy and covetousness are filling our mental wards with drugged-out people, suffering from nervous exhaustion from trying to acquire and maintain all that they think they need and want? Why is one of the most lawless, immoral segments of our population today - those under the age of 18 - our children? Why is it that much of our political and judicial systems are ideologically corrupt to the core? People convicted of heinous crimes released on their own recognizance or given suspended sentences. Could it be because we as a people, a

nation, are living contrary to the very holy will that seeded us? Have we gotten too smart for our own good?

Modern, sophisticated, all-wise revealers, give me some answers that address the facts, not excuses them, or redefines the questions!

Dear hearts, this is the message we have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. Loving one another, as the self, does not mean we excuse or condone bad behaviors at the personal or collective level for others or ourselves. Also, we had better reject the silly notion that we have a kindly, old grandfather God, who just because he understands the genetic, social, and cultural reasons for why we are the way we are will mitigate or excuse our actions and cancel out their consequences.

Modern World, with all your apostles of enlightenment and so-called Revealers of New Truths that compromise God's will and ways, listen up, listen up - you are living in your last hours. O, the world may not end, but God will not and has not ever abided compromising holy life-truths and holy ways of life. Listen up, Modernity; you will reap what you sow just as previous generations have that abandoned Gods' ways.